

## Chapter 5

### THE LONELINESS AND MADNESS OF WITNESSING: REFLECTIONS FROM A VEGAN FEMINIST KILLJOY

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"How do you cope?" One of the students asked, intently—searchingly.

I froze. It was a reasonable question. Especially so, considering I had been invited into this space—a student-led undergraduate course on self-care and trauma in social justice-oriented work—to talk about my own experiences related to the theme for the week: *What to do when people don't care about what you care about*. My mind raced: *They're asking for strategies. What strategies for coping or self-care do I have? What can I offer?* And then my mind went blank, panicking. I felt a quiver move through my body. I felt my chin begin to tremble. *How do I cope? Is that what I'm doing? Coping?* I felt my face start to flush.

*How do I cope? How do I cope?* Everyone in the room was looking at me, waiting. I wondered what coping looks like and if that's what it looked like I was doing. I wondered if looking like I was coping was why I had been asked to come in to talk to the class. *I'm not coping*, I thought. *I haven't been coping for a long time*. I felt my vision go blurry as my eyes filled with tears. *Oh no*, I thought frantically. *Don't cry. Not here. Not now. Get it together, Gillespie!* I looked up and they were still waiting.

Tears catching in my throat, "I'm not coping," I said. "I haven't been coping for a long time." And then I broke down, mortified, but without any control over the full-bodied, undignified sobs that cut through the silent room.

"Oh god! Oh my god!" one of the students blurted out, too loudly for the space. "Are you OK? Are you OK? Oh my god!" and then, to her classmates: "What do we do? What should we do? Oh god!"

Haley Bosco Doyle, who was facilitating the class and who had invited me to attend, turned to the other student and said, "It's OK. Let her be." Then Haley turned to me and put her hand on my shoulder gently and waited. They all waited while I covered my face with my hands and sobbed.

When I had finally gathered myself together, we talked about how out-of-place tears can feel in an academic classroom. How classrooms, and academic spaces more generally, are framed as spaces of intellectual engagement and not emotional outpourings. I talked to them about my mortification at crying in front of them, and about how it might be useful to try to reframe how I

was thinking about those tears. What if they weren't something to be ashamed of; what if, instead, we could think about crying—a *teacher crying*—as a subversive act: a rejection of masculinist, rationalist notions of the academy as an unemotional space, or academics as unemotional beings. I left the classroom that day, emotionally undone.

I'd like to say that this undoing in front of a roomful of students was a breaking point or a turning point of some kind, but it wasn't. It is a memorable moment of rupture, a moment where the damage done by my experiences witnessing violence bubbled up to the surface to remind me that I was not OK. That in witnessing, studying, teaching, and writing about violence against animals, I will probably, in some ways, never be OK again.

This was early 2016. Four years earlier, in 2012, I had completed the fieldwork for my dissertation on the lives of cows in the Pacific Northwestern United States dairy industry. My intention was to document as best I could the embodied experiences of animals—cows, bulls, calves—raised for dairy production. This work involved entering spaces where the visceral experience of suffering and, often, dying animals was made mundane and routine through the abstracting effects of the commodification process (Gillespie 2016, Gillespie 2018). Farmed animal auction yards were one of my primary research sites. In these spaces, I witnessed countless instances of animal suffering and violence not typically viewed as violence: cows collapsing and dying in the rear holding pens and in the auction rings; animals being jabbed with electric prods, leaping forward to avoid the shocks; cows and calves sold apart from one another as they bellowed for each other from across the auction yard; cows crammed into pens so tightly they couldn't turn around; day-old calves with their umbilical cords still attached selling for as little as \$15, or lying crumpled and weak in the holding pens. There were cows in all stages of physical health: some were robust and still viable as commodity producers; many others were emaciated and barely able to walk; many limped severely, their hides covered with open wounds and udders red with infection. Intentionally witnessing the trauma animals experience in farming is, for the witness, a psychically overwhelming onslaught of visceral suffering—an exposure to secondary trauma.

At the same time, the speed, efficiency, and everydayness with which animals are sold through the auction ring has the effect of obscuring or making mundane the violence experienced by each singular cow passing through the ring. To repeatedly reject this abstracting effect and focus in on each body, each life, and each face requires you to become the witness, the killjoy. Witnessing the suffering of animals in spaces of routine animal use is an act of embodying and inhabiting what Sara Ahmed has identified as *the feminist killjoy*. Ahmed writes, "When we make violence manifest, a violence that is reproduced by not being made manifest, we will be assigned as killjoys. It is because of what she reveals that a killjoy becomes a killjoy in the first place" (Ahmed 2017, 256). The killjoy is a witness. The killjoy bears witness to acts of violence and injustice

and documents them as such—in memory, in speech; in writing, in the acts of recollection that mark and politicize this violence.

