

# Parallel Lives

*Human–Cow Entanglements  
at a Finnish Prison Farm*

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**Abstract:** This article investigates cow care-taking practices in a Finnish prison and living gene bank. Building upon work in Feminist Science and Technology Studies, Critical Animal Studies, and Critical Heritage Studies, we seek to understand how human and nonhuman animal lives are partially folded together, while also discussing the worlds cultivated in a space of conservation and incarceration. Empirically, the article draws upon multispecies ethnography undertaken during two separate visits to Pelso Prison in central Finland. We conclude that cows emerge as not simply working animals. They are viewed as valuable genetic material vital to the Finnish nation state as well as given names and granted personalities. Meanwhile, in the company of an endangered cattle breed, inmates gain new value as care-workers and conservationists “saving” the breed. In this space of exception, precarious interspecies lives are interwoven.

**Keywords:** *Conservation; Multispecies ethnography; Critical animal studies; Bovine biopolitics; Feminist cultural studies; science and technology studies*

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The 2021 Canadian documentary *Prison Farm* shows how caring for cows helps inmates process guilt and give back to the community. Caring for young calves confronts the hardships associated with being away from their own human children. As one of the men puts it: “Taking care of these animals is taking care of my guilt.” Another man notes that “without this, I’d have nothing. I’d just be an inmate.”<sup>1</sup> Cow care-taking is vividly displayed as being about more than merely acquiring a new set of job skills; we are shown how it gives these men a sense of purpose.

This article investigates cow conservation and care-taking practices as they unfold in the case of a Finnish prison farm which, in addition, functioned as a living gene bank for endangered species of livestock. Departing from our backgrounds in feminist cultural studies and animal genomic science scholarship, we study how inmates and cows work side by side and are potentially transformed in the company of one another. Located in central Finland, the Pelso Prison and living gene bank can be viewed as a space of exception. Here, an endangered breed of cows known as Northern Finncattle or Lapland cows have been kept. The breed is most often divided into three different varieties: Northern Finncattle (the variety referred to in this article, which tend to be white with black ears or spots), as well as Western and Eastern Finncattle. Smaller in size in comparison to other cattle types, Finncattle are viewed as native to Finland. As noted by Sakari Tamminen in his ethnography of Finnish biogenetic resources, non-human animals have become vital in the making of the Finnish nation state. Labelling and conserving *Finnish* cattle, sheep, and even apples becomes, then, interwoven with “the theoretical ideas of a natural Finnishness, a nonhuman nationhood.”<sup>2</sup>

Emerging from the claims that human and nonhuman animal encounters can be transformative, we theorize the Pelso Prison and living gene bank as a space of exception. This means recognizing the ways that the exception, in the case of the Pelso Prison, becomes a

1 “Prison Farm”, CBC Television, <https://www.cbc.ca/cbcdocspov/episodes/prison-farm>.

2 Tamminen, *Biogenetic Paradoxes*, 80

regulatory and nation-making norm.<sup>3</sup> This understanding is echoed in Tamminen’s work, in which he uses a biopolitical framework to argue that the conservation of Finncattle and Finnsheep exceeds the conservation of nonhuman animals and extends itself to “Finland and the current forms of power in use to maintain particular nonhuman populations as genetic resources.”<sup>4</sup>

Against this backdrop, two research questions guide our work: How do inmates work alongside cows at the Pelso Prison? And secondly, in the contexts of conservation and incarceration, what kinds of worlds are cultivated? While endangered cows emerge as valuable genetic resources, they are also viewed as therapeutic nonhuman animal interventions. Meanwhile, in being alongside endangered cows, inmates gain positions as nurturing conservationists and caretakers. In what follows, we begin with a presentation of the Pelso Prison to discuss how multispecies ethnography helps document the ways that human and nonhuman animal lives are partially folded together. We then turn to how nonhuman animals entangle with national, gendered, and racialized histories, while also presenting our theoretical approach drawing on work within the fields of Science and Technology Studies (STS), Critical Animal Studies, and Critical Heritage Studies. In our analysis, we centre human–cow forms of relatedness, and we delineate how the Pelso Prison case helps us understand how different worlds are cultivated when inmates and endangered cows work alongside one another, as well as the broader biopolitical implications of this space.

### **Doing Multispecies Work**

Located a mere 300 kilometres south of the Arctic circle, Pelso Prison is an all-male prison consisting of closed as well as open wards. It currently houses eighty inmates. The living gene bank at Pelso Prison was established in 1984 and closed in August 2022 (fig. 1). The gene bank was separated into two areas: a Finncattle barn and outside area and an area dedicated to Finnsheep. The

3 See Agamben, *State of Exception*.

4 Tamminen, *Biogenetic Paradoxes*, 42.



**Figure 1:**

The Pelso Prison and living gene bank is located approximately 82 km from Oulu, Finland.

Photo taken by Charlotte Kroløkke, February 2022.

