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The composition and decomposition of commodities: the colonial careers of coal and ivory

Abstract:

Commodities are composed of heterogeneous parts, for they are not pure, despite coal being almost 100% carbon. With the introduction of steam ships in the Indian Ocean trade that was at the nexus of Africa, Middle East, South Asia and China, the economic viability of coal had to be constructed from the different parts of the imperial political machinery of administration, technology and modernist fantasy. Ivory was also a key commodity in the Indian Ocean, contributing considerable wealth to that early global market. Leaving one environment in Africa, it gained value by being culturally reworked and aestheticised, and in the process humans' feelings for it were enhanced as a part of the value-adding, if not fetishing, process. Later in its colonial career, elephants' feelings about being slaughtered were also taken into account by their human advocates, and under this new environmental alignment the trade in ivory eventually came to a halt in 1989. This paper argues, in a Latourian fashion, that affects are key agents in a chain of associations that have transformed the careers of ivory and coal as 'vibrant matter' (Bennett) transformed from its original living sources to its lively appreciation by humans.

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Part 1: coal

Coal is a fungible commodity because it is almost 100 percent carbon, but this purity and substitutability is deceptive, for in its relations it is unique and even institutionalised, as in the imposition of a carbon tax to offset its destructive effects on ecosystems. Value is added or taken away from it in the process of extracting it from 'nature' and turning it into a tradable commodity. My attempt to theorise the commodity will involve engaging with the *materiality* of the commodity, the stuff that makes it up, like simple carbon atoms. But beyond materiality, I am also interested in the *composition* of commodities, how they are 'made up' in more fanciful ways. In this, the composition of the commodity is hybrid, for it is packaged into a network of relations that move the object around and give it life – vibrancy, as Jane Bennett would say of the 'political ecology of things'– particularly in relation to those human beings who are connected with such commodities (Bennett 2010).

So not only is the commodity *composed in its being* by packaging, desires, functional articulations, ideologies and forces of labour, it is also mechanically reproduced in quantifiable units, and this multiplication of items distinguishes it from unique object-events, and more or less guarantees its distribution, giving each commodity a temporal career. The speed of its movement through space and time, its transportation through markets where it gains or loses value and is traded for other items of value: this is what articulates the commodity *with* time, it is what makes the two concepts inextricable from each other.

But in a second movement I want to attend to the *undoing* of those materials, forces, signifiers and so on that compose the commodity. As this compositional analysis attends to the elements that make up the hybrid, networked commodity, it becomes a useful critical procedure for unhitching those relations. This is what I mean by decomposition. For why should we assume, as is often popularly done, that everything 'in the world' is inevitably heading towards commodification, that it is only a matter of *time* before the next thing in the free-for-all 'natural' commons is swallowed up by processes of possession and exchange. In fact, there are processes of decomposition of commodities going on all the time: 'banning' (as we shall see with ivory), 'use by date', 'out of fashion', 'passé', 'antiquated' (so many are to do with time!). Allen Shelton writes:

> But what I had ignored, and what Marx had neglected as well, is that commodities cool off, come out of the market, get stranded in space and time, virtually die, become gifts, and are collected into memory palaces surrounded with a different kind of liquid than that which floats active commodities. The French anthropologist Marcel Mauss had to resort to words and concepts outside of the contemporary European frame to approximate this world. He employs a variety of interrelated concepts drawn from the Pacific Islands and Aboriginal Australia (Shelton forthcoming).

Some commodities are more stable over time than others, yet they all decompose into their component parts, eventually, and you can marvel at how they even managed to generate their unity, once you examine all the links and workings. The lesson here is not to assume relentless commodification under the pressure for market-formation, as if capital must always win out. In fact, markets are constantly dealing with processes

of commodities turning into other things, returning to nature, as it were. Sometimes this is because a commodity is deliberately zapped by a counter-spell, as Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers would say, that takes away its aura (Pignarre & Stengers 2011). We shall see later how aligned to colonialism ivory's career was and how a 'save the elephant' environmentalist movement was the 'counter-spell' that decommodified ivory and put a ban on its sale, taking it completely out of the legal market.

