

An Auto-ethnography of Anti-dairy Vegan Activism in New Zealand

Lynley K. Tulloch

The University of the South Pacific

Abstract: *This paper examines my experiences of anti-dairy activism in New Zealand. Using auto-ethnographic methodology, I discuss the emotional work and core strategies and tactics of Starfish Bobby Calf Project (hereafter called Starfish). Starfish is a grassroots vegan activist group that I founded in 2013. Its genesis began in my childhood, when I became aware of the plight of bobby calves while living in rural New Zealand. It combines both autobiography and ethnography to analyse the emotional process of becoming an activist and campaigning against dairying. In doing so I uncover the narratives that underpin the dairy industry and the larger ideologies that structure it. This paper also explores the emotional work of animal rights activists in navigating the contradictions of a speciesist culture; including re-representing the animal as an individual with rights and subjectivity. Using Starfish as a case study, it is argued that animal rights politics is shaped by the emotional dynamics of such networks.*

Keywords: *Human-animal studies; auto-ethnography; New Zealand dairy industry; bobby calves; animal cruelty; animal rights; animal rights activism; emotional labour*

Introduction

I am seven and I cannot bring myself to eat the dead flesh of an animal. I cannot put it in my mouth. My reaction is visceral, I am revolted by the act of consuming an animal. My father stays behind and doesn't let me get down from the table until I have eaten it. I put a piece in my mouth and gag at the texture. I feel and sense the absent animal, now present once more in my mouth.

Over time I buried that revulsion deep down when I was forced to eat meat repeatedly as a child. Sometimes I would push the meat to the sides of my mouth, then excuse myself from the table so I could spit it out in the toilet. After a short stint of vegetarianism in my late teens I reverted back to meat-eating. It was not until I was in my thirties that I managed to partially shake off the shackles of enculturation and become vegetarian. Becoming vegan and an animal rights activist would take another ten years after that.

My animal rights activism is primarily focused on fighting the dairy industry. The dairy industry violates the rights of the animals it farms in a number of ways. One of the biggest travesties of dairying is the phenomena of bobby calves. A bobby calf is one that is defined by the Ministry of Primary Industries (MPI) as 'surplus to farm requirements that are typically sent to slaughter aged between 4 – 14 days.' (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2017, p. 8). These calves are ones who are not kept for replacement herd or beef and so are killed. Their bodies are mainly used for human consumption, while a smaller percentage are reserved for pet food (31,000 or 1.6%). Around two million bobby calves are killed every year in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2017).

This paper is presented in the form of an auto-ethnography. It is a collection of stories of the calves I have encountered in my experience in founding and guiding Starfish Bobby Calf Sanctuary (hereafter called Starfish). I use narrative to explain how Starfish has evolved through relationships with those within the animal rights community and those opposed to it. It's also my story – one of personal awakening that has taken decades. It's a story of threats and violence. It's a story of 'othering' and exclusion from both within and outside academia.

Most important, however, are the stories of the lives of bobby calves and cows caught up in the toxic system of large scale industrial animal agriculture. My account of their lives is partial and obscured, for it would be arrogant to assume I can speak for these cows and calves who have endured unspeakable horrors. I cannot tell their full truths – I can only tell it as I see it through my eyes. Empathy enables me to recognise the suffering they are experiencing. Through my activist work I have seen many instances of abject human cruelty toward calves, some of which will be detailed below. Dairy cows are also brutally exploited – their bodies, reproductive systems and offspring are abused; they are killed; they suffer.

I dedicate this story to them and their calves.

Auto-ethnographic research method

Auto-ethnography is a form of qualitative research that is based on the idea of telling stories. These stories are purposefully selected and actively constructed in the author's preferred vocabulary (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). Personal narrative writing allows the researcher to examine their experiences within the context of the social phenomena being studied. It is also a way of analysing these phenomena and developing deeper theoretical understandings of them. Auto-ethnography can also be evocative and attempt to engage the reader emotionally in the narrative journey (Méndez, 2013). The following auto-ethnography is both analytical and evocative.

Auto-ethnography provides a way of researching from the ground up, rather than a top-down approach that authoritatively describes the experience of others – both human and nonhuman. It is particularly useful for grassroots activists who seek to explore the cultural milieu in which they work. It is also a way of better understanding both self and others (Anderson, 2006).

This auto-ethnography has a twofold purpose: to analyse the culture of dairying in New Zealand and the countercultural anti-dairy activist movement in New Zealand. In particular I explore the construction of Starfish as a site of political resistance to dairy exploitation. I analyse

the intersections at which discourses of dairying merge in contradictory and new ways when anti-dairy activists and members or proponents of the dairy industry meet each other. This interaction can occur in person (for example when picking up rescue calves from a farm) or on media and social media sites.

I have gathered my material for this paper from my experiences. This includes my own embodied experience, my emotions, my desires, my hatred, my frustration, my stories and my truth. It also includes accounts of my interaction with dairy farmers who I come into contact with and the voices of activists who participate in the Starfish community. This latter source – the voice of activists involved with Starfish – come from reflexive interviews with participants.

The Lernaean Hydra connection

Auto-ethnography is characterised by the process of telling stories understood as narratives embedded in cultures and histories, threaded together by a common theme or themes. In this paper I interlace my story of fighting the dairy industry with that of the legend of the Hydra of Lerna which serves as an extended metaphor.