Finncattle living gene bank had grown from its first initial thirty inhabitants to, at the time of its closing, some sixty-eight milking cows, two breeding bulls, and sixty-five calves and heifers. With the goal of breeding, and accordingly, preserving Finncattle, the living gene bank was established at Pelso Prison following a series of events thought to have saved the Northern Finncattle breed. The former Head of the Finnish Agricultural Research Centre, Professor Kalle Majjala's work on farm animal conservation is viewed as vital in the establishment of the bank.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1980s, the numbers of Finncattle dropped drastically and the breed teetered on the brink of extinction. The decision was made to establish a working living gene bank at Pelso to conserve the breed while simultaneously giving inmates the opportunity to cultivate "relevant" working skills. In his ethnography of Finnish biogenetic resource management, Tamminen describes Pelso Prison as a form of disciplinary power, arguing that the prison "holds populations that have no place in the society but that the society is unable to let die since they might prove useful later and in other contexts than those from which they emerge".<sup>6</sup>

The decision to close the living gene bank and relocate all the animals to the Lappia Vocational College, located in Loue in the northern part of Finland, was based on several reasons. One significant factor in the decision was that the Pelso Prison is itself scheduled to move to a new facility in 2024. Also, animal husbandry work is now considered less "relevant" and hence it was no longer felt that the prison farm was helping inmates to cultivate the "necessary job-related skills".<sup>7</sup> At the gene bank's new location in northern Finland, agricultural students will do the care-work while small Lapland-based businesses are expected to derive benefits from what is described as the potential for luxury Lapland products.<sup>8</sup> For example, the Arctic

5 MTT Agrifood Research Finland, "EuReCa Cryoconservation".

6 Tamminen, *Biogenetic Paradoxes*, 80.

7 Interview with Assistant Director of Pelso Prison, February 2022.

8 For more information about the plans, see Tiinamaija Rantamartti, "Tervolassa valmistaudutaan ainutlaatuisen geenipankkikarjan tuloon — Lappian koulutustilalle suunnitteilla miljoonainvestointi," *Yle.fi* 6 October 2020, <https://yle.fi/a/3-11578328>.

Ice Cream Factory, a local Lapland business, will extend its range of products to include Finncattle-derived dairy.<sup>9</sup> The company markets its products as being “inspired by Arctic nature and the best childhood memories”, produced from natural ingredients in made-to-appear exceptional Northern flavours (cloudberry, bilberry, and Northern Finncattle milk).<sup>10</sup> The transfer of the Northern Finncattle living gene bank to Lappia Vocational College has received considerable media attention, and has been naturalised as an epic “return to Lapland” for the Northern Finncattle.<sup>11</sup>

To understand how inmates and cows were mutually transformed in the company of each other, we employed a multispecies approach.<sup>12</sup> In our case, this meant spending time in the company of inmates and cows at the Pelso Prison. We made two visits to the facility: the first was in February 2022, and the second in August 2022. The latter visit was undertaken during a time of emotional upheaval due to the closing of the living gene bank. During both visits, we spent time inside and outside the barn (fig. 2). We were present at the milking station and engaged in the milking of the cows. We chatted with staff and inmates before, during, and after their work. We walked with cows to their summer pastures and hung out with them within small and large enclosed areas while observing, interacting with, touching, and brushing them. Some of our conversations were conducted in English, while others were carried out in Finnish. At the time of our visits, the cattle team consisted of two female supervisors who undertook all the work involved in managing care-work while also supervising a team of five to seven Finnish inmates. They jointly managed the twice-daily work with Finncattle undertaken early in the morning as well as late in the afternoon. While we were within the confines

9 For more information about this project, see Suvi Jylhänlehto, “Lapinlehmän maito maistuu nyt artesaanijäätelöissä – tilamaito kannetaan tonkassa navetalta tuotantotiloihin.” *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* 3 Sept. 2022. <https://www.maaseuduntulevaisuus.fi/ruoka/fa1c83c6-df7b-4971-a322-3ee71bcc2067>.

10 See Rifat Jahan, “Arctic Ice Creams Born out of Local Flavors”, *Daily Finland*, 7 July 2019, <https://www.dailyfinland.fi/business/11451/Arctic-ice-creams-born-out-of-local-flavors/>. See also the Arctic Ice Cream Factory’s website, <https://www.arcticicecream.fi/>.

11 Conversations with supervisors at the Pelso Prison and living gene bank.

12 van Dooren et al., “Multispecies Studies”; Ogden, Hall, and Tanita, “Animals, Plants, People, and Things”; Tsing, “Unruly Edges”.



**Figure 2:**

Outdoor interactions with cows during the winter months.

Photo taken by Charlotte Kroløkke, February 2022.



of the Pelso Prison structure, we exclusively spent time in the living gene bank noting the presence of guards when arriving and leaving the bank.