So it is with this in mind that I would like to turn to the first of two examples: coal and its distribution in the Indian Ocean of the nineteenth century. Coal, of course, along with other carbon derivatives, was the primary resource that energised the industrial revolution. It is a 'mass' resource, and largely fungible. For global oceanic trade, it became, with the rise of steamships, the commodity that provided the energy to transport other commodities. Steamships were more reliable, supposedly, and in the Indian Ocean traders would no longer have to rely on the annual cycle of monsoon winds to move things around by sail:

> The early steamers with single combustion engines required vast amounts of coal. They carried as much as they could, but this meant that they were limited to carrying only mail and passengers, their being no room for freight. In 1856 Ida Pfeiffer went from the Cape to Mauritius in a new steamer, of 150 horse power. It cost a massive £500 a month to run, not counting the cost of coal, which was very considerable. The ship gobbled up more than a ton every hour, yet coal cost £2/10s a ton at the Cape. The steamer was relatively efficient, for some of the early steamers used up to 50 tons of coal a day. The consequence was frequent stops at places on the way – Cape Town, Aden, Galle – to pick up coal. In the 1850s Galle imported 50, 000 tons of coal a year, most of it coming from far away Cardiff. In these early days much of the coal was taken to these depots strung around the Indian Ocean in sailing ships (Pearson 2003: 202–3).

50,000 tons of coal a year, from Cardiff to Sri Lanka, in *sailing ships*? Am I missing something here with this story of coal depots? Couldn't it be the case that this commodity, coal, is also fuelling a fantasy about the domination of nature, and about imperial figures in topees showing off their modernity to the natives? And it is true, coal and steamships, initially, did not pay for themselves at all. They were subsidised by the British Government by way of mail contracts, because, as historian Michael Pearson goes on to say:

> it was essential to have means of regular communications between [the empire's] different parts, so that trade could flourish, security be enhanced, and troops and war material be moved as needed … Very large sums were involved. Between 1840 and 1867 the contracts yielded £4.5 million, and £6 million between 1868 and 1890. Overall the support given by the British government was about 25 per cent of the total capital (Pearson 2003: 203).

Technologies improved such that these subsidies could be reduced and phased out, at least for the mail runs, but we still have a dirty inefficient fuel moving large inefficient ships for many years on the strength of a story, a story retold by Michael Taussig, with Primo Levi:

> ‘I wanted to tell the story of an atom of carbon,’ said [Primo] Levi. What stories they would tell, fairytales and ghost stories like we’ve never heard before. For that is where the story of carbon can take you, carbon, ‘the element of life,’ now better known as I write these lines as that which is going to kill us off through global warming. Element of life, indeed! What stories they could tell! Nothing compared with what they are going to tell! To date, this story has been occupied territory and called the domination of nature, but –who knows – if the storyteller got it right, then might not something else emerge?
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> Therefore, if it is the poetry that does the hard work, combining the manmade with the natural so that there is not longer much of a difference, the poetry to which I refer and defer being the join, then I shall abjure the stepwise story, this happened and then that happened, and try as best I can to nudge some of the things-in-themselves into speech such that they manifest their disjointedness no less than their joint (Taussig 2009: 225–6).

I would say they manifest their composition as much as their decomposition, the things being hybrid-in-themselves and hybrid in the heterogeneous environments which provide life-support for them, hybrid markets being one case in point:

> Economic markets are caught in reflexive activity: the actors concerned explicitly question their organization and, based on an analysis of their functioning, try to conceive and establish new rules for the game. This reflexivity is evident mainly in the proliferation of hybrid forums in which the functioning and organization of particular markets … are discussed and debated (Callon, Méadel & Rabeharison 2002: 194–5).

So that is one kind of story about the composition of the commodity, in this case coal, where part of the composition – a rhetorical but essential part – is a narrative about industrialised modernity. Without this story, coal would not be able to sustain itself in the market. But of course, I have only looked at early steamships. Carbon, the ‘element of life’ has found its new source in its cousin, oil, and is now in everything we use; all sorts of consumable energy, plastics, chemical products and so on. Carbon itself may not be decomposable, but its individual products are being decomposed in a piecemeal fashion, the campaign against plastic bottles, for example, that links to the commodification of water (Hawkins 2011: 534–52).

Part 2: ivory

Picture this: a group of elephants in the Roman Circus Maximus about 55 BCE facing death at the hands of the gladiators. For the Roman Emperor, Pompey the Great, the animals provided a spectacular theatre of cruelty. But they turn to the crowd for help, and Pompey faces a kind of popular revolt, as reported by Pliny the Elder:

> Pompey’s elephants, when they had lost all hope of escape, tried to gain the compassion of the crowd by indescribable gestures of entreaty, deploring their fate with a sort of wailing. So great was the distress of the public that they forgot the general and his munificence carefully devised for their honour, and bursting into tears rose in a body and invoked curses on the head of Pompey for which he soon afterwards paid the penalty (Pliny 1940 HN 7: 19–22).

