

Working Bodies, Feeling Lives

*The Spatial-Temporal Regimes
and Affective Ruptures of Farmed
Animals' Reproductive Labour*

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Abstract: Spatial and temporal regimes of reproductive labour define farmed animals' lives and experiences and continuously intensify their exploitation, creating an affective infrastructure through which capitalist logics of production operate. Genetic manipulation, gestation, and ovulation become forms of forced labour, operating across scales—from the global organization of animal agriculture industries to the intimate “geographies of the closest in”—the body, uterus, cellular makeup, and animals' interior lifeworlds. Industrial animal agriculture's imperative of accelerated time structures this appropriation through carefully managed reproductive cycles, growth rates, and lifespans oriented around maximizing productivity, rendering farmed animals' “working day” effectively continuous. This article draws on multispecies ethnographic fieldwork with cows raised for beef and chickens commodified for egg production to illustrate how shifting spatial arrangements and temporal pressures produce distinct but interconnected regimes of reproductive control and violence. Cows experience cycles of expanded and contracted spatio-temporality that enable prolonged social bonds, only to rupture them, while chickens endure extreme temporal acceleration and spatial compression that intensify metabolic strain and abstraction. In both cases, reproductive labour generates cumulative affective harms in both the effects on the body and the routine severing of relational connections. Ultimately, this article calls for reimagining multispecies futures grounded in self-determination, relationality, and flourishing beyond commodification.

Keywords: *reproductive labour; animal geographies; animal agriculture; animal affect; spatio-temporal regimes; commodification; multispecies flourishing*

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Farmed animals experience intensive reproductive control from birth to death—from breeding and bringing into being animals for commodity production and consumption, to curtailing reproduction in the form of sterilization of certain farmed animals for meat. Both are essential for the reproduction of the industry and for the mass consumption of their bodies and reproductive “outputs”. The meat, dairy, and egg industries wholly rely on the life energies of both female and male farmed species, eclipsing the possibility of lives and social relationships oriented around their flourishing.

Dinesh Wadiwel theorizes farmed animal reproduction as “metabolic labour”, the exploitation of animals “right down to the metabolic and generative capacities of the living organism”.¹ Referencing Amrita Pande’s work on commercial surrogacy in India, he writes, “the metabolism of the body can be subsumed by the production process, so that the outcome of this metabolism becomes the product, even if this product is intimately connected to the body of the labourer themselves”.² “Gestational labour”, more specifically, is performed by those individuals caught up in a constant cycle of reproduction in animal-based food industries.

This labour occurs *at scale* (billions of farmed animals are instrumentalized for their reproductive capacities globally each year) and simultaneously plays out at the most intimate scale of the individual body.³ Feminist geographers have characterized the body as the “geography of the closest in”, the scale at which external processes of power and politics shape an individual’s most intimate experiences.⁴ The animal body is the scale at which global logics of capital and commodification play out, as the body, suffering and exploited, is transformed into a site of production and reproduction. At an even more intimate scale, the “interuterine space [...] is perhaps the closest of all spaces”,⁵

1 Wadiwel, *The War Against Animals*, 15.

2 Wadiwel, “Industrial Scale Surrogacy”, 158; Pande, *Wombs in Labour*, 90.

3 Gillespie, “Sexualized Violence”; Mountz and Hyndman, “Feminist Approaches”; Pratt and Rosner, *The Global and the Intimate*.

4 Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*; Longhurst, “Situating Bodies”.

5 Longhurst, *Bodies*, 128.

co-opted by the logic of capital for the production of commodities derived from the reproductive process (e.g., milk, meat, eggs). Still yet more intimate is the cellular level at which farmed animal breeds are genetically constituted to maximize productivity, and where cells accumulate to form eggs and sperm. Alongside these ever-more-intimate physiological exploitations is the individual's psyche as cognitive space—their interior lifeworld, the intimate scale of the emotional and relational impacts of their commodification. It is at every register—at every scale—that geographies of reproductive control play out.

