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"Metabolic Labor: Broiler Chickens and the Exploitation of Vitality"

Beldo, Les

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Amid mounting concerns over viral and bacterial outbreaks in industrial farm settings, scholars of modern industrial agriculture have increasingly focused their attention on the dangers posed by an "excess of life." While important, this focus tends to produce a narrative in which life is associated with disruption, pathology, and chaos, while that part of the animal that remains productive comes to be viewed as determined, machinelike, and anthropogenic. In this essay, I focus on the way that life is counted upon to exceed. Industrial animal husbandry depends upon nonhuman vitalities to predictably exceed human inputs to production, but this fact has been overlooked amid an emphasis on containment and control. I propose we think about nonhuman contributions to production, including those taking place at the microbiological level, as labor. This approach confers two advantages over Cary Wolfe's influential biopolitical analysis of the factory farm. First, it provides a register for talking about how life can be both potentially disruptive and indispensable to certain forms of capitalist production, even as multiple forces work to erase nonhuman contributions from the way we think about production. Second, it allows for the possibility of agency on the part of farmed animals that includes more than just resistance, disruption, or death. This essay concludes with an ethnographic description of the lives of broiler chickens on a hobby farm in rural Michigan, asking what it is like to do metabolic labor. (Text from author's abtract)

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