Here the elephants exhibited the charisma of the large mammal that links them in an affective chain to humans in a similar way to the way they are linked today, a way that saved them yet again. By the twentieth century elephants will have survived the ivory trade, which burgeoned through the colonial period transforming a natural substance (elephants' teeth) into a cultural one (ivory); a 'primitive' resource into a complex set of commodities with a diverse array of functions and meanings. As we shall see, affect was a key element in the composition and decomposition of ivory as commodity.

Ivory, in this process, was transformed in the course of what I would like to call its *political career*. Ivory is not just a 'natural substance', it acquires a second nature in its relations with other things and other beings. Further, these relations give it an agency, and the complex of relations intersecting create a particular character for that agency, hence the politics (Thompson 2002: 166–90). So ivory was never passive: only a complex disarticulation and rearticulation of its relations to other beings and things can turn it into a passive substance, passive to the will of human beings to procure, distribute and craft it.

To make ivory, one has to first disarticulate it from elephants, those very beings whose articulateness saved them, apparently, in Pompey's circus. 'Tusks' have to be translated into 'ivory'. The elephant – let's start with the elephant as a composed being – uses its incisor teeth to dig for water, strip bark, move things around, poke enemies and display for courtship. Tool-like, the tusks already seem to *extend* the purely natural (except there is no such thing as the 'purely natural', everything is evolving and changing subject to forces, some of them affective). Because the elephant uses its tusks to articulate relations, the political career of 'ivory' has already begun: tusks are part of an elephant's power, if you like. After the hunt, this power is wrenched away with their teeth, and the political career of ivory continues. But does this go in a straight line, from the so-called natural to the cultural, to the worlds where human mammals compose things for their advantage?

It is important, I think, not to see this as a one-way street, from nature to culture, primitive resource to complex commodity. Because if my story only makes one point, it will be that 'nature' will *return* to give the elephants a voice (trumpeted by human advocates), a voice demanding elephant survival. The story will participate in the turning around of ivory and its political career, changing its configurations of value. Clearly, that value is not made by raw material alone, but also by the magic of the stories spun about it. Matter thus 'vibrates' in the liveliness of its relations; while our lives are also crafted into matter*:* all beings, all things have their political spokespersons gathering alliances to their causes. I am trying to grasp the wonder of ivory here, taking the risk, like Bruno Latour, like those misguided medieval folk, or primitives, who believe 'in a world *animated* by all sorts of entities and forces instead of believing, like any rational person, in an *inanimate* matter producing its effects' (Latour 2010: 481). This is a rationalist *reduction,* which is starting to look even stranger, because it treats objects as if they are dead, while our actual practice is constantly to *take them up* in lively relations, as Jane Bennett argues in her 2010 book *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things.*

Ivory was initially wrested from elephants in an atmosphere of fear. Early Ethiopian hunters used poison-tipped arrows shot from powerful bows and they supplied the ancient Middle East and Europe with ivory. Some African tribespeople were traditional elephant hunters, but they took risks: a wounded elephant could trample people in a hunting party, and such risks continued through the colonial period, even when big bore elephant guns became available. Human fear and elephant fear and rage characterised the theatre of the hunt. Then there was the slaughter and butchering of the elephant's head, cutting back into the jaw so that the invisible one third of the tusk could be wrenched out by several men with a final great creaking pop. When this is done on a large scale and the elephant meat ignored, then the extraction of ivory starts to look, well, inhuman. Killing fields, especially in the early seventies when the price of ivory increased ten fold (Thompson 2002: 168). An affective relation of man to elephant is then further reproduced in the inhumanity of man to man, in the cruelty of slavery. The value of ivory now being forged in human as well as elephant blood; the porters of tusks who stumbled on their way to the Ivory Coast would be left to die and replaced by others. That slavery is sometimes called 'black ivory' is no accident. These were the two great commodities being extracted from Africa from the pre-colonial through the colonial periods. This was a harvest of death as well as ivory, 'an animated image of death' is how Conrad describes Kurtz being carried out on a stretcher towards the end of *Heart of Darkness,* 'an animated image of death carved out of old ivory'.

