

# The afterlives of the lively commodity: Life-worlds, death-worlds, rotting-worlds

EPA: *Economy and Space*  
0(0) 1–16

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DOI: 10.1177/0308518X20944417

[journals.sagepub.com/home/epn](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/epn)



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## Abstract

This article engages with Rosemary-Claire Collard and Jessica Dempsey's theory of lively commodities in a discussion of cows raised for dairy exchanged in farmed-animal auctions. Taking their theorization of the lively commodity as a starting point to better understand the commodification of nonhuman life, I propose an extension of this work that attends to a continuum of commodity forms understood through the life and death of the cow. Cows raised for dairy move through the auction yard as a site of capitalist exchange as lively, soon-to-be-dead, and once-living commodities, their value determined by the stage of their life-course and their bodily condition. As such, the auction can be understood as a landscape of life-worlds, where the cow's liveliness determines her value; and death-worlds and rotting-worlds, where the afterlives of the lively commodity are extracted as capital. Ultimately, the article calls for an upending of the commodification of nonhuman life and a new imaginary of the kinds of life-worlds that are possible beyond logics of capital.

## Keywords

Commodity, capital, afterlives, animal, agriculture

## Introduction

Farmed animals occupy continual states of fluid commodification during their lives and deaths, and their bodies' commodity afterlives. The forms and structures of commodification shift over the life-course of the animal, and are often dependent on the particular purpose for which they are instrumentalized by humans, and on their sex, age, breed, and bodily formation and condition. This article takes the framework of *lively commodities* as a

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starting point for broadening understandings of the commodification of life and death and an array of commodity forms—those that occur in the context of a single life and body. I center the farmed-animal auction yard as a site of exchange where these shifting forms of commodification are easily visible, but these are logics that extend beyond the auction, across animal agriculture and animal consumption more broadly. The farmed-animal auction shows the evolution of animals' commodity status—the fluidity of moving from beings of reproductive liveliness to soon-to-be-dead commodities, to once-living commodities.

Rosemary-Claire Collard and Jessica Dempsey (2013) advance a theory of the *lively commodity*: “live commodities whose capitalist value is derived from their *status as living beings*” (p. 2684; emphasis in the original).<sup>1</sup> In their analysis of lively commodities, they outline what is objectionable about the commodification of nonhuman lives. In one example, they draw on Collard's fieldwork on the exotic pet trade to argue that it is animals' disposability that reinforces hierarchical relations between humans and other species. Whereas much work on commodities focuses on those that are either inanimate objects (e.g., art, books) or those that are the product of formerly living things (e.g., vegetables, fish, meat), Collard and Dempsey (2013) explicitly theorize commodities with lively qualities (exotic pets and ecosystem carbon)—both to fill the topical gap that animals' particular status as “lively” has not been widely theorized in terms of understanding commodification *and* as a way to center the ethical consequences of commodifying life. Their work treats nonhuman life not as a monolithic category, but rather with an acute awareness of how “the process of capitalist commodification (or its effects) might operate rather differently depending on which particular natures are being commodified” (Castree, 2003: 275). In this vein, Collard and Dempsey (2013) ask us to pay particular attention to what kind of life is being commodified in circuits of living, and lively, capital—*animal capital* (Shukin, 2009)—and in this case, *farmed-animal capital*.

Here, I center the *dairy cow* to illuminate the life-worlds, death-worlds, and rotting-worlds—worlds and moments in time—that cows inhabit and pass through as they are trapped within the commodity circuit, from birth to death and beyond. As Bob Torres explains, “[t]he bodies and functions of animals have [been completely appropriated by capital, and, subsequently, put to use in a single way only, subordinating the total animal being to this single productive activity]” (2007: 40). The circulation of farmed animals and their reproductive outputs as capital is not a new phenomenon, but in fact dates back to early forms of capitalism; as such, challenging these forms of socioeconomic relations requires an upending of long-standing, normalized relationships of exploitation (Nibert, 2013). Cows, in particular, are especially poignant in this context since the earliest forms of capital were, in fact, *cattle* (Franklin, 2007; Gunderson, 2011); the word *cattle* has its root in *chattel* (property). Tracing back to this early capitalist organizing logic, the commodification and instrumentalization of cows used today for dairy illuminate the lively commodity and its afterlives in a mundane setting—so mundane, in fact, that farmed animals' commodity status is rarely questioned (although their welfare in spaces of commodity production is an ongoing subject of debate, and has itself been commodified [Buller and Roe, 2012]) (Gillespie, 2018; Parry, 2012). Whereas the empirical details of the exotic pet trade feature an animal's liveliness as “exotic” or “extraordinary,” the cow used for dairy embodies the everyday, the absolutely ordinary, the thoroughly normalized dimensions of liveliness as a commodifiable trait and as a site of ethical concern. Cows' status as commodities shifts dramatically over the life-course; it is not that they ever cease to be commodities—rather, the *kinds of commodities* they are manifest at different moments in their lives and deaths. These shifts prompt fundamental ethical questions about commodifying life and require a more robust conceptualization of the commodification of animal life that attends not just to

*lively* commodities or *dead/once-living* commodities, but also to the *soon-to-be-dead* commodities and their *afterlives*, which all play a vital role in maintaining the accumulation of animal capital.

