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Working with Sentient Property

Rhoda M. Wilkie, *Livestock/Deadstock: Working with Farm Animals from Birth to Slaughter*. *Animals, Culture, and Society* series. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2010. 248 pp. \$29.95

A few years ago, I worked with a writing student who decided to develop a project about his pigs for the local agricultural show. He described the meticulous attention he paid to his animals and the long hours spent each day prepping them for the county fair. He cleaned, fed, and cared for them, and genuinely enjoyed their company. He took pride in their fine quality, but he also seemed to perceive them as friends: he loved his pigs. If you have been to a county agricultural fair, you know that many of the livestock show animals are auctioned afterward. My student's pigs were no exception, and each year his prized pigs were sent off after auction, either for breeding or for slaughter. I found it difficult to reconcile this student's contradictory relationship with his pigs. He had expressed such affection for them, and yet didn't bat an eyelash about their ultimate fate. Incredulous, I asked if he ever wanted to keep a special pig instead of sending it off; he replied, his father would never allow that. They were a farming family, and keeping a pig simply was not done. I detected a sense of unease when I broached this topic, as if perhaps there had been a pig or two he would have preferred to keep, but ultimately he saw this as the way things work on his family's farm. This scenario, which is in no way unique, baffled me at the time, and it came to mind as I read Rhoda M. Wilkie's *Livestock/Deadstock*. Her work offers insight into this sort of human-animal relationship.

Rhoda M. Wilkie calls our attention to a critical gap, an "interspecies blind spot," in sociological research of human-livestock interactions: the voices of people directly involved with the production of food animals from birth to slaughter, and the ways in which they view and understand their interactions with the animals with which they work, have not been given due consideration (2). Her aim is to present a more nuanced look at human-animal relations, and to challenge the one-dimensional assumptions that are typically made about livestock producers' attitudes toward and perception of farm animals. Wilkie notes that much of the literature on livestock production has been developed by animal advocates, many of whom have no first-hand experience with livestock, leading to static representations of commercial animal production (i.e.

intensive production is bad and the workers are uncaring) and overlooks the possibility that some handlers may have more dynamic experiences with livestock. Wilkie argues that this bias in the available resources, coupled with our tendency to view livestock production through the lens of factory farming, does not present a complete picture. To obtain a fuller view of human-livestock relations, we must look at operations that vary in scale and purpose, as well as speaking to persons “who breed, rear, show, fatten, market, medically treat, and slaughter livestock,” in order to understand how they “perceive and make sense of their interactions with the animals that constitute the center of their everyday working lives” (2). Indeed, this seems to be a significant oversight in discussions of interspecies connections, and Wilkie’s book takes an important step in opening up new avenues of discourse.

Wilkie supplements her study with field research conducted in northeastern Scotland, which has a reputation for producing beef cattle. She employs an ethnographic approach, shadowing and interviewing people who represent a range of roles in the production process. This includes “thirteen farmers and stockmen, eighteen mart [livestock market] workers and auctioneers, twelve hobby farmers, five veterinary workers, and four abattoir workers” (189, n. 22). Her interviewees and the responses they elicit demonstrate the variety of attitudes toward and interactions with livestock that are possible throughout the process of production, and Wilkie effectively incorporates the information obtained from this research into her text. The first-hand accounts are quite revealing, and they are an important component of Wilkie’s larger project to understand the human-animal relationship from the perspective of the producers. That said, I wondered how representative this sample of interviewees was of human-livestock interactions in a broader sense. I am not trained in sociology, but my reaction to her study sample was to question if this snapshot of livestock production is perhaps, in part, influenced by the specific region and culture studied; would investigations in other national and international regions produce similar findings? While she is clear about the source of her field data, Wilkie’s text as a whole doesn’t address human-livestock relations solely in Britain (although this does tend to be her focus.) Her work examines aspects of European, Australian, and American production as well, which could possibly lead the reader to infer that her field research can be applied similarly to these regions. Wilkie closes the book with a call for further research, and it would be interesting to see what similarities are found in other locales.

Chapters Two through Five offer insight into several larger factors that contribute to contemporary human-livestock interactions. Chapter Two provides a brief overview of the domestication of wild animals and how this evolved into the industrialization of