Yet the substance, the very qualities of the material of ivory, made it such an object of desire that all these lives could be sacrificed in abundance for its extraction and global distribution. It is ductile to carve, highly durable, strong, a beautiful creamy white and sensually smooth to the touch: these are also lines of affect that relate it to humans, human industry, human ritual. Death sanctifies this process of transformation of elephant dentine into beautiful panels carved by Romans, thrones for ancient kings and queens, a huge number and variety of artefacts amplified after industrialisation in Europe. The sacrifice imparts a magical quality to the substance, then further enhanced by its refashioning into cultural objects, of which more anon. But ponder Conrad again: 'The word "ivory" rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it.'

Hunters, traders, middlemen, all driven by a lust for wealth, sure, but it is more than Marx's 'primitive accumulation': '*they were praying to it*', says Conrad. It was like a perverse religion without a church where the parishioners become the carcasses of elephants and slaves, and the office-holders are the white hunters driven mad by obsession, the very meaning of obsession being that any subtle values fall away. Single-mindedness reduces the complex of relations that matter, like a certain rationality hell-bent on making objects inanimate.

It is a mad story, is it not? Born of death, ivory takes on a life of its own 'as a product readying itself for the market' (Taussig 2009: 152). It has its own inherent qualities, to be sure – ductile, durable and smooth – and in its various lifelines, its political trajectories, its liveliness will be enhanced by all sorts of other cultural transformations and connections. And at each turn affective forces give the relations a vector.

So how do you sell ivory? Or to be more in tune with our idea of lines of transmission of affect, what does it *feel like* to trade and sell ivory in the colonial period? We know something of the fear of the hunt, and the horror of the dead who have never been counted, the people even less than the elephants. Now the ivory arrives in the godowns of Zanzibar or Mombasa for distribution around the world. Here, the experts class it into types, with loving caresses of the smoothness of the material. The experts know how the ivory can be cut, they look for the Schreger pattern that only elephant ivory has: a delicate pattern of loosely woven lines, ‘like stretched netting or soft circumflexes’ (Walker 2009: 24), a ‘weave of intersecting lines reminiscent of fussy banknote engraving’ (Walker 2009: 23). The expertise is elaborated in discourses, animated by the same love of the stuff that makes its Japanese carvers serenely happy and makes it preferred to this day by piano players who feel its warmth, sweat-absorption, the slight adhesion of fingers on keys. At this stage of ivory’s history the pianist is not thinking of elephants or slavery: ‘the animal product and its source species occupied different worlds’ says John Frederick Walker. ‘Ivory was being removed, transported, and reshaped far from its “original ecological context,” allowing the elephant to become conceptually distanced, even uncoupled, from its own teeth’ (Walker 2009: 60).

Ivory billiards balls became ‘vital to the game’ by 1700 in Europe, replacing the hardwoods used earlier. ‘Ivory was the only material that had sufficient elasticity or resiliency – “life” as it was called – to permit the full range of physical interactions between colliding balls’ (Walker 2009: 102). That satisfying click as they strike each other. Billiards put a premium on small tusks, ‘scrivelloes’, from female elephants usually; a set of premium billiard balls was offered for sale in 1908 for $176, and by 1922 it was estimated that 4,000 elephants a year were being killed for the trade. And by 1913 the US was importing two hundred tons of ivory annually simply for the thin facings on piano keys.

What else was ivory crafted into? ‘Doctors’ ladies,’ Chinese figurines of naked women used by female patients too modest to use explicit language with their doctors, Japanese Hanko, or business seals, combs, straight razors, ivory *chudas* for Hindu marriages, boxes, elaborate decorative spheres within spheres, parlour bell pulls, Victorian cane heads, knitting needles, chopsticks, ivory dust for black paint, handles for ham bone holders, cucumber saws and grape snips, backgrounds for miniature painting, dominoes and dice, rulers, knobs for scientific instruments, Chinese cricket cages, cuff links, false teeth, hip replacements, dildoes. Ivory was the plastic of its age.

