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# Cultural Myths and Open Secrets: The Cattle Industries in Australia

In a meditation on the "question of identity" Gertrude Stein, modernist writer, art collector, dog lover, writes about one of the dogs she and her partner Alice B. Toklas lived with: "I am I because my little dog knows me" (*Geographical History* 99). In a later discussion on identity and creativity Stein again includes the statement about her dog, adding:

I was just thinking about anything and in thinking about anything I saw something. In seeing that thing shall we see it without it turning into identity, the moment is not a moment and the sight is not the thing seen and yet it is. ("What Are Master-Pieces" 146–47)

With regard to Stein's unusual acknowledgement of the dog as a subject, and with respect, I rework her meditation to describe the moment when I turned on the television to watch the ABC current affairs program *Four Corners* and was confronted with a disturbing report which publicly 'outed' cruel practices taking place as part of the live animal export industry<sup>1</sup>:

I was just thinking about anything (in the lounge room relaxing at the end of a working day, television on in the background) and in thinking about anything I saw something. Suddenly images of steers being tortured to death were before me on the screen. In seeing that thing shall we see it without it turning into identity. We look at what is happening to individual cattle in an Indonesian abattoir but it is not us, it is them, or conversely one can simply turn away, turn a blind eye. The moment is not a moment. We know that it happens again and again. And the sight is not the thing seen. This is TV footage, we are not there in the abattoir. And yet it is. We know it happens

<sup>&</sup>quot;A Bloody Business." Four Corners. ABC Australia. 30 May 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;a href="http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2011/s3228880.htm">http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2011/s3228880.htm</a>.

and now we can see it. *Shall we see it without turning it into identity.* We see a steer but we don't recognise him as a subject and he cannot see us.

The public outcry following the exposé on *Four Corners* prompted the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard to call for a temporary suspension to the trade of live cattle to Indonesia. The animals in the *Four Corners* report are just a few of the millions of calves and cattle in the Australian cattle industries who are killed year in and year out for human consumption of meat and dairy products. The conditions of their lives and their deaths are geared to human profit and pleasure. It is an open secret. And the structure of the open secret depends on turning a blind eye.

### Part One: The Letter

A couple of Christmases ago, inserted inside a greeting card from a former colleague (coincidentally once my high school teacher), was a letter she had written to me:

#### Dear Melissa,

I have wanted to tell you about this visit to a big dairy when I was doing a certificate in agriculture. 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.

There are rows of these calf kennels in a paddock half a kilometre from their mothers living in the mega-shed. The chain on each calf is perhaps one to one and a half metres long – short enough so that the calves cannot possibly have any contact with each other. Thus they spend their youth.

I was deeply depressed (sickened) for weeks afterwards. Felt you are the only person I knew who I could tell. Anyway, not a topic for the 'festive season'!

This letter, written by a woman who has lived much of her life in the country, is remarkable in that it clearly shows that she did not know what happens to cows in parts of the dairy industry. At a personal level there was a sense of paradox that this person was sharing secrets with me – that I was the only one she could tell. Over forty years earlier, when she was my teacher in high school, she had been the object of my nascent desire. At age thirteen, and in the days before the gay rights movement fully evolved in this country, this became my first experience of being 'in the closet' – I kept my feelings secret, not only from her but from everyone I knew.

The letter inside the Christmas card, sent to me as someone known to care deeply about the welfare of cows, brought these two secrets together. The woman 'came out' to me as a witness to the institutionalised cruelty to dairy cows and in the process handed to me an 'open secret'. The operation of the open secret is embedded in the epistemology of the closet, which Eve Sedgwick identifies as "the defining structure for gay oppression" in the twentieth century (71).