I have written elsewhere about my feelings of grief and mourning in my role witnessing the suffering experienced by cows in the auction yard (Gillespie 2016). And these experiences and moments of seeing this violence *as violence* were, indeed, overwhelmed by lasting grief and sadness, but they were also marked by profound loneliness and by feelings of madness. To intentionally focus on each individual suffering being—to remind myself again and again that *this is the cost of commodifying life*—made me feel like witnessing this violence for another second would push me “over the edge” into a kind of abyss, a place of being unhinged, inconsolable, and permanently changed.

And yet, I found myself moving forward. I didn’t witness this violence for just another second, but for too many more seconds to count—too many animal lives to count or remember or grieve. And in order to witness, I found a way to contain these feelings of madness—not eliminate them, but contain them, and push them down, in order to survive. Ahmed tells us that “[the feminist killjoy] comes to exist as a figure, a way of containing damage, because she speaks about damage.” I watched as these animals passed by and I contained these feelings of grief and feelings of being driven to the edge of sanity. I felt anger and disbelief and shame and desperation and I contained those, too. I moved on to the next field site. I wrote my fieldnotes. I finished my fieldwork. I taught courses on violence against animals. I prepared to write my dissertation. I defended the dissertation and finished the Ph.D. I rewrote the research in book form, all the while working hard to contain the damage, because it *was* damage—layers of damage: the internalization of the damage humans cause to the animals they farm and the damage to the witness of this damage as a result of witnessing.

Witnessing can easily drive you to madness or exacerbate mental health issues already there. It can carve out new psychological and emotional wounds. And it can open old ones, worrying at the tender scars until suddenly what you thought was healed, or at least contained, is open again, raw, festering, and exposed to the world. For me, the act of witnessing has done both. Witnessing animal suffering, for me, has exacerbated these familiar affective specters of madness, deepening them and fleshing out their contours. But they have also cut new wounds, laying bare new realities of violence, suffering, and apathy.

There are layers of damage in witnessing. There is the act of witnessing that, in spaces of animal agriculture like the auction yard, left me with overwhelming feelings of despair, rage, shame, and grief. There’s something about the scale of animal agriculture—the 50 billion land animals killed each year for food—that is incomprehensible. You try to comprehend it, to contain it—you witness one animal suffering and dying before your eyes and you know that that one is billions—but the scale of it is uncontainable. You can’t grieve for 50 billion animals at once and contain that grief. You try. You fail. Your mind works hard to abstract from the animals before you—to blur your vision with tears, to set a ringing in your ears to obscure the sounds of the suffering—to protect itself

and to protect your heart. You don't see or remember the next few animals passing before you. You feel shame that you can't focus on and remember each one. You try harder. You find yourself abstracting again. You exhaust yourself with the effort.

And then you notice that no one around you is having this experience: they are laughing, bidding, snacking, chatting with friends and family. This pushes these feelings of madness further. You return to your life—changed, undone—to find that most people don't know about, care about, think about the suffering of animals at all. And this is another layering of the madness of witnessing. You've just witnessed this violence and you stand, outside of (and always within) spaces of violence against animals, always a witness, a killjoy, a reminder that this violence is happening all the time. You find yourself alone. Ahmed writes:

A killjoy might first recognize herself in that feeling of loneliness: of being cut off from others, from how they assemble around happiness. She knows, because she has been there: to be unseated by the tables of happiness can be to find yourself in that shadowy place, to find yourself alone, on your own ... The costs of killing joy are high; this figure herself is a cost (not to agree with someone as killing the joy of something). (Ahmed 2017, 259)

I am lucky to have a close handful of family, friends, and colleagues who understand or who have been willing to try to understand violence against nonhuman animals *as violence*. Some of these people already cared about violence against animals and others have come to care about it because it is something I care about. Within this circle, I am also lucky to have a partner who is enormously supportive and has engaged in this journey of learning about violence against animals with me, and a close friend and colleague who has accompanied me into some of these spaces and engaged in endless conversations about this work (see Lopez and Gillespie 2016).

