Labour in Flesh and Feathers

Multispecies Mutuality Against Agroindustrial Invisibility

Domenico Volpicella, Università di Bologna
ORCID: 0000-0001-7020-0778, e-mail: domenico.volpicella2@unibo.it

Abstract: This article explores "more-than-human labour" through multispecies ethnography among small-scale breeders of heritage and rare poultry in Australia. Animals are not passive recipients of care but active participants in agricultural processes, performing metabolic, reproductive, ecological, and affective work that sustains life. Based on one year of participant observation, conducted in Western Australia, Queensland, and New South Wales, the study shows how farmers recognise in their birds will, sensitivity, and agency. Chickens, ducks, and turkeys interact, resist, and shape human gestures, giving rise to hybrid and affective ecologies where care and control intertwine. Rereading rural husbandry through this lens questions the human monopoly over work and value, revealing relational and peripheral economies where humans and nonhumans co-produce life and meaning. Yet these relations remain ambivalent, traversed by asymmetries of domestication and dependency. Tracing six interwoven dimensions of more-than-human labour – metabolic, reproductive, affective, ecological, aesthetic, and political – the paper shows how slow, caring practices in small farms become forms of ethical resistance and regeneration. Valuing these fragile collectives invites us to imagine agricultural policies attentive to interdependence, post-anthropocentric educational paths, and multispecies economies that transform the ruins of capitalism into grounds for shared survival.

Keywords: Multispecies ethnography; More-than-human labour; Degrowth; Australia; Poultry breeds.

Introduction

At dawn, on a small farm near Byron Bay, on Australia's eastern coast, the day begins with hens scratching among fallen guavas, ducks plunging their bills into the mud, and a rooster crowing into the rising light. These gestures embody the ordinary labour through which life sustains itself, often rendered in-

Antropologia pubblica, n. 1, 2026 • Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine © 2026 – MIM EDIZIONI SRL
ISSN: 2531-8799 • ISBN: 9791222335469 • DOI: 10.7413/2531-87990667
This is a peer-reviewed and open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY-4.0).

visible by industrial agriculture. One morning, while helping Lindsay – a poultry breeder whose farm lies near Byron Bay, in New South Wales, where I lived and worked for several months – to clean the pens, he decided to kill one of the roosters that had been selected out of the breeding flock, to be used for consumption. The gesture was quick, practiced, and embedded in routine. A moment earlier the bird had been foraging with other roosters, still performing its quiet metabolic work turning feed into warmth, feathers, and motion. Minutes later, its body would nourish Lindsay and his family, and the remaining parts would return to the compost heap, where heat and microbes would decompose them into fertile soil. In that scene, the continuity of the labour of life became tangible: what the animal had metabolically transformed in life continued to circulate in death, feeding bodies and soils alike.[1]

Figure 1. Linsday killing one rooster for food on his farm (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)

[1] Throughout the article, I use the term *animal* to refer to nonhuman animals, in line with the multispecies approach of Despret (2016); Haraway (2008); Kirksey, Helmreich (2010).

This article emerges from those mornings, months of shared routines, smells, and gestures on small farms in different parts of Australia, where humans and birds live and work together. Between 2021 and 2022, I conducted multispecies ethnography in Queensland, New South Wales, and Western Australia, following heritage and rare-breed poultry breeders. The aim of this essay is to reflect on the concept of "*more-than-human labour*" (Barua 2018; Mouret, Lainé 2023) as a lens through which to understand the forms of care, production, and regeneration that emerge within non-industrial farms. In such contexts, labour does not regard only humans but emerges as a process of co-creation that implies what Haraway (2016) calls "*response-ability*": the capacity to respond and to become responsible together. I use "work" to refer to the broad set of situated practices through which beings sustain everyday life on the farm (feeding, scratching, resting, incubating, composting, cleaning, waiting). I use "labour" more narrowly to designate those practices as socially organized and value-generating activities, activities through which differences in agency, responsibility, and recognition are negotiated across species, and through which certain effects become legible as "productive".

In this sense, "more-than-human labour" does not metaphorize animal life as human work; rather, it names the empirical fact that farm life depends on distributed, interdependent activity performed by birds, humans, soils, microbes, infrastructures, and seasons, and that such activity is actively interpreted, coordinated, and sometimes disciplined by farmers. Likewise, I define value not as a single measure (e.g., profit) but as the plural outcomes through which labour becomes meaningful and consequential in these farms: subsistence and food, soil fertility, continuity of breeds and genealogies, affective well-being, aesthetic distinction, and ethical-political commitments to slowness, care, and biodiversity. Importantly, these values are often invisible from the standpoint of agroindustrial production, where value is typically registered through standardized metrics (growth rate, feed conversion, uniformity, throughput) and through the spatial and temporal scales of integrated supply chains.

Methodological note: multispecies ethnography in practice

This article is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2022 in Australia and Italy. The present analysis focuses exclusively on the Australian component of that research. In Australia, I carried out two extended periods of participant observation of approximately six months, living and working alongside heritage and rare-breed poultry breeders in Queensland, New South Wales, and Western Australia. The material pre-

sented here draws on fifteen semi-structured interviews, numerous informal conversations, and extensive fieldnotes produced through daily participation in farm routines (feeding, cleaning, composting, flock management, incubation, and show preparation). Over the course of fieldwork, I directly observed and worked among more than 2,000 individual birds across different farms, breeds, and life stages.

I describe this approach as multispecies ethnography not simply because animals are included in the field, but because they actively shaped research practice. Access to farms required learning to move with birds' rhythms, adjusting bodily gestures to flock dynamics, and participating in seasonal cycles of brooding, feeding, and reproduction. Animals were not treated as symbolic extensions of human narratives but as participants whose actions – resistance, habituation, aggression, cooperation – reoriented daily routines and researcher positioning. Rather than claiming access to animal interiority, the analysis is grounded in repeated observation of embodied interactions and in the material consequences of interspecies coordination.

The concept of "more-than-human labour" engages with scholarship on animal work and animal organization studies (Hamilton, Taylor 2013; Tallberg, Hamilton 2022), which has challenged the assumption that work is an exclusively human domain. This literature demonstrates how animals contribute to value creation and how power operates across species within organized systems of labour. At the same time, multispecies ethnography has foregrounded the methodological and political stakes of studying nonhuman lives (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010; van Dooren 2019). Situating "more-than-human labour" at the intersection of these debates allows this article to examine how labour, value, and agency emerge through interspecies coordination, negotiation, and discipline within small-scale husbandry. Against this background, the following section situates these practices within the broader historical transformation of poultry production under industrial capitalism.

From the ruins of modernization: poultry in the industrial era

The chicken is today the most farmed animal in the world, with over 33 billion individuals (FAO 2025). Since the 1950s, genetic standardization and vertical integration – whereby a small number of corporations control multiple stages of production, from breeding and feed supply to slaughtering and distribution – have reduced the diversity of breeds and practices, turning domestic poultry keeping into a highly concentrated industrial system (Blanchette 2019; Dixon 2004). More than half of the world's traditional poultry breeds have been lost,

replaced by commercial hybrids selected to maximize productive yield in intensive systems (Josephson 2020). This process signals the transformation of animal life into biological efficiency.