In Greek mythology Hydra was a huge nine-headed serpent who was a menace to those in the city of Argos. He ate their crops and ravaged herds of domesticated animals. Hydra had toxic blood and poisonous breath. If one of his heads was cut off he grew two heads in its place. One of his heads was immortal. Greek Hero Hercules was given the task of killing Hydra by the jealous King Eurystheus. Hercules could not kill him by cutting off his heads, so he had to think outside the square. He set fire to a neighbouring forest and burned the heads. Finally he buried the immortal head (Ferguson, 2001).

This paper develops three interconnecting and distinct themes in relation to the myth of Hydra: the symbolic, the mythological and the cultural. Hydra is symbolic of the dairy industry in New Zealand. His huge size and rapid growth of new heads can be likened to dairy intensification and growth over the last two decades. His multiple heads represent the various

facets of the dairy industry that work together: the farmers themselves; the industry representatives and mouthpieces; the regulating bodies that protect it.

Hydra's toxic blood is symbolic of degraded water quality in New Zealand's freshwater streams and lakes caused by dairy intensification (Foote, Joy, & Death, 2015). His deathly breath is composed of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), mainly methane and nitrous oxide. Dairy emissions account for nearly a quarter of New Zealand's emissions (Foote, Joy, & Death, 2015). Hydra ravaged and killed herds of animals, just as the New Zealand dairy industry slaughters around 2 million bobby calves every year (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2017).

Campaigning against the evident animal abuses and environmental fall-out of the dairy industry has felt like fighting Hydra. The giant serpent keeps gaining strength, growing and dividing itself into ever more mutations even while I futilely aim for the jugular with my pen as the sword and my heart in my mouth. While the deforestation Hercules employed to kill Hydra recalls the massive deforestation for animal agriculture in colonial Aotearoa New Zealand, killing the dairy industry feels like an even greater task. It involves addressing the complex superstructure and belief systems this industry has cultivated.¹

I should have known better than to poke a sleeping serpent.

That brings me to a story about the beginning ...

In the beginning Hydra slept. I also slept, like the child I was, with an innocence. Children don't usually go around poking at serpents. They have other things to do.

As a child I raised three calves for calf club, and I loved those calves with all of my being. I brushed them and cuddled them, spending hours teaching them to lead. I fed them warm milk from a bucket twice a day. I soon learned, however, that not all calves are born equal. On the way to school we passed a bobby calf pen. I don't know who it was, but someone told me they were bobby calves and that they got sent to the 'freezing works' to be killed. The freezing works was up the road and it smelled bad. Sometimes the smell of death would travel the two kilometres to our farmhouse. The calves stood there on the cold frosty morning with their little hooves on the wooden slats. They would be picked up and taken to the freezing works. They were a blur as the car passed them by. I think I might have caught the eyes of one of

them. But I am not sure. Memory is a fickle companion. All I can say with any certainty is that those calves had a lasting impact on me.

I learned a lot of things about the animal-human relationship while raising calves, many of them covert. Through calf club I learned that an animal's body is a possession. I won prizes for my calf club calves – 'dairy type' and 'rearing'. I also was taught that we control those bodies and sometimes inflict pain on them. One awful and bloody day my father dehorned our pet calves. The smell of the burning flesh seared my nostrils. Their heads were trapped in a device, so they could not move. The blood trickled down onto their long eyelashes.

Another time I watched as my father pulled a calf from a cow with a tractor and ropes. He had been brought up on a dairy farm, but now this little hobby block was just an interest for him. The cows were going to be sold on. I didn't know much about birth and death, but I watched as the steamy calf dropped solidly to the ground with his tongue lolling. I saw the mother turn around to lick her calf. Much later when I gave birth to my own son I remembered that cow.

I remember her still, just as I remember the girl-child I once was. She's still there, shadowy and ghost-like, unable to let go of the pain. I remember the bobby calves in their pen, looking unknowingly into their brutal and short future. I remember the icy morning and the warm milk. I remember my anxiety that humans hurt animals. It still churns in my stomach.

That's the thing with memories. They may be fickle, and they may be blurry, but they seep into you, so you are never separate from them. Even the unconscious ones.

As a child I learned all the lessons that children must learn to become participating members of a culture that normalises the use of nonhuman animals for their flesh and bodily secretions such as milk. I learned that we have a right to breed and display animals like possessions; to maim them and domesticate them; to incarcerate and kill them; and to eat them. I learned we can even take their babies from them and claim them as our own.

The New Zealand Dairy Industry

I did not know it then, as a child, but the dairy industry and its monstrous assumptions were inside me. They were inside me when I took pride in my ribbon for ‘dairy type’ at the calf club. The monster was nourished with every glass of milk; every time I collected the milk bottles from the gate; every satisfying push on the silver top of the bottle; every cheese toastie and every encounter with my pet calves. Such everyday cultural practices normalised the consumption of milk and milk products.

In 1979, when I was 12 years old, New Zealanders each drank 188 litres of milk per annum. (New Zealand History, 2018). I don’t think I made the connection between bobby calves and milk. These kinds of unpalatable truths are relegated to the margins of society.