The work of Sedgwick and others has shown that at the moment when gay identity was being publicly discussed, defined and categorised in medical discourse it was, paradoxically, constituted as a secret, an open secret. The conditions of secrecy that marked the entry of homosexuality into public discourse were necessary for what queer and performance theorist Lynda Hart, following Lacan, terms the maintenance of the "Law of the Father" whereby the retroactive constructions of sexual identities are necessary to uphold the fictional coherency of that symbolic order (Hart 17). As Hart points out, "the secret is thus not about the substance of something

hidden, but rather it is a construct born in the desire of the one who proposes a narrative of secrecy" (16-17).

The historical emergence of homosexuality in medical discourse meant, in Michel Foucault's words, that "the homosexual was now a species" (Foucault 43). Those in the field of animal studies are aware of the repercussions for individual animals when categorised as species, as Dale Jamieson points out: "individual creatures often have welfares, but species never do" (qtd. in Margodt 21). Marked as outsiders the new human species, the homosexual, was the subject of (pseudo) scientific scrutiny in medical discourses such as phrenology and sexology. In what Bram Dijkstra refers to as a "nasty exercise in phrenological fanaticism", forensic scientist Cesare Lombroso put forward a detailed connection between criminal behaviour and bodily signs (Dijkstra 289). As Hart suggests, Lombroso's pairing of so-called inversion with the female offender, which emerged from "the excruciating, painstaking calculation of his subjects' physical attributes; the obsessive measuring of their crania, anklebones, middle fingers ... is a wedding that has continued well into the twentieth century" (Hart 12–13).

Cows were and are subjected to the same kind of scrutiny. In an early instance, circa the 1820s, a version of cow phrenology developed in France whereby identification of certain markings on the back of cows' udders were said to "infallibly" predict cows who would produce the greatest amount of milk. The classificatory system was taken up with the view to create a superior "race of cows" (Valenze 279). Such eugenic practices foreshadow the industrialisation of cattle breeding which is now widespread.

The 'findings' of sexologists and criminologists conflated 'inversion' with the working class and criminality. Similarly marked by speciesism as abnormal, that is as not human, cattle are an unpaid working class. As a recent book on milk puts it, "the most modern dairy farms now rely on sophisticated technology that Karl Marx would recognize as ruthless agents [sic] of alienation" (Valenze 8). As well, cattle were and are treated as criminals with respect to the fact that they are held captive and have few individual rights. Animal welfare lawyer Malcolm Caulfield points out the inadequacy of existing laws to protect farm animals. He cites dairy and live

animal export as two industries with high levels of cruel practices built in as standard operating procedure (Caulfield).

In this paper I consider some of the factors that have contributed to the open secret of the practices of the cattle industry and the implications for animals. Sedgwick suggests that the terms "the closet' and 'coming out' now verg[e] on all-purpose phrases for the potent crossing and recrossing of almost any politically charged lines of representation" (71). The 'outing' of the cruel practices of the live animal export industry, publicly exposed in the *Four Corners* report, is an example of a politically charged line of representation, which has subsequently been crossed and recrossed.

## Part Two: Us and Them; Then and Now

In 1985 the late Val Plumwood, philosopher and environmental activist, survived a crocodile attack whilst canoeing in the Kakadu National Park. Twice she was released from the crocodile's death roll and twice recaptured until, after the third death roll, severely injured, she somehow managed to scramble up a steep muddy bank and first walked then crawled her way to safety until she was eventually found by a ranger. Woven into the narrative of this near-death experience is a broader discussion: firstly of the framework of human subjectivity "structured to sustain the concept of a continuing, narrative self" and thereby viewing the world "from the inside" (Plumwood, n.p). For Plumwood the near-death experience showed a glimpse "from the outside": "I was prey." With this first-hand experience she observes that humans "act as if we live in a separate realm of culture in which we are never food, while other animals inhabit a different world of nature in which they are no more than food, and their lives can be utterly distorted in the service of this end" (Plumwood, n.p).

The cattle industries in Australia, with their focus on cattle as food for humans, began with the importation of a small number of cattle by ship from South Africa c.1788. In an archaeological dig undertaken about twenty years ago in The Rocks in Sydney thousands of bones were recovered in the backyard of former convict George Cribb's property where he lived from

1809 to the 1820s (The Cumberland/Gloucester Street Archaeological Site, 5-6).