In Australia, this process has been particularly rapid and radical. The country has no native poultry breeds: all those existing today were introduced by European settlers starting in 1788 (Peters *et al.* 2022). In the twentieth century, breeders developed local varieties such as the Australorp and the Australian Langshan, now part of Australia's rural biodiversity.[2] Until the mid-twentieth century, poultry production took place mainly in home backyards and small farms, where hens provided eggs for household consumption and chicken meat was reserved for special occasions (Dixon 2004).[3]

After the Second World War, rising urban demand led to the adoption of the American model of vertical integration, which transformed poultry farming into an industrial, corporately controlled system (Blanchette 2019). Today, six major companies manage around 90% of the Australian chicken-meat industry, controlling every stage of production, from genetics to feed, slaughtering and packaging, while about 800 contract growers provide the infrastructure and labour.[4] According to the latest government data, over 750 million chickens are slaughtered annually in Australia, producing more than 1.5 million tonnes of meat and confirming poultry as the country's most consumed animal protein (ABARES 2025). This growth reflects the consolidation of a vertically integrated industry in which a few corporations control most stages of production, leaving small breeders structurally marginal.

In this model, animals are raised as biological machines. Imported commercial genetic lines (like Ross or Cobb) are designed to grow at record speed and convert feed into meat or eggs with maximum efficiency.[5] Broiler chickens reach slaughter weight – around 2.6-3 kg – in 35-65 days, while laying hens are culled after just over a year, when their productivity declines (RSPCA 2020). Male chicks, having no commercial value, are killed immediately after hatching. Industrial poultry farming reflects a paradigm of agricultural intensification based on genetic standardization, confinement, and technological control, a system that turns living beings into production units and reduces life to a

---

2 See Rare Breeds Trust of Australia, *Poultry Watchlist*, https://rarebreedstrust.com.au/poultry (accessed 26/10/2025).

3 See Australian Chicken Meat Federation, *The History of Chicken Meat Production in Australia*, https://chicken.org.au/history (accessed 26/10/2025).

4 See *Industry Overview*, https://www.poultryhub.org (accessed 26/10/2025).

5 See *Broiler Production Facts*, https://chicken.org.au/broiler-production-facts (accessed 26/10/2025).

measurable flow of inputs and outputs (RSPCA 2022).[6] Animals become parts of an extractive chain where vitality is pushed to its limit. Yet, at the margins of this productive machine, other stories survive: genealogies of animals and people who continue to work together according to different logics. These are forms of life that resist homogenization and keep alive relations, bodies, and rhythms irreconcilable with the rationality of efficiency. It is from within this agroindustrial capitalism that my research begins; places where life, though embedded within structures of extraction, continues to labour for its own regeneration.

Breeds, genealogies and resistances

Within a poultry sector increasingly shaped by industrial standardization, some poultry breeds still carry the memory of older worlds. They are not the result of recent industrial genetic engineering or corporate-controlled hybridization, but descend from historical lines shaped through long-term selective breeding practices implemented by generations of farmers. While these breeds are also products of artificial selection, they differ from contemporary industrial hybrids in terms of temporal scale, ownership regimes, and the speed and intensity of genetic standardization. These are the poultry populations commonly referred "heritage" and "rare poultry breeds".
In the *Dictionary of Agroecology* (Derrouch *et al.* 2016), a "breed" is defined as a domestic subspecies selected by humans, whose individuals share similar genotypic and phenotypic characteristics. The term "heritage" refers to those breeds kept before the expansion of industrial agriculture in the 1950s and maintained by breeders who recognize in them ethical, aesthetic, affective, and modest economic value, though one not structured around productivity maximization. "Rare breeds", instead, are those considered at risk of extinction, regardless of their geographical origin or historical presence in a given country. It is important to note that some breeds, or even specific colour varieties within the same breed, may be rare or endangered in one national context but relatively common in another. This depends on their history of import and export, as well as on the interest and number of breeders who maintain them in a given region. A telling example is that of the *Sicilian chicken*, a native Italian breed still relatively widespread in its country of origin but currently endangered in Australia due

[6] See *Chicken Farming in Australia*, https://www.peta.org.au/issues/chicken-farming (accessed 26/10/2025).

to the extremely small number of breeding individuals and caretakers. In 2024, the *Rare Breeds Trust of Australia* recorded, through its national *Poultry Watchlist* programme, fifteen poultry breeds in the "Critical" category and forty-nine in the "Of Concern" category. These represent the most vulnerable populations within Australia's poultry heritage, characterized by extremely low reproductive ratios and an almost total dependence on networks of amateur and small-scale breeders. This data reflects the growing fragility of traditional breeding practices, now exposed to the pressure of standardized production models that erode biological diversity and the technical memory of local breeds.

During my fieldwork across Australia, I met breeders of heritage and rare breeds in various regions, from Western Australia to New South Wales and Queensland. They live in rural or peri-urban contexts, caring for animals excluded by modern agriculture. Their motivations vary: preserving biodiversity, love of living forms, connection to land, or resistance to agroindustry. Many of them have another occupations and breeding is often a second activity or a family commitment carried out more for passion than for profit. Their farms are small, their economic margins limited, and their market modest, yet the goal is not growth but continuity: to keep genetic lines, relationships, and landscapes alive. In these spaces one finds geese, ducks, chickens, guinea fowls, turkeys, and other birds that have lived for years alongside their breeders. During fieldwork I worked with various heritage breeds, Australorp, Cochin, Legbar, Frizzle, and others. Together, these animals and their breeders are the protagonists of this article.

Entangled lives: ethnography of shared labour

My research took place within the everyday life of small Australian farms, where I lived and worked alongside the farmers. Every morning I opened pens, scattered feed, and cleaned sheds in the damp darkness, amid the smell of grain and wings. Doing ethnography, in this context, meant participating in work rather than observing it: moving cages, collecting eggs, learning to follow the animals' rhythm, to know when to wait and when to act. As the days went by, my gestures fell into step with theirs, with the hens scratching in the mud, the ducks moving as a group, the slow breathing of the farms coming to life.

Through this daily work, I began to recognize that what was happening around me was not merely "human work with animals", but a broader entanglement of actions, energies, and transformations. Work was not simply a productive activity, but a relationship that joined bodies, rhythms, and environments in a vital cooperation, what Barua (2018) and Mouret and Lainé (2023) describe as

more-than-human labour: a metabolic and ecological process in which matter, time, and care move across species, generating forms of continuity and co-dependence. Using the term "labour" here is analytically significant. It foregrounds the fact that these interspecies relations are not merely affective or symbolic, but materially consequential for subsistence, ecological maintenance, and the continuity of breeds. Calling them "labour" makes visible how value and responsibility are distributed across species, and how certain activities come to be recognized – or obscured – as productive.

Following Porcher (2011), animal labour can be understood as a moral and affective cooperation, a shared activity that produces bonds as much as material goods. During my fieldwork, I could observe how this cooperation unfolded in the smallest gestures of daily life. When I entered the pens carrying the feed bucket, the hens would gather around me, following my movements with an almost choreographed precision. Some came close, pecking at my boots or tilting their heads as if to read my intentions; others kept a cautious distance, observing in silence. Over time, the initial wariness gave way to a form of mutual recognition, a tacit understanding of each other's roles and rhythms. This slow transformation from distance to familiarity made visible what Porcher calls moral and affective cooperation: a relationship built not through language but through repetition, gestures, and shared attention.

Each morning, as I opened and closed the pens, I learned to anticipate their movements, knowing which hen would rush to the gate first, which would wait behind until I stepped aside. The animals, in turn, seemed to read my signals, my posture, my tone of voice, the rhythm of my steps. This mutual attunement was not a symbolic exchange but a form of labour itself: a choreography of care that allowed the fragile system of the farm to hold together. As Despret (2016) reminds us, understanding such relations requires thinking with animals, allowing their presence and initiative to reshape our ways of moving, perceiving, and knowing. I experienced this daily: learning to slow down, to move gently, to respect the temporal and spatial distances that the birds established. Through these small adjustments, work became a shared form of knowledge, a reciprocal learning process in which my gestures were continuously redefined through theirs. In this sense, to speak of animal labour is not to use a metaphor but to make an ethnographic statement: in the farms I observed, animals are not mere biological resources but subjects who, through their actions and responses, actively participate in the material, affective, and moral construction of shared work. It is within this interweaving of practices, times, and relations that more-than-human labour becomes ethnographically tangible: a way of conceiving and living work as co-production of life.

