# Animals matter: Resistance and transformation in animal commodification

By Julien Dugnoille

Categorizing non-human animals (henceforth "animals") as human commodities implies reducing their lives to mere market values. However, precisely because some of these animals' lives and experiences are complex, such commodification often leads to a form of resistance from the animals commodified. Therefore, examining the many ways in which animals are commodified also requires one to focus on the many ways in which animals resist their own commodification. At the same time, since resistance tends to require a response from the resisted, looking at resistance also implies exploring the ways in which the resisted react to those who resist commodification. It thus appears necessary to explore commodification and resistance alongside the impact that this resistance can have on the resisted/commodifier and how, in some cases, this response has agency in triggering a significant transformation. However, defining animal resistance in the context of their commodification is far from straightforward. We see this Special Issue as a way to provide potential avenues for exploring both resistance and commodification and the ways in which they intertwine.

First, we agree with Kohn that resistance and agency are not the same thing, yet that both notions are useful and interconnected (2013). Nonhuman agency, roughly conceived as the ability to act independently and, by doing so, to make some sort of difference to other entities/actors, takes many forms and exists within as well as beyond human structures (Kohn 2013, 91). However, it is not the topic explored here. Rather, our focus is on animal resistance in the context of their commodification, a relation which necessarily emerges within a human structure. Nonetheless, the specific forms of animal resistance that emerge from their

commodification, and which we explore in this collection of articles, can be seen as windows into the kinds of agencies that "exist beyond the human" (Kohn 2013, 91). Yet, such agencies are by no means reducible to these forms of resistance. Moreover, it must be noted that the contributors to this Special Issue have not limited their approaches to animal resistance in a way that Kohn found to be reminiscent of Pierce's "secondness" (Kohn 2013), i.e. as a brutal "otherness" (Kohn 2013, 58), a mere shock that takes the resisted out of their usual way of engaging with other beings. Rather than only approaching it as a brutal *otherness*, we argue that animals' resistance to their own commodification also has the potential to highlight an existential continuity or *commonality* between the resistant and the resisted. We see animals' resistance to their own commodification as a space where the human commodifier can also experience a shared finitude, a common vulnerability at the level of the flesh, with the commodified animal.

Second, it follows that we will approach animal resistance in two ways: On the one hand, resistance will be understood the way it has been theorized in cultural geography (Emel, Wilbert, and Wolch 2002; Philo and Wilbert 2004; Sharp 2000; Warkentin 2009; Wolch and Emel 1998), by some ethologists (Allen and Bekoff 1995; Bekoff 2003; 2004; 2010; Bekoff and Allen 1997), and by authors from less institutionalized channels such as critical and radical animal studies (Colling 2021; Hribal 2003; 2011; Nibert 2002), i.e. as a form of active uncooperativeness to both the physical or metaphorical lines that humans have drawn for them. On the other hand, we argue that an approach to resistance as active uncooperativeness only, overlooks the impact animals may have on humans thanks to more enabling forms of resistance such as when they demonstrate resilience, docility and cooperation in their own commodification. Thus, we will simultaneously approach animal resistance, in line with a Sartrian existentialist framework (Burgat 2015; Grene 1971; Sartre

1943; 1983), as the everyday defiance animals demonstrate through mundane intersubjective exchanges and which result not only in blocking but also in *allowing* (e.g. Pearson 2015) the human intentions that attempt to commodify them. While Pearson, in particular, has argued that blocking and allowing are two forms of "nonhuman agency", we argue that, in the case where blocking and allowing emerge in the context of animal commodification, both responses should in the first instance be seen as forms of resistance. Unlike other forms of animal agency, animals' resistance to their own commodification necessarily emerges from a relational imbalance occurring within a human structure, and which is imposed upon them. Referring to animals' responses in these contexts as agency instead of resistance would fail to acknowledge these power differentials. Moreover, speaking of *nonhuman* agency generically, would also run the risk of drowning animals in a pool of other animal agents, such as objects, whose commodification may not have the same moral cost.