This commodification in the case of farmed animals is perhaps most easily understood within the geographic space of the farmed-animal auction yard, a space characterized as a commodity-exchange market (Smith, 1989; see also Collard and Gillespie, 2015). Animals are bought and sold in a highly efficient auction system and the space itself is integral to this seamless commodification and movement of capital. This article illuminates how life moving through the auction sheds light on the logics of animal capital. In particular, I focus here on the spatial logic of the auction as a way to better understand the consequences of commodification for nonhuman lives, their bodies, and their deaths.

These lives and deaths constantly orchestrated as commodities in the industry belong to real, living beings (what Rhoda Wilkie [2010] calls *sentient commodities*, and what Torres refers to as “superexploited living commodities” [2007: 39]). They suffer as a result of their commodification—physically, emotionally, and psychologically—and this suffering is something that is routinely denied, ignored, or dismissed as morally inconsequential, or perhaps it is acknowledged and considered, but is ultimately determined to be a regrettable reality of animal agriculture. Ryan Gunderson argues that capital’s “drive for self-expansion and self-accumulation is the source of the majority of contemporary food animal suffering” (2011: 260). I take as my starting point here the perspective that commodifying farmed animals does them profound and irreconcilable harm, and that dairy production delivers these harms at each phase of the commodification process from birth to slaughter (Gillespie, 2018; Narayanan, 2019a, 2019b; Nibert, 2013; Torres, 2007).

Dairy-breed cows are selectively bred for prolific milk production far in excess of that needed to nourish a calf. To prompt this milk production, cows must give birth regularly, and so they are artificially inseminated annually, gestate for nine months, their calves are removed immediately after birth, and they are milked for 300 days out of every year. When their productivity (of milk and pregnancy) declines, they are sold for slaughter. Beyond the slaughterhouse, their remains (those that cannot be commodified for human food consumption) are rendered into a range of new commodities comprising bone, fat, flesh, and skin. It is this life-course arc that guides my analysis of the lively commodity and its afterlives.

I have organized my thinking about lively commodities and their afterlives around life-worlds, death-worlds, and rotting-worlds, but these are not always distinct and easily distinguished landscapes. They are often deeply entangled, and in fact their logics of commodification can be difficult to disentangle. Within the human-shaped life-world of the lively commodity, death-worlds lie just beneath the surface, undercurrents through all of the discourses and material displays of liveliness.

A perfect illustration here is the newborn calf whose mother’s milk is diverted into the market and whose maternal bond is typically severed at, or shortly after, birth (Narayanan, 2019b). The male calf, a manifestation of new life coming into the world, is routed immediately onto a short path to death. Male calves born into the dairy industry can, to a certain extent, be understood in terms of what Collard and Dempsey categorize as *outcast surplus*—animals who are “superfluous as far as capital accumulation is concerned” (2017: 79); these calves are sometimes killed at or shortly after birth as “waste” or “discards” from the dairy industry and may be composted on the farm or sent for rendering. Their value is low and teeters on the edge of a failed cost–benefit calculation regarding cost of feed versus potential capital that might be generated from their slaughter. As external to the primary capital accumulated through dairy production, male calves, however, are often enrolled in an effort to recuperate capital from an otherwise valueless body, wherein they may be raised for 4–6

months in confinement for veal, slaughtered shortly after birth for lower-quality “bob veal,” or they may be raised as steers for beef (although dairy breeds differ from breeds typically raised for beef). A select few are raised as “natural service” breeding bulls or for semen production on a breeding farm, where they are forcibly ejaculated by artificial vagina or electro-ejaculator (Gillespie, 2014). A recent development in dairy production involves the proliferation of sexed semen as a commodity—a way of trying to eliminate any outcast surplus in the form of male calves, and in so doing, dramatically increase the number of female commodity laborers available to the industry (Ettema et al., 2017; Hutchison and Bickhart, 2016; McCulloch et al., 2013)

Even the birth of the calf (a clear embodiment of liveliness as life is brought into the world) is a harbinger of death for the cow. Cows in the dairy industry are typically allowed to live for 3–7 years (a fraction of a cow’s possible lifespan of 20–25 years) before they are no longer reproductively vital enough to warrant the cost of feeding them. With approximately one calf born per year after the first delivery at age two, the cow will typically deliver 1–5 cows in successive years before she is deemed “spent.” Thus, each pregnancy and birth brings her one year closer to death, to her slaughter, where further capital is extracted in the form of meat. Even in life and liveliness, the extraction of milk is a kind of death-world—in the death of the cow–calf bond, and in the impending death of the calf denied his mother’s milk. The specter of death looms also in the milking parlor, waiting for the cow’s milk production to decline, when this commodity life-world of milk dries up and transports her to her death. But this is all obscured beneath the surface of the lively commodity in the height of her productivity and liveliness. This full arc is visible in the circulation of the cow as capital through the auction yard.