From this perspective, the analysis is articulated around six interdependent dimensions of more-than-human labour that emerged from ethnographic observation, each illuminating a different way in which life works: metabolizing, reproducing, caring, regenerating, representing, and resisting. The first concerns metabolic labour, which sustains life through the transformation of energy and matter, revealing the interdependence of bodies, soils, and nutrients. The second is reproductive labour, in which mating, incubation, and selection shape the genealogical continuity of species and the shared temporalities of care. Affective and therapeutic labour refers to the processes of attention, companionship, and comfort that bind humans and animals, turning the relationship itself into a productive force. Ecological and regenerative labour highlights the active contribution of animals to the repair and maintenance of the environment, while aesthetic and symbolic labour shows how beauty, distinction, and mutual recognition are co-produced by both species. Finally, political and ethical labour embodies slow forms of resistance to agroindustrial time, framing husbandry as a practice of daily opposition to extraction and productive acceleration.

Taken together, these dimensions delineate an ethnography of shared vitality: a way of understanding labour not as an act of domination or appropriation but as a relational practice of coexistence and co-creation. In this view, value – understood as the plural outcomes through which labour becomes consequential in these farms – does not reside in the capacity to produce or extract but in the quality of the relationships that allow life to continue, in the reciprocity, dependency, and care that make the common world possible.

Metabolic labour

In this section I focus on metabolic labour, an often invisible yet fundamental dimension of life within the farms I visited. As Barua (2018) notes, metabolic labour concerns the ways in which life itself, eating, growing, reproducing, and even dying, becomes a productive force. Metabolism, therefore, is not merely a biological process: it is a form of work that transforms matter and energy into forms of value – edible flesh, fertile soil, bodily warmth, reproductive continuity – through which life becomes materially consequential on the farm. This becomes particularly evident in Australian farms dedicated to heritage and rare breeds, where I carried out my fieldwork. The birds were constantly at work, though their labour rarely appeared as such. From the first light of dawn, they scattered across the paddocks and gardens. They scratched the soil for worms, seeds, and scraps, selecting with surprising discernment what to eat. Around the compost

pile, they competed for kitchen scraps, again displaying a selective discernment about what to eat and what to leave. Their movements expressed a subtle intelligence: a hierarchy of preferences shaped by taste, habit, and the social dynamics of the flock. When I threw a handful of grain, the group reacted as one living body, rushing forward, wings half open, beaks clicking against the ground, then gradually dispersing again into individual rhythms. After feeding, they drank, then rested or took dust baths in the shade. These moments of apparent idleness were also forms of labour: through rest, digestion, and preening, the birds transformed what they had consumed into flesh, bone, feathers, and heat. Even sleep was part of this rhythm through which energy circulated and life sustained itself. Tas, a rare poultry breeder in Western Australia, put it simply: "They eat feed, pick at insects and grass, and they have everything" (Harvey, 22/07/2022). Yet this "everything" was not mere consumption but an active collaboration with the land. By grazing and scratching, the birds aerated and fertilized the soil. Their metabolism was also social, shaped by proximity, imitation, and constant negotiation for food and shade. Each gesture, pecking, scratching, bathing, resting, contributed to the circulation of matter and energy across the farm. This activity intertwined with that of other agents – earthworms, microbes, moisture, heat – forming what Barua (2018) calls the "vital work of the earth", a continuous, distributed transformation through which life itself becomes productive. In my terms, this vital work becomes labour when it is socially organized, recognized, and made consequential within the farm's regimes of value. Metabolism here is not only physiological but ecological and relational, an ongoing cooperation through which animals, humans, and materials co-produce fertility and energy. This labour, however, is never one-sided.

In common representations, the farmer appears as the sole productive agent, the one who provides care, feed, and infrastructure. Certainly, human work is essential: breeders supply grain, scraps, or space for foraging, water, and medical care. Yet what I observed was a system of co-labour, in which birds worked together with humans, soils, microbes, and plants. Through their own work, they sustained not only their lives but also those of others. From the first days of a chick's life, metabolism was visible as a transformative force: what entered its body – grain, grass, insects, kitchen scraps – returned as movement, heat, sound, manure, meat, eggs, and, eventually, death and decomposition. While this metabolic process is common to all living beings, what differs across farming systems is the way it is organized, accelerated, or made visible. In small-scale farms, these transformations remain perceptible as cycles of exchange within the farm's ecology; in industrial systems, they are reorganized within tightly controlled regimes of growth and efficiency, where metabolic processes are intensified and largely abstracted from their ecological contexts.

Figure 2. Heritage turkeys foraging freely around Lindsay's farm (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)

Among all expressions of metabolic labour, manure is an everyday and paradigmatic form. For these breeders, manure is not waste but a vital resource that keeps the entire system alive. "The manure goes back into our garden", said Liz, a breeder from Perth. In this simple sentence lies an agricultural logic

grounded in localized cycles of return: manure is composted with plant residues, producing heat and fermentation; after weeks or months, the resulting compost is spread over the same fields and family gardens from which feed and food are drawn.

Of course, manure is also valorized within industrial systems, where it may be processed, transported, sold as fertilizer, or used in biogas production. The difference, therefore, is not whether manure generates value, but at what scale and under which organizational regime this transformation occurs. In small-scale farms, metabolic circulation tends to remain spatially proximate and temporally visible, embedded in cycles that connect birds, soil, crops, and household subsistence. In industrial contexts, by contrast, manure enters extended supply chains and infrastructural systems, where its metabolic transformations are intensified, displaced, and often abstracted from the ecological relations in which they originate. From a theoretical point of view, manure embodies what Barua (2018) calls "metabolic value": a form of value generated through the flow of matter and energy rather than monetary transaction. Even faeces, therefore, participate in the regenerative labour of life, an invisible but essential work performed by animals, microbes, heat, and decay, which restores fertility to the soil. In this sense, as Krzywoszynska (2020) suggests, microorganisms too perform a kind of microbial "labour", transforming matter and renewing the soil's vitality, a cooperation often invisible yet essential to agriculture. This process also unsettles conventional distinctions between waste and resource. In industrial settings, manure is often treated as a management problem to be contained, transported, or processed at scale. Here, by contrast, it is reintegrated into visible cycles of fertility. As Douglas (2002) reminds us, dirt is "matter out of place": manure becomes "waste" only within specific classificatory regimes. In these farms, its reclassification as compost reveals how metabolic labour depends not only on biological transformation but also on symbolic and organizational arrangements that define what counts as value and what counts as excess.

Metabolic labour, however, does not end with life but continues after death. I recall an episode one morning at Lindsay's farm, the breeder in New South Wales with whom I lived and worked for three months. That day we were to clean the henhouses near the main house, where Lindsay kept his most beautiful specimens. Yet he had noticed for some time that one old rooster was unwell. Old and weak, he was pushed down by a younger male. As we cleaned one of the pens, Lindsay took the old rooster and decided to kill him to make space and avoid wasting feed. He laid the body on a large pile of manure and straw that we had accumulated in previous days. In the following days, smoke rose from the pile as the rooster's body decomposed. Lindsay knew that in a

few weeks it would have turned into compost, later used to fertilize his vegetable garden, which provided most of his fruit and vegetables for the year. The animal's body returns to the earth, merging with other organic matter and once again participating in the world's metabolic labour. Composting becomes a practice of "becoming-with" (Haraway 2016), through which death re-enters the metabolism of life. Through this daily and corporeal metabolism – the transformation of waste into life, of decay into nourishment – animals enact what Barua (2018) calls "the vital work of the earth".