Figure 1 Cattle long bone chopped from Midshaft: Collection of The Rocks Discovery Museum. Courtesy of the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority

Archaeological evidence of slaughter waste covering the site suggests that Cribb, a butcher, supplied his shop with cattle and other animals who were slaughtered on his property (5–6).



Figure 2 Cattle butchered/chopped skull fragments: Collection of The Rocks Discovery Museum. Courtesy of the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority

Instead of showing these kinds of realities for animals, works by colonial artists, such as John Glover's watercolour *Patterdale Landscape* with Cattle c.1833, tend to reinforce a utopian vision. Art historian Jeanette Hoorn notes that by the 1830s "pastoral capitalism was changing the patterns of land use in Tasmania" (Hoorn 78). Glover's farm, "Patterdale", in

northern Tasmania, was a 7,000 acre property run by his sons with convict workers. Hoorn suggests that in paintings such as *Patterdale Landscape with Cattle* "the right of Europeans to exercise their gaze is being asserted" (78). Paintings of cattle grazing peacefully in the Australian landscape created an "arcadian vision of nature providing for the European" (78). But the promise of abundance for the humans is predicated on loss for the cattle themselves.



Figure 3 John Glover, Patterdale landscape with cattle c.1833

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, and the National Library of Australia, Canberra. Rex Nan Kivell Collection

Historically both economic and political interests have converged in the development of the cattle industry, particularly in the so-called 'frontier' lands of northern Australia. In the early decades of the twentieth century the development of the cattle industry in Australia was considered important on several counts: "in an era where the imperial bond was paramount, the export of beef was a tangible reminder of the alliance between Britain and Australia" (May 1). The "empty north" was felt to be vulnerable to foreign invasion and the cattle industries were considered to be part of a solution to this threat. In 1928 the North Australian Commission put forth a case that the Kimberley district needed to be populated: "It is so rich in natural resources that an enemy could land here and produce all their requirements" (May 1).

The white men who worked in the cattle industries in the frontier lands have been made the subject of nationalist mythmaking, although such mythologising often requires whitewashing. One example is Matt Savage, known as Boss Drover, who is remembered as a "peerless drover and cattleman ... a great name not so long ago around the campfires of central Australia and the desolate Kimberley region to the north" (Willey). Savage worked in the cattle industry in the Kimberley region for over fifty years, commencing as a boy in the early years of the twentieth century. The many stories he tells reveal brutality and indifference to the lives of animals and in many cases to the indigenous inhabitants: "he tells of a cattleman who chopped a stockboy's head off; then without wiping the axe, calmly returning to the butchering of a bullock" (Introduction). His stories mention in passing dogs killed en masse for their scalps which attracted a bounty paid by the government, a practice reintroduced in 2013, and cattle, stolen, abandoned and killed for any of the many reasons that suited the cattlemen:

At one time Victoria River Downs employed men to brand cattle on contract. There was nobody in the yard to keep tally and they were paid so much for each ear-mark they brought in. The mark was a little square – called a "block" – taken from the bottom of the ear with a pair of pliers.

Of course it was much more profitable to shoot an old bull – or even a prime bullock – because then you could cut about three blocks out of the bottom of the ear and another two or three from the top, and claim the money for half a dozen brandings. (50)

The novel *Man-Shy* (1931) by Frank Dalby Davison provides a counter-discourse figuring cattlemen as "hard-bitten fellows ... armed with whips" (Davison 5). The novel is distinctive in the way the narrative focuses on the

<sup>&</sup>quot;Pastoralists are being offered \$100 for each wild dog scalp they claim under a bounty scheme being trialled in Western Australia to reduce attacks on sheep and cattle. The state's agriculture and food minister, Ken Baston, said the \$75,000 programme would target an 88,000 sq km region encompassing more than 50 stations in the Murchison region ... Only pastoralists will be allowed to claim bounty payments, but they can give permission to external parties to kill wild dogs on their properties and pay them privately" ("Western Australia puts \$100 bounty on wild dogs").