### **The auction as a site of commodity exchange**

Methodologically, this article draws from research conducted as a feminist geographic multispecies institutional ethnography (Babbie, 2005; Gillespie, 2019; Hamilton and Taylor, 2017) of bovine animals in the dairy industry in the Pacific Northwestern United States. As one part of my nine months of fieldwork and textual analysis, I engaged in participant observation at farmed-animal auctions in Washington and California, which are the focus of this article. As I have written about in *The Cow with Ear Tag #1389* (Gillespie, 2018), the auction was originally only a peripheral part of my research, just one of the nodes in the commodity circuit that defines the life-course of cows in the dairy industry. But this space quickly became central for understanding the experience of the cows raised for dairy and the accompanying violence involved in the commodification of their bodies and labor. Initially, this intentional focus on the auction yard was a result of a methodological difficulty: early in my research I discovered through contacting dozens of dairy farms that only one would allow me to visit; most farmers seemed either suspicious of an academic researcher or simply uninterested in being part of an academic study. Auction yards are spaces open to the public and so quickly became one of my primary types of field sites (see Gillespie, 2018).

In this partially happenstance encounter with auctions, I found that there is something remarkable about the farmed-animal auction yard. The management of animals in this space of stark commodification, the way the space itself is designed to facilitate efficient containment and movement, the tools involved in daily auction practices—these dimensions of the auction are central to an analysis of the nature of commodification of animal bodies and lives (Collard and Gillespie, 2015; Gillespie, 2018). It is tempting to say that the moment of auction is when the fate of the animal is determined—whether she will be sold for meat

(transported to the slaughterhouse) or for dairy production (transported back to the farm). But in reality, her fate is already determined long before she enters the auction ring. Whether she is sold for slaughter or for dairy production, whether she dies in transport or at the auction yard, she is bound for premature death when her body is too worn out to produce as a result of excessive commodity production. The auction is a site where the cow's value is determined and assigned a price as she circulates in and through this space as capital, and where her particular commodity formation is illuminated in the fluorescent lighting of the ring. The auction where this occurs exists within the broader social, political, and economic setting of animal agriculture as a norm. As an institution imbued with complex cross-species power relations of dominance and subordination, of violence, and of resistance (Nibert, 2013; Wadiwel, 2015), animal agriculture (and its accompanying political-economic, ethical, and social implications) is reproduced in the space of the auction, and in the bodies and uses of the animals themselves.

Auctions as markets of economic exchange can be both geographic and virtual sites of market exchange guided by competition, by viewing that which is available for sale, and by prior knowledge of value and price of similar items in past sales (Garcia-Parpet, 2007; Geismar, 2004; Smith, 1989). They are spaces where sellers bid against one another directly, determining the final price offered for a particular good. Auctions in agricultural and food production contexts, in particular, offer sellers and buyers a “more effective commercial network” (Garcia-Parpet, 2007: 33), linking buyers and sellers in rural areas who might not otherwise have the occasion to enter into such robust markets of exchange. Some farmers and farmed-animal buyers choose to do business directly, outside of the more formal site of an auction. Many, however, prefer to buy and sell at auction where competition determines pricing and there is a more formalized system of trade. Charles Smith theorizes that, “auctions are social processes capable of defining and resolving inherently ambiguous situations, especially questions of value and price” (1989: 3). The relations of exchange unfolding at auction rely on the “construction of *price* (as the monetary amount assigned to objects by the market), and . . . *value* . . . [as] a set of judgements surrounding the assignation of price that are established in a multiplicity of ways – social, political and so on” (Geismar, 2004: 290; emphasis in the original). As I explore in this paper, the bodily condition, potential use, and commodity type that define each cow are qualities that construct ideas about value in the farmed-animal auction; the starting and purchase prices are assigned around this system of valuation.

Performative elements in auctions work to produce certain forms of value, aesthetics, emotionality, and authenticity (Smith, 1989). Auctions are often highly entertaining events, offering a lively and theatrical diversion to attendees—both those who are there bidding and those who are just there for the show (Cassidy, 2007; Smith, 1989). Auctions where live animals circulate as capital involve different forms of performative theatrics to produce the animal as a commodity: in Collard's (2020) exotic pet auctions, for instance, zebras, spider monkeys, reptiles, camels, and parrots are discursively constructed as extraordinary, one-of-a-kind; these auctions are shrouded in excitement and exoticism. Thoroughbred auctions in the horseracing epicenter of Kentucky, like those held at Keeneland (a pavilion located in the picturesque pastoral landscape of Lexington), are also spectacular events. The horses themselves are immaculate—prepared meticulously ahead of time for the event, groomed to perfection, to highlight their beauty, physique, athleticism, and health—and they often sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars (Cassidy, 2007). Some of the performative elements present in these high-value animal capital auctions are present in farmed-animal auctions (as I will discuss more below); however, farmed-animal auctions, like the dairy industry auctions I attended, are much more mundane, everyday kinds of events, and their systems of

valuation oriented around a broader spectrum of (lively, soon-to-be-dead, and once-living) animal capital.

Farmed-animal auctions in the United States are usually held inside large buildings directly adjacent to a grid of pens and chutes for containing and moving the animals in advance of and following the sale. The auction itself takes place in a hall with bleachers for buyers and spectators, a pen with doors wide enough to herd multiple large animals through, and an elevated seat for the auctioneer. In the auction ring, individual animals are auctioned off either by the head (per whole animal) or by the pound (usually per hundred pounds of weight). Occasionally, they are sold in a group, in which case the auctioneer will note that the buyer must purchase the whole lot at the per-head or per-pound price. At the beginning of each sale, the animal is herded into the ring and the bidding begins. With a rod or paddle (and occasionally an electric prod), the auction workers keep the animal moving in the ring, turning around and pacing back and forth so that the audience can view them from all angles as they bid. When each round of bidding is finished, the animals are herded out an exit door, where they step onto a scale that displays the weight on a screen above the auctioneer. This calculates their total cost.