Reproductive labour

In farms dedicated to heritage and rare breeds, reproduction represents one of the most complex and shared forms of labour between humans and animals: a vital process that intertwines control and contingency, technique and affection. In this sense, reproductive labour can be read not only as the generation of new life, but as part of what Stefania Barca (2020) calls the "forces of reproduction": those practices that sustain the biophysical and relational conditions of life itself, often marginalized within capitalist regimes centered on productivity and growth.

Breeding flocks are typically composed of one or two roosters and around ten hens per male. The dominant rooster constantly supervises the group, calling the hens when he finds food, chasing away intruders, and maintaining order among rivals. His labour is incessant: he mates in turn with the hens of his harem, spending his days in a choreography of vigilance, fatigue, and assertion. The subordinate males linger at the margins of the pen, waiting for a brief lapse in attention – a shadow, a distraction – to attempt a furtive copulation. Sometimes they succeed: a flurry of wings, a sharp cry, and the dominant rooster dashes across the yard, chasing the offender until he retreats to the edge of the fence. These moments – brief, bodily, intense – are also part of reproductive labour: energy spent, hierarchies negotiated, and the social fabric of the flock continually remade through conflict and desire. Desire here does not simply denote instinctual drive, but what Andreas Weber (2019) describes as the inherent tendency of living beings to unfold through relational encounter – a vital tension through which life seeks connection and transformation.

Farmers observe these dynamics with interest and precision. In many farms, individuals are separated by breed and selected according to morphological standards – colour, size, posture, feather quality. Roosters deemed unfit for reproduction are isolated in separate pens awaiting slaughter, while genealogical lines are carefully recorded, forming a living archive that runs through bodies

and generations. Most breeders rely on incubators, which allow them to control temperature, humidity, and hatching times, making birth more predictable and reducing losses. As Franklin (2007) notes, the generation of life is thus partially displaced from bodies to infrastructures: the incubator becomes a technology of governance that imitates maternal warmth and the cyclical rhythms of life, transforming reproduction into a manageable process, though not one devoid of relation.

Liz, who runs a heritage-breed farm near Perth, perfectly embodies this technical rationality. Each morning she collects the eggs, cleans them, catalogues them, and places them in incubators, meticulously noting data and genealogies. Her work is made of methodical gestures repeated every day. Reproduction here is a labour of precision and attentiveness, in which life is carefully attended to rather than simply controlled. Following Ingold (2022), to attend is not merely to monitor but to place oneself in exposure to what unfolds, allowing action to be guided by the rhythms and responses of the living beings involved. The breeders' vocabulary itself reflects this genealogical attention: line breeding, bloodline, strain. Each knows their lines as the branches of a family tree. Every choice – which rooster to pair, which egg to keep or discard – requires time, sensitivity, and observation, but also endurance, loss, and failure. As Wilkie (2010) notes, animal breeding belongs to a moral economy in which efficiency and care are tightly interwoven. A hen that stops laying, a rooster that fails to fertilize, a chick born weak, each of these moments opens a negotiation with the limits of life. Yet even within this architecture of control, animals maintain a degree of autonomy. Some hens, especially among traditional breeds, still retain their brooding instinct, whereas commercial hybrids have largely lost it. Egg laying is a daily work dependent on bodily and environmental factors rather than any human schedule. In small farms devoted to heritage breeds, reproduction is not a strictly programmed process but one largely entrusted to the rhythms and volitions of the animals themselves.

Within this panorama of practices and controls, the case of Kevin shows a different approach. Kevin told me he does not use incubators because he wants reproduction to occur naturally, through the hens' brooding. "I do one sitting a year", he said, explaining that he lets the hens brood only once a year, without forcing them or resorting to artificial means. "Mine would only lay a group of eggs to sit on, then I stop. I don't use incubators. I want them to raise their chickens naturally". He admitted that it is not always easy – "It's difficult sometimes" – but he prefers to respect the seasonal and biological rhythms of the animals. "They make 15 eggs over a month and I make them sit on six. The other 11 months they don't lay" (Harvey, 23/07/2022). He ac-

Figure 3. Orpington chickens forming a small breeding flock from which Lindsay will raise all future generations of the breed (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)

cepts that the hens determine the timing of reproduction rather than himself. The refusal of the incubator, in his case, is not merely an ethical choice but a way of giving voice to the hens, allowing them to "say when" and "how" to reproduce, as Despret (2016) would suggest, inviting us to consider animals not as objects of production but as subjects capable of responding and co-determining the situations in which they live. In Kevin's practice, reproduction becomes a form of interspecific dialogue, a subtle coordination between bodies, seasons, and intentions.

At the same time, his approach embodies what Porcher and Estebanez (2019) define as "co-reproductive labour": a shared work between humans and animals in which the breeder does not control production but accompanies it, accepting failures and slowness as integral parts of the vital process. Reproduction can be read as a hybrid practice in which human, animal, and environment cooperate in an ecological and domesticated form of technique. Temperature, light, seasonal rhythm, and food availability become part of the labour itself, configuring a relational system that binds matter, care, and time. Overall, reproductive labour in these farms reveals the constant tension between control and participation, between the human desire to guarantee breed continuity and the autonomous vitality of animals that eludes all planning. As Besky and Blanchette (2023) observe, this fragility of work is the very condition of multispecies labour: reproduction is an activity exposed to risk, loss, and unpredictability, yet precisely for that reason capable of generating meaning and relation. Within this shared precarity between incubators, bodies, and seasons life continues to produce itself as collaboration, despite (and through) the human attempt to govern it, revealing reproduction not merely as a technical process but as a contested terrain between forces of production and forces of reproduction (Barca 2020).

Affective and care labour

The affective and caring labour of animals reveals itself in the smallest details of everyday coexistence. On the farms I visited, hens, ducks, and sheep are not merely recipients of care but agents of reciprocal attention. Danniell, a middle-aged breeder from Western Australia, told me that her ducks became vital companions when she fell ill. "They give you something to get up for", she said. During that difficult period, it was the ducks – their calls and movements – that restored her desire to rise. "If I didn't have them, I probably wouldn't have got up from bed", she told me. "Once I was outside, I felt better… They're good for your mental health; if I didn't have them, it would have been harder".

Now working again as a nurse, she contrasts the noise of the ward with the quiet rhythm of her animals: "Too many people, too much pain. I prefer the company of nature and myself" (Harvey, 03/07/2022). In this daily exchange, made of ordinary gestures and silent presences, the ducks not only depend on her but also sustain her emotionally, giving back balance and a sense of purpose. Coulter (2016) describes this interdependence as a continuum of human-animal labour, in which affective work is shared and staying alive becomes a collective activity. Danniell's ducks work in the full sense of the term: their vitality, their demand for attention, the daily obligation they impose on their caretaker all constitute a form of affective labour that produces tangible effects, the movement of the body, the return to light, the continuity of living. They are not passive, they actively participate in maintaining the relationship, taking care of the human as much as she takes care of them.

