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Massey University

**Making milking bodies in the Manawatu.  
Assembling “good cow”-“good farmer” relationships  
in productionist dairy farming.**

A dissertation presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Social Anthropology at Massey University, Palmerston North New Zealand.

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## Abstract

This research traces the material and social relations of dairy cows and dairy farmers in productionist dairy farming. Life story interviews and participant observation on dairy farms reveal how dairy cow/dairy farmer relationships take diverse forms in response to competing demands in productionist dairy farming. Seeking ways of understanding the complexities inherent in dairy cow/dairy farmer relationships, I enrolled dairy cows as ethnographic research participants. Embodied, sensory and empathic participant observation methods led to understandings of how humanimal relationships form across species boundaries. My research findings suggest that deeply embedded cultural narratives of what it means to be a “good farmer” may conflict with the multiplicity of “good cow” identities. Dairy cows create tension for dairy farmers: dairy farmers work with dairy cows as production machines; but also care for dairy cows as co-workers. This ethnographic humanimal research highlights how dairy cows and dairy farmers are not fixed as “good” or “bad”. Rather, through an anthropological appropriation of Actor Network Theory, this research highlights how dairy cow/dairy farmer networks form and reform (in part) through unintentional and intentional dairy cow agency.

Keywords: dairy cows, dairy farmers, New Zealand agriculture, production(ism), humanimal, Actor-Network-Theory.

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	i
Abstract .....	ii
List of Figures .....	vi
Preface.....	vii
Chapter One: Introducing Humanimal Relationships.....	1
<i>Humanimal anthropology</i> .....	1
<i>Writing about cows</i> .....	3
<i>Angelica and Lavender</i> .....	4
<i>Structure of this thesis</i> .....	10
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	12
Chapter Two: Narrating Actor Network Theory .....	14
The story of Little ANT .....	14
<i>Little ANT meets Cow</i> .....	15
<i>The origins of Little ANT</i> .....	16
<i>ANTs at work</i> .....	16
<i>Animal agency</i> .....	19
<i>Recalling four moments of translation</i> .....	21
<i>Critiquing ANT</i> .....	24
<i>Straying from the ANT hill and finding the ‘Anthropological ANT’</i> .....	29
<i>Flows and fluidity of new ANTs</i> .....	31
<i>Jumping the moon</i> .....	36
<i>A note from the author</i> .....	38
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	38
Chapter Three: Locating “Good Cows” and “Good Farmers” in the Literature	40
The story of Cow .....	40
<i>Development of New Zealand agriculture</i> .....	41
<i>An intensifying industry</i> .....	42
<i>Dairy farming for profit</i> .....	44
<i>Responding to market signals and changing cows</i> .....	46
<i>Resisting diversification</i> .....	47
<i>“Good farmers”</i> .....	49
<i>Post-productivism</i> .....	50

<i>Animal/farmer relationships</i> .....	52
<i>Locating cowness in the literature</i> .....	54
<i>Dairy cows' alienation as animal workers</i> .....	55
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	60
<b>Chapter Four: Humanimal Methodologies</b> .....	<b>62</b>
The story of Cassie.....	62
<i>Doing humanimal research, kyokan and 'empathic apprenticeship'</i> .....	64
<i>Empathy through food</i> .....	67
<i>Fieldwork at home, entering a familiar field</i> .....	69
<i>Sharing stories</i> .....	71
<i>Understanding in silence</i> .....	74
<i>Milking cows with my senses</i> .....	78
<i>Communication with cows</i> .....	80
<i>Learning to talk with cows</i> .....	82
<i>The anthropology of walking: tracing the path of cows</i> .....	87
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	90
<b>Chapter Five: Remaking Productionist Networks</b> .....	<b>92</b>
Making "Good Cow" Bodies and "Good Farmers" .....	92
<i>Introduction</i> .....	92
<i>Locating Manawatu farmers in productionist networks</i> .....	93
<i>Defining a "Good Cow" and the limits to "Good Farming"</i> .....	95
<i>Reordering productionist networks via cow bodies</i> .....	99
<i>Hooves: resistance by foot</i> .....	99
<i>Udders: mundane milk makers</i> .....	103
<i>Wombs: hidden capacities of cows</i> .....	106
<i>Ear tags: the virtual life of cows</i> .....	115
<i>Fluid Cows</i> .....	122
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	123
<b>Chapter Six: Cow/Farmer Relationships</b> .....	<b>124</b>
Empathy and care in the mundane .....	124
.....	124
<i>Caring in the mundane</i> .....	124
<i>Intent in the milking shed</i> .....	130
<i>Meeting 'Pullers'</i> .....	132
<i>'Pulling' as an act of friendship: 401 and 330</i> .....	137