As Anna Tsing writes, multispecies ethnography requires a recognition of how humanity itself emerges in interspecies relationships. Multispecies scholars Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster refer to the cultivation of “arts of attentiveness”, asking “how human lives, lifeways, and accountabilities are folded” together.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, it extends our scholarly interest to the ways that human and nonhuman lives come together, paying attention to ethical concerns related to nonhuman animals<sup>14</sup> and critically questioning the centrality of the human subject. In the field of anthropology, the multispecies turn has led to a renewed interest in the lives of animals, whether these unfold in labs, on farms, or in various ecosystems.<sup>15</sup> Following from the above work, as well as the ethical guidelines for multispecies work proposed by Heather Rosenfeld and Lauren Van Patter,<sup>16</sup> we obtained informed consent from all human participants including administrators at the Pelso Prison and carefully considered how our presence could negatively affect the lives of the human and nonhuman residents. Having outlined our case and methodological approach, we now turn to our theoretical perspectives prior to discussing our analytical interventions.

## **On Cows and Conservation: Theoretical Perspectives**

Historically, nonhuman animals have been linked to the making of nations, and cows are no exception.<sup>17</sup> Breeds, to quote Krithika Srinivasan, can be viewed as a “construction of the human imagination”.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, as Mette Svendsen argues, nonhuman animals become politicized in accordance with eugenic discourses when, for example, attempts are made to keep pigs bred outside

13 van Dooren et al., “Multispecies Studies”, 2.

14 Rosenfeld and Van Patter, “Introduction”.

15 Kirksey and Helmreich, “Emergence”.

16 Rosenfeld and Van Patter, “Introduction”.

17 Kroløkke, “Heritage”; Tamminen, *Biogenetic Paradoxes*.

18 Srinivasan, “Biopolitics of Animal Being”, 113.

of Denmark away from the national borders.<sup>19</sup> Nordic Mountain cows become symbolic of an imagined exceptional Scandinavia,<sup>20</sup> while the emergence of Finncattle (as a breed) is bound up with early twentieth-century Finnish nationalist movements: “Labor-intensive breeding techniques were used to purify the national animals of foreign blood and to produce purebred Finnish animals in order to prove the theoretical ideas of a natural Finnishness, a non-human nationhood.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the desires for pure-bred animals are reiterated at a time when Scandinavian politicians and media reports express concern over immigration and the emergence of an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse Scandinavia. Accordingly, Eike Marten notes that “valued diversity and de-valued differences resonate highly with human diversity discourse.”<sup>22</sup> In this manner, nonhuman animals become material as well as symbolic nationalized capital.<sup>23</sup>

Nonhuman animals are also deeply embedded within colonial and racialized discourses.<sup>24</sup> Notably, Radhika Govindrajan shows how colonial powers intertwine with notions of the nonhuman. While the colonizer is afforded the status of humanity, Govindrajan argues, animality becomes attributed to the colonized.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, and in her critique of Gregory Colbert’s photographic exhibit of exoticized animals (e.g., elephants and cheetahs), Nicole Shukin shows how the visual representations of humans and animals portray brown-skinned non-Westerners as “closer to animals than the white Westerner, who, after all these twists and turns, remains in imperial position as the universal subject.”<sup>26</sup> The racialized hierarchies implicating

19 Svendsen, *Pigs, People, and Politics*.

20 Kroløkke, “Heritage”.

21 Tamminen, *Biogenetic Paradoxes*, 79–80.

22 Marten, “Bio/diversity”, 56.

23 Kroløkke, “Heritage”; Shukin, *Animal Capital*; Swart, “Other Citizens”; Tamminen, *Biogenetic Paradoxes*.

24 Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*; Taschereau Mammers, “Human–Bison Relations”; Morin, *Carceral Space*; Parreñas, *Decolonizing Extinction*; Shukin, *Animal Capital*; Wyckoff, “Sexism and Speciesism”.

25 Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*, 11.

26 Shukin, *Animal Capital*, 199.

human and nonhuman actors are also present in human spaces of confinement.<sup>27</sup> Karen Morin points to the ways that animals (especially dogs) historically have played a role in the prison system while additionally showing how the figures of “laboring prisoners” and “laboring animals” fruitfully can be thought together: “Labor exploitation inexorably transforms brown-skinned prisoners and animal bodies in carceral spaces.”<sup>28</sup>

To theorize and document human and nonhuman animal relations, we turn to burgeoning work within Critical Animal Studies.<sup>29</sup> In her ethnographic study of interspecies relatedness in the Central Himalayas, Govindrajan troubles interspecies power relations and dismantles the idea of human exceptionalism. Similarly, and based on a visual archive and photo-elicited interviews, in our own earlier work, we discuss the ways that human–mountain cattle relations are brought into being through recognizable kinship terms. Nordic Mountain cows emerge, we argue, as “mothers”, “daughters”, “friends”, “co-workers”, “family members”, and, importantly, as “pets”.<sup>30</sup> In a similar vein, Catherine Nash discusses interspecies relatedness between Icelandic horses and humans. Interspecies relatedness, she argues, is embedded within categories of similarity and difference, shaped by how these animals are “valued as individuals, as representatives of the breed and embodiments of pedigree and lineage within the breed and evaluated in relation to other members of the breed”.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, in her analysis of the Animal Planet television show *Cell Dogs*, Donna Haraway shows how non-human animals emerge as companions, inmates, even therapists. In these programs, dogs and prisoners turn into “freedom-making technologies for each other”.<sup>32</sup> Characteristic of this work, then, is

27 Brower, “Lives of Animals”.

28 Morin, *Carceral Space*, 91–92.

29 Birke and Hockenull, “Investigating Human–Animal Bonds”; Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*; Howell and Kean, “Writing in Animals in History”; Kuhl, “Human–Sled Dog Relations”; Nash, “Kinship”; Linné, “Cows on Facebook”; Webster and Ebersole, “Maasai Relationships”.