Danniell's experience is not unique. Stuart, a forty-five-year-old breeder from Karrakup, told me something strikingly similar. After years of illness and personal loss, his birds kept him anchored. "When I got very sick, it was the birds that stopped me from giving up", he said. "They gave me purpose to get up" (Karrakup, 19/07/2022). His words echo Danniell's: the daily demands of feeding, cleaning, and checking on the animals turn care into a form of therapy. As Barua (2018) reminds us, animals too labour affectively: they generate energy, meaning, and value through circuits of attention, companionship, and comfort. Their capacity to affect and be affected is itself productive, a way of keeping the world in motion. Care thus becomes a more-than-human productive force: a mode of inhabiting the economy of life that refuses the separation between material and emotional production. Niki, a breeder of Fayoumi chickens in Western Australia, speaks of her flock in a tone of deep familiarity: "They are my family… My animals are my joy, my passion, my life" (Harvey, 03/07/2022). When she says that "they purr when you massage their combs", an embodied intimacy emerges, in which care is not one-directional. The animals respond, recognize, and demand. Their reactions, the vibrating, the approaching, the seeking of contact, are acts of care, genuine gestures of attention toward those who look after them. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) writes, these practices constitute matters of care: material and affective forms of sustaining life that generate shared worlds of vulnerability and tenderness. Animals not only receive care but also exercise it, through presence and relation, transforming dependence into reciprocity. As feminist theorists remind us (Federici 2012; Mies 1986), invisible care sustains all production. Extending this insight beyond the human, these farms show how care itself becomes multispecies work, a continuum of attention and maintenance that holds life together.

Figure 4. CJ (Judy's friend) playing with ducks (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)

Yet this affective proximity is not universal. Not all farmers see animals as companions or healers. Even in the most affectively charged relationships, animals remain embedded in systems of ownership, hierarchy, and mortality. The difference lies not in the absence of production or death, but in how these conditions are negotiated, justified, and lived. In my research I showed that relations between humans and animals unfold along a continuum of conviviality (Volpicella 2024): at one end, animals are resources; at the other, they are kin. Most farms fall somewhere in between, where affection, utility, and power coexist. Breeders often describe their role as stewardship or responsibility: they provide food, space, and protection; the animals, in turn, provide companionship and rhythm. Yet this reciprocity is never symmetrical.

As Wilkie (2010) notes, the social contract between humans and livestock is unequal, though within it forms of recognition and care still emerge. Many breeders are aware of this ambivalence. The same gestures that express care – feeding, protecting, naming – also reinforce dependence and hierarchy. As several told me, their animals "deserve a good life" yet remain "under our responsibility". Even where affection and respect are central, agency is still drawn by human hands. These examples reveal the moral complexity of care. Within relationships of affection, power never disappears: it is reconfigured through routine and maintenance. The farmer decides the conditions of life and reproduction. Love and control coexist within the same ethical landscape. As Haraway (2008) observes, to care is to become entangled in obligations that never guarantee equality. In this sense, affective and care labour among these multispecies collectives does not erase power but reconfigures it.

The examples of Danniell and Stuart show how animals participate in sustaining human life affectively; response-ability, however, points to a broader ethical orientation: a commitment to remain accountable to the vulnerabilities and dependencies that structure these relations (Haraway 2016). It is not simply mutual comfort, but an ongoing negotiation of obligation and care within unequal conditions. The farm becomes a space where labour and care merge, sustaining life through mutual yet uneven acts of giving and receiving. Daily care is thus not only maintenance but kin-making: a way of creating situated relations that hold worlds together through response. "We become-with each other or not at all", writes Haraway (Ivi, p. 4). Animals that work affectively teach humans how to respond, how to pay attention, how to stay. In their willingness to share life and participate in its daily maintenance, they become true companion species, co-creators of families and connections built on the ongoing practice of making life together.

Ecological and regenerative labour

In the Australian farms I visited, ecological labour is not an abstract concept but a daily practice embodied in the relationships between humans and animals. Ducks, hens, and turkeys actively participate in the maintenance of the land, transforming production into a regenerative process. The farmers do not simply describe an agricultural activity, but a coexistence: a way of working *with* animals, in which care, fertility, and survival are shared. In this sense, animal labour manifests itself as a form of "*ecological cooperation*", an entanglement of gestures, sensitivities, and intelligences that keep the landscape alive.

Judy walks with me along the fence as her hens scratch the moist earth, opening small furrows between sheep manure and blades of grass. She talks without stopping, pointing out with her hand the rotation of the paddocks, the coexistence of other animals (cattle and sheep) and poultry, the almost choreographic precision with which the animals move in space. "With the rotation it gets fertilized and they get rested. Also multispecies: we have cattle and sheep, you can keep much lower worm population. The chooks when you let them out they scratch the manure, it all works together" (Glenlyon, 27/05/2022). Her description is not that of a production process, but of a moving ecosystem. The animals do not work *for* her, but *with* her. In their actions – grazing, scratching, fertilizing – a shared labour emerges, one that maintains the vital cycles of the soil. In Tsing's (2015) terms, one could say that what is produced here is "*life in the ruins*": an economy of reciprocal survival, where regeneration arises from multispecies collaboration rather than total human control. In Judy's words, animal labour appears as a daily activity of ecological repair. The hens "scratching the manure" break the soil's crust and reactivate the cycle of matter; the sheep and cows, alternating on the pastures, maintain a microbial balance that regenerates grass and reduces parasites.

This ecological cooperation takes different forms across farms. In Megan's farm, too, animal vitality is part of a regenerative economy. "The turkeys… They free range all the time, they never get locked up. They do eat a lot of grass, eat bugs. I have no ticks on the dogs since I had the turkeys", she tells me with a smile, as a group of ducks slowly crosses the orchard. "Utilizing ducks in orchard, they eat the bugs, you're not feeding them with commercially grown grain crops. It's fabulous. It cuts down a lot of things. You don't poison anything". In this landscape, animals perform an invisible yet essential labour: they hold together economy, ecology, and affectivity. Their presence reduces pesticide use, increases soil fertility, and contributes to a form of *situated sustainability*, rooted in the rhythms of the land and in species behaviour.

Here, ecological labour is not delegated to technology but distributed among organisms acting in synergy. Animal actions – eating, grazing, digging – are not viewed as instinctive behaviours but as forms of *agency*, a capacity to modify the world in intentional and creative ways. As Despret (2016) argues, animals not only respond, they propose worlds taking part in a shared construction of possibilities. Megan's ducks, turkeys, and hens, through their habits and preferences, actively shape the form of the farm. What emerges is a network of productive and affective co-dependencies that recalls a conception of labour as *relation*, not as command.

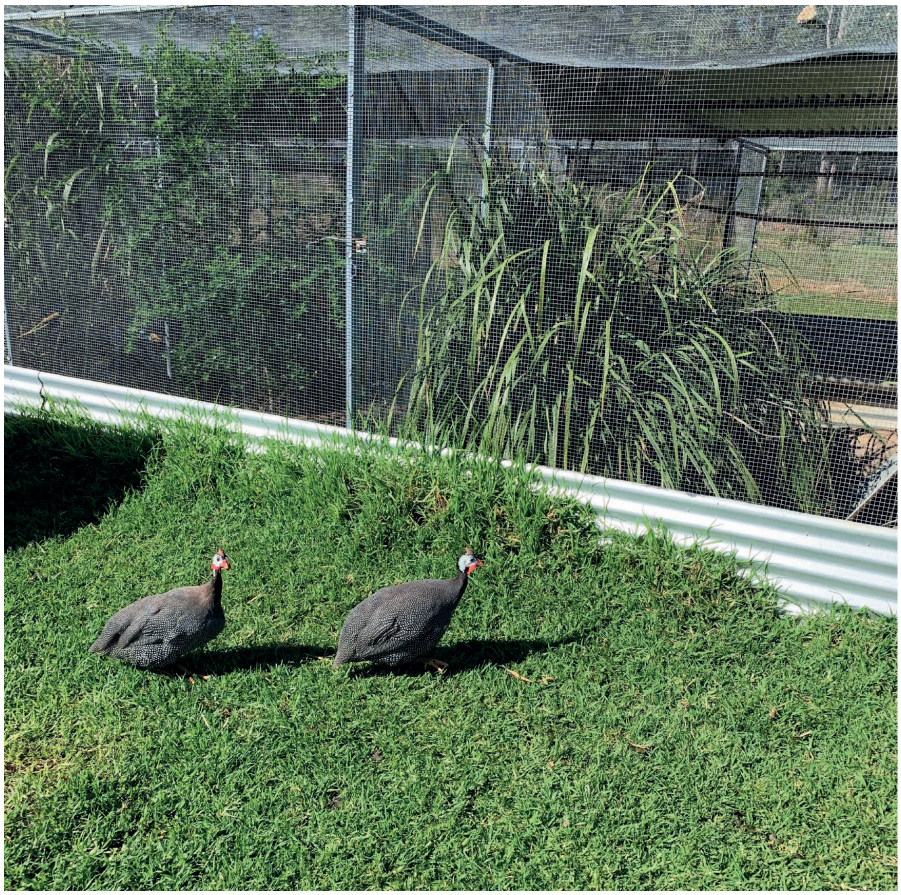

Figure 5. Guinea fowls in Stuart's garden. They are highly valued for their ability to naturally control ticks and other pests (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)