Geographically, the auction yard is a space noteworthy for the tensions between containment and controlled mobility. For auctions to facilitate the efficient sale of animals, it is crucial for animals to move smoothly through the network of pens and chutes and move quickly in and out of the auction ring during the sale. The spaces are designed with this need for controlled mobility in mind. Nearly every segment of fencing is hinged and moveable, so that together they can easily be arranged by one or two auction workers to create a pen as a space of containment and immobilization or a chute as a space of controlled movement. Auction workers are responsible for managing this space; in other words, they determine which segments of fencing are involved in containing the animals and which are not. With bovine animals, an auction worker's memory and awareness of the current layout of the auction yard is critical for worker and animal safety. An error in judgment that leads to a frightened 1200-pound animal barreling down a chute that a worker thought was a contained pen could lead to injury of workers or other animals. Similarly, a missing segment of fence in the wrong place could lead to animals escaping. Thus, the management and knowledge of each segment of fencing is important for the efficient containment and movement of the animals leading up to, during, and after sale.

There are certain characteristics that make dairy industry auctions distinct from one another; namely, the type of auction makes a difference. Bovine animals used for dairy most often appear at one of two types of auction: dairy market auctions and cull market auctions. Dairy market auctions typically sell animals whose value as lively commodities is still viable; in other words, those who are still reproductively viable as calf and milk producers. Cull market auctions sell animals whose value as lively commodities is exhausted and their remaining value is to be sold for slaughter. I have chosen to focus in the next two sections on the dairy market and the cull market auctions as two distinct examples where the spatial management of animal bodies determines their status as lively commodities (a kind of life-world) or soon-to-be-dead and once-living commodities, and their afterlives (a death-world and rotting-world).

## **Lively commodities: Life-worlds in the dairy market auction**

A small Jersey cow enters the auction ring. Her coat is a shiny, creamy-brown, remarkably pristine compared to the filth of the holding pens behind the auction yard, where manure, mud,

and milk leaked from overfull udders make a wet slurry that coats many of the cows' legs and hooves and is splattered on their bellies and sides as they wait. She circles the ring, skittishly, trying to avoid the thwack of the paddles wielded by auction workers to keep her moving. The auctioneer tells us that she is due to give birth in about two months. We are told that this will be her second calf. "So, ladies and gentlemen, this beauty here is a sure thing!" the auctioneer promises, "And look at those udders! She's a real looker!" The cow leaps forward out of reach of one of the handlers, her eyes wide, and the auctioneer exclaims, "Whoa! We've got a live one there! Look at her go!"

This is the dairy market auction—a space that manifests as a particular kind of life-world organized around commodifiable traits of liveliness. In her work on the exotic pet trade, Collard refers to "commodities as lively and not living because it is not merely being alive that is integral to their being companion commodities, but also liveliness, which is to say, active demonstrations of being full of life—eating a mouse, flapping around a cage, or even blinking eyelids" (2014: 153). So, too, is liveliness integral to the dairy market sale: The cow is lively, full of life as she gestates the calf with whom she is pregnant; another cow is full of a different kind of life—full udders ready to deliver life-giving sustenance to her absent calf, diverted instead into the market; and yet another, energetic, bright-eyed, glossy coat, the picture of health. These are some of the qualities that make the cow in the dairy market auction attractive as a lively commodity.

Although liveliness does not characterize the full spectrum of farmed animals' experiences, the lively commodity form is integral to understanding one of the key anchors of animal agriculture as an institution. That farmed animals are both alive and lively, at least for a certain segment of the arc of their commodification, is essential to the flow of capital through agricultural and food economies, and through the auction yard in particular. The production of certain commodities, in fact, *requires* a certain degree of liveliness. In the case of animals raised for milk, eggs, and semen, for instance, the animals must be kept alive and lively (reproductively viable and productive—not only living, but enlivened with new and future life) for as long as they can accumulate capital in this lively state. These commodities—milk, eggs, semen—are the products of *living* beings, animals who also themselves are commodities, routinely bought and sold with the promise of the future production of milk, eggs, or semen.

Like the flow of cows through the auction yard, capital flows into, through, and out of these animals' lively bodies. And this flow begins with semen-as-capital. The liveliness and virility of the bull, his genetic stock, his physical condition, and his age, all play a part in making the bull himself a lively commodity, exchangeable in the market. Semen is forcibly ejaculated from these bulls, and then packaged and frozen, sold typically in single-dose straws to be circulated internationally as reproductive capital—a commodity in its own right, oriented around life, futurity, the promise of commodities to come (see Gillespie, 2014, 2018; Narayanan, 2018). This semen-as-capital flows into the cow's uterus when she is forcibly impregnated via artificial insemination. The fertilization of the egg, the emergence of new life within the cow—again oriented around futurity and the promise of new capital born, either in the form of a female calf who promises future reproductivity and value, or in the form of prolific milk production diverted from the calf into the market—or both. Cows, then, enter into a circular flow of capital through their bodies, mirrored in the movement of their bodies through the auction yard, until this flow slows—until their productive and reproductive capacities decline and their bodies become more valuable in their next commodity form, as meat. At this point, they are likely routed through a different kind of sale

(the cull market), but up to this point, the reproductive cycle on which their lively commodification is founded manifests its valuation in the dairy market auction.

