

# Bearing Witness as Researchers in the Pursuit of Equality

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Kathryn Gillespie, [The Cow with Eartag #1389](#) (2018).

Most academics who care about substantive equality accept that ideologies and attendant violence about which lives matter in society and which lives don't cause devastation and trauma to individuals and communities. Many of us write about such suffering in our work so that others can learn about it and push for law reform and social change. But how exactly we as academics can bear witness to this suffering in the course of our equality-inspired, change-seeking research and writing is not a frequent point of discussion. But it should be, especially when the suffering we write about is chronic, of staggering magnitude, largely incommunicable, and sanctioned by law.

Anyone looking for an excellent example of how to bear witness to ongoing violence as a researcher—and learning along the way about the structural violence inherent to the dairy industry—should pick up Kathryn Gillespie's [The Cow with Eartag #1389](#). In it, feminist and critical animal studies geographer Gillespie eloquently bears witness to the massive yet mundane suffering engendered by the human appropriation of cows' milk. Gillespie deeply cares about the plight of all farmed animals and the vulnerable humans exploited in agriculture, but has chosen to focus her critical lens on the dairy industry. She aptly defends her focus noting that milk is a substance produced by an industry whose workings "is obscured from public knowledge", but is a product so normalized for humans to drink that "many well-educated and thoughtful people" are "surprised to discover that a cow has to be regularly impregnated to produce milk" (P. 14).

Through discourse analysis, participant-observation, interviews, library research, and stories about individual animals she encounters, Gillespie offers the reader a rare comprehensive and *embodied* account of the multiple components of the workings of the US dairy industry and how it takes living beings and turns them into things. Drawing from an intersectional feminist care-based ethic, Gillespie considers the routine structural violence that infuses the day-to-day practices of an industry that, from birth to death and thereafter, so completely commodifies the cow, her children, and her reproductive capacities under capitalist logics. Each illuminating chapter discusses a specific aspect of the dairy industry and "other peripherally related industries" such as the veal and beef industries it generates; other chapters innovatively explore the ethics of sanctuary spaces and 4-H agricultural education programs for children. Throughout, the analysis shines in integrating personal narrative with academic research to present an absorbing critique of what the law permits humans to do to animals even when so-called best practices are voluntarily adopted.

The contributions above to the burgeoning critical literature on animal agriculture constitute reason alone to read Gillespie's book. But it is how Gillespie bears witness to the experiences of animals she encounters that is particularly noteworthy. One of the most eye-opening parts of the analysis for any reader will be Gillespie's account of the auctions that take place as part of the animals' commodified trajectories. Given the near impossibility for members of the public to visit animal agriculture enterprises to observe their practices, buttressed by a legal climate where attempts at undercover exposés are classified as terrorism (Pp. 38-40), Gillespie highlights the auction hall as one point in the otherwise hidden world of farmed animals' lives where the public is invited. In Chapters 4 and 5, Gillespie describes her experiences sitting in on dairy auctions and, most brutally, the cull market

auctions. I treasured these chapters for the rare glimpse they offered into what transpires in such spaces and for her candour in discussing what she thought and felt as she sat and observed for purposes of her research the parade of suffering animals that were auctioned off in front of her.

Indeed, it is while observing the cull market auction that Gillespie meets the book's eponymous figure, one of the "spent" dairy cows who is meant to sell for cents on the pound to those who wish to transform her into meat. As Gillespie tells us, this is an animal who "limped through the door into the ring" and "whose impacts of her life as a commodity producer were easily legible on her body" (P. 96). This cow attracted no bids, and as the handler herded her toward the exit, she collapsed on the stage while the auction continued around her, "her mouth foaming with saliva and her breathing labored" (P. 97).

Gillespie writes about how her "mind raced with frenzied thoughts" about whether she should buy the cow, how she would transport and house her if she did, and "(w)hy this cow and not the dozens of others I had watched pass through the ring?" (P. 97), an experience she earlier describes as "immediately overwhelm(ing)" making her "unable to focus on each individual animal because of the scale of the suffering, each devastated body blurring into the next" (P. 96). She tells us of how her failure to intervene haunted her for "months afterward" and motivated her to produce a dissertation 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" (Pp. 97-98).

Elsewhere, Gillespie has written about the embodied and empathic practice of bearing witness in doing academic work in spaces of violence and trauma.<sup>1</sup> Her book provides an even fuller account of what bearing witness can look like when we seek to problematize legalized violence as academics in pursuit of justice. Her last chapter is aptly titled "On Knowing and Responding", where she talks candidly about the difficulty of personal dietary change yet the pressing need for it to occur. As she has done throughout the work, Gillespie brings us back to the animals' experiences, articulating the hope that "it is possible to learn from them, to let their stories be instructive as to how human-animal relations might be radically reimagined" (P. 219). Gillespie is not a legal scholar, but her work is of relevance to all of us in law pressing for equality in "radical" ways and encountering the extreme suffering of others whose lives we hope will one day matter.

1. Kathryn Gillespie, [\*Witnessing Animal Others: Bearing Witness, Grief, and the Political Function of Emotion\*](#), 31 *Hypatia* 572 (2016).

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