As mentioned earlier, many of these farms also reuse animal manure as compost for gardens and vegetable plots, closing the cycle of fertility and reinforcing the metabolic continuity between bodies, soil, and food. This practice recalls what Krzywoszynska (2019) calls soil care: an ecology of regeneration in which living beings, human and nonhuman alike, participate in the maintenance and renewal of the earth through material and ethical forms of cooperation. These animals, by transforming waste into humus, embody this form of *care work* that unites maintenance, the refusal of waste, and the construction of a future. The animals teach, through their gestures, that to work does not mean to extract value but to maintain the conditions for life. As Tsing (2015) suggests, collaboration is work across difference, without a promise of harmony. This differential and imperfect labour – between human hands and hooves, between feathers and roots – is what holds the world together each day, in silent cooperation.

Aesthetic and Symbolic Labour

Australian poultry shows are not merely rural spectacles but spaces where life becomes visible through the joint work of humans and animals. It is still dark when Niki leaves home: "I came with a lot of birds today… I've driven a couple of hours, started at 5am. It's a day out and it's enjoyable". Behind the lightness of their words lies a process of preparation that lasts weeks: feathers washed, legs cleaned, cages polished. Yet the final form is not solely the work of human hands. "They're getting used to the show prep now, with the bathing", Niki explains (Harvey, 03/07/2022). The animals learn to be touched, to remain still, to collaborate. Their calm is a learned response, a form of labour that translates relationship into gesture. During the shows, animal work becomes manifest. The bodies, lined up in rows, breathe under artificial lights; every taut feather, every maintained posture is the result of continuous activity.
Kevin, who breeds Modern Game Bantams, states clearly: "I feed mine strict diet to stop them getting fatter and to keep their feathers in good condition… They know who I am, they wait for me in the morning, if they see me the roosters would crow" (Harvey, 23/07/2022). The hens and roosters work with him, regulating their metabolism, learning to display themselves, adapting their senses and muscles to the human rhythm. This *labour of appearance* – the work of seeming – is performed by their living bodies: feathers that regenerate, calluses that form, resistances that adapt to the cage. Unlike metabolic labour, which concerns the transformation of matter and energy within ecological cycles, aesthetic labour operates at the level of visibility and recognition. It is the work through which living bodies become legible, evaluated, and distinguished

within shared regimes of taste and judgment. As Bennett (2010) suggests, matter does not simply exist but exerts force and presence; in poultry shows, this vitality becomes oriented toward display and evaluation. The animal body here is not only metabolically active but aesthetically disciplined and publicly exposed as a bearer of value.

Figure 6. Niki with one of her Egyptian Fayoumi rooster (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)

The shows, held across every Australian state, represent the peak of this entanglement. Judges and breeders gather to evaluate which animal best embodies the breed standard. The prize measures not only the breeder's skill but also the animal's ability to sustain the form, to embody it until it becomes a way of being. To reach that point, many birds travel for hours, often on an empty stomach: "They can't have a drink or eat until the judging is finished. For such a small bird with high metabolism they need to drink and eat all the time" (Harvey, 23/07/2022), Kevin continues. Their beauty is muscular and sensory labour, a form of embodied discipline. As in care labour, here too the relation materializes through the body: a choreography of training, trust, and endurance. Grosz (2008) writes that aesthetics, in nature, is a "generative excess of life", a vital energy that expresses itself as form. In this sense, the glossy feathers or proud bearing are not ornaments but the result of a biological and behavioural work that makes survival itself possible.

Tas, eighty years old, breeder of Cochins and Leghorns, proudly shows me his creations: "I created the Silver Duckwing Leghorns… By years and years of inbreeding I managed to have yellow legs in my Cochins" (Harvey, 22/07/2022). Yet that genealogy, which for him is a work of dedication and patience, is also the work of the animals. They are the ones who brood, who generate, who transmit. Every bloodline is a bodily archive, a heritage made of feathers, bones, and life cycles.

Drawing on Van Dooren's (2014) reflections on the generational work required to keep species going, we might understand this as a labour of continuity, that is the daily work of keeping life going, of making it endure through relationships, care, and repetition. In this sense, genealogy is not merely a tree extending through time but a multispecies knot of shared temporalities (Rose 2011). Rather than a fixed structure branching from an origin, genealogy can be understood – following Ingold (2007; 2011; 2015) – as a line in movement: a trajectory continuously generated through practice, attention, and embodied engagement. Lines, for Ingold, are not abstract connections but lived paths formed through the ongoing activity of beings. Each new clutch, then, is not simply the extension of a pedigree but the continuation of a line that must be actively sustained – through mating, brooding, feeding, selecting, and exhibiting. Genealogy becomes less a diagram of descent than a weaving of interdependent life-lines, where humans and animals co-produce temporal continuity through shared labour. Extinction, conversely, represents the breaking of these threads – the loss of a temporal coexistence that sustains the living world. The breeds that survive are those able to persist through time, keeping their relational lines active. To be standard is not only to be beautiful, but to continue

Figure 7. Rare breed poultry show in Western Australia (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)

participating in this shared knot of life, ensuring the persistence of the species within the human world.
In this context, the survival of rare breeds depends on their aesthetic conformity. To be beautiful, to adhere to the standard, means to continue existing. Animals that best embody the form are preserved, reproduced, exhibited; the others are excluded or eliminated. Aesthetics thus becomes an ontological condition, a criterion of life and death. Aesthetic evaluation thus becomes a selective force, shaping which lines are allowed to continue and which are allowed to disappear. "To be beautiful" is therefore not a privilege but a form of labour that allows one to remain in the world. Life itself, as Rose (2011) suggests, defends its continuity through relations of care and attention toward others, and in these fairs, animals turn toward life through form, through the language of colour, posture, and song. This genealogical and sensorial work is not simply a celebration of form but a negotiation between vitality and standardization. The ideal does not pre-exist in nature; it is a projection articulated through human regimes of evaluation and desire. Yet it cannot be realized without the active participation of animal bodies. As Ingold (2013) reminds us, form does not pre-exist making, but emerges through process. In poultry shows, this process unfolds within a selective and hierarchical framework: animals co-produce the form through their embodied capacities, even as that form is measured, disciplined, and constrained by human standards. Their labour, then, is neither pure autonomy nor mere submission, but participation within a regime that both enables and limits their continuity.

Political Labour

On the farms I visited, politics was not expressed through protest or discourse but through gestures, through the slow work of keeping beings alive. Every act of feeding, cleaning, or composting became an act of resistance to the logic of industrial productivity. Judy, a breeder from Queensland, put it simply:

> My work on the farm, my goal is… It's not all about money and life should not be all about money. Of course money is important, but mostly it's teaching other people about these old breeds. I get a lot of satisfaction from helping people start up new breeds, or just being able to eat my own produce and animals (Glenlyon, 27/07/2022).