Nancy Cunard, the jazz-age shipping heiress, was photographed by Man Ray wearing massive clunky ivory bangles. She was disinherited for her affair with a man of African descent, as the artistic elite of her generation pursued its exoticisation and eroticisation of Africa in the early twentieth century. The title of the photograph, ‘Ivory Shackles,’ is perhaps an ironic comment. The erotic is one of the strongest forms of investment of affect in the commodity, and for ivory it extends, in the Western canon, from the Song of Solomon’s ‘thy neck is as an ivory tower’ to Nabokov’s ‘The hollow of my hand was still ivory-full of Lolita’ (Nabokov 1991: 67).[2] There is a *poetics*, then, which is replete with the racial force of whiteness and

purity, and more, for ivory as colour is not just 'whiteness' its rich allusions assure its embeddedness in a kind of sacred mythology, as in John Frederick Walker's list:

> Ivory suggests age, antiquity, importance, dignity … it is the color of diplomas, decrees and proclamations. Ivory is the color of German taxis and the underparts of the largest breed of domestic cats, the Ragdoll. It's the description given to the center portion of lesions as well as to the rind of ripe casaba melons. Ivory is the tint of the clouds given off when ice water is added to a glass of aniseed flavoured Turkish raki and it the lightest acceptable color of authentic Swiss Grade A Emmentaler cheese. It's the colour a bride would choose for her gown if she wanted a traditional look for her wedding (Walker 2009: 105).

It can't be then, as he says, 'just another name in the color wheel' because of all this cultural embeddedness. But what he is alluding to is the final change in fortunes and a realignment of affect that took place in 1989 when the ban on the trade in ivory took place. Today, if you search for ivory on *eBay*, you only get the colour, because trade in actual items is banned. The disarticulation of the lives of elephants and ivory that was in place in the colonial period ceased, as environmentalist discourses were able to re-establish the link, forged by that powerful feeling of compassion for the charismatic species.

I won't go into the role of the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species* (CITES) in bringing about the ban, the debates about illegal poaching, the rise in elephant numbers and the postcolonial arguments about Western environmentalist lobbyists who put elephant lives ahead of the needs of farmers in Africa whose crops and lives are threatened by uncontained elephant herds, not to mention the tons of vegetable food needed to sustain elephant populations which can wreak havoc in African national parks. There are stockpiles of ivory that some African countries seek to sell for the monetary value alone, but some environmentalists want to deny them this right for the sake of elephant numbers. Without affect, there is no doubt the de-commodification of ivory would not have taken place; it was a complex of affects: compassion, outrage, and some moral righteousness: most of it coming from the West. The colonial configuration of power that gave us the ivory trade is still largely in place to the extent that African voices are not heeded, for instance an African politician's offer to those advocating a total ban on ivory. 'Sure, you can burn our ivory stockpiles, if you pay for it.' An offer that is yet to be taken up.

John Law, of the Latourian school of thought, has made a case that the expansion of European economic power via oceanic trade in the sixteenth century can only be understood if the 'technological, the economic, the political, the social and the natural are all seen as being interrelated' (Law 1986). And now we would have to add *the affective* to that list. And we would have to wonder what kind of writing (or methodology) can incorporate the technological, the economic, the political, the social and the natural and the affective in the one text, and we might have to conclude, that because of the affective, the text would not only be interdisciplinary, but also novelistic.

We are familiar, now, via Latour and the ANT school, with the democratising tendency to welcome the agency of things into human networks and to dismantle the

proscenium which has Man playing out various cultures on a stage with Nature as a uniform backdrop (Latour 2007). So I have highlighted ivory and given it a career, which is to say a kind of life. In being alert to the forces at work in real time in shaping this life, one notices different kinds of agency, which lead me to endorse the idea of objects being animated. Not that they are autonomously alive, but that they are animated in every relationship that gives them function, meaning and affect.

What attracted me in the narrative about ivory was what at first looked like a reversal and a return to Nature, as ivory was banned in order to save the elephants. But this about-face in ivory's career, was not in any sense a return. It was a reconfiguration of the natural-cultural assemblage. The political configuration changed to solve a problem; some of ivory's friends and enemies fell away and it gained new ones. It was decommodified, but not necessarily defetishised as such, because a new kind of sacred was installed that was a strong affective driver. This is, of course, the edenic conception of the purity of Nature, a concept at the heart of Western modernism: the classical nature-culture bifurcation which, according to Latour and anthropologist Phillipe Descola, and earlier Whitehead and James, has gotten us into so much trouble. So, first conclusion: no 'return to nature', just a redistribution of agency, which is precisely what happens when commodities become recycled, creating new materials and commodities (glass is recycled as glass fibre insulation, plastic bottles become cloth) as well as employment.

My second conclusion is that while ivory's colonial career moved it into industrialisation and commodification, this modernisation has not necessarily meant decolonisation. Nations in Africa have political independence, but their continued dependence on an asymmetrical global trade in commodities points us to a colonisation continued by economic means. Ivory is an interesting case study in this area because its decommodification left a set of colonial power relations in place, but this time they are organised around the kinds of moralistic arguments driving organisations like CITES; only 'responsible' Western countries can trust themselves to care about the right kinds of things. An old colonial moral pedagogy is thus still in place.