Still, most people don't understand nor do they bother to try to understand what animals experience—indeed, many people take offense at the thought that farmed animals' lives and experiences matter in any consequential way. Or, others think the matter of caring about animals is cute or laughable or merely a manifestation of privilege. Working on and caring about violence against animals frequently renders one socially unintelligible. Social unintelligibility, as James Stanescu writes, is “a failure of recognition by others, a failure to code as reality what you know reality to be. It is an erasure of existence, an erasure of sense, and an erasure of relations. To have your grief for one you care about rendered unintelligible does not invite simple ridicule; it invites melancholia and madness” (Stanescu 2012, 579). And so, sometimes it is easier—less painful—to try to cope, or to pretend to cope. At least in trying to cope, it is only the pain of what you have witnessed that you must carry. To expose yourself as not coping, to try to talk about the pain of what you have witnessed

with people who don't see it as intelligible adds a layer of isolation and a feeling of going mad that only works to amplify the damage.

But there's also a profound loneliness to looking like you're coping when you're not. Thinking back to the theme of that day's class—*what to do when people don't care about what you care about*—there's a profound loneliness to caring about things that other people don't care about. There's a profound loneliness when people don't care about what you care about. Sometimes the impacts of people not caring about what I care about are so much that there have been times I've wished desperately that I could just not be the killjoy doing the work of killing joy for even a few moments or a day.

These moments of disavowal have occurred in my personal life in many different contexts and they regularly happen in my academic life. For instance, I have had many of these moments while on the academic job market, which for the killjoy can be its own kind of mental health nightmare. For any academic, the experience of going on the job market is fraught, stressful, and sometimes traumatizing. Ann Cvetkovich describes the experience:

Huge uncertainties about the future—Is my intellectual work any good? Will I get a job? Where will I be living? Is this really what I want to do?—coalesce around an endless array of tiny tasks and decisions about everything from which font to use on a CV to how to describe one's dissertation, which represents years of work, in a single paragraph that will capture the attention of an unknown reader. (Cvetkovich 2012, 30–31)

This is compounded by the stress of waiting to hear (often waiting for a rejection that hiring committees might never even bother to send), the stress of interviewing and campus visits (if you're among the very few who land one), the unsettling reality of uprooting your life and moving to a new place, making new friends and colleagues, and so on. Any academic who's been on the job market in recent years will have their own set of stories from their own personal hell of trying to get an academic job.

All of this is magnified and transfigured for the killjoy. For the killjoy whose witnessing work is also about killing joy, the job market is a field of emotional and psychological political landmines. On one side, you're tasked with selling your research over and over again in neatly curated descriptions, all the while pretending that this research hasn't driven you to madness. You try to write about it in applications or talk about it in interviews in ways that don't betray that you have been completely undone by it, that just thinking about it makes you want to close yourself into a dark closet and cry.

On the other, you have to package your research just right—so that it is not too political, not too obviously killing joy, to get in the door. And this process is made even worse if your work is about killing joy in relation to people's everyday practices of consumption (like uncovering the violence of dairy production). When confronted with my first campus visit for a

feminist geography job, I was advised to frame my work through its explicit contributions to feminist theory; I developed a job talk that highlighted these contributions. Still, my dissertation was about violence against cows in routine practices of agricultural production; there was no getting around or concealing this fact, and this violence was framed as a distinctly feminist issue. As everyone settled into their seats and I began my talk, I watched with a sinking feeling as a platter of cheese and crackers was passed through the audience. *Oh no.* I thought. *I'm fucked.* As the roomful of academics (many of whom were self-described feminists) nibbled on their cheese, I detailed the gendered violence experienced by cows raised for that cheese. Ahmed writes:

Sometimes, when [the killjoy] appears on the horizon of our consciousness, it can be a moment of despair. You don't always want her to appear even when you see yourself in her appearance. You might say to her: not here, not now ... You might think, you might feel: I can't afford to be her right now. You might think, you might feel: she would cost me too much right now. (Ahmed 2017, 171–172)

*Why did it have to be cheese?* I thought. *I just want a job. Can't I just not be the killjoy for once?* The committee didn't bother to notify me of my rejection for that job.

Colleagues regularly remind me that rejection on the job market is not personal, but when your work is about witnessing and making legible routinely obscured forms of violence, it is nearly impossible to not take it personally insofar as I regularly feel that I failed the animals whose lives and deaths populate my research. It is not that these animals would care whether or not I had gotten a job; rather, rejection represents a feeling that I didn't do enough to communicate the urgency and importance of attending to violence against them. And this is part of being the killjoy more generally—the way killing joy, witnessing, making political becomes so thoroughly entangled with the killjoy's own life that sometimes I think, at my very core, I have been reconfigured and defined by these forms of violence and others' responses to them. Internalizing this violence and its social unintelligibility marks the body and mind in profound ways and I am still working to understand how this occurs.