Time, too, is at the heart of the commodification of farmed animal reproduction and the forced labour they perform. The “working day for animals”, argues Wadiwel, “is never ending; indeed, intensive production systems aim to turn all time into labour time for animal workers”.⁶ The life course of farmed animals is oriented around careful calculations of time: the time it takes to impregnate, gestate, and birth new animals; the time it takes to raise an animal destined for slaughter as meat; the time a reproductively-exploited animal can be bred before they are “spent”. The pressures of time are everywhere in animal agriculture—the ticking clock of the reproductive cycle, the looming spectre of death, the economic calculations made to maximize efficiency and profit, the emotional toll of passing and stalled experiences of time—entangled with shifting scales of production and reproduction to dictate the lives and deaths of billions.

In this article, I explore how scales of both *space* and *time* can be understood as mechanisms of reproductive control, bringing non-human life into the world and abruptly ending that life to fulfill human consumptive desires. I offer two brief accounts from ethnographic fieldwork in industries that raise cows for meat and chickens for eggs to illustrate this interplay between space and time as essential to their reproduction and the social reproduction of animal consumption and production at large. The first takes us to a ranch that efficiently manufactures cows into beef as they move between landscapes of reproduction, production, and slaughter; the second

6 Wadiwel, “The Working Day”, 183.

brings us to a “poultry” auction yard, where the rapid capitalist exchange of birds for meat and eggs contracts time and reaffirms and intensifies their commodity status.

Alongside these ever-more-intimate physiological forms of exploitation is the individual’s psyche—their interior *lifeworld*—the intimate scale of the emotional and relational impacts of their commodification that echo through the body. The spatial compression and temporal acceleration intrinsic to commodified reproduction function not only as mechanisms of production but also as lived, affective conditions for the nonhuman animals at the heart of these processes. These shifting spatial temporalities shape feeling, expectation, attachment, and loss. The forced reproductive labour of farmed animals represents a multi-scalar, multi-temporal, affective regime. It converts the most intimate geographies of life into capital, systematically erasing autonomy, relationality, and flourishing. Conceptions of flourishing outside of these capitalist regimes, then, radically oppose normative ideas of nonhuman animals as commodities and forced labourers. This understanding of commodified life as a multi-scalar affective regime sets the stage for a consideration of how multispecies flourishing and self-determination might be imagined and practiced beyond the spatial and temporal logics of reproductive labour.

Cows “on the Range”: Expanded and Contracted Intimacies and their Systematic Rupture

Cows raised for “free range” beef in the rural U.S. west offer a unique site for understanding ever-changing spatial-temporal forms of commodity production—one that highlights the affective violence of gestational labour and the intimate ways this plays out in the cow’s body and social world. In my fieldwork on cows raised for beef, I’ve witnessed the movement of cows from spaces where, at certain times, lives of self-determination and freedom might be imagined: for several months of the year, they are moved onto leased forest land where they roam freely with no human contact. But the rest of the time, they are moved in the close spatial confines of transport trailers back and forth to ranches, feedlots, auction yards, and slaughterhouses.

By industry standards, these are small-scale operations; ranchers raise a couple hundred cows on average—some exceeding this number significantly and some raising only a dozen cows. For some, the scale of production is an important matter here. Proponents of “alternative” agriculture assert that smaller scale, free range ranching leads to higher welfare and lower environmental impact. From another perspective, scale of production matters very little. These so-called “humane” and “green” practices put intense pressure on the environment (sometimes more so than industrial farms because of the destruction of public forest and land) and on the bodies and lives of the nonhuman animals at their centre.⁷

This kind of beef production involves a protracted form of gestational labour, not only in the nine months it takes for a calf to be born as future meat or gestational labourer, but in the extended time it takes for a cow to engage in the labour of caring for and raising a calf to slaughtering weight and age.