point of view of the cattle, in particular a red heifer who is orphaned when her mother, described as an old, thin cow, gets bogged in the mud of an over-used water hole while her few days old calf sleeps on the bank. The calf wakes up and calls for her mother:

The old cow heard it. She answered, and her cry was a blending of physical and mental agony – the same as that of any other mother in like circumstances. Then she struggled. It was a terrific effort, and it racked her old frame to pieces. It was a losing struggle, for with each wrench of her body she slipped further back. The water rose up to her neck and bubbled round her nostrils. There was a short turmoil and swirling under the surface, as she drowned. (14)

Created from material Davison had previously published in Australia (1923–1925), a magazine owned and run by his family (Rorabacher 43), Man-Shy was originally rejected by publishers "because it was about a cow" (Dow 6). Davison and his brother printed and distributed the novel themselves and their father entered it into a literary competition established by the Australian Literature Society, in which it was awarded the gold medal for best Australian novel published that year (Rorabacher 43). Man-Shy starts with what Davison's biographer in the 1970s called "an opening sentence now familiar to every Australian with any knowledge of his nation's literature and to many readers abroad": "The mustering for drafting and branding was a distressing time for the cattle" (Rorabacher 45). The orphaned red heifer is eventually caught by the stockmen to be branded:

One man knelt on her neck. He gripped her jaw by thrusting his fingers in her mouth, and twisted her head up so that she could not move her fore-part. Before she could use her hind legs, they were in the noose of a rope, and stretched out and tied to a post. (32)

Two men hold her down while the branding iron is heated:

"Hang on!"

It was the warning word from the brander before he applied the iron.

The two assistants took a fresh grip and tensed their muscles.

The novel and its opening sentence are no longer as well known as they apparently still were in the 1970s.

The red heifer did not know what happened – or how long it would last. She felt the scorch of the iron, and bellowed and wrenched her body in one convulsive effort to free herself; but the pull of the ropes and the weight of the men had been applied in just such a way as to cope with that. She was helpless.

To the touch of the second and third iron she lay quiet, except for a painful quivering of her muscles. (50–51)

She later manages to escape from the cattle-yard and the novel tells her story of living in the bush, always on guard to evade the cattlemen's muster. *Man-Shy* and its popularity with readers provide evidence of an empathetic counter-discourse in Australian literature and culture which recognises the cow as a subject challenging or disrupting the default discourse about cattle. Sales of over 250,000 copies of the novel strongly suggest that this story, with its unusual focus on the animal's subject position, captured reader's interest, despite initial publisher concerns of the value of a story "about a cow".

In contrast *The Overlanders*, a 1946 film starring Chips Rafferty, creates a romanticised view of the drove. Critic Paul Byrnes notes that:

This film began as a propaganda production while the war was still going on. In 1943, the Australian government asked the British Ministry of Information to make a film to publicise Australia's war effort ... The inspiration was a true story told to [filmmaker] Harry Watt by an official of the Australian food administration. During 1942, 85,000 head of cattle had been driven south from northern Western Australia in order to protect them from the Japanese attack. Watt ... wrote a screenplay that brought together a set of strong characters projecting his sense of Australian values: self-reliance, bush toughness, ingenuity and egalitarianism.

Scenes shot from above showing men on horseback droving long, moving lines of cattle slowly across the desert landscape are accompanied by a sound track which features dogs barking, whips cracking and music which is "vigorous, with sweeping gestures and a heroic mood" (Stevenson). The myths of the drover as a dusty, hyper-masculine and patriotic hero are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Associate Professor Annie Potts for this insight.

evidenced again in the more recent blockbuster film *Australia* (2008), directed by Baz Luhrmann. Like *The Overlanders, Australia* renders the cattle industry, in particular the live export of cattle, as integral to the war effort (Boyde).