30 Cf. Kroløkke et al., “A Flock of One’s Own”.

31 Nash, “Kinship”, 136.

32 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 64.

the desire to discuss how human and nonhuman animal encounters trouble species hierarchies and — in the employment of recognizable kinship terms — become folded together.

As we centre the conservation practices conducted in the Pelso Prison farm, we additionally draw upon work in STS and Critical Heritage Studies that shows how conservation is “caught up in apparatuses of biopower”.<sup>33</sup> In his study of the biopolitics of endangered species preservation, Matthew Chrulew analyses the networks of power that ensure that certain exoticized animals are bred and kept in captivity. Eike Marten also understands biodiversity conservation as “a biopolitical investment”,<sup>34</sup> which works by turning made-to-appear native plants into species that, unlike their “alien” counterparts, are meant to “live and be harnessed”.<sup>35</sup> In the case of conservation, then, biopower can be understood as the power to make live and *not* let die.<sup>36</sup> The conservation of endangered species is thus predicated on “the promise of vitality to come”<sup>37</sup> as well as the making of “latent futures”<sup>38</sup> that privilege species-thinking, which Chrulew defines as follows: “species over individuals, code over life, genes over bodies.”<sup>39</sup> By preserving DNA, blood, or reproductive cells, biobanks and living gene banks function as future-making institutions, “hopeful projects”<sup>40</sup> engaged in conservation in the name of a better future to come.

From the perspective of Critical Heritage scholars, concepts like “biodiversity” and “endangerment” are foundational in the institutionalization of biobanks. As Rodney Harrison notes, banking biodiversity can be conceptualized as hope as well as “a form of biopolitical power” involving an “anticipatory temporal disposition toward the future”.<sup>41</sup> When nonhuman animals are classified as “endangered”,

33 Chrulew, “Managing Love and Death”, 140.

34 Marten, “Bio/diversity”, 51.

35 Marten, 54.

36 Kowal and Radin, “Indigenous Biospecimen Collections”, Chrulew, “Freezing the Ark”.

37 van Dooren, “Banking the Forest”, 263.

38 Radin, “Planned Hindsight”.

39 Chrulew, “Managing Love and Death”, 148.

40 van Dooren, “Banking the Forest”, 262.

41 Harrison, “Freezing Seeds”, 81.

for example, it conjures up visions of “loss” and national “depletion”<sup>42</sup> and serves as a biopolitical quest to save specific species of animals.<sup>43</sup> It is against this backdrop that the conservation of certain species becomes understood as an attempt to secure the nation’s biodiversity and consequently, a form of bio-wealth. Which species come to be viewed as native (and worthy of conservation) entails an active biopolitical intervention in the “production of more or less distant *futures*”<sup>44</sup> as well as a re-naturalization of the borders of the nation state.

In this paper, we seek to unsettle human and nonhuman animal binaries. Nonhuman animals can be viewed as relational, even performative categories enabling human and nonhuman animal partial connections and divisions.<sup>45</sup> In Haraway’s influential work, “becoming-with” is viewed as a material as well as a discursive process.<sup>46</sup> It entails understanding human and nonhuman animal interactions as collaborative. Anita Maurstad, Dona Davis, and Sarah Cowles employ this approach when showing that being-with horses is strongly performed in the stories that riders tell.<sup>47</sup> Human and nonhuman animals become-with one another as well as with a multitude of other environments.<sup>48</sup> Similarly borrowing from Haraway’s work, Andrea Petitt and Alice Hovorka add a feminist intersectional approach to the study of how women in Botswana become-with cows. To Petitt and Hovorka, becoming-with helps take “both humans and other animals seriously by engaging the relationships between them.”<sup>49</sup> Human and nonhuman animal worlds, these scholars argue, are materially as well as discursively knotted together. While we find inspiration in this work; in our analysis, we prefer Joanna Latimer’s concept of “being alongside” to “becoming-with”, as it emphasizes

42 Breithoff and Harrison, “From Ark to Bank”, 39.

43 Chrulew, “Managing Love and Death”.

44 Breithoff and Harrison, “From Ark to Bank”, 38.

45 Birke, *Intimate Familiarities*; “Rats (and Mice)”; Birke, Bryld, and Lykke, “Animal Performances”, Latimer, “Being Alongside”.

46 Haraway *When Species Meet*.

47 Maurstad, Davis, and Cowles, “Horse–Human Relationships”, 324.

48 Such as viruses and bacteria, cf. Gundermann, “Equine/Human Lyme Embodiments”.

49 Petitt and Hovorka, “Women and Cattle”, 146.

partial connections with nonhuman animals rather than hybridity: “Each part remains partially connected but also partially divided.”<sup>50</sup> In contrast to the more totalizing joining-together in the trope of “becoming-with”, being or working alongside one another encourages attention to, for example, the ways that human caretakers may benefit from their nonhuman animal interactions, yet still, in the structures of the penal system, remain inmates. In employing Latimer’s concept, we can also show how human and nonhuman animals work and dwell together, and in this manner, embody a form of partial connectivity.