From the 1980s there has been a general upward trend in the number of dairy cattle in New Zealand. In the 2016/17 season there were 4,861,324 dairy cows in New Zealand (Livestock Improvement Corporation Limited & DairyNZ Limited, 2017).

The systemic agricultural practices of the dairy industry have become increasingly technologised alongside the intensification process. This is especially evident with breeding. Cows are impregnated yearly to induce lactation. In the 2016/2017 calving season 72.7 percent of cows were inseminated by artificial insemination (Dairy NZ). The aim of Dairy NZ is to yield greater milk with fewer cows – thus maximising profit.

Once the calf is born most cows will bond due to hormonal changes. Just as in humans, the bonding process is triggered by rising oxytocin levels released during calving. Hudson and Mullord investigated maternal bonding in dairy cattle in New Zealand. They concluded that ‘five minute contact with a calf immediately post-partum is sufficient for the formation of a strong, specific maternal bond with the calf’ (Hudson & Mullord, 1977). A more recent study confirms that cows and calves form strong bonds. Weary and Chua documented behaviour patterns in cows and calves after separation indicating stress including moving and standing up more, calling out, and putting their head out of the pen.

Of course, academic proof of a cow's maternal distress at separation from a calf is not necessary for us to *know* it happens. On a rescue mission one day I witnessed first-hand a mother cow who had just had her calf taken from her. The bellows were relentless and painful as she called over the fence for her calf. She paced rapidly back and forth along the fence line, her movements frenzied and panicked.

I have also seen new born calves just taken from their mothers. Their forlornness is evident. They are all alone in the world. Once the farmer determines a calf to be surplus to requirements she or he is tagged for death and killed. 1.77 million calves were sent to the slaughter house at a mere 4 -10 days of age in the 2016/2017 calving season (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2017). This was an increase from the 1.5 million calves in 2008, but a decrease from when bobby calf numbers peaked at almost 2.2 million calves in 2015 (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2017).

The Hydra's appetite for calves is enormous and multifaceted. Calves are not only killed at slaughterhouse facilities. They also die on the farm.

Dairy NZ has put out a booklet entitled 'Humane slaughter: On-farm guidelines' (Dairy NZ). It states, 'Humane slaughter of calves (birth to yearling) may be required when rearing is considered non-viable' (8). It is recommended that these calves are killed by captive bolt, firearm or chemical means (euthanasia by a vet). The Code of Welfare for Dairy Cattle (2016) issued under the Animal Welfare Act further requires that any technique used must result in rapid destruction of brain function. It also states that : 'Calves must not be killed by the use of blunt force', except in emergency situations when no other methods are available. (New Zealand Government, 2016, p. 31).

The ban on killing calves by blunt force was put in place after a public outcry following the investigation of New Zealand dairy company Manuka by Chilean authorities. This investigation was a result of the use of blunt force trauma by a Manuka production manager on a Chilean dairy farm. The killing of 6000 bobby calves on this farm included 'smashing a bobby calf to death with a hammer' (The National Business Review, 2014).

New Zealand likes to claim it has high animal welfare standards, with an Animal Welfare Act (1999) that establishes a ‘duty of care for animals’ (Ministry for Primary Industries). In landmark amendment to the Act in 2015, all animals are now considered sentient (Library of Congress, 2018). The law requires people in charge of animals to ‘attend properly to the welfare of those animals’ (Library of Congress, 2018).

Despite these platitudes, footage from Farmwatch revealed in the ‘Dark Side of Dairying’ campaign in 2015 revealed extreme examples of cruelty by workers in the bobby calf killing chain (Farmwatch, 2015). Footage showed calves who were left in cages on the roadside for hours without sustenance, thrown onto transport trucks, bludgeoned and thrown mercilessly around blood-soaked slaughterhouse concrete floors.

In my activist and rescue work, stories also leak from workers within the dairy industry. This year one of the most harrowing stories I have been told is of calves who are sick being left to die in pens, put especially aside for this purpose. They are denied any sustenance and care and must die a prolonged and distressing death. There are parallels here with stories of the dying rooms in orphanages in China where sick babies are left to die without sustenance. Anne Thurston relates her experience of this, ‘I had expected the dying children to be crying, begging to be saved. Instead they were silent, withdrawn, immobile. They had no expectation of being comforted or saved’ (Thurston, 1996).

And so it is with the calves. They demonstrate ‘learned helplessness’. There is no expectation of kindness or nurturing.

The stories of calves subject to this kind of cruelty leak into the margins of our lives, only told to people who have learned to listen. These stories are slippery, snippet-like and prone to disappear. They are difficult to validate, and even harder to internalise.

Dairy Industry Mythology

The legend of Hydra also illustrates the mythological power of dairy industry leaders and their reliance on storytelling through television commercials (TVCs) to convince the public they are immortal and invincible. Hydra is a demonstration of the power of storytelling and narrative in shaping cultural perceptions.

Writer and activist Paul Judge and I have analysed how Fonterra, New Zealand's largest company (a dairy co-operative) has recently produced a series of TVCs. It was fronted by former All Black Captain and now media influencer Richie McCaw. These TVCs build on cultural norms associated with Arcadian rural idyll discourse (Armstrong, 2017). These include ideas such as the community working together for the common good; hard-working generations of kiwi farmers; cows treated kindly and in a mutually beneficial relationship with farmers (Tulloch & Judge, 2018). Other key cultural messages in the TVCs include patriotism through agrarian connection to the land.