The value of the cow oriented around liveliness at the dairy market auction rests on different qualities from those animals in Collard's exotic pet auctions, where their "ability to enter into encounters with humans—to be touched, looked upon, spoken to, and heard—is central to their construction as valuable objects, and thus productive of their economic value" (Collard and Dempsey, 2013: 2687). The cow's value is oriented around her (*re*) *productivity*, and less so around the encounterable and companionable qualities that make a parrot, for instance, valuable in an exotic pet market or a wild mustang valuable in a mustang market (on encounterability and companionability in auctions, see Collard [2020] and Pütz [2020], respectively). As a commodity whose economic value is derived primarily from her liveliness, the cow enters the commodity circuit; at auction, she is evaluated and sold for her bodily condition (her age, breed, health, temperament, and future reproductive potential). These qualities are all oriented around her liveliness as it translates to reproductivity as a commodity itself. This cow promises new life—liveliness in the form of new calves, new commodities, new producers of commodities. But she is also actively working as a prolific milk producer exchanged in this auction for her liveliness, or life-energies, required to produce large quantities of milk. Milk itself is imbued with meaning around life and liveliness—as "nature's perfect food," milk is a mammal's first food, a complete form of nourishment and life sustenance (DuPuis, 2002). The extraction of milk for commodity production is the extraction of a kind of life-force, the commodification of a life-sustaining material artifact routed away from the newborn who would rely on it for life. Milk is the valued commodity at the heart of the dairy industry, but it is not by far the only lively commodity upon which capital accumulates. Nor is milk even a commodity that circulates in the auction yard—rather, it is the *promise* of milk that is commodified in and through the bodies of the cows sold at auction.

The cow as a lively commodity is bid on and corralled through the auction ring in ways different from the way the cow as a soon-to-be-dead commodity moves through the cull market auction. Across both the dairy and cull market auctions, there is a fairly consistent average speed at which animals are sold—roughly one per minute, resulting in somewhere between 50 and 60 sales per hour. This speed of sale has not increased since the 1960s, when 50 sales per hour (on average) were made in farmed-animal auctions in the United States (Cassady, 1967). This stagnation in speed is attributed in part to the fact that "the time required to move animals through an auction slows down the operation, and the buyers, some of them ranchers to whom time is a more flexible element, tend to be more casual in their bidding" (Cassady, 1967: 90).

While other auctions that sell inanimate commodities may operate at more efficient speeds (e.g., tobacco, dead fish, produce), the speed at which it is possible to move living animals through the auction is limited by the lively nature of the commodity being sold (the cow). However, the speed at which farmed animals are moved through other agricultural spaces—namely, slaughterhouses—*has* increased to match the extreme intensification of other aspects of animal agriculture since the 1960s (Cronon, 1991; Striffler, 2005; Weis, 2007, 2013). Animal scientist Temple Grandin has been lauded by the meat industry for her redesign of slaughterhouses to more efficiently move animals through the chutes and into the slaughterhouse (see Grandin, 2010). These designs eliminate some of the distractions and fear-producing features a cow might encounter in the movement from truck to slaughterhouse. By herding cows into a single-file chute that obscures the vision of each cow, for instance, Grandin has enabled a sharp uptick in the speed at which cows carry themselves to slaughter to match the increasing mechanization of the disassembly line.



In reflecting on this intensifying speed in the slaughter process versus the stagnation in the auction yard, it is clear that there is something more going on to explain the limits in speed in auctioning live animals. In other words, it is not merely that animals are alive that restricts the rate at which they are moved through the space.

The dairy market typically allows more time than the cull market for moving each animal through the ring. In her work on the human social relations unfolding at UK farmed-animal auctions, Wilkie writes: “Breeding animals . . . have an indeterminate floating value, which may be influenced by a variety of factors, such as their breeding history, age, looks, and reputation of the selling farm. Thus, their price is more variable, and the selling of these animals takes more time” (Wilkie, 2010: 79). An important part of these sales occurs prior to the animal entering the auction ring: In conversations between the seller and auction staff, a cow’s starting price is determined, and then made fluid in the bidding process, and finally solidified in the moment of purchase in the auction ring itself. Constructing the cow as a lively commodity—and all of the complexities involved in determining this liveliness—takes time, more time than is needed to construct the soon-to-be-dead commodity in the cull market auction (as I will explain below). The qualities that define liveliness in the cow are precarious and can be dismantled easily with injury, aging, or a decline in fertility. At every dairy market auction I attended, it was routine for the auctioneer and the audience to engage in banter—sometimes focused on the cow’s udders, her physical beauty, her youth, or her fertility—as the cow was being guided in tight, constantly moving circles in the ring. This banter constructed a kind of story about the cow and her liveliness—enormous udders that bring copious quantities of milk, youth and proven fertility that promise the birth of calves, and her beauty—a more amorphous quality not tied directly to her (re) productivity, but which added to an affective sense of liveliness in the buyer: the pleasure, perhaps, of adding a “real looker” to their herd.