Representations of the dairy industry are generally of a different kind, figuring it as peacefully bucolic and gendered female, thereby obscuring the harsh realities for the animals. The Australian dairy industry depends on the deaths of an estimated 700,000 calves annually (Animals Australia) and a similarly high number of "redundant" dairy cows, but despite this is rendered as clean and green in promotional material.

The dairy farms found on the pages of several of Olga Masters's stories, mostly set in the 1930s, are in the lush country of the south coast of NSW. The stories reveal the close proximity of the lives of humans and cows, especially at milking time when the cows are milked by hand. But despite depictions of intimate human-animal contact the cows, and their bodily product of milk, are for the most part figured as displaced metaphors for the lives of the humans. Literary critic Dorothy Jones points out that the "pattern of allusions to milk and milking ... establish[es] the pervasive presence of the dairy industry" and the way it shapes, in particular, the women's lives (Jones 5). In *Loving Daughters* (1984) the characters' lives are so immersed in the routines and practices of dairying that the limited choices for one young woman – who returns to the dairy at milking time after a quarrel with her fiancé – are suggested in an image of flies trapped in the milk pails, "caught in the foam, struggling" to stay afloat (Masters 320).

In the short story "The Chosen Vessel", published in 1896, Barbara Baynton interweaves the situation of a dairy cow with that of a woman. Alone in the Australian bush with her baby while her husband is away shearing, the woman is murdered after night falls by a swagman who earlier had called at the house for a handout of food. The story opens with a scene of the woman separating a calf from its mother, a daily ritual:

she had been a town girl and was afraid of the cow, but she did not want the cow to know it. She used to run at first when it bellowed its protest against the penning up of its calf. This satisfied the cow, also the calf, but the woman's husband was angry, and called her – the noun was cur. It was he who forced her to run and meet the advancing cow, brandishing a stick, and uttering threatening words till the enemy turned and ran. "That's the way!" the man said, laughing at her white face. In many things he was worse than the cow, and she wondered if the same rule would apply to the man, but she was not one to provoke skirmishes even with the cow.

Leigh Dale suggests that the scene allows Baynton "to depict the trauma and the potential of violence which accompanies the separation of mother and child" (376). The effectiveness of this metaphor is that it is grounded in the revelation of a standard practice of dairying, the forcible separation of a calf from its mother so that the humans can have the milk instead of the calf. Dale notes that the overnight penning shown by Baynton has now been replaced by permanent separation of calves from their mothers (383 n.15).

The industrialisation of dairying and the hidden secrets of how cows have been transformed into units of production are what provided the shock that impelled my colleague to describe to me in the letter what she had witnessed:

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 ... The calf is taken to what seems like a large dog kennel and tied up with a collar and chain. ... Thus they spend their youth.

In a recent media release from the "Young Dairy Development Program" (established to support the work of young dairy farmers aged 18–40), the Australian dairy industry's ambitions are figured in a scenario that is already a reality for many cows throughout the world. Gone is any notion of green fields and contented cows:

Farms with 70,000 cows might seem like science-fiction to most Australian dairy farmers, but to Charlie Perotti they're all in a day's work ... Mr Perotti, a Senior Executive at Alta Genetics who manages its Global Reproduction and Premier Dairy program, will tell of his

experiences at some of the world's biggest dairy farms at the Milk it 4 More "Pathways For Your Future" expo. (Young Dairy Development Program)

That this undeniably dystopic scenario for the animals is promoted as aspirational necessitates the large-scale turning of a blind eye to the suffering of animals.

## Part 3: Blindspots

Luis Buñuel's experimental modernist film *Le Chien Andalou* (1929) emerges in violence – of both an overt and secret kind. A literal and figurative blindspot appears in the most famous scene in the film which shows a woman sitting on a balcony when a man approaches her from behind with a razor blade in his hand.