We tease out the various discourses arguing that:

The above discourses are, in reality, not clearly demarcated and contained within labelled categories. The advertisements use the various ideologies by interlacing them to make an ever-evolving discursive position on dairy farming in New Zealand. For example, the Arcadian rural idyll ideologies are articulated with technological innovation and environmental sustainability in powerful ways. (Tulloch & Judge, 2018)

There is an inevitability about the goodness and strength of dairying for New Zealand and New Zealanders.

Starfish Bobby Calf Project: waging the battle against Hydra

The journey of Starfish Bobby Calf Project has involved a lot of dedicated hope and faith. At the door of desperation, when a young calf's life has hung in the balance, I have hoped. It has

involved me in a spiritual awakening of sorts. When I walk alongside my bovine rescues I offer myself to their rhythms. They have a capacity, in their silent communion, to make time stand still.

From its inception Starfish has been a community and has evolved in relation to the strengths and commitment of the people involved. Nonetheless, despite the increasing involvement of people over the years, I originally founded Starfish. Starfish was conceptualised after an epiphany moment. It's about now, in my forties, that Hydra wakes from his slumber and reveals a character so foul I could not ignore it anymore.

I was working as an academic and had rented a house in a rural area. A calf rearer was leasing the land I was living on to raise ex-bobby calves to on-sell to farmers who would then 'finish' them to slaughter weight. These calves may escape the bobby truck, but they go on to spend their entire short lives growing like a crop that will be harvested.

The calf rearer was a nebulous character. He would appear in a noisy haze with his farm bike, towing a milk feeder in his wake. The calves would come in waves, running to the substitute mother and latching onto the rubber teats. Their little tails wagged rapidly. Then one day a batch of very young sickly calves arrived. In the next few days there was a succession of calf deaths. I felt anxious for their welfare and tried to help. I retrieved a calf who lay curled up on the outside of the fence having tried to escape, possibly looking for his mother.

It felt like I was in an alternative reality. I did not go to work that week but watched over the calves. They fell like dominoes, like flies, like so many lost souls. On a wet morning, the type that only occurs in the dank Waikato, I looked out the window to see a calf lying motionless in the middle of the paddock. I ran to him and he was still alive, still breathing in guttural grunts of pain. I had heard those sounds before from my oldest son who had experienced several serious bouts of pneumonia.

The rain dripped down my face, and the world disappeared under my feet. I imagined all the people in warm cafes sipping coffee made from the milk his now absent mother produced for him.

The implications from a feminist perspective, and from the personal stance of a mother who has breastfed babies were clear. The networks of commodification that exert power over the nonhuman animal body are gendered (Gillspie, 2014). Sexual violence in the dairy industry is prevalent and the cow is exploited for her reproductive capacities during dairy production. This includes domination over the reproductive capacities of cows, including artificial insemination and the removal and killing of the cow's offspring.

This young calf desperately needed his mother. Calling on my younger son for help I carried the calf to a shed for shelter. I fell to my knees and cradled his head. I was a mother with my own son. The monstrous presence of Hydra looked over my back at the calf. His poisonous breath and toxic blood permeated the air with a foul smell. The calf had diarrhoea. His head hung limply in my hands, his own breath shallow and difficult.

I called the calf rearer. He did not come for an hour, just long enough for me to experience emotions so profound they would change the course of my life. I nursed that calf and held him, just as I had done with my son. I stood in for the absent cow who could not mother.

I never found out if the calf lived or died. I did ask, but the answer was vague and noncommittal. It seemed to me that he well may have forgotten the exact calf I was referring to. After all, he had so many. I knew he had a pile of dead calves at the back of his shed on his premises down the road. Their unblinking eyes had startled me one day when I had gone in search of the calf rearer. A farm hand came up behind me, a largish man with chapped hands - the calf rearer's own son. He asked me what I was doing there. I had a feeling I was in the wrong place and a threat hung unsaid between us. There are some secrets that Hydra does not want told. The farmer is a protector of those secrets.

I became vegan overnight and planned the Starfish project over the next year. It is called Starfish because of the story by Loren Eiseley called 'The Star Thrower', about a man who decides to return stranded starfish to the sea, rather than continuing to appropriate them like other characters.² This revolutionary aspect of the Starfish story is captured in its mission to facilitate a cultural and political shift in our relations with animals. Starfish has two broad aims that converge with those of the contemporary animal rights movement: a) gaining publicity to

raise awareness of the issues in dairying and b) challenging conventional thinking about our relationship with non-human animals (L. Munro). Starfish also supports people in becoming active in animal rescue and rehabilitation and in facilitating possibilities for activist action.

To achieve the above aims Starfish uses several strategies. I rescue calves who have been condemned to death by the dairy industry, providing a safe refuge while we find permanent homes for life. The numbers of calves that I rescue under Starfish are negligible considering the vast numbers that are killed in New Zealand. This haunting reality is also captured in ‘The Star Thrower’; as Eiseler writes, ‘I flung and flung again while all around us roared the insatiable waters of death’ (90). Nonetheless, for the calves we do save the principles of life, compassion and true humanity are upheld.