These longer-term bonds are distinct when contextualized in the broader landscape of farming animals for food. As I observed in my earlier work on dairy production, for instance, the gestational labour of cows is abruptly disrupted when their calves are born and removed immediately after birth, directed toward future production as gestational labour, or routed to short lives of intensive confinement for veal.⁸ The cow’s gestational (and metabolic) labour continues in milking (and in her immediate reimpregnation), and is necessarily defined by a severing of cow–calf social bonds, diverting her energy into production (and reproduction) and alienating her from the calf who was born to her as kin. This immediate alienation is done so that milk (and colostrum produced immediately after birth) can be transformed into capital, thus maximizing even down to the day how much milk each cow can produce for the generation of capital. The clock is ticking, and economic efficiency dictates the logic behind this alienation.

7 Stănescu, “Selling Eden”.

8 Gillespie, *Cow with Ear Tag #1389*; see also Narayanan, *Mother Cow, Mother India*.

Embarking on this new research on “free-range” beef production, I have observed that, despite the absence of the abrupt severance of cow and calf at birth observed in dairy production, the same clock is ticking for cows raised for beef. Like dairy, beef production involves contracted time-space intervals, where the intensification of commodification crystallizes at key points in the production process—in the artificial insemination of herds of cows all at once, and in the culmination of pregnancy where ranch pens become delivery wards when cows give birth nine months later *en masse*, calves tumbling from their uteruses in a rush of amniotic fluid onto the still-frozen ground. Branding, ear tagging, and castration of male calves occurs on intensified time-space scales—a day or two where these bodily modifications are performed on an assembly line, before temporal-spatial logics of production are expanded again, as cows and their calves are moved back into forests for another summer of grazing and foraging.

Over the span of the years that calves remain with their mothers in cow–calf operations, the gestational labour of caring for the calf is assigned to the cow herself, as well as to the rest of the herd. Wadiwel explains that the “logics of animal agriculture [seek] to reduce animal labour time by shortening lives, while simultaneously, through the use of selective breeding and feed control, to maximize ‘yield’.”⁹ In the case of cow–calf beef operations, certain elements have been intensified (e.g., the efficiency of insemination and bodily modifications, the speed of transport and slaughter), but there are inherent biological limits in a cow’s reproductive cycle that necessarily slow the speed of capital accumulation; thus far, despite significant advances in shaping cows’ genetic makeup directed toward efficient and maximized “yield”, it has not yet been possible to reduce the gestation time for cows. And although selective breeding is geared toward maximizing the yield of flesh that meets consumer expectations, it cannot eliminate the time required for a calf to grow into that “beef”.

Against these limits, industry must find other ways to reduce cost and labour and increase efficiency, in this case by maintaining the

9 Wadiwel, “Dairy Cow Labour Process”, 9.

cow herself as labourer and carer, and, during their wandering the forests and meadows, leaving herds to engage in the labour of finding their own food and water. Gestational and metabolic labour are intensified. The cow is impregnated each year but is also tasked with sustaining the life and health of the next generations of raw materials and consumption commodities. As Wadiwel points out, the cow is never not working.

Cows' interior lifeworlds are characterized by socially complex forms of cognition and relationality, passing knowledge to others, learning from spatial and relational experiences, forming intense social bonds with their calves and with herds, demonstrating "emotional contagion"¹⁰—understood as empathy, in both positive and negative states—and exhibiting signs of post-traumatic stress disorder following stressful events.¹¹ The effects of rupturing long-term social bonds in cows raised for beef are not well studied, but a growing body of evidence shows that the negative emotional effects of cow-calf separation are more severe with later separation.¹² In cow-calf beef operations, where cows typically raise their calves for two years, they experience the deepening of affective bonds and the development of kinship connections, followed by their instantaneous rupture. As this cycle continues, loss is not a singular or discrete event; it accumulates at the "geography of the closest in" through repetition. Gestational labour shapes and reshapes the temporal and spatial geographies of the closest in, necessitating an affective endurance across multiple pregnancies and in the fragmentation of intergenerational relationality formed in herds.