<i>Individualisation</i> .....	147
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	148
<b>Discussion</b> .....	<b>150</b>
Humanimal Methodologies.....	151
The Importance of Imagination.....	152
<b>References</b> .....	<b>154</b>
<b>Appendices</b> .....	<b>162</b>

## List of Figures

Figure 1.....	p. 6
Figure 2.....	p. 7
Figure 3.....	p. 9
Figure 4.....	p. 79
Figure 5.....	p. 87
Figure 6.....	p. 104
Figure 7.....	p. 104
Figure 8.....	p. 116
Figure 9.....	p. 116
Figure 10.....	p. 130
Figure 11.....	p. 132
Figure 12.....	p. 134
Figure 13.....	p. 135
Figure 14.....	p. 136
Figure 15.....	p. 138
Figure 16.....	p. 139
Figure 17.....	p. 140
Figure 18.....	p. 141
Figure 19.....	p. 142
Figure 20.....	p. 142
Figure 21.....	p. 143
Figure 22.....	p. 143
Figure 23.....	p. 144
Figure 24.....	p. 144



## Preface

“Novels are ends in themselves, worth reading in their own right. Academic writings are means to other ends” (Law, 2004, p. 11). In academic writing, where the journey is hastily and mechanically assembled for the purpose of delivering readers to a destination, a conclusion, or a discussion “[t]he textures along the way, the actual writing” becomes subordinate to such ends (ibid). John Law (2004) suggests an alternative mode of academic writing, one that embraces the journey of what writing can offer the writer and the readers. This is an academic writing of creativity, and most importantly, imagination (p. 12). In this creative writing, the textures of the journey are illuminated by the fabric of discovery found in storytelling. Layers upon layers of narrative are built: some humorous, others playful and some encapsulating more serious tones all in the pursuit of not simply getting to the end, but of enjoying the journey just as much.

At the outset of this thesis it was a very clear intention of mine to enjoy the journey. The whole journey. This, of course, included a lot of writing. “One of the main things anthropologists do is write” (Geertz in Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 149) and I saw no reason to make this a mechanical process. Rather, I vowed to find a means to let my passion for anthropology walk hand in hand with my imagination and creativity. What began to unfold upon the pages of my drafts were creative writings, telling the stories of animals as theories and of literature as embodied histories. In pursuing this unconventional style of presenting academic writing I found myself not just enduring the process of writing a thesis in order to reach the submission date. Instead, I found happiness, I struggle for a better word, but happiness can be rare and I feel lucky to have found it during a difficult and draining task.

By not feeling restricted in creating a thesis that followed all the rules of normative structure and narrative style, I have been inspired by nursery rhymes, fables, legends and fantasy. During many late nights on my computer, while searching for inspiration, I would often fondly remember the gusto with which my nana recited our favourite nursery rhymes to my sisters and I. Nana would pull faces, take dramatic deep breaths followed by hair raising pauses as she rhythmically detailed the fate of Jack and Jill, the Queen of Hearts and poor old Humpty Dumpty. I particularly enjoyed all the diverse characters, human and nonhuman alike who would come to life through the written word and Nana's unique style of storytelling.

This thesis, amidst its academic pursuits, is also a journey of creative writing and of storytelling. Cows are naturally playful, clever and caring beings and through creative writing this thesis serves to share my deep seated recognition that although they do not speak in a similar tongue, they are still beings of this world that deserve to have their story told. It is my intention in this thesis to share with you the lives of dairy cows, and their lives with the dairy farmers who work and live with them. Finally, I hope that in reading this thesis, you can let your imagination wander a little and ponder the idea that although a cow cannot jump over the moon, it does not mean she might not dream to.