These constructions of the cow as a lively commodity add a performative nature to the dairy market auctions, wherein the auctioneer and the audience, focused on the physical and reproductive features of the animal, are not merely commenting on a reality of the cow-as-commodity before them, but are in fact *producing* this reality through the performative auction process (see MacKenzie et al., 2008: 2–3). The breeding cow, in this instance, is then the stage on which the construction and maintenance of the *lively commodity* is formed and plays out. Even as this performance is focused on attention to the qualities that define her value, the cow herself—as a living being with interests of her own, outside of being commodified—is obscured (see Gillespie, 2018). And this obscuration is necessary for her to circulate as lively capital, reduced as she is to valuable lively qualities. Still, the cow is sold as an individual, priced “per head,” meaning that a price is assigned to her life and body as a whole, reflecting the value placed on her condition and potential as a lively commodity (very different from how soon-to-be-dead commodities are sold).

The dairy market auction can be characterized as a kind of life-world—where lives are priced and sold as singular wholes based on the commodifiable features that define an animal as not just alive but *lively*. This life-world manifests and is enacted and produced through a solidified commitment to the animal-as-lively-commodity. This is a life-world not organized as a cow might organize her life, around enduring intra-species social relations and qualities of life, care, and sociality that matter to her. Rather, it is a life-world shaped by and for humans and their use of the cow, her welfare considered and tended to only inasmuch as is necessary for her successful commodification (see Gunderson, 2011). Indeed, her life is oriented fundamentally around the material and conceptual reality of the cow-as-lively-commodity. In the microcosm of the dairy market, life and liveliness come to the fore as specific logics of commodification. This life-world of the auction, organized around the

logic of the lively commodity, is only the first step in a wider arc of the commodification of life and death. It is only the first of multiple worlds through which commodified nonhuman lives pass in commodity circuits.

### **Soon-to-be-dead and once-living commodities: Death-worlds and rotting-worlds in the cull market auction**

Cow after cow limps through the auction pen, their legs lame and their bodies in various stages of collapse. Many have docked tails and their hides are covered in feces, mud, and dried blood from wounds and abrasions. Their ribs and hip bones jut out severely, creating a landscape on their bodies of concave valleys and skin stretched loosely across sharply angled bones. Their udders hang low with little elasticity and many are red with mastitis. Milk mixed with blood leaks from some of their udders. Cows move through the auction pen at a rate of about one per minute, sold quickly and without fanfare, and then are moved through the exit door and onto the scale. All of these animals are sold by the pound (per hundred pounds) for meat. When they exit the auction yard, most will board transport trailers destined for the slaughterhouse, while others may be fattened for a short time before traveling to slaughter. At one auction, a cow collapses in the auction ring, does not sell, and dies at the auction that night. At another auction, a cow collapses in the holding pens prior to the sale and is shot at the end of the day. Their bodies are picked up the next day by a “deadstock hauler” and delivered to a rendering facility.

This is the cull market auction—a space that can be understood as both death-world and rotting-world. The endpoint of the cull market auction is death (slaughter); thus, the space, the people who attend, and the atmosphere all become oriented around commodifying the soon-to-be-dead cow as meat. Her body, in fact, is already conceptualized as meat, sold as she is *by the pound*. Wilkie (2010: 79) points out that as animals move toward the end of their utility as living producers of commodities and near slaughter, their value becomes easier and more straightforward to determine since they are sold by weight. Although still technically living, the cow’s value gets further abstracted away from her liveliness and even from her life itself, as her price shifts from per-head (a system of value based on her as a whole life) to per-pound (a system of value based on the near-future potential of her body as meat).

The audience is populated almost exclusively by “meat buyers” and the cows passing through the ring are worn out, their liveliness spent, their bodies in a moment of transition between lively and once-living commodities. But these cows are not, in fact, dead, and so how do we understand their commodity status in this transitional moment and in this space? It is not simply that there are lively commodities and once-living commodities; there is the liminal state between the two: a soon-to-be-dead commodity, actively exchangeable in this commodity market, but whose future value is frozen for a moment, dependent on making it to the slaughterhouse where they can fulfill the purpose of their purchase by being killed for meat (their next commodity form). Slaughter—the violent transition from life to death—is a key node in the commodity circuit, where value is extracted from the body in the form of meat (Dutkiewicz, 2013; Pachirat, 2011; Wadiwel, 2016) and the cull market sale relies on cows being able to reach this point.

Unlike exotic pets, for instance, who remain alive “for the duration of their inclusion in the commodity circuit” (Collard and Dempsey, 2013: 2684), farmed animals’ existence as commodities extends through these soon-to-be-dead and once-living phases. The cull market is a space where these soon-to-be-dead animals, their value as lively commodities expended,

move like specters through the auction ring—reminders of both the bodily consequences of their commodification as lively beings and the fate of the slaughterhouse that awaits them. In these soon-to-be-dead lives, they inhabit what Achille Mbembe calls *death-worlds*: “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (2003: 40). This is the sense I had sitting in the audience at the cull market auctions, that I was witnessing the living dead, or “future corpses,” to use James Stanescu’s (2013: 150) language (where he draws on Reviel Netz’s [2004: 221] theorization of the Nazi death camps). Theorizing these cows in the cull market auction as *soon-to-be-dead*, as the *living dead*, or as *future corpses* highlights how they are moving through and into these death-worlds and how their commodity status is shifting as they approach their slaughter.