The first time I read Johanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory," I felt a part of the loneliness I was feeling shatter: she was speaking about the damage done by encountering, being exposed to, being haunted by normalized forms of violence. She wasn't talking about violence against animals, but this didn't matter; her words validated and authenticated the psychic and embodied effects of being the killjoy, the misfit, the outcast, trying to love and care and live in this world. She writes: "the body and mind are sensitive and reactive to regimes of oppression—particularly our current regime of neoliberal, white-supremacist, imperial-capitalist, cis-hetero-patriarchy. It is that all of our bodies and minds

carry the historical trauma of this, that it is *the world itself* that is making and keeping us sick" (Hedva 2016).

Because of the privileged space I inhabit in the world (white, physically able-bodied, cis-gender, born in the United States, human), I am in many ways insulated from feeling the full effects of many direct forms of structural violence. And yet, if we take Hedva's words seriously—that "it is that all of our bodies and minds carry the historical trauma" of our current and historically embedded regimes, then the damage caused by intentional (and sometimes unintentional) witnessing of violence (against animals and others) refracts the echoes of these traumas and violences and animates them anew.

Whether we identify as the killjoy, the witness, or not, the impacts of the violent regimes we live in take their toll—and this occurs radically differentially and unequally depending on levels of vulnerability and precarity. But becoming the killjoy is also another kind of taking-on of damage and committing to disrupt, communicate, and (hopefully) transform, through the act of taking on that damage and refusing to obscure it.

Reading Hedva's work alongside Ahmed's exploration of containment and damage in the killjoy's reality, I understand us all to be containers of damage. "To be a container of damage is to be a damaged container; a leaky container. The feminist killjoy is a leaky container. She is right there; there she is, all teary, what a mess" (Ahmed 2017, 171). If "*the world itself*" (Hedva 2016) causes us all damage, then we all become containers of damage and damaged containers, absorbing the damage caused by the current and historical violent regimes we inhabit. To be considered *normal*, *healthy*, and *happy*—and to make others feel comfortable and happy—it is expected that we be good at making it look like the damage isn't there. Feeling blue or under the weather are acceptable temporary states of being in response to certain stimuli (a sad or tragic event, a virulent cold virus), but to remain in these states of revealing the damage (the clinically depressed, the chronically ill, the neuro-atypical, the perpetual witness) is to become Ahmed's leaky container; it is to become the killjoy ("*there she is, all teary, what a mess*"); it is to become the figure that ruptures the fiction that everyone (no, *anyone*) can be healthy or happy when the world is so thoroughly imbricated with these regimes of oppression that take shape and form in our bodies and minds.

It is in this realization that I am learning, in an unexpected way, to celebrate the killjoy in all her teary, leaky, witnessing mess and to find gratitude in the damage she contains and expels—I've come to find a strange sense of warmth and familiarity in the feelings of madness that are called forth and energized by her presence. Because I see these experiences of witnessing violence against animals as a memorable point of rupture—a place of springing a leak in the container—I sometimes wonder what it would be like to go back to before I chose to expose myself (through witnessing, writing, and teaching) to the ubiquitous world of violence against animals. Becoming the killjoy is painful. It adds an additional psychic burden to the deeply buried wounds that may

already be there. In these flickers of thinking about the past, I feel nostalgic for a time when these wounds were not so numerous and when those that were already there were more deeply buried. I feel nostalgic for a time when I was not so actively and relentlessly the leaky container of the killjoy. But this seductive nostalgia is hard to sustain because I wouldn't choose to not have witnessed these things and I wouldn't choose to not be changed by them.

More than that, though, even if I wanted to engage in this undoing of damage, I couldn't. I was already a container of damage, only, perhaps, I was a little less leaky. The surfacing and layering on of the damage of witnessing has shaped and continues to shape who I am in my body and mind and heart. Eli Clare, writing on the politics of cure and pushing back against ableist notions of normative forms of embodiment and neurotypicality, asks: "Can any of us move our bodies back in time, undo the lessons learned, the knowledge gained, the scars acquired? The desire for restoration, the return to a bodily past—whether shaped by actual history, imagination, or the vice grip of *normal* and *natural*—is complex" (Clare 2014, 211). In much of his work, Clare refers to the body-mind as a rejection of the mind-body dualism and as an acknowledgment that who we are is a complex and inextricably entangled fusion of embodiment, thought, and feeling. Moving our body-minds back in the temporal arc of our lives is an impossibility. We are shaped so thoroughly and "brilliantly imperfectly" (Clare 2017) by how we arrive in the world, by how our experiences reorient and transform and undo and remake our body-minds. Who would we be without this madness, this feeling, these politicized manifestations of witnessing and care?

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