### **Being alongside Cows**

“Welcome to prison,” the supervisor says when our team of researchers first arrives on a cold February morning. In this white snowy landscape, where it is difficult to see where the road begins and ends, the supervisor’s big, warm smile stands out in contrast to the cold climate. “Finnish native breeds” the sign on the outside door reads, featuring a photo of a cow with her calf. Walking into the corridor, a cosy little dining area and office are located on the right-hand side. Here, what appears as a never-ending supply of coffee and cake await (see fig. 3). Across from this room, we find the changing area where the two supervisors and all guests get dressed. The walls are adorned with posters and drawings by the inmates: one poster shows the eight dam lines that have been housed at the prison farm, while a Christmas card (drawn by one of the inmates) along with a range of cattle awards are featured as well (see fig. 3). In the changing room, we put on big rubber boots, overalls, gloves, and a hat—not only to protect us from the freezing cold, but also to help shield us from the smell, the cow dung, and the mud.

The two supervisors are experienced at working with Finncattle. The main supervisor has spent the past ten years working at the prison and knows each cow by her udder, she jokingly says. Whereas inmates come and go throughout the year, the supervisors have remained the same. Of the five inmates present during

50 Latimer, “Being Alongside”, 96.



**Figure 3:**

Photo of the head office in which supervisors dine, enjoy coffee breaks, or teach.

Photo taken by Charlotte Kroløkke, August 2022.

our visit in August, only one was on the team in February. All the cows have been named either by the supervisors or by the team of inmates. During this first tour of the farm, we meet, for example, the award-winning Amma — a Northern Finncattle cow who is fourteen years old and now retired. Amma spends most of her time outdoors, but she also has an open shed for shelter and sleeping.

At the living gene bank, all cows are marked with an ear tag number, but they have also been given names by the inmates, many of which refer to aspects of prison life, alcoholic drinks, or public figures. We meet several three-month old calves — for example, Tuomio (which means “sentence” or “verdict” in Finnish) and Tyrmä (which means “dungeon” or “jail”). Uuno is just one month old and a favourite of one of the inmates. Meaning “number one”, Uuno is also the name of the beloved Finnish comedy character “Uuno Turhapuro”, created by Spede Pasanen, a caricature of a Finnish man (ragged, lazy, and dirty yet married to the daughter of a rich industrialist). In the living gene bank, Uuno seems to indeed enjoy several privileges: He walks freely around in the barn, follows us, and mirrors our curiosity when, like us, he peeks into the enclosed areas (fig. 4). In what the supervisor refers to as the “teenage” division, we meet “Tuborg” (named after a brand of Danish beer), whose mother is named “Olvi” (a brand of Finnish beer). During the second visit, the calves we met in February have already left for their new residences or, as in the case of Uuno, joined a local farm as a companion animal. During this visit, we are greeted by several new three-month old calves. We meet “Ulla” (a conventional Scandinavian female name) and “UKK” (named after Urho Kaleva Kekkonen, president of Finland from 1956 to 1982), as well as a black-and-white calf named “Upcider” (a Finnish brand of alcoholic cider). Given the fact that the living gene bank is soon to close along with the expressed affections that the supervisors and inmates share with us about the living gene bank, the last calf to be born at the facility is named “Unohtumaton” meaning “unforgettable”.

In this working environment, inmates and supervisors attend to various farm chores: cleaning the inside areas, attending to the cattle, feeding, and milking them, while also helping the young ones latch





**Figure 4:**

Uno (the calf) follows us around and visits the other cows in the barn.

Photo taken by Mervi Honkatukia, February 2022.



**Figure 5:**

Cows line up to get into the milking station.

Photo taken by Charlotte Kroløkke, February 2022.

on to large artificial nipples that have come to constitute their source of nourishment. With the radio blasting (music and programming are chosen by the inmates), the atmosphere is decidedly laid-back, and everyone appears to be focused on their work. Inmates move around the barn, cleaning, laughing, talking to each other — and, importantly, always also to the cows. As a team, we join the inmates and cattle, brushing the cows, milking, and walking with them. The cows appear content and often playful, especially the younger ones. Cows move to and from the milking station (fig. 5). Inmates make coffee, and everyone seems occupied with performing specific tasks. Much in the same manner as the inmates, cows appear adjusted to the daily routines, including going into the milking station as well as, in the summertime, going on a twice-daily walk to a nearby green pasture. The inmates tell us that despite the smell and the risk of injury when in the company of large animals, working at the living gene bank is highly desirable work.