Her words capture a form of political labour grounded in care and sufficiency. Yet "care" here is not univocal. It is directed both toward individual animals – their well-being, rhythm, and life conditions – and toward the continuity of the

breed as an ideal and collective form. This dual orientation reveals an inherent tension: caring for living beings sometimes overlaps with caring for lineage, standard, and preservation. Political labour, in this context, does not resolve this tension but inhabits it, negotiating between affection for singular animals and commitment to the survival of the breed. Together with her sheep and chickens, Judy builds what Gibson-Graham (2006) call an economy of enough: a livelihood based on maintenance rather than extraction. Her hens, through their eggs and compost, work with her and with the land – a small alliance of survival and reciprocity. In these worlds, as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) and Tronto (2013) remind us, care is not a private disposition but a form of political work, a practice of maintaining the conditions for collective life.

Danniell, who breeds endangered ducks, told me: "They're endangered, critically. We don't want the breed to disappear and not be around anymore" (Harvey, 03/07/2022). Yet what disappears is never an abstract breed as such, but the ongoing chain of living individuals who embody it. A breed exists only insofar as successive bodies hatch, grow, reproduce, and die. The preservation of a breed is therefore always enacted through the lives – and deaths – of particular animals. In this reciprocity of survival, animal labour becomes ethical not in an abstract sense of "life" as such, but in the effort to sustain a particular lineage through time. What is kept going is not life in general, but a specific configuration of life, a breed shaped by human selection, attachment, and standardization. The ethical claim thus lies in the attempt to prevent disappearance, even though this prevention unfolds through the selective reproduction and culling of individual bodies. Care becomes an ethical attention, a politics of living-with (van Dooren 2019). Yet this work is never only human.

The animals themselves, through their gestures and temporalities, subvert the logic of efficiency. On small-scale farms, the rhythms of feeding, brooding, dying, and decomposing introduce other temporalities – those of compost, rest, and slowness. Here animal labour becomes political in the deepest sense: it produces alternative ontologies of value. Slow-growing breeds such as Australorps or Leghorns embody this temporal resistance, challenging industrial obsession with speed and profit. In intensive systems, value is measured in days: a commercial broiler reaches slaughter weight in five weeks; here, a traditional chicken takes six or seven months. This slowness is not inefficiency but a moral choice: a way to resist extraction and stay within care. "Our birds take their time", Judy told me. "They're slower, but they live well. They have a life, they grow with the seasons" (Glenlyon, 27/07/2022). This temporal generosity, however, does not apply equally to all bodies. Birds that fail to meet the breed standard are often separated and eventually slaughtered. Yet even in these cases, their life unfolds over months rather than

weeks, within open paddocks rather than industrial sheds. This slowness, as Kallis (2018) notes, produces a form of temporal justice: value measured by duration rather than speed, by regenerative rather than extractive rhythms. As Povinelli (2016) argues, late liberal capitalism governs the distinction between life and nonlife by controlling biological time – shortening it, optimizing it, accelerating it. Slow-growing animals, on the other hand, inhabit time as resistance: they stretch its duration, forcing humans to wait, to follow the rhythm of breath and brooding. In these practices of waiting and letting go, the political labour of animals takes the form of mutual education: humans learn to work *with* time, not against it. Yet these scenes of care and coexistence should not be mistaken for harmony.

As Fair and McMullen (2023) remind us, nonhuman labour can be profoundly alienating: it unfolds within asymmetric relationships in which affection and discipline are intertwined. Animal labour is often sustained by subtle forms of control – confinement, selection, culling – practices that express both care and domination. Hribal (2010) has shown that animals can also resist these structures, refusing commands, escaping enclosures, disrupting productivity. Even in affective or small-scale contexts, living together requires negotiation, and sometimes, conflict. There is tenderness in these relationships, but also fatigue, repetition, and loss. Mies (1986) already warned that reproductive and affective labours – whether human or nonhuman – can become the hidden foundations of extractive systems. Recognizing these contradictions does not negate the ethical strength of multispecies mutuality but sees it as a fragile achievement: a daily balance between care and coercion, dependence and freedom. As Fair and McMullen (2023) argue, animal labour unfolds within alienated conditions of control and confinement. Yet the breeders I met inhabit its margins, recomposing alienation through care and slowness, transforming necessity into ethical attention. Their animals continue to work – they lay, reproduce, die – but in ways that re-establish a partial relationship between life and value.

In this partial reappropriation, one can recognize an ethics of *degrowth*: a moral economy that separates value from output, and life from the imperative of growth (D'Alisa, Demaria, Kallis 2015; Kallis 2018). As Mouret and Lainé (2023) write, more-than-human labour makes the limits of productivism visible and opens the possibility of slow economies founded on co-dependence and maintenance. Within this alternative temporality – made of seasons, brooding, and composting cycles – emerges an ethics of reciprocity: animals are not resources to be optimized, but companions in shared labour against the cult of productivity. It is a fertile, not passive, slowness, a rhythm that generates attention, relationship, and vitality. Haraway (2016)

invites us to "*stay with the trouble*": to remain with the difficulties, to keep weaving ties even within collapse. The political labour of animals resides precisely here, in this uneasy co-presence. Their shared world is made of moral choices and daily gestures, but also of micropolitics of degrowth and sufficiency: recycling, self-production, mutual maintenance, reduction of ecological impact. "I just want to leave zero footprint", says one of the farmers, "be self-sufficient". Here, sustainability is not an abstract project but a lived relationship, a domestic economy of interdependence. Within this network, animals are not objects but political workers. Through their resistance, their slowness, their unruly vitality, they disrupt the logic of profit. Their ethical labour lies in keeping a common world open, however small or fragile. Tsing (2015) states that living is collaborative survival in the ruins of capitalism. Precisely among those ruins – amid clean cages, manure, nests, and heaps of compost – the political labour of animals takes shape, a practice of coexistence that builds the future, one slow life at a time. If invisibility is the fate of animal labour under industrial capitalism, these farms make it tangible again, transforming the hidden work of life into a visible practice of care, resistance, and regeneration.

Conclusion

Writing about *more-than-human* labour means returning to what keeps life moving, to the gestures, rhythms, and residues that hold the world together. In the Australian farms where I carried out my research, labour takes forms that elude economic and productivist language. It is not labour that generates surplus, but that which keeps the soil alive, accompanies the slow growth of a breed, transforms waste into fertility, creates bonds and families. In these peripheral worlds, where capital arrives mostly through its absence, labour becomes metabolism: a circulation of energy, matter, and care among humans, animals, and microbes. Farmers, and the hundreds of birds around them, form collectives of survival. Their daily gestures do not reproduce the logic of production: they silently deactivate it. Their hens occupy an ambivalent position: they are at once biological instruments within projects of breed preservation and living partners in regenerative ecologies.

It is precisely this tension – between instrumentality and relationality – that defines the political stakes of more-than-human labour. Manure, brooding, the death of a rooster, everything enters a choreography of life in which nothing is wasted. It is the invisible labour that allows life to continue, it is diffuse, unquantified, yet vital. Reflecting on more-than-human labour reveals that

human work has always been shared, porous, and dependent. These experiences make it visible: human bodies depend on the rhythm of eggs, the warmth of compost, the slow metabolism of others, the presence and beauty of the nonhumans. Living among animals, accepting slowness, sharing the fatigue of daily care, these are not metaphors but forms of work. *To stay with the trouble*, as Haraway (2016) writes, means learning to live and think with the heat, the smell, and the friction of matter. During fieldwork, my own body also became part of this metabolism. I carried cages, cleaned waterers, felt the same fatigue that shaped the breeders' gestures. Ethnography, then, is not just a description of labour but a continuation of labour by other means, another form of invisible work that transforms observation into relation, note-taking into care. Writing, too, is composting: letting words ferment with memories, smells, and affections until they return as stories capable of nourishing thought.