Apart from saving their lives, I rescue these calves so that people can experience them as individuals and not as a faceless mass. The primary objective is to re-introduce these calves on a cultural level. I aim to re-represent them. Through social media posts, media opinion pieces and a website we frame our rescue calves as individuals who have distinct personalities.

In addition, Starfish has become the springboard for activist protests against dairy. We have hosted several protests including: outside the Fonterra office in Hamilton in January 2015;³ outside the Huntly District Courthouse in June 2016 when ‘bobby basher’ (as he was dubbed in the media) Noel Piraka Erickson was on trial for abuse of bobby calves; outside the Waikato Museum when it was hosting an exhibition put together by Fonterra in December 2016; outside the Meat Fest in Auckland in February 2017.⁴ It seems we are always ‘outside’, pushing the boundaries of what is considered normal in our relations with the nonhuman animal.

Starfish takes an animal rights perspective where animals are considered as having value in themselves. This perspective contrasts with the dominant representation of farm animals as property, as commodities and as dispensable. The primary idea that Starfish aims to disseminate is that cows and calves are subjects of their own existence: they possess a will to live and can experience a range of emotions.

Dilemmas and limits of sanctuary work

In his doctoral dissertation Elan Abrell (2016) theorised this role that many animal sanctuaries perform. Abrell argues that the sanctuaries he studied in the US ‘function as laboratories where activists conceive and operationalize new models for ethical relationships, models they hope will influence broader public debates’ (iv).

Abrell also discusses how in rescuing animals from situations where they have no rights (animals-as-property), activists face many dilemmas and contradictions. Abrell argues that through the process of transforming from *bestia sacer* (animal with no rights) to sanctuary animal is deeply complex. Through their rescue these animals have been discursively reshaped as having rights. Yet this is not how they are viewed in the wider socio-political and economic context of wider society. Legally these animals are still considered property. According to Abrell, their relationship with humans in the sanctuary community is one of ‘improperty’. They are living beings sitting precariously ‘on a shifting spectrum between property and subjecthood’ (v).

Even in sanctuaries it is difficult to ensure that an animal is treated as a subject and given agency. The idea of animals-as-property is embedded in the processes of the legal system. At Starfish, for example, I must legally ensure that I register my calves with the National Animal Identification and Tracing (NAIT) system. This involves assigning a number to the animal concerned and putting a tag in his/her ear. We also have to limit their agency through farming practices such as fencing (incarceration) and veterinary procedures which may be painful like dehorning or desexing. While the practices described above may be in the best interests of the animal’s welfare, it quickly becomes apparent that conferring rights on animals in a sanctuary context is not without its philosophical dilemmas.

Furthermore, in market discourse our rescue calves are still regarded as tradeable commodities. At Starfish we buy calves from farmers or from stockyards, putting money back into the very industry responsible for their suffering in the first place. Thus, as Abrell asserts,

the realities of animal rescue requires compromises to the aspiration of giving animals autonomy as subjects of their own existence.

At Starfish we attempt to rehome calves to people who will keep them for their natural life, though this can be problematic as there is a shortage of resources to keep all of them throughout their lives. Although the new caregivers sign an adoption form saying they are no-kill homes, and they will surrender them back if they do not want them anymore, the animals are still vulnerable as legally their status is property. Once we have handed the calves over we have no legal recourse to stop the new ‘owners’ from sending the animals to slaughter.

Abrell insightfully comments that, ‘[r]emaining entangled in larger political-economic contexts of animal circulation and still susceptible to physical control and potentially harmful treatment by humans as a result of their legal status, animals in sanctuaries are neither fully autonomous subjects nor property’ (v). This ambiguous position can create very real danger for the animals. For example, despite my best efforts we had two escapee rescue steers who were rustled by a neighbouring farm and never returned.

Mostly there are successful outcomes for the rescue calves and some of their stories will be told below. However, and drawing on Abrell’s analysis, it is important to note that without a shift in the larger political and economic structure that frames the legal realities of these animals’ lives, they are never really autonomous.

Hydra fights back

I rescued three calves from a calf-pen in Te Aroha one foggy winter day in 2016 (fig. 1). The farmer questioned me about my motives. I told him I just wanted some calves for pets and I wanted to save their lives and give them a good home. He sold them to me, but levelled with me by saying the calves were worthless.

I’m always hedging my encounters with farmers, always warding off the potential threat. I have to be ready to disarm any conflict for the animals’ sake. I practice welfarist

language and morph into what I need to be in the face of Hydra's physical presence. At any moment he could strike.



Fig. 1: Shalana and Lynley Tulloch. One of the bobby calves rescued from a pen at Te Aroha, New Zealand. Photo credit: Megan Ebersberger

When navigating the swampy lowlands of Waikato dairy farms, I must be something they can understand. I feel like a traitor. It is one of the hardest, most contradictory parts of calf rescue. I have to deny my real self to walk among them. The utilitarian value-system that frames the existence of animals in the animal agriculture industry is pervasive among the farmers I have encountered.

The welfarist model is always at my disposal to give me the right answers that allows me to rescue the calves safely. I always put their safety first.