These specific commodity categories are important; however, even as these cows are specters of sorts—shadows or ghosts of their younger, more vital and lively selves—they are also very much still alive and feeling keenly the impacts of their commodification and the suffering it entails. Most cows at the cull auction still have the will to live, to survive, to get to the next thing, and so they keep moving. They are living and not living, experiencing keenly these last days, hours, moments before they are sold once more, their bodies reduced to living flesh sold by the pound. One of the consequences of commodification, of materially and conceptually rendering animals as commodities, and even writing critically about their commodification is that who they are, as living, feeling, social beings (who they are in spite of and exterior to their commodification) can be easily obscured. So, yes, they are the *soon-to-be-dead*, *living dead*, and *future corpses*, but they are not only that, and keeping this tension in mind may help to avoid the persistent erasure of their still-aliveness and their suffering, an erasure that is so easily accomplished through the commodification process.

Although not as clearly visible as in the dairy market auction, there is still a performative element to the cull market auction in an unlikely quality: the swift and unceremonious nature of the sales, and the often more business-like nature of the auctioneer’s discourse. At the cull auctions I attended, there was almost no joking or jovial banter, replaced instead by a steady stream of the auctioneer’s calls, punctuated by the subtle nod from an audience member to signal their bid. The cull auction lacks the more obvious performance and showing-off of the cows at the dairy sales, but the monotonous and swift nature of the cull auction offers a different kind of performative production of the cow-as-commodity, in conceptualizing the still-living cows as already-dead meat. This performative production of the cow as meat is integral to cementing their status as a soon-to-be-dead commodity, which enables their next transformation into a once-living commodity.

The cows at the cull market auction are suspended in a liminal state that strikes a precarious balance: They can’t be too lively, or they would still circulate in the dairy market economy; yet they must have enough life-energy to walk on their own through the auction ring. So-called downer, or non-ambulatory, cows (like the ones I watched collapse at various auctions) cannot be slaughtered for human consumption and so rapidly lose their potential as capital when they can no longer deliver themselves to the slaughterhouse. This efficient movement and subsequent sale is also reliant on the animals being in a condition that enables them to physically move through the auction space. When a cow collapses at auction, workers will do all they can to urge her to her feet. If a cow dies at auction, workers will have to deal with the disposal of her body by calling a deadstock hauler to pick up her body and deliver her to a rendering facility. When cows have difficulty moving through the auction yard, they mar the efficiency of the auction, and so handlers work hard to keep the cows moving smoothly. The auction, and the sellers, have a vested interest in selling each cow and moving them out onto the transport trucks—both for financial reasons and because of the

difficulty of dealing with those who collapse or die at auction. However, the commodity-potential for these “downer” cows is not lost entirely; they can be routed into a different stream of circulation: the rendering industry. As a buyer in the cull auction, one of the most important questions is: Will she make it through the auction ring, and can she make it, alive, to the slaughterhouse?

I identify the cull market auction as both death-world and rotting-world in part to show how the cull market is not a straightforward space of dying or death. It is not merely a steady flow of worn-out cows on their way to slaughter. It certainly *is* this; it is a clear example of Mbembe’s *death-world*, a space containing and organized around those designated as the living dead. But it is not only this; the cull market is a kind of *rotting-world* as well. Rotting-worlds are those characterized by decay, decomposition, rot, the breaking-down of the once-living, vibrant body. Typically, rot and decay are associated with things already dead—bodies, fruits, damp wood. But in the cull market auction, soon-to-be-dead cows are already in various states of decay and decomposition. To decompose involves the falling apart of what was once unified as one. In this case, the wholeness, healthfulness, and wellbeing of the cow has fallen apart. She moves with difficulty, her body injured by the impacts of her life-long commodification; she is wounded, infected, nutrient-depleted, exhausted, her skin hangs loosely over the skeleton whose bones will later be ground to dust for fertilizer. It’s a kind of decomposition of the living, and the extent to which the cow has decomposed determines just what kind of commodity she will become next. If she is composed enough to make it to the slaughterhouse, then she is commodified for meat. But if her body and life-energies have decayed too much, capital must be extracted in a different way—through rendering.

Rendering facilities process animal remains that cannot be utilized as food for human consumption. Renderers take both the remains left over after slaughter (bone, skin, offal, etc.) and the full-body remains of those who die before they reach the slaughterhouse (and thus are not fit for human consumption). These bodies and fragments of bodies are rendered down and converted into a staggering number of new commodities: bone meal, fertilizer, soap, perfumes, gelatin, car tires, pharmaceuticals—the list goes on. High temperatures must be applied to these remains in the rendering plant to eliminate the virulent bacteria associated with rotting flesh. Animal remains reach the rendering plant in various stages of rot. During my fieldwork I was told on more than one occasion how powerful the smell of rot and decay is in the rendering plant: one deadstock hauler I spoke with said that he had “seen grown men walk into a plant and lose their lunch. The smell is powerful.” A former worker in the rendering industry told me that she worked at a plant for six months and the smell of rot never got easier to stomach; she vomited every day when she arrived at work. The stench of rot, of decomposing animal remains, the machinery designed to transform this rot; this, the rendering plant, is a rotting-world, and its commodity logic—born through the cull auction—a race to recuperate capital from that which is already quickly decomposing.