While cleaning the stables, we chat with two of the inmates. They describe working with non-human animals as transformative. According to one of them, working with this type of cow breed has been a “healing” experience — a type of “recovery”. It is, he says, “good for guys like me.” Being with cows makes him feel like “a good guy”. The one-month-old calf Uuno is, he admits, his favourite, and he recounts how he took care of Uuno from the moment he was born. As is common practice in dairy farming, calves are separated from their mothers upon birth. Left with a new-born calf, the inmate explains that he felt nervous and concerned about having the responsibility of nurturing a new-born, but in the end they both “made it” he says, smiling. This mentality is echoed by another care-worker, who talks of the vulnerabilities associated with giving birth and one incident in which he helped “save” one of the new-born calves.

The description of working with animals as healing and calming recurs in other conversations as well. One care-worker says that working with animals helps him control his temper. It calms him down. This speaks to the affective relationships that emerge in being alongside cows. Moreover, it also reveals how relatedness frequently is

formed when in the company of specific cows. As we walk into the barn, for example, we immediately encounter the cow Olea. Dressed up with one of the care-worker's hats (see fig. 6), the inmate explains that this signifies their friendship. Not only has he taken care of her for a substantial part of her life, but he is also keen to express that he really likes her personality. Displaying a similar level of reciprocity, Olea runs towards him when he calls her name once the milking is done. Meanwhile, Olea also appears to have a mind of her own, "escaping" the milking station to visit other parts of the barn and skipping into the enclosed area, thereby avoiding having to spend the summer night outside in the pasture.

While all the inmates note that simply working with cows makes it easy to think of something else, attending especially to "native" cattle makes the inmates feel that they are "making a difference". Here, time passes by quickly, they say. Meanwhile, the vulnerability of being in the proximity of animals weighing 3–400 kg (660–880 lbs.) is a humbling experience and inmates go to great lengths to negotiate human–cow spaces. As one of the inmates put it: "You cannot fight with the cows, they will always win." Another states that he especially likes working with cattle (as opposed to sheep), because they are so "big". Thus, the inmates' being-alongside the cows is informed by a peculiar mixture of interspecies humility and masculinized prowess. Materially, this is displayed, for example, when the inmates move bulls to an outside area, and one of them recalls trying to ride one of the bulls like a cowboy at a rodeo. Moreover, it unfolds when inmates interact with a range of three-month-old calves. Here, inmates are united in expressing a playful joy, touching, and chatting with the animals.

Haraway's observation that nonhuman animals serve as therapeutic interventions seems right on the mark.<sup>51</sup> In being alongside these cows, inmates engage in a form of self-transformation by establishing interspecies intimacy with cows granting them distinct personalities such as being curious and easy-going. Not only do all the inmates volunteer to work in the living gene bank, being paid a minimal amount for their labour (less than five Euros a day), but they

51 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 63.



**Figure 6:**

Photo of the cow Olea wearing a care-worker's hat.

Photo taken by Mervi Honkatukia, February 2022.

also unilaterally express developing affective bonds, turning cows into “friends” and “pals” — in some cases, even nonhuman companions. In the case of Olea, her care-worker wishes he could take her home with him, while another inmate, with a smile on his face, explains that the cows are probably the reason he keeps returning to prison. Cows and people emerge “as subjects and objects to each other, mutually adapted partners in the naturecultures of lively capital.”<sup>52</sup> In this living gene bank, Finncattle are both individualized cows (with names and distinct personalities) and simultaneously also gendered symbolic forms of national bio-wealth. The latter is especially evident when inmates stress that they enjoy working with native Finnish animals and when supervisors point to the bank’s success story of having “saved the breed”.

While cows are anthropomorphized as “pals”, inmates gain new qualities and value — as “productive” citizens. In this human–cow co-shaping, the value of Finncattle extends beyond their national bio-wealth as “native” animals. It is within this context that interspecies encounters further transform inmates into “good” citizens. As one of the inmates put it: “The cows would say — if they could speak — that he [in reference to himself] is a good guy.” Another inmate echoes this sentiment when stating that the work at the bank is a form of escape for him: “The cows just love you. They don’t care what you have done.”

In these forms of multispecies affective relatedness (“The cows just love you”), inmates and cows synchronize their movements with one another. Finncattle engage in the choreography of “good dairy production” or made-to-appear docile working bodies, when they, for example, are disciplined to enter the milking station or when they walk in an orderly line to the summer pasture — like human children going on a kindergarten trip (see fig. 7). In the case of the Pelso Prison, cows are disciplined to move in particular ways (to and from the milking station, for example) revealing what Chrulew calls the “intense anatomo-politics of the animal body”.<sup>53</sup>

52 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 62.

53 Chrulew, “Managing Love and Death”, 148.



**Figure 7:**

Late summer walk with Northern Finncattle from their pasture back to the living gene bank.

Photo taken by Charlotte Kroløkke, August 2022

Yet the relationship between the inmates and the Finncattle goes beyond farming practices such as milking, testing of the milk, the udder, and the use of assisted reproductive technologies, to more synchronized practices such as moving inside and outside of the barn area.