Chickens in the Auction Ring: Accelerating and Intensifying Gestational Labour and the Affective Geographies of Capital Exchange

Where cows' lives in free range beef production highlight the effects of expanding and contracting forms of gestational labour, chickens raised for eggs experience an exhaustingly accelerated kind of

10 Marino and Allen, "Psychology of Cows".

11 Cooke et al., "Effects of a Simulated Wolf Encounter".

12 Marino and Allen, "Psychology of Cows".

gestational and metabolic labour. Where the temporal constraints of the length of the cow's reproductive cycle have not yet been effectively conquered by biotechnologies that would reduce this labour time, the bodies and capacities of chickens raised for both eggs and meat have been thoroughly transformed to meet an ever-intensifying capitalist logic. And where cows raised "on the range" are visible, their movement and confinement observable by passers-by, most hens raised for eggs are hidden in barns, moving only when they are transported to auction yards or slaughter. It is thus rare to witness the forms of commodification that shape their embodied and affective experiences.

The "poultry" auction yard as a fieldwork site, however, offers a window into the acceleration and intensification of their gestational and metabolic labour, and its effects on their lives and bodies. It is a space that concentrates the spatial and temporal logics of commodification of the nonhuman animal into a distinct place and moment of exchange—a moment that lays bare the nature of their exploitation and its attendant costs to the hen herself.

For hens, the space-time compression of egg production and circulation of life as capital is the result of a thoroughly intensified history of breeding and extraction of reproductive "outputs" through the exploitation of the ovulatory process. Yamini Narayanan writes, "[t]he commoditization of ovulation through hyper-ovulation specifically, is a unique form of reproductive exploitation that is imposed upon female farmed animals. In the case of 'egg-laying' chickens, it is their ova—or eggs—the product of their ovulation itself, that is the commodity".¹³ Chickens have been selectively bred by humans for millennia to produce eggs at a rate of nearly one a day (no other species of bird lays eggs at this rate). In the biological crafting of the contemporary egg-laying hen, the spectre of time and efficiency looms, driving and serving the logic of capitalist exchange and growth. The bird's natural reproductive cycle has been maximally exploited to serve the interests of human consumption and the capitalization of that consumption where "control over the hen's reproductive ability at

13 Narayanan, "An Ecofeminist Politics", 570.

the genomic level produces eggs of a standardized size, weight, and regularity across billions of ovulating bodies”.¹⁴

This reproductive exploitation takes an exacting toll on the hen’s body; she is in a chronic state of metabolic hunger,¹⁵ performing the metabolic labour of trying to sustain the level of nutrition she needs to survive and to continue laying eggs. As Les Beldo explains, even in the context of pasture-raised chickens, they “labor at both the macrobiological and microbiological levels—by eating, rooting, and laying eggs, on one hand, and by metabolizing feed into eggs or animal flesh protein on the other; but they have the additional burden of enduring their own metabolic labor, of constantly feeling the effects of the cellular processes within them that generate eggs at the rate demanded by capital”.¹⁶ Most chickens, however, are raised in high-confinement operations of spatial compression, where their chronic metabolic hunger pushes their bodies to extremes and, in the case of forced moulting—a practice wherein chickens are denied food to drive up egg production—every bit of life energy is directed toward laying eggs.

Eggs appear as abstracted reproductive commodities, severing the possibility of maternal care, emotional connection, and future kinship relations. There is no period of recovery, no slowing down in the reproductive process, for egg-laying hens. The acceleration of their gestational and metabolic labour ever intensifies, culminating in the final foreclosure of the possibility of flourishing at slaughter. The hen is expected to be both labourer and machine, her living reproductive capacities incorporated into production as though they were a form of biological infrastructure.