I am 'othered' and I 'other' the calves. I 'other' the farmers. I utilise the very discourses I challenge to rescue them. Rescues involve a very self-conscious positioning of discourse. I look at the farmer as discursively constituted. I wage a discursive battle, riding in on my Trojan horse.

Sometimes farmers use black humour, either to defuse the situation or as a form of micro-aggression. An example of this is one farmer who told me that the calves would ‘make good steak when they get a bit bigger’. The farmer had been told I was vegan and had been reluctant to sell them to me. These kinds of micro-aggressions are characteristic of rescue attempts.

Aggression from dairy farmers is usually limited to my social media page. In this form, abuse directed toward me has been prevalent, and at times overwhelming. This has included implied death threats, a concerted smear campaign as well as a sharing of the email address of the Dean at the University where I worked as a lecturer. This campaign involved encouragement for people to write letters of complaint to the Dean. In a meeting with the Dean, I was shown a letter, presumably from dairy farmers, that called on the University to sack me, or they would not send their children there.

The complaints were not, of course, upheld. Public universities in New Zealand should not only serve the public good, but have a legal obligation to take up a role as critic and conscience of society and to uphold academic freedom (Munro, 2016).

There is also an aspect of surveillance by the dairy industry. In 2016 Starfish erected an anti-dairy billboard in a prominent place in Hamilton, Waikato (fig. 2). It read: ‘The dairy industry slaughters millions of calves every year, just so we can drink their mothers’ milk. Ditch Dairy. Go Vegan’. It included the Starfish Bobby Calf website. It ran for the months of November and December. We received threats on Facebook that the billboard would be vandalised, but it never was.



Fig. 2: The Starfish Bobby Calf Project erected in Hamilton, New Zealand. Photo Lynley Tulloch.

In January it was replaced with a new billboard. Dairy NZ placed one on the same space, I believe in response to the perceived public relations threat our billboard represented.

It also contained a message for us.

It read: 'Dairy. It's a big thing for New Zealand'.

Emotional work of activists and volunteers

Dairy is a big thing. Fighting Hydra alone is impossible. Starfish is a loosely organised group of vegans and activists who have one thing in common – a commitment to fight the dairy industry and expose the inherent cruelties and environmental impacts. At Starfish the people volunteering with the rescue calves are usually already transgressing the normative social order

pertaining to our relationship with nonhuman animals. Many are committed vegan animal rights activists.

Emotional dynamics are central to social movements (Collins, 2001). They work to motivate and cement commitment. Nonetheless, emotional work can take a toll and activists and volunteers can experience burn-out, stress, and feelings of alienation from wider society.

It is clear from the informal interviews I have done with activists/volunteers who have connected with the Starfish calves that this encounter elicited a strong emotional response. Volunteer work involves a lot of emotional work, including the management of emotions, and emotional costs (Hacobsson & Lindblom, 2013).

The personal connection with calves was significant to Adrian Rogers (fig. 3), an investigator for Farmwatch. Adrian met the calves while filming the *Dark Side of Dairying Campaign* in 2015 (Farmwatch, 2015):

Meeting the calves was deeply moving. I had seen them on farms by the hundreds, but to experience their individual capacity for joy, playfulness and companionship was nothing short of a revelation. It made the treatment of bobby calves at the hands of the dairy industry almost completely unfathomable. (Rogers)



*Fig. 3: Adrian and Gorgeous George, one of our rescue bobby calves.
Photo credit: John Darroch*

Volunteer Susanne (surname withheld upon request) was also touched by the calves' vulnerability when helping foster calves in 2018:

Big beautiful eyes, so gentle and cheeky and still wobbly when she stood up. Another calf that was too scared to drink from the bottle and still so weak. It was heart-breaking to see these babies without their mother. I can't believe they are just four very lucky babies to be saved when so many have a horrific fate awaiting them. (Susanne)

Emerging themes from these interviews include an emotional connection with the calves and a deepening horror at what the dairy industry subjects them to.

Alice Shopland, founder of a vegan food company called Angel Food was a sponsor of a rescue calf she called Gabriel (fig. 4). Gabriel is a long-term resident of Starfish, having never been rehomed due to health issues as a calf. His journey from a sickly calf to a boisterous and confident three year old steer who recognises his name and enjoys being close to humans is one of my favourite stories. I asked Alice what meeting Gabriel had meant to her and if it shifted her animal rights advocacy. She said:

The massive scale of animal exploitation can be overwhelming and, dare I say it, even numbing for people who know what's going on and who care about it. Meeting Gabriel was a potent reminder for me that these are sentient beings and that they are individuals. We can't put everything right as fast as we want to. But we can make a difference for some of the individuals caught up in an unjust system, and we should. (Shopland)



*Fig. 4: Gabriel the rescue bobby calf with Lynley Tulloch. He is now 3 years old.
Photo credit: Andrew Collins*

Activists' experience with the very animals they are fighting for appears to be valuable in fostering an emotional connection with the animals and deepening an understanding of their predicament. The invisibility of animal sentience within large scale agricultural practices such as dairying in New Zealand can be broken down with physical contact.

The importance of physical contact comes through clearly in the following quote from Sarah Oliver on meeting a calf called Rosie. Sarah is a long term vegan and SAFE member who volunteered with Starfish in 2016.