Accordingly, while cows are certainly disciplined to move in particular ways, in being alongside one another, inmates and cows also synchronize their movements to adapt to each other's needs. Cows appear to recognize specific inmates and, regardless of this, they interact with everyone using their heads and body weight to get attention (fig. 8). For this reason, inmates carefully manage the interactions with cows. This is also the case with calves. Calves are less predictable, as one inmate found out when playfully kicking a football in an indoor areas for calves, this may result in human injuries. Meanwhile, the inmate and cow interactions unfold indoors as well as (during the summer months) outdoors in the pastures. Inmates walk with the cows (as well as selected calves who, much like companion animals, are put on a leash) to and from their pasture. Encouraging and pushing cows to follow a particular path, inmates also playfully discipline the cows that have chosen paths of their own. In these examples of being alongside cows, humans and nonhuman animals playfully connect in the Finnish agricultural landscape.

At the Pelso Prison and living gene bank, human and nonhumans appear, in Haraway's terminology, as messmates or companion species to one another. Not only are cows viewed as having a mind of their own, when, for example, invading the supervisors' personal space or simply choosing their own path or direction (during the summer walk); inmates also enjoy spending time with the cows playing, as in the case of the football, and interacting with them. In this manner, at various points during day-to-day activities, the distinction between humans and cows seems to become blurred—though it is of course quickly reinstated as soon as the cows are being milked and their calves are taken away from them.<sup>54</sup>

54 See Svendsen, *Near Human*.





**Figure 8:**

Interaction between supervisors and cows.

Photo taken by Mervi Honkatukia, February 2022.

## **Conservation/Incarceration: The Governance of Nonhuman Animals**

Pouring coffee, yet visibly annoyed during this August afternoon work shift, the inmate grabs his cup and turns his back on the male prison guard. Guards are always present if one of the supervisors is absent. Today, however, three supervisors are working, and the guard's presence appears to elicit a negative reaction. A stern appearance, prison attire, and equipment (radio and a gun) disrupt the otherwise laid-back atmosphere characteristic of the milking station; materially reminding these cow care-workers of their position as troubled political bodies (their status as inmates). In this section, we discuss how worlds of human and nonhuman animal conservation and incarceration are cultivated and how the boundaries between them at times collapse but also, as indicated in the above example, are re-affirmed. This means privileging the ways that material and social worlds intertwine as well as paying attention to the governance of what Kirksey and Helmreich refer to as interspecies entangled biographies.<sup>55</sup>

Each day, inmates are picked up by one or both supervisors. From our vantage point at the living gene bank, we observed inmates walking casually with one of the supervisors to and from the prison. Once inside the structures of the living gene bank, wearing their characteristic orange overalls, inmates quickly move around the barn or the accompanying outside area, pausing only occasionally to have a brief chat or smoke a cigarette. The worlds of conservation and incarceration collapse into one, not only for the inmates but also for the cows, who invariably also move in and out of different spaces of confinement. The supervisors train the inmates informing not only them — but also us — of how to interact with each cow including her temperament (for example, willingness to be milked) and family history. This may shape how inmates know and care about the cows.<sup>56</sup>

55 Kirksey and Helmreich, "Emergence".

56 Gillespie, *Cow with Ear Tag*, 26.

Although Northern Finncattle are viewed as valuable Finnish genetic material, at Pelso Prison, cows must also be reproductively fit. Stroking one of the cows and chatting with the supervisor, we learn that this one will not be going to the vocational college up north. Due to a “poor uterus”, the supervisor says, she will be going to the slaughterhouse. Technologies of biopower (the use of assisted insemination, for example) dictate which of these endangered animals may live.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, echoing this reality, Kelly Somers and Karen Soldatic argue: “Biological diversity is narrowed by the killing of animals who are deemed ‘non-productive’ or ‘productively disabled.’”<sup>58</sup> Regardless of their endangered status, milk is still at the core of these cows’ existence, and although Finncattle apparently produce less milk than other breeds, their milk is supposedly (according to the prison staff) of a higher quality. In this manner, the decision of which animals get to live and which are slaughtered is bound up with a rationale of productivity. An exception to this rule is the 14-year-old Amma, who received several milking awards yet is past her reproductive years. During the second trip, we learn that Amma now lives on a farm as a companion animal along with a group of other cows and horses. Accordingly, a few of the cows get to live lives in which their reproductive abilities play little or no role, the supervisor says.

Although the Pelso Prison participates in the industrialized logics of productivity, the treatment and management of the cows also differs from the intensive and industrialized agriculture in several ways. Supervisors stress the cows’ physical and mental health and well-being along with that of the team of inmates. Worrying about the level of care that the cows—once moved to the vocational school—will experience, supervisors interestingly position the inmates’ care-work as a more genuine and stable type of care compared to the prospective care offered by “random” vocational students.