Finally, we acknowledge that discussions referring to animal resistance have been accused of imposing a human category, heavily embedded in human political meaning, upon animal intentionality (Best 2011; Pearson 2015). Of course, we are not suggesting that animals form politically active groups of resistance against their oppressors, and we agree that this would be yet another attempt at colonizing animal lives and experiences. Instead, as mentioned above, we are trying to reclaim the term "resistance" so as to incorporate more subtle forms of resistance that we have observed and which have the potential to remind the human commodifier of their existential continuity with the animals they commodify. Indeed, as we shall see in this Special Issue, it could be argued that mundane intersubjective exchanges force the resisted to realize their own objectification by "*autrui*" (in this case the animal they want to commodify), and compel them to interrogate their own being-in-the-world, and the overall subordination of animals to humans. Some of our findings reveal that

in the context of their commodification, animals' resistance has the potential, to use Sartre's terminology, to hit the commodifier "right in the heart" and lead the commodifier to challenge their own identity, sometimes to the point of transforming humans into active members of a resistance movement on behalf of animals themselves.

However, this human transformation is a very long and marginalizing process which can take decades. Indeed, when explored ethnographically, it is clear that animals' resistance poses a series of complex moral questions to their human commodifiers. This is particularly difficult for those amongst our human participants who derive pride from "mastering" the skills required for their specific line of work and see the transformation or the manipulation of an animal as a form of craft, constitutive of their own identity. Following intersubjective exchanges with a nonhuman other or after being in the presence of a collective of animals about to be transformed into mere substance, some of these human individuals feel caught between the manifestation of animal subjectivity and their own idea of "a job well-done". Their own identities as workers are, thus, challenged as the satisfaction associated with their professional *savoir-faire* is tainted by self-doubt and philosophical considerations.

This emphasis on human *savoir-faire* means that this collection of research articles will also explore resistance and transformation in human-animal interactions through the lens of classical and contemporary debates about commodification (Collard and Dempsey 2013; Kopytoff 2013; Macquet in Appadurai 1986; Polanyi 1944; Stuart and Gunderson 2018; Wilkie 2010; 2015). Using these debates as theoretical frameworks will enable the contributors to this Special Issue to show that when individual humans attempt to establish what kind of commodities animals are, they provoke the latter to emerge as selves. These frameworks will help us articulate the feelings of dissonance experienced by human participants when they "thingify" sentient beings: The more those categories are discussed, the more their

negotiability and artificiality manifest themselves to those who engage in those transactions and, thus, the more these commodity classifications are fragilized. We will engage with a series of terms coined by academics focusing on these questions to articulate the tension between the commodified, the commodifier, the commodification ideal, and the reality of the commodification process. These terms include "sentient commodities" (Wilkie 2015), "fictitious" or "incomplete commodities" (Polanyi in Stuart and Gunderson 2018), "singularized beings" (Kopytoff 2013) and "lively commodities" (Collard and Dempsey 2013).

First, Vander Meer will take an ethnographic approach to explore how France, as one of the last EU nations to allow wild animals to perform in circuses, is struggling with the place of these animals in society, uneasy with their commodification but only committing to a gradual national ban on wild animals in travelling circuses in 2020. Vander Meer will show that the French "circus animal" commodity category is fueled by a cultural discourse of French *civilité* which has a long and complex history in France that bridges consumerism and republican ideals. By being trained to perform civility, showing restraint, docility and orderliness, these animals are perceived as having suppressed their brute or chaotic natures to become "bettered" versions of themselves. But their entertainment value derives from the presented visual dissonance between their species' wildness and enacted civility, which reduces individual animals to symbolic objects. Using Shapiro's framework (1989), Vander Meer will argue that, even though these animals resist and make their individuality more visible when they interact with trainers, this commodification process leaves them "ontologically vulnerable". There is clear tension between trainers' living towards animals as singular individuals integral to the circus family, with the intersubjectivity and civility that this entails, and the animals' ultimate lively commodity status, as owned working animals that must perform civility.

Second, taking a historical approach to human-animal interactions in three urban zoological gardens (the Paris menagerie, the London Zoo, and the Antwerp Zoo) combined with an ethological approach to archived animal behavior, Pouillard will examine the actions of animals which challenge the zoo's ideational and physical boundaries. The historical evidence she will mobilize includes successful/unsuccessful escapes, the demonstration of stereotypic behaviors, or self-harming. In light of current ethological advances, especially in the field of animal cognition, she will revisit stereotypic behaviors and argue that these indicate the development, under conditions of captivity, of "a way of finding by oneself what cannot be found through lived experiences in the surrounding environment and, concomitantly, a way to resist from within when any transgression of the boundaries is prevented or stifled" (Pouillard, this issue), thereby challenging the commodity status of "zoo animals" as mere specimens on display. These different forms of resistance have contributed to the changing of zoological gardens' husbandry policies. However, as Pouillard will demonstrate, far from liberating animals from their confined conditions, these changes have unfortunately helped making the zoo institution an even stronger control apparatus.

