

The political afterlives of lively commodities

This paper explores the political afterlives of lively commodities. Specifically, we are interested how animals and plants continue to do work (i.e. to produce value) among the living, long after their own biological lives have ended. This line of inquiry builds on a growing body of literature concerned with 'commodities whose capitalist value is derived from their status as living beings' (e.g. bees, exotic pets, and other interactive/reproductive species) rather than from their status as derivatives of living beings (e.g. honey, meat, and trophies, etc.) (Collard and Dempsey 2012, 2684). Within this body of literature, lively commodities 'produce capitalist value as long as they remain alive and/or promise future life' (Collard and Dempsey 2012, 2684). Accordingly, there is a common and often correct assumption that lively commodities are seen as disposable, superfluous, or waste once their lives have fulfilled their purpose in circuits of commodity exchange – this might well be why countless goldfish are flushed down countless toilet bowls, whether or not their biological lives have technically come to an end. In short, for many lively commodities, death represents a final form of violent separation – not from their places of origin, past relationships, or even natural habitats, but – from commodity circuits. However, this is certainly not the case for all lively commodities. Rather, we argue that many lively commodities live on after death, secreting various forms of value and shaping the political-economic and -ecological terrains of labour-capital antagonism for future generations. Although this is the primary contribution of our paper, we also reflect on how certain lively commodities become sources of other value during their afterlives, including noncapitalist value. Our analysis is framed around consideration for how different types of animal and plant remains (e.g. carrion, cadavers, and preserves) are oriented to capitalist value production 'in spirit'. Moreover, it is informed by fieldwork and research that the authors have carried out on animals (mainly charismatic megafauna) and plants (mainly succulents) respectively.