Like the inmates, who possess different skills and manage different machines while taking care of the day-to-day assignments (seemingly at their own pace), each cow is considered an individual with a

57 See Marten, “Bio/diversity”.

58 Somers and Soldatic, “Productive Bodies”, 35.

distinct personality. Throughout our visits, supervisors and inmates are united in entertaining us with stories of different cow personalities, while we — when in the proximity of the cows — certainly observe and recognize that the cows act differently. Few cows appear hesitant in our company; most of them come close and are even assertive at times, while none of them can be considered docile. Most frequently viewed as a desirable, even necessary, trait in the safe management of livestock, we are told Northern Finncattle display none of the docility of other breeds such as, for example, Holstein cattle. Thus, contrary to Richie Nimmo’s observation that “assemblages of disciplinary technologies” are “geared towards the production of ‘docile’ and ‘productive nonhuman bodies’”<sup>59</sup> in this living gene bank, endangered cows partially unsettle otherwise well-established forms of nonhuman animal caretaking practices while simultaneously, despite their status as endangered, upholding the rationale of productivity in terms of their reproductive abilities.

At the gene bank, human and nonhuman worlds are intertwined with worlds of conservation and incarceration. Outlining different “bovine biopolitical” modes of operation, Jamie Lorimer and Clemens Driessen sketch the move from industrialized agriculture to conservation, welfare, biosecurity, and rewilding.<sup>60</sup> Each biopolitical mode is characterized, they argue, by a distinct set of logics as well as a distinct set of human and nonhuman monster figures. Whereas the logic of profit and improvement characterizes industrial agriculture, preservation and companionship help define the biopolitics of conservation and welfare; including the ways that welfare also gets entangled with industry practices and standards, respectively. In the case of the Pelso Prison living gene bank, inmates acknowledge the individual cow, expressing care and responsibility towards them along with emphasizing their status as “endangered” and “native”. This is in opposition to industrialized agriculture epitomized by the image of the high-achieving “turbo-cow”.<sup>61</sup> In contrast, in the world of the living gene bank, the image of an individual yet simultaneously

59 Nimmo, “Bio-Politics of Bees”, 5.

60 Lorimer and Driessen, “Bovine Biopolitics”, 4.

61 Orland, “Turbo-Cows”.

made-to-appear “social” and “happy” cow prevails. Meanwhile, the “turbo-cow” and the irresponsible breeder/farmer appear, in our observations, as undesirable — even monstrous — human and nonhuman animal figures.<sup>62</sup> While cow wellbeing appears at the centre of working alongside cows, the living gene bank does operate according to industry practices as well. Moreover, in conservation practices, the bank operates at the level of the species (rather than at the level of the individual cow). Simultaneously, and in the protection of what becomes framed as nationalized genetic resources, the bank enacts a biopolitical intervention in the production of (non)human futures.

We posit that Finncattle’s position as “endangered” and “native” plays a key role in the ways that these interspecies biographies entangle. Interestingly, whereas these made-to-appear native nonhuman animals turn into forms of Finnish bio-wealth (yet simultaneously expendable and killable), it also appears that their symbolic value (at least temporarily) sticks to the human inmates as well. The cultural significance of these cows adds another layer of understanding to this. When working alongside native Finncattle, inmates are seen as having an opportunity to become rehabilitated and accordingly, come to resemble “care-workers” and “conservationists” contributing to, as noted by one of the supervisors, “saving the breed”. Thus, the endangerment/conservation label works doubly: it safeguards the Northern Finncattle breed, turning these cows into nationalized bio-wealth, while simultaneously attributing cultural value and symbolic significance to the inmates themselves.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, we want to reflect on what our analysis of the Pelso Prison can offer for theories of more-than-human worlds. Only a few of the inmates have any previous experience with animal husbandry and even fewer expect to work with cattle in the future. Nevertheless, the inmates describe being alongside cows as a vital and meaningful human and nonhuman animal interaction. Working with cattle enables inmates to leave their prison living quarters, and it grants

62 Lorimer and Driessen, “Bovine Biopolitics”, 4.

them the opportunity to work and closely interact with other living beings. All inmates echo the therapeutic value that being in the company of cows has: it grants them a sense of worth and helps them engage in what they refer to as meaningful work. In the company of cows, these inmates take on new value, when they emerge materially as well as discursively as Finnish care-workers and conservationists who “save” what is positioned as a “native” cattle breed.

In the decision to move the living gene bank to its new location, Northern Finncattle prove useful in new and other ways. Transformed into a late-modern capitalist site of education, entertainment, and food consumption; in this naturalized “return to the Arctic”, Northern Finncattle genetic material becomes optimized and emerges now as a symbol of authentic—even “pure”—Arctic experiences and ingredients.

We began with a desire to understand how inmates work alongside Finncattle as well as the worlds that are cultivated during conservation and incarceration. Taking a multispecies methodological approach helped reveal the ways that this living gene bank materially—as well as discursively—operates within different biopolitical modes of nonhuman animal well-being, neoliberalism, and conservation. At the Pelso Prison, cows are not merely nonhuman animal labourers; they become partially individualized: They are given ear tag numbers but also individual names and granted personalities based on perceived traits, such as “curious”, “stubborn”, and “gentle”. They emerge as “trouble-making teenagers” as well as disciplined “workers” when at the milking station. Supervisors and inmates express responsibility and care towards the individual cow as well as the breed as a whole, yet also remain bound to the neoliberal principle of productivity. In these human and nonhuman animal interactions, inmates gain a sense of worth as productive citizens and conservationists. In this manner, inmates and cows work alongside each other experiencing moments of connection as well as difference.

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