It is in slaughter and rendering that the afterlives of the lively and soon-to-be-dead commodities reside. The commodified remains of the cow could be theorized as dead commodities, but in this case the dead commodity is not actually a dead commodity; flesh-as-meat, bone, skin, hooves, and offal are dead, but they hold in them the once-living and lively animal, the soon-to-be-dead, and the life-worlds, death-worlds, and rotting-worlds through which they have circulated as capital. These slaughtered, rendered commodity forms are the afterlives of the lively commodity, the afterlife of liveliness of a life oriented around being commodified. They are not simply, then, a dead commodity, but a once-living commodity—a commodity-after-life.

## Afterlives: Concluding thoughts

The farmed-animal auction yard as life-world, death-world, and rotting-world defines the fluid commodity status of living beings, like the cow raised for dairy. The commodity logics sustained through the auction as a site of commodity exchange necessitate a fuller account of commodification that follows from the lively commodity form and illuminates the implications of commodifying life, death, and afterlife—from birth to slaughter and beyond. The slaughterhouse and the rendering plant manage the afterlives of commodified bodies by transforming them into an array of new commodities. These remains and their circulation as capital become afterlives of the lively commodity. They are commodities in their own right but are entangled with these other commodity forms. These stages of commodification understood through the auction yard illuminate not just the consequences of bodies and lives enrolled as lively commodities, but also as soon-to-be-dead and once-living commodities—all contained in the individual life and death arc of each cow.

It is not just the afterlives of bodies in their new commodity forms that are important here, but also the afterlives of the commodified cow herself, the process of her commodification, and what it means more broadly for the institution of animal agriculture. The institutional memory of the cow—of other farmed animals, and other forms of nonhuman life—works to reproduce animal agriculture as a dominant and largely taken-for-granted institution. Collard and Dempsey close their article on lively commodities with the questions: “What market violences are tacitly accepted, and which become sites of interrogation and political movement? What types of market value are socially accepted and what are not, and upon what ethical and political grounds?” (2013: 2695). The cow, commodified at every juncture in her life and death, becomes a normalized signifier for the long-standing, ongoing, and intensifying acceptability of commodifying life, *for what else could her purpose be if not to be commodified?*

Indeed, the use of farmed animals (as well as other species and nonhuman ecosystems) has long been normalized and depoliticized in ways that comfortably sustain their subordination and exploitation and the hegemonic institution of animal agriculture: “Justified by ideology, structured by relations of profit, and reinforced by our behavior, the exploitation of animals is deeply rooted in our society and culture, and deepened significantly by the commodity-based nature of capital” (Torres, 2007: 27). Precisely because of the normalization of this institution and because farmed animals’ lives are thoroughly shaped and appropriated by humans, these varied commodity forms demand deeper and more ethically and politically engaged analyses (Hobson, 2007; Srinivasan, 2016). Nicole Shukin argues that the market’s involvement in “animal life has persistently eluded politicization, possibly because so much is at stake . . . If animal life is violently subject to capital, capital is inescapably contingent on animal life, such that disruptions in animal capital have the potential to percuss through the biopolitical chains of market life” (2009: 24).

Thus, centering an analysis of farmed animals as lively, soon-to-be-dead, and once-living commodities—and acknowledging the harm done by commodifying these living beings—necessitates a transformation of the concepts of both animal capital and market life. In the case of farmed-animal species, this transformation requires much more than a consideration of how their commodification could be less harmful, as welfarist approaches do; it requires a robust imagining of worlds otherwise for species, like cows, who have circulated as lively and once-living capital since the rise of market-oriented capitalist economies (Gunderson, 2011; Nibert, 2013). A seismic shift away from relationships of commodification between humans and other species involves a radical transformation in what kind of life-worlds are possible for species who have for so long been farmed. This reimagining upends

fundamental notions of what or who can be commodified at all, profoundly disrupting both humans' sense of entitlement to nonhuman life-worlds and humans' unselfconscious perpetuation of nonhuman death-worlds. Might, then, we think of the concept of *afterlives* in a different way—not only as a framework for thinking of what forms of commodification follow from the lively commodity, but one that leaves commodity relations behind entirely, making possible forms of life oriented around the *flourishing* of nonhuman lives on their own terms?

### Acknowledgments

Rosemary-Claire Collard and Jessica Dempsey's theorization of the lively commodity has been foundational in geographies of commodification and of the nonhuman; I am indebted to their thinking and writing on this concept. Collard's body of work more broadly and her colleagueship is one of the brightest lights in critical geography. I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their excellent suggestions for improving this manuscript, to Trevor Barnes for his astute editorial guidance, and to *Environment and Planning A* for providing a home for this article.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Note

1. Collard and Dempsey's explication of the *lively commodity* articulates with earlier work on "lively capital" (e.g., Haraway, 2008) and is followed by other work on living or lively capital (e.g., Barua, 2016, 2017; Pütz, 2020). I have chosen here to engage primarily with Collard and Dempsey's formulation of the lively commodity.

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