livestock production. Wilkie provides a succinct but useful overview of domestication and the development of industrialized cattle production, which helps to contextualize her larger points, and she manages not to get bogged down by, or privilege, debates over the who/how/when/where/why of domestication. As she says, “Irrespective of how it arose, domestication of the ‘big five’ animal species all these years ago has an interspecies legacy that is as significant now as it was then, albeit for different reasons” (24). Wilkie describes the changing role of livestock in the United States and the rise of the feedlot system (which relied on specialized labor), and she explains that increased demand, both in the U.S. and Britain, coupled with improvements in refrigeration technology at the end of the nineteenth century, mark the rise of the industrialization of food production. The chapter also considers the integral role good stockmen play in production, and notes that they have become difficult to find. While formerly underappreciated, good stockmanship has come under the industry’s radar, albeit for economic purposes. Since research shows that good stockmanship “enhances animals’ well-being and productivity,” industrial producers have incentive to adopt such practices (35). Interestingly, the cultivation of empathy on the part of workers toward animals may soon be employed to further production, and Wilkie is careful to mention the problematic nature of this: “But adopting such a calculative perspective, irrespective of how understandable it may be, diminishes the stockperson-animal interface to little more than another productive factor that needs to be understood so it can be fully exploited” (36). What this economic-fuelled research fails to take into account is the stockmen’s understanding of their relationships to these animals, which is exactly what Wilkie’s work aims to do.

Chapter Three looks at the gendering of the production process and of the animals involved. Again, Wilkie provides a brief historical overview of women and men’s changing roles in animal production that efficiently contextualizes the gendered nature of livestock production today. She notes that as farms increased in size and became more industrialized, labor was divided in new ways. In addition to production roles, the types of animals with which men and women should work, and the animals themselves, were also gendered in interesting ways. For example, several women Wilkie interviews see all cattle, regardless of their gender, as “male” because they are larger and more aggressive than sheep. She also found that gender stereotypes continue to play a significant role in the types of interactions with and attitudes toward animals that are deemed suitable for each sex. Wilkie notes that gender and gendering is an “under-explored aspect of contemporary agricultural life,” and her work opens up

opportunities for further exploration of this fascinating component of human-animal relations (43).

The ways in which livestock is marketed and valued is examined in Chapter Four. Wilkie explains the rise of the auction system in Britain and illustrates the central role auctioneers play today in assigning value to livestock. What this chapter reveals is that there are a plethora of factors that determine the value of livestock, because they have no fixed, standard value and, as such, require an auction system in order to be marketed, valued, and sold. Her interviews with auctioneers are particularly revealing, as each man describes his methods in the “price discovery” process (78). Whereas in the nineteenth century cattle would be assessed based on conformation, from a butcher’s perspective, today such factors as the number of people there to bid, the seller’s and buyer’s expectations, the career path of the animal (will it be used for breeding or fattened for slaughter?) and supermarket prices, to name a few, are taken into consideration as auctioneers attempt to gauge where to start the bids. Wilkie’s experience at the mart reveals that animals’ values are assessed in differing ways once in the sale ring. She notes that animals sold for breeding are kept in the ring longer; potential buyers are allowed to inspect the animals more closely, auctioneers provide more background information on the animals, and they move the sale along more slowly. Prime animals that are ready for slaughter are sold much more quickly and their value is more easily determined, because they are assessed primarily on conformation and fatness. As her later chapters echo, the amount of individual attention an animal receives seems to correlate directly with the way it is perceived by handlers. The breeding cow that is inspected by a farmer at auction will be treated more like an individual than the prime cattle that is sold for slaughter, which will be treated as a commodity. This becomes a recurring theme of Wilkie’s book as she works to reveal the multiple factors that determine how livestock are perceived by the people who work with them. What I find troubling — and Wilkie does eventually address this — is that, in the end, all of these animals are seen as commodities. The breeding cow may be treated as an individual in the sale ring, and she may live for ten years in the farmer’s barn, but she is still assessed in terms of how productive she might be, and she too will one day make her way to the slaughterhouse when she can no longer be productive in the breeding shed. As I will elaborate below, while I concede it is important not to view livestock production in a one-dimensional way, I found it difficult to understand how not being viewed as a commodity at some points in its life by some persons would do the animal much good in the end. Wilkie’s work certainly makes me appreciate the dynamic and multi-faceted relationship many producers have with these animals, but

this almost never alters the end result of this relationship: the livestock returns to its commodity status.

Wilkie's examination of hobby farmers serves as an interesting counterpoint to commercial farmers. Chapter Five points to the current appeal of hobby farms and demonstrates the various roles they play, from conserving rare breeds to providing meat for niche markets. What is of most importance here is the hobby farmer's relationship with and perception of his animals and how this differs from commercial farmers. Many of Wilkie's respondents maintained that their animals had to "pay their own way" (91), but this didn't necessarily mean they were killed, and not all hobby farmers ate their own animals (although some certainly did.) Wilkie notes that because most hobby farmers don't rely on their animals for their sole source of income they can afford to view their animals as pets, and many of them name and form emotional attachments to their animals. Wilkie posits them as "productive outdoor pets" (111) and indicates that the small herd sizes allow hobby farmers to see their animals as individuals. Wilkie concludes that increased interest in hobby farming will reconnect its new enthusiasts with farm animals, "many of which are destined for their plates" (114). How this will change human-livestock relations, she says, is yet to be seen, and I believe this is an important element for further research. At a time when so many consumers view their meat as coming from the grocery store, not from a living animal, it is important to examine how increased interaction with food animals may shape one's perception of them and influence one's food choices.