Echoing Pouillard's historical analysis, Mc Loughlin will take an ethnographic approach to zoos to argue that paradoxical forms of care used to commodify animals in a Danish zoo are legitimized by core social values of cooperation, egalitarianism and solidarity, characteristic of the social democratic Danish state. Stemming from Donovan's concept of interspecies dialogue (2017), Mc Loughlin will argue that the keepers' belief in cooperation diminishes the asymmetries of power in the zookeeper/zoo animal relationship. Mc Loughlin will show that Danish zookeepers acknowledge and incorporate zoo animals' resistances as adaptive and coping responses to the zoo's artificial environment. Further, it is also to reduce their own emotional discomfort with the impact of zoo directives on animal lives that some

keepers argue that certain animals are “working with” them, reconfiguring them as “cooperative commodities”. Mc Loughlin will conclude that practices of care, legitimized by a commitment to Danish values of cooperation and solidarity, are perceived by zookeepers to cultivate intimate forms of multispecies closeness, and neutralize any consideration of violence and asymmetries of power. However, in line with Pouillard, Mc Loughlin will further contend that these ideologies of care and cooperation remain constrained by the limits of captivity that must be endured by zoo animals.

Ward will combine a historical and an ethnographic perspective to highlight that deer, as a species, have resisted their confinement within the livestock category ever since medieval times. Ward will argue that deer are particularly good at resisting categories because some of the behaviors they display force their commodifiers to perceive them as participating in both “livestock” and “wildlife” commodity categories simultaneously. In particular, Ward will argue that the complete transformation of deer from wildlife to livestock has been continuously resisted by behavior and biology as well as the social position deer have long possessed. Standardizing the deer’s body for consumption, one that is easy to transport and process in abattoirs, is an enterprise of human adaptation, a practice only recently emerged, as previously the deer’s physical traits (especially antler formation) and their common display of aggressive behaviors towards humans and each other resisted commodification efforts. Finally, Ward will contend that deer farming, because of these physical and behavioral traits absent or less frequent in more commonly farmed species, has had the result of revitalizing the concept of livestock animal in the eyes of the farmers he has interviewed who, otherwise, have tended to vegetalize “livestock” in their own discourse about animal agriculture.

Finally, taking an ethnographic approach to test the suitability of a philosophical framework to human-animal intersubjective exchange, Dugnoille will explore the way resistance to commodification demonstrated by livestock animals through both blocking and allowing forces small-scale farmers to reevaluate not only their profession, but the legitimacy of animal subordination altogether. Using a Sartrian existentialist framework, Dugnoille will show that existentialism, if applied to human-nonhuman intersubjective exchanges, is not only a humanism as it reveals to be a very fertile ground on which to explore how selves, whether human or nonhuman, are mutually constitutive. Dugnoille will also highlight some aspects of the existential crises that small-scale farmers undergo as they realize that they are themselves "beings-for-(an animal)-*autrui*", a realization which has the potential to arise every time one human self meets an animal one. In that sense, Dugnoille's research article will suggest that animal resistance should also be explored through more mundane human-animal interactions, as animals, by showing docility and acceptance to their own commodification, challenge human professional and existential identities.

A central theme across these research articles is that, as a result of struggling with normalized animal subordination, human caretakers often experience feelings of isolation and a loss of identity. While in most cases, this struggle is quickly discarded by coping mechanisms such as counter-anthropomorphism, cognitive dissonance or moral licensing, it has also led some individuals to aspire for a radical change in their profession. In retrospect, such participants could identify one specific encounter with the subjectivity and sentience of a specific animal in their work, which had radically changed their own perspective on animal commodification. These *a posteriori* "epiphanic" narratives express the values these human individuals place not only on emotional resistance and transformation in the form of affect and interspecies exchange, but also on their own philosophical resistance as human

individuals against dominant discourses about the sanctity of human life as opposed to that of other life forms, and on the message they want to convey as a result of these existential realizations. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the dynamics of resistance and transformation explored in this Special Issue also reveal that increasing zones of contact between human individuals and the animals whose commodification they benefit from, have the potential to challenge the control of animal bodies as a legitimate paradigm on a wider scale.

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