Aligned with the spatial compression and physical intensity of their commodification, they inhabit an intensified affective atmosphere, where their own stress, suffering, and exhaustion are magnified by that of the tens of thousands of other birds crowded tightly around them. Commodifying an animal like an egg-laying chicken

14 Narayanan, “An Ecofeminist Politics”, 582.

15 Narayanan, “An Ecofeminist Politics”, 579.

16 Beldo, “Metabolic Labor”, 119.

conscripted into the gestational and metabolic labour of egg production is an abstracting process—the chicken’s inner life, subjectivity, emotional connections, and kinship ties are obscured in the way she circulates as capital generated from her reproductivity. If we consider the body, the uterus, and the cellular formations that become eggs as geographies of the closest in, we can also consider the hen’s interior lifeworld—her emotions, cognition, and connections to others—as another intimate scale violated by her reproductive exploitation. Her reproductive life and the affects it produces are ones of compression, overload, and abrupt termination.

As I sat in the poultry auction, birds confined in cardboard boxes were shuffled through the assembly line of the auction ring, grabbed roughly from the boxes, and held up for the eager audience to view. Some were chickens enrolled in the metabolic labour of meat production, but most were hens raised for the metabolic and gestational labour of eggs as an extractive commodity. Box after box stuffed with hens was unpacked and then repacked in mere seconds, a handful of hens—all the same breed and condition—displayed and sold, making room for the next box of hens, who the auctioneer announced, with boredom creeping into his voice, were “more of the same”. Sitting in the audience, it’s easy to see these individuals as an abstracted mass—a flow of egg-laying machines, all the same, all generators of eggs as commodities. But attending to the individuals—their squawking, their stress, the futility of their struggling against the tight grip of the auction worker’s hands, the eggs laid mid-air that elicited raucous laughter from the crowd—created an affective atmosphere of mass (but also, importantly, *individualized*) suffering.

The interior lives of chickens are often dismissed through a belief, not always consciously articulated, that they simply have no interior lives at all. But ethological research on chickens, still in its nascent stage, has shown that chickens possess complex forms of cognition, emotion, and sociality. They demonstrate awareness of time, episodic memory (the long-term recollection of past experiences), and anticipation of the future; empathy for others in distress; distinct

personalities that shape their social worlds; self-control and self-assessment (indicators of self-awareness); and a clear understanding of their relationship to space and their environment.¹⁷ Considering the interior worlds of the egg-laying hen, then, requires reckoning with what they are denied, how they experience trauma, loss, and anticipation, and what they know about the spatial temporalities that dictate their labour and lives.

Like cows, endurance defines the lives of hens enrolled in the gestational labour of egg production, but this is an endurance of relentless acceleration and intensification. There is no pause, no temporal expanse attached to gestation, no care labour for the products of their reproductive appropriation. Their labour is wholly oriented around the rapid-fire production of an egg a day. The speed becomes a blur, an abstraction, but it is not an abstraction for the hen; it is her daily lived reality transfigured by the spatial and temporal logics of intensified production.

Toward a Spatial-Temporal Geography of Multispecies Self-Determination and Flourishing

Against the violence of forced reproductive labour, what other futures are possible? How might the lives of farmed animal species, freed from being farmed, be reoriented toward self-determined modes of flourishing?

Neither self-determination nor flourishing is possible for animals who are commodified for food. The commodification of the gestational and metabolic labour of cows, chickens, and other farmed species—no matter the scale or context—relies on the underlying logics of capital that drive engrained forms of animal use. Thinking multispecies life beyond commodification requires moving beyond the status of the merely “not capital”, toward an understanding of how their lives might be reconfigured outside capitalist relations. Solidarity with other species in this context would involve a commitment to futures of flourishing that rely on the self-determination of nonhuman animals, where their lives are not determined by logics

17 Marino, “Thinking Chickens”; Montgomery, *What the Chicken Knows*.

of capital and exploitation but by their own selves—their emotional and social worlds and their own forms of meaning-making in re-crafted spatial-temporal geographies.¹⁸

A natural first step in acknowledging the realities of reproductive labour and the affective wounds that this labour delivers (the *geographies of the closest in*) is to consider how farmed animals experience the violence of reproductive exploitation—the severing (or denial from the very start) of the possibilities for kinship relations, the consistent frustration in being denied agency and self-determination, the awareness of a past filled with loss and anticipation of a future filled with more loss, and the relationship to the spatial and temporal mechanisms that constrain their embodied and emotional experiences of the world.