Chapters Six through Eight get to the core of Wilkie's investigation and examine more directly the human-livestock relationships she observed and, I suggest, they present her most important findings. They also begin to address the concern I voiced above regarding the fact that producers may see some animals as individuals for a period of time, but they are almost always re-commodified and sent to slaughter. Chapter Six is primarily concerned with tracing the shifts in the legal status of livestock and how this relates to their perceived status. Wilkie's overview shows how far animal welfare guidelines and legislation in the United States lag behind Europe, in part because of the industry's influence in the U.S. In 1999 European legislation acknowledged livestock as "sentient beings." This elevated status, while recognizing animals as more than "things," raises other moral dilemmas. That livestock are both legally sentient and legally property is problematic, and Wilkie shows how this paradox also perplexes those who produce livestock. What is of importance to Wilkie here is that, despite that

livestock are legally property, they can sometimes be perceived as non-commodities. While this does not alter the legal status of livestock, and most will be re-commodified, the author claims, “it is precisely these types of experiences and perspectives that shape the diverse, dynamic, and contradictory nature of people’s perceptions of and interactions with productive animals in everyday life” (122). Wilkie admits that there’s a fine line between producers’ perception of livestock as commodity or sentient being, but, she argues, that their perception is not static is important. She employs the term “sentient commodity” in order “to draw attention to the ambiguous and shifting perceived status of livestock and people’s cognitive and emotional attempts to negotiate this fine line in practice” (123). Wilkie seems to anticipate her reader’s reaction to the idea that animals’ commodity status can be “temporarily suspended;” as I noted above, I found it difficult to appreciate the full weight of this because I am troubled by the fact that the animals are re-commodified in the end. Wilkie claims, “If we simply dismiss these experiences by arguing that the animals remain commodities legally, regardless of how producers perceive them, then we are disregarding some of the practical, cognitive, ethical, and emotional challenges faced by those who work directly with livestock” (127-8). The author does convincingly suggest that approaches that fail to take the producer’s perspective into account don’t provide a complete picture of human-livestock relations, and the later chapters in the book demonstrate the extent to which livestock workers grapple with the challenges they encounter.

Chapter Seven provides insight into the multiple factors that can determine the level of engagement, or disengagement, workers will develop with livestock. Wilkie contends, “the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of byre-face [cowshed] workers cannot be uncoupled from the productive role of both humans and animals in the practical division of labor (e.g. breeding, storing, and finishing) or the socioeconomic context in which commercial and hobby farming take place” (129). What her field research reveals is that the amount of time spent with an animal, the worker’s role, the “career path” of the animal, and the scale of the operation are some of the key factors that determine the level and type of engagement producers have with livestock. Some of Wilkie’s interviewees note that a breeder will spend considerably more time with his animals and will interact with them more. A breeding cow may be on his farm for ten years, so he has the opportunity to know her as something more than a generic cow. The finisher, on the other hand, who simply fattens cattle up for slaughter, is less inclined to engage with his animals. These cattle are relatively self-sufficient, and the main objective is for them to eat and build up bulk. The finisher spends only three months with the cattle, and is more likely to perceive them as a herd, not individuals. Wilkie’s research certainly substantiates her claim that “Animals can be located and relocated along a

status continuum that ranges from commodity to companion,” and she demonstrates that producers can have positive interactions and relationships with their livestock, but her findings also have larger, more troubling implications. While Wilkie doesn’t examine factory farms, her research points to possible outcomes of such large-scale operations. If the size of the operation and the opportunities for interaction determine a worker’s level of engagement with and perception of livestock, then this surely does not bode well for the factory farmed animal or the workers at such institutions. Wilkie’s findings imply that nuanced interactions with livestock become difficult in more mechanized, industrial production contexts. Given that such a large proportion of the world’s animal-based food is produced in industrial operations, it seems imperative that further research be conducted to assess how workers in this particular context understand their relationship to livestock and to what extent the production context limits their level of engagement.