When I met Rosie what struck me was the confirmation of 'someone' who was aware, as my dog is. She also was so panicked and wary of us and I could only imagine the scale of terror that she would experience as a calf at a meatworks. Also connecting with her as I had not been around cows since I was a child on farms when I was not connected at all with them as animals. (Oliver)

Kat Worsfold, vegan activist and founder of The Roost Sanctuary (a rooster sanctuary in New Zealand) felt a range of emotions at being involved in a calf rescue. It was an experience she treasures.

A couple of years ago I was privileged to participate in a rescue of some bobby calves who were destined for the slaughterhouse. We went to a breeding farm in Waikato, where we met these gorgeous little beings. They just wanted to cuddle up to you and suck your fingers, because of course, they had been torn away from their mums virtually at birth. They were just full of love - wanting to both give and receive it.

So, we helped Lynley Tulloch by bringing some calves to her house and settling them into their little warm barn. What a wonderful experience that was, to help in saving these lives. This will remain one of my most treasured memories. All beings want to live, and all lives are worth saving. (Worsfold)

Vegan writer and activist Sandra Kyle has been associated with Starfish from the beginning. She tells of one of the earliest rescues.

Raised in an urban environment, I had never before been so close to farmed animals. I watched as these bobbies, plucked at the last minute from the slaughter truck, were released into the paddock of their new, safe, temporary home. Please don't tell me that animals don't feel joy. A number of these little ones started running and jumping – yes jumping – up and down, like excited children! (Kyle)

Paul Judge, an administrator of the Starfish Bobby Calf Facebook page, felt a range of emotions in the rescue of one calf (fig. 5):

We rescued a little shivering calf from the Frankton Saleyards and called him Gorgeous George. He was nursed to full health with love and care and I will never forget the day I visited and saw him running with joy and sheer curiosity around the paddock. There was a sadness to it, though, as he went up to a horse in the neighbouring paddock and tried to approach her as if the horse were his Mum. It was heart-breaking. A memory I have of him some months later was one of witnessing this little calf's profound joy of life. He had been called over for feeding and came on his own from way across the paddock and under the stand of tall trees where he was hanging out with his mates, about three other steers of varying ages. After he'd had his fill he ran off as fast as he could to be back with his mates. I had never seen a bovine animal express such delight in being alive. The image of this little guy bouncing off towards his buddies has stayed with me as an image of true animal sentience and bonding with his fellow beings. (Judge)



*Fig. 5: Paul Judge with Gorgeous George shortly after he was rescued.
Photo credit: Lynley Tulloch*

Connection with the calves as *subjects* is a clear theme emerging from the interviews. Emotions toward the calves ranged widely and included fear and reverence. Starfish volunteer and long term vegan activist Michael Hitchcock expresses this well:

Meeting Starfish calves is coming face to face with the victims of the dairy industry. A reminder that bobby calves are not a statistic, but babies who want nothing more than our compassion. A reminder as to why I'm an activist. (Hitchcock)

Halimah Ilvarasi, a vegan advocate from Singapore visited the calves in 2016. The calves were a bit bigger when she came, and she felt a little intimidated.

Meeting your calves was a whole different experience. Firstly, the size. I've never had the opportunity to be around animals so big, so magnificent and so powerful. I think my initial meet was a mixture of anxiety (afraid of getting kicked, trampled on), reverence and appreciation. (Ilvarasi)

The people who adopt the calves for life often find that close contact deepens their compassion, and that of family members. Rhiannon Rodriguez is a vegan mother who recently adopted a little calf (fig. 6) who was named Marshmallow by her four-year-old son Mason. She says:

Ember is too little to understand, but Mason now completely understands that she would have been killed so we could drink her mother's milk, and he is absolutely devastated by the thought. He keeps asking why humans would do that and why would they have taken her from her mum and would they have cried. Then he adds, it's OK we'll be her mummy now. (Rodriguez)



Fig. 6: Marshmallow and Ember. Ember is Rhiannon's youngest child. She has formed a deep bond with Marshmallow. Photo credit Rhiannon Rodriguez

For children allowed to express and develop empathy and explore value-systems toward animals who are farmed, new possibilities open for a more compassionate co-existence. Rhiannon also stated that her husband, who was not yet fully vegan was having a shift of consciousness.

Vidal, who isn't vegan, has had a rather vast shift of consciousness. He's totally in love with Marshmallow and it's definitely put a question mark over his consumption of milk. I think he very much had his head in the sand before, but you can't ignore it when there is a bobby calf giving you cuddles. (Rodriguez)

Very few activists come to the farms with me to rescue the calves, but Paul Judge accompanied me on a recent visit to rescue calves. He reacted with sadness.

I've been quite sad about it all, those little ones we left. Can't get them out of my mind ... the lovely little one who was sitting so dignified and quiet. (Judge)

Ah yes. The ones who are left behind. Hydra comes for them.

The satisfaction that comes from successfully rescuing and raising a calf who would otherwise have been slaughtered is one of the positive aspects of rescue work. It helps to spend time with them and know that you did make a difference and prevented a calf meeting the horrific fate of the bobby truck. Alfie (fig.7) was one such calf. He had been the last born calf on a dairy farm that was closing down and being sold. When I went to pick him up he had been all on his own for several days in a calf shed that had housed probably thousands of calves over the years who had gone to their deaths. His late birth had saved him, as he missed the bobby truck and I was made aware of his presence. He frolicked in the pen, oblivious to how close his life had hung in the balance.