Figure 4 Image from Un Chien Andalou (1929) directed by Luis Buñuel

The sequence which follows includes a close up of her eye being slit open by the razor blade. The scene has been the subject of much critical discussion over the past seventy years. Taking note of Stein – "the moment is not a moment and the sight is not the thing seen and yet it is" – one finds in this case that the cutting of the woman's eye is not the cutting of a woman's eye.

It is an edited sequence to make it appear to be the cutting of a woman's eye but in reality it is the cutting of a calf's eye, which the filmmaker used instead of a human eye.



Figure 5 Image from Un Chien Andalou (1929) directed by Luis Buñuel

For the majority of critics of the film this fact and all the implications associated with it remains a blindspot. If it is mentioned at all it is merely an insignificant footnote.

The Four Corners exposé on national television of the plight of individual animals in the live animal export trade, made explicit in the graphic footage of deliberate cruelty to steers, including having their eyes stabbed and gauged, should no longer be a footnote. However the 'outing' of Meat and Livestock Australia and Livecorp's alleged prior knowledge and failure to act to protect the animals may become just another open secret with vested interests putting forward a strong case to retain cattle workers and their trade as an integral part of the fabric of Australia. Following the Four Corners report advertisements were placed in the print media such as "The human cost of animal cruelty" with a portrait style photo depicting a farming family and a personalised letter from a female farmer appealing to the Australian public for support and explaining how her family has been affected by the suspension of the live animal export trade: with three children under four and large overheads associated with the running of their herd of 10,000 cows, including fuel for their "vehicles and helicopters" she

writes that "we are left lying awake at night, contemplating our future" ("The Human Cost...").

The Labor government's decision to recommence the live animal export trade to Indonesia after the temporary suspension, and to provide financial compensation to the farmers affected by it, indicated that it felt confident that the majority of its constituents, however moved by what was revealed in the *Four Corners* report, were able to live with the open secret of that industry. An article in *The Australian*, "I'll say sorry to Jakarta for cattle ban: Tony Abbott", which showed a photo of cattle strung up on ropes, (according to the caption a photo of the cattle being unloaded in Indonesia), states that:

Opposition Leader Tony Abbott said if elected the Coalition would never make such a "catastrophic decision", which not only hurt the domestic cattle industry but soured trade relations with Indonesia...

Tony Abbott is now the Prime Minister of Australia, recently elected with a substantial majority. One of his first actions as Prime Minister was to travel to Indonesia and offer the apology:

"We can work together – but it will take some effort, especially after the shock of the former Australian government cancelling the live-cattle export trade in panic at a TV program," he told a business breakfast.

"Nothing like this can ever be allowed to happen again." ("Tony Abbott's Indonesia visit seals deal over live-cattle trade")

Following Abbott's visit the industry has agreed to supply Indonesia with:

53,000 "slaughter-ready" cattle, in addition to the December quarter quota of 46,000 head for fattening in Indonesian feedlots ... Australian exporters hope the new system will let Indonesian shipments next year reach 500,000 head and build from there towards the 2009–10 peak of 718,074 head. ("Tony Abbott's Indonesia visit…").

Clearly there are powerful intersections between cultural representations and the politics and economics of the cattle industry that inform a secrecy structure and its maintenance in Australia. The operation of the open secret is not to conceal knowledge, so much as to conceal knowledge of the

knowledge. The open secret enables denial, the choice of turning a blind eye. Perhaps the lessons learned by individual gay people and brought to light in queer theory may be useful: there is never one simple moment of revelation – of crossing the threshold of the closet – that will lead to permanent disclosure. Instead queer theory shows how the endlessly negotiated and renegotiated cycles of coming out – the crossing and recrossing of politically charged lines of representation – can eventually lead to social change. When knowledge of knowledge becomes public knowledge and cultural secrets are recognised as open secrets then the practice of turning a blind eye becomes visible. As Stein says: "Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches" ("If I Told Him" 221).

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