My third conclusion is about the passions surrounding ivory. I have tried to illustrate their diversity, from the responsiveness of the human hand to smoothness, to the satisfying click of a billiard ball, to the more complex articulation of machines, exoticism, pride in a craft skill, collectionism, exhibiting desires, and so on. One last example concerns the development of lathes for turning ivory into beautiful objects. From the end of the seventeenth century, Peter the Great, the Russian Czar, had a collection of ivory turning lathes, which he worked himself. Walker tells us Peter the Great had 'a passion for putting on a workman's apron, picking up a chisel and spinning a piece of tusk on a mandrel, sometimes far into the night'. The Czar turned out 'goblets and candlesticks, measuring instruments and sundials, openwork pyramids with polygonal stars inside, sceptres, columns, engraved snuffboxes and polygons'. He wasn't unique in his passion. For some two hundred years, as historian Kraus Maurice has detailed, the crowned heads of Europe – in Austria, Bavaria, Saxony, Italy, France, Denmark – spent untold hours at their lathes turning ivory (Walker 2009: 76–7).

Less Eurocentric examples, stories from China and India, would reveal different sets of passions, with different assemblages of humans and non-humans. My point is that the passion for ivory takes many forms, and that its poetics is not just in the object, but in the relations that give the object life. Each little enthusiasm sustains ivory in the relations that push its many careers along. The poetics of ivory is not about its powers of representation, though these play a part. The beautiful carved figurine is an image of beauty, but how it got there is equally important as it is created through a chain of transformations. We can follow those transformation back down the line, from display case, to shop, to workshop with its lathe and specialised tools, to the merchant's trading house, to its transport as cargo, to the trader back in Africa, to the hunting party with its guns, to the savannah and the herd of elephants, to the particular elephant having its tusks violently wrenched out. What is also on that chain of transformations and translations is a chain of human affect being translated, transformed, and sometimes reversed.

I also want to go back to coal, to carbon, the quintessential fungible commodity, the 'element of life'. It is its relation to fire, its consumption with oxygen that makes it release its energy. This attribute also puts it in a special relationship with human cultures and their use of the transformative power of fire. Fire rather rapidly decomposes things, and we have learnt to harness this energy in machines which work for us. Normally with commodities we have to labour to transform them into items for the market – no less for coal, which, seemingly a simple element, nevertheless has to be mined and transported with value-adding labour.

In its decomposition, in its combustion/consumption, it returns the complement with its labour, working for us as an energy source. And with this energy we power our cities where we, lucky ones, pursue our post-industrial forms of labour in air-conditioned rooms with plenty of computers, brought to us by creative invention, not just the market. Let us remember that the market is perhaps not a Durkheimian 'total social fact', but more of a 'reflexive game' (Callon et al. 2002: 194–5); it is a hybrid forum where government subsidies can play the role of promoting a substance like coal against the logic of the market itself (in the nineteenth century) and against ecological logics and calculations (in the contemporary era).

It is in this reflexivity that events are open to the opportunities of intervention. There are stories that can be told that are not in the financial languages of market inevitability, as in stories of the domination of Nature bequeathed by the nineteenth century. If we pay attention to the decomposition of commodities and the forces that disenfranchised them; then we become aware of counter-spells that burst the bubbles of capitalist enchantments: the market is not necessarily all-consuming. Stories, then, but also forms of analysis. How can an analysis work as a counter-spell? Not, I think, by critique as denunciation, where the critic is like a disempowered marginal character at the gates of power. Not as an inflammatory critique, but a cooler one that proceeds by way of tracing the relations between things, that decomposes these relations in such a way that decision-making processes are slowed down (rather than rushing to the usual conclusions via the usual transcendent concepts). Combine inventive storytelling with a more cautious analysis, then, in a poetry that decomposes and recomposes things in their lively relations.

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Endnotes

1. See also Jo Littler, 2008 *Radical consumption,* Maidenhead: Open UP, and Tania Lewis and Emily Potter, 2011 *Ethical consumption: A critical* introduction, London: Routledge
2. 'The hollow of my hand was still ivory-full of Lolita – full the feel of her pre-adolescently curved back, that ivory-smooth, sliding sensation of her skin through the thin frock that I had worked up and down while I held her.' Vladimir Nabokov, 1955 *Lolita,* Vintage, New York.

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