Livestock/Deadstock explores several paradoxes inherent in livestock production, from producers claiming to love animals while also using them as tools to the slaughtering of animals only when they are healthy, and Chapter Eight returns to what is called “the constant paradox—the definition and treatment of animals as functional objects, on the one hand, and sentient individuals, on the other” (148). The “constant paradox” seems to be most palpable during the slaughter stage of the production process. This chapter illustrates the severe discomfort many producers and slaughterers feel for this final stage. What is particularly striking about Wilkie’s findings is the extent to which producers deny their own involvement in the slaughter stage and the contempt they display for those who work there. What comes to the foreground in this chapter is that many people who produce livestock are troubled by sending the animals to slaughter, and some slaughterhouse workers find it difficult to work at some parts of the disassembly line (such as stunning cattle or slitting their throats). While those outside of production may be tempted to imagine all producers and slaughterers as cold and uncaring about killing animals, Wilkie’s research indicates that, at least in her sample set, those who work within the industry face challenges that have not been fully appreciated. One recurring motif throughout this chapter is the significant level of denial on the part of producers about the end stage of production. Many of the workers Wilkie interviews employ euphemisms, such as “going away” or “down the road,” to describe where their stock are headed after auction. Many simply can’t, or won’t, allow themselves to think about what happens to their livestock next. Some even create a sort of fantasy to help them ignore the true fate of the animals. One mart worker explains,

“When I finish work at the end of the day, I don’t think about what happens to them afterward. I can’t, really.... It’s probably easier to think that it all stops here. They leave on the floats, and they all live happily ever after” (152). Another respondent speaks of how she can handle delivering her stock to the slaughterhouse, “But I don’t want to see them going down the chute and actually having the bullet put in their face — don’t want to see that, hear that, or know about that. As far as I’m concerned, they left me healthy, and I’m looking for that check the next day. But I could not see them being shot. That’s not my job” (143). Wilkie suggests that it is the division of labor in the production of livestock that enables such willful ignorance of the endpoint. What is so interesting is that in earlier chapters Wilkie’s subjects tend to believe that livestock are bred for slaughter, that’s their “job,” but when it comes to the thought of the animals going down the chute, producers have difficulty stomaching the idea and work hard to deny their responsibility. The desire to shift responsibility for the death of an animal is also seen at the slaughterhouse, and again the division of labor makes this possible. Because the animal is first shot in order to stun it, and then its throat is slit, who kills the animal is less clear. Like the farmers, slaughterhouses employ “verbal concealment” in order to re-conceptualize the work they do; “butcher” and “slaughterhouse” become “meat plant” and “meat factory,” while “slaughterman” becomes “meat designer” (156). What does this mean in terms of human-animal relations? If people can rationalize the production and consumption of animals, why does no one want to accept responsibility for the killing of animals that is the necessary end point of that? Of course, the obvious answer is provided by the interviewee: it’s easier this way. While Wilkie’s book is important for showing this under-explored side of slaughter, there seems to be much room for further investigation into this perplexing denial of responsibility for the animal’s death, from the consumer who purchases the product to those who produce and slaughter it. What Wilkie’s book shows is that there are several ethical, emotional, and practical challenges that producers and slaughters face that are full of contradictions, and readers are given the opportunity to appreciate these experiences from a multi-dimensional perspective.

The final chapter points to the larger significance of Wilkie’s research and articulates her contribution to the field while also calling for additional studies. Previous studies had not taken the livestock worker’s perspective into consideration, and Wilkie urges scholars not to overlook this central player in human-livestock relations; she suggests, “the actions, attitudes, and feelings of byre-face and slaughter-face workers are absolutely central to how livestock are managed and produced and should therefore be explicitly factored into lay and professional debates about food-animal production” (184). After reading the full text, I felt convinced on this point.

I must admit that I entered Wilkie's book with certain reservations. As a vegan and animal advocate, I was resistant to the text initially because I feared her research might be used as an apology for producers of animal food, as a way to make readers feel better about eating meat because at some point someone might not have seen the animal as a commodity. I was pleased that Wilkie did not take this route. She indicates in the opening chapter that she maintains a vegan diet, which perhaps helped me, personally, to follow her into this world. What I found is that Wilkie remains impressively objective throughout the work; she insists from the start that this is not a book about ethics, and she adheres to her mission of investigating how producers of livestock negotiate the various challenges they encounter in their relationship to the animals. As noted above, at times I found it difficult not to consider the ethical questions raised by some ideas expressed in the text. I also feel that we cannot so easily dismiss looking at production through a factory farm lens. While I certainly appreciate the nuanced and ambiguous relationships that Wilkie's work reveals, the animal products most consumers purchase will not come from the region or productive context Wilkie studies. Wilkie also notes that her work focuses primarily on cattle and sheep, and, given that poultry and pigs are typically produced by intensive methods, it seems likely that research into human-livestock relationships in those contexts may result in very different findings. That said, I think Wilkie's work is an important first step in the development of a more complex understanding of human-livestock relations and it opens up a range of possibilities for further research — and reinforces the critical need for such work. The book will appeal to a broad audience, from those interested in sociology and psychology to human-animal studies and animal advocacy. Whether I like it or not, humans will continue to consume animals, and producers will continue to be central to the production process. From an animal-welfare perspective, continued study of the human-livestock interface could potentially improve conditions for workers and animals alike, although there is the possibility that a deeper understanding of human-livestock relationships could also become just another tool for the industry to exploit.