A project of supporting self-determination, though, cannot stop at an acknowledgement of farmed animals' suffering and the way their lives are subsumed by the logic of capital. It is not just a project of working *against* the harms of commodification, capitalist accumulation, and the violence of forced labour, but one of working *toward* something radically different. As Lauren Corman argues, “reduc[ing] nonhuman animal subjectivities to representations of suffering and victimization[... and] the representation of their suffering alone can [...] fail to unsettle fundamental assumptions about them, the very assumptions required for the continuation of capitalist industries”.¹⁹ Considering an individual's full range of experience—yes, the physical, emotional, and psychological suffering and indignities they endure, but also what brings them joy and a sense of connection and meaning—“deepens the sense of what is lost when other animals are harmed” and opens pathways for what lives of flourishing outside of forced gestational and metabolic labour might look like.²⁰

Flourishing is a spatial, temporal, and relational condition, not merely the absence of suffering. Thus, it necessitates a fundamental reorientation of spatial and temporal conceptions of lived

18 Celermajor et al., “Justice Through a Multispecies Lens”; Gillespie, “Unthinkable Politics”; p. jones, *Bird's-Eye Views; The Oxen at the Intersection*.

19 Corman, “Ideological Monkey Wrenching”, 252, 253.

20 Corman, “Ideological Monkey Wrenching”, 255.

experience— new geographies of both exterior and interior life. There is a growing body of literature on sanctuaries for formerly farmed animals as sites of possibility and co-creation of life and space, as well as the often fraught forms of control and compromise that arise in these spaces.²¹ Reproductive autonomy at sanctuaries, for instance, poses one of the most profound problems for the creation of more liberatory futures, where sterilization and the prevention of reproduction are routinely (sometimes regrettably) denied to nonhuman residents.²² Sanctuary scholarship—and the multispecies lived experiences unfolding at the most thoughtful sanctuaries— highlights, albeit imperfectly, how these spaces can cultivate a radically different understanding of space and time, encouraging a shared project of co-creating space and doing away with the ticking clock of lives oriented around the violence of capital.

We need projects like these— world-making projects where space can be rethought, articulated, and manifested anew to create the conditions for sociality built on self-determination, pleasure, and intra- and inter-species care as a process of meaning making. We need new understandings of time configured not around controlled reproductive and productive cycles, but around the cadence of life as it is lived and felt by those whose lives are their own. And we need imaginaries for what reproductive self-determination might look like outside of the logics of capitalist reproductive labour. patrice jones urges us to reflect on how our “ability to think outside capitalism must be presumed to be compromised” since we are so thoroughly enculturated into the logics of capital that they are difficult to see, prompting the question: “Who might be better able to notice the most salient aspects of capitalism? What might we see from their standpoint?”²³ How then, can we, as humans, sit in a state of humility, curiosity and reverence, and open-hearted receptiveness that allows for us to be taught the many things we don’t know?

21 See Abrell, “Interrogating Captive Freedom”; *Saving Animals*; Blattner et al., “Animal Agency in Community”; Donaldson and Kymlicka, “Farmed Animal Sanctuaries”; Gillespie, “Unthinkable Politics”, “Politicized Multispecies Ethnography”; M. Jones, “Captivity”; p. jones, *Birds-Eye Views*; “Queer Eros”.

22 Siemienieć, “Sexual and Reproductive Rights”.

23 p. jones, *Bird’s-Eye Views*, 6.

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