Fig. 7: Alfie, one of our rescue bobby calves. Photo credit: Max Deutsche

Shawn Bishop sponsored our calf Gorgeous George in his first few months. She came to meet him and was delighted in his gregarious nature (fig. 8). She says,

Meeting Gorgeous George was such a mix of emotions: wonder at his innocence, delight in his friendliness, and profound sadness knowing the fate of two million tiny calves just like him. (Bishop)



*Fig. 8: Shawn Bishop with Gorgeous George the calf she sponsored at Starfish.
Photo credit: Debbie Mathews*

Yet despite the strong painful emotions, sanctuary work can be deeply rewarding. Shawn Bishop who runs The Animal Sanctuary illustrates well the complexity of emotions this work involves in the following quote:

Running an animal sanctuary, and rescuing animals that are abused or about to be killed, is extremely hard work... and is incredibly rewarding. It fills my heart and satisfies my soul. In spite of the horrible situations I'm exposed to, I walk around with a Cheshire Cat grin, knowing with certainty that I DO make a difference. (Bishop)

Conclusion

As Eiseley notes of the beach in his story, 'death walks hugely and in many forms ... In the end the sea rejects its offspring' (70). And so it is with the dairy industry, whose faceless form, likened throughout this paper to Hydra, casts its offspring out; condemns them to a cruel and untimely fate. Eiseley describes the collectors of starfish and shells as having a 'greedy madness'

about them (69). They ignore the plight of the dying starfish, seeing them in mass terms as a means to make money. And so it is with calves.

The pathological madness of the dairy industry needs to be challenged. In the popular imagination, dairying is positioned as a form of good nutrition and an innocent farming activity. Its far reaching tentacles now have their grip firmly in the global context, where consumers buy into the pure and natural branding of Fonterra. Far from being innocent and pure, Fonterra has a lot of blood on its hands and has caused immense suffering to animals and the wider environment.

Starfish Bobby Calf Project is a loosely connected group of activists and volunteers located in New Zealand who have the common goal of fighting against the dairy industry and advocating for the animals caught up in its brutality. The emotional experiences of this kind of activism are important in fostering a cohesiveness and strengthens the movement. Such emotional work is underexplored in terms of animal rights activism and it is hoped that this analysis will lend some valuable insights into its significance. Animal advocacy work becomes more meaningful when it is connected to direct experiences, such as direct physical contact and care of rescued calves. The stories presented of physical and emotional contact with rescued animals illustrates the importance of this type of work as an essential component of education for change. Meaningful experience and emotional engagement with animals may be the fire that eventually destroys Hydra.⁵

In this paper I have described the history and development of my animal rights activism and its focus on the dairy industry. I have explored deep contradictions within our Western culture and our attitudes toward animals, through auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnography is more a process than a product. It provides an authentic way to write my life into my scholarship. As a living document I hope that it will engage readers with the possibilities of social action for animals. This story does not end here. It is not an end in itself, but rather invites further conversations and evokes possibilities for a more compassionate world.

I also hope that this paper might engage activists involved in sanctuary work in further theorising the many dilemmas we face. How do we address the many contradictions evident in caring for animals who are ‘improperty’, neither full subjects or property.

Sanctuary work is extremely hard, and yet it is an important arena of resistance to dominant ideologies of animals as property. In my view, the animals within sanctuaries deserve us to give this important subject our full attention (fig. 8).



*Fig. 8: Lynley Tulloch with Gorgeous George at 2 years of age.
Photo credit: Paul Judge.*

Notes

¹ I am indebted to Paul Judge for this insight.

² In this story the writer is walking on a beach in Costabel after a storm. The sand is full of dying starfish washed up from the sea, and Eiseley details how they cannot survive with their pores blocked with sand. ‘Long-limbed starfish were strewn everywhere, as though the night sky had showered down’ (Eiseley 70). Shell collectors are out at night during tourist season, collecting huge bags of starfish and shells to boil up – presumably making a profit from their deaths.

As the writer ventures further along the beach he notices an old man carefully selecting living starfish and throwing them back to safety in the sea. Eiseley contemplates the futility of this action, conjuring up images of starfish along the many beaches worldwide. Upon being questioned the old man simply replies that he gave up being a collector and wants to help the starfish.

Eiseley’s reflections raise profound questions about humans and our relationship with the natural world, and about our capacity for change. One man stood up against the masses; against those who seek to exploit and kill life. The old man is positioned as a lover of life and a representation of true humanity; whereas the other ‘collectors’ of starfish are engaged in what Eiseley disparagingly calls a ‘vulterine activity’. As he writes his story, Eiseley speaks of how, following in the footsteps of the old man, he goes on to fling starfish into the sea. He imagines other starfish being flung ‘far outward on the rim of space ... I could feel the movement in my body. It was like a sowing – the sowing of life on an infinitely gigantic scale’ (Eiseley 90).

³ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/farming/74725762/abuse-dished-out-to-both-sides-in-wake-of-bobby-calf-videos>

⁴ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/89802647/vegan-group-plans-protest-at-meatstock>

⁵ I am again indebted to Paul Judge for his engagement with this paper.

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