What these farmers and their animals do is neither romantic nor nostalgic, it is political. Within their silent persistence lies an alternative economy, one that rejects accumulation and invests instead in continuity. They preserve breeds, repair soils, transform decay into nourishment. Through them, animal labour becomes a politics of maintenance: the art of keeping life alive. Against a system that extracts value from every living and nonliving thing (Povinelli 2016), their worlds insist on another form of vitality, slower, more fragile, yet enduring. In the end, *more-than-human* labour is not an extension of human labour: it is its foundation. It is the silent effort of bodies and elements that keep the world in motion even when no one is watching, even when no one pays. Invisible not because it lacks value, but because it unsettles the very categories through which value is seen. Against the abstraction of agro-industrial economy, these farms make visible what usually remains hidden: the incessant labour of living and dying well together.

Perhaps anthropology, by staying close to these lives, can learn to work in the same way, not to dominate or to explain, but to repair, to give back, and to remind us that life, in its material density, never ceases to work upon us as well. Working with nonhumans in these peripheral worlds also means inheriting and reworking the ruins of plantation time, the long histories of extraction that have disciplined both species and soils. Yet what I observed are not purified escapes from these histories, but new entanglements in the making: gestures through which humans and nonhumans, compost and care, transform ruins into habitable grounds.

As Tsing (2015) writes, in the ruins of capitalism, ferality becomes a form of labour, the labour of living otherwise within domination. By valuing these fragile collectives of humans and animals, we can also begin to imagine other futures

of work, futures where labour is no longer defined by extraction, efficiency, or accumulation, but by reciprocity, maintenance, and shared endurance. The multispecies assemblages described here show that political imagination does not only emerge from resistance or protest, but from the material and affective negotiations that sustain life in the everyday. Their practices invite us to rethink the very boundaries of economy and ecology, revealing that production is always co-production, that every act of labour is also a relation. In this sense, more-than-human labour provides not only an analytical lens but a practical horizon for reconfiguring the sociomaterial conditions of coexistence. These small Australian farms demonstrate that value can be generated through care, slowness, and repair, through the ethical attention that binds living beings and landscapes. Recognizing this opens concrete possibilities for transformation: new agricultural policies attentive to interdependence and to the metabolic work of animals, new educational and institutional frameworks capable of acknowledging nonhumans as co-workers, and alternative economies grounded in regeneration rather than accumulation. These multispecies collectives remind us that regeneration – ecological, ethical, and political – always begins from the shared labour of living together. Through these slow and interdependent practices, mutuality itself becomes a form of political imagination, a way of envisioning economies grounded in repair, reciprocity, and shared endurance. In doing so, anthropology can act as a practice of public care, making visible the fragile labours that sustain the world and opening spaces for alternative, multispecies economies of the future.

References

ABARES (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences)
2025 *Agricultural Commodities: September Quarter 2025. Tables v1.0.0,* Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Canberra. https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/agricultural-outlook (accessed 26/10/2025).

Barua, M.
2018 Animal Work: Metabolic, Ecological, Affective. *American Anthropological Association.* DOI: https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.27930.

Bennett, J.
2010 *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv111jh6w.

Besky, S., Blanchette, A.
2023 *The Fragility of Work*, in S. Besky, A. Blanchette (eds.), *How Nature Works*, Duke University Press, Durham, pp. 1-22.

Blanchette, A.
2019 Living Waste and the Labor of Toxic Health on American Factory Farms. *Medical anthropology quarterly*, 33 (1), pp. 80-100. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12491.

Coulter, K.
2016 *Animals, Work, and the Promise of Interspecies Solidarity*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137558800.

D'Alisa, G., Demaria, F., Kallis, G. (eds.)
2015 *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, Routledge, London.

Derrouch, D., Giraldo, L., Giraldo, M.
2016 *Dictionary of Agroecology*, CIRAD Editions, Montpellier.

Despret, V.
2016 *What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions?*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Dixon, J.
2004 *Consumers, Corporations and the State in the Australian Food System*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

Douglas, M.
2002 *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge, London.

FAO
2025 *Chickens | Gateway to poultry production and products.* Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, https://www.fao.org/poultry-production-products/production/poultry-species/chicken/en (accessed 26/10/2025).

Fair, H., McMullen, M.
2023 Toward a Theory of Nonhuman Species-Being. *Environmental Humanities*, 15 (2), pp. 195-214. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-10422366.

Federici, S.
2012 *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle,* PM Press, Oakland.

Franklin, S.
2007 *Dolly Mixtures: The Remaking of Genealogy*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Gibson-Graham, J.K.
2006 *A Postcapitalist Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Grosz, E.
2008 *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Hamilton, L., Taylor, N.
2013 *Animals at Work: Identity, Politics and Culture in Work with Animals*, Brill, Leiden.

Haraway, D.
2008 *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
2016 *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Hribal, J.
2010 *Fear of the Animal Planet: The Hidden History of Animal Resistance*, AK Press, Oakland.

Ingold, T.
2007 *Lines: A Brief History*, Routledge, London.
2011 *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Routledge, London.
2013 *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, Routledge, London.
2015 *The Life of Lines*, Routledge, London.
2022 On Not Knowing and Paying Attention: How to Walk in a Possible World, *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 31 (1), pp. 20-36. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/07916035221088546.

Josephson, P.R.
2020 *Chicken: a history from farmyard to factory*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Kallis, G.
2018 *Degrowth*, Agenda Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne.

Kirksey, E., Helmreich, S.
2010 The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography. *Cultural Anthropology*, 25 (4), pp. 545-576. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01069.x.

Krzywoszynska, A.
2019 Caring for soil life in the Anthropocene: The role of attentiveness in more-than-human ethics. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 44, pp. 661–675. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12293.
2020 Nonhuman labor and the making of resources: making soils a resource through microbial labor. *Environmental Humanities*, 12 (1), pp. 227-249. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-8142319.

Mies, M.
1986 *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*, Zed Books, London.

Mouret, S., Lainé, N.
2023 Nature(s) at work. *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances.* 17 (1). DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/rac.29904.

Peters, J., Lebrasseur, O., Irving-Pease, E.K., Paxinos, P.D., Best, J., Smallman, R., Callou, C., Gardeisen, A., Trixl, S., Frantz, L., Sykes, N., Fuller, D.Q., Larson, G.
2022 The biocultural origins and dispersal of domestic chickens. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 119 (24). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2121978119.

Porcher, J.
2011 *Vivre avec les animaux. Une utopie pour le XXIe siècle*, La Découverte, Paris.

Porcher, J., Estebanez, J. (eds.)
2019 *Animal labour. A new perspective on human-animal relations*, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld.

Povinelli, E.A.
2016 *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Puig de la Bellacasa, M.
2017 *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More-than-Human Worlds*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Rose, D.B.
2011 *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville.

RSPCA Australia
2020 *Layer Hens: Industry Overview*, https://www.rspca.org.au/layer-hens, (accessed 26/10/2025).
2022 *Meat Chickens: Industry Overview*, https://www.rspca.org.au/meat-chickens, (accessed 26/10/2025).

Tallberg, L., Hamilton, L. (eds.)
2022 *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Organization Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780192848185.001.0001.

Tsing, A.L.
2015 *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Tronto, J.C.
2013 *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*, New York University Press, New York.

van Dooren, T.
2014 *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*, Columbia University Press, New York.
2019 *The Wake of Crows: Living and Dying in Shared Worlds*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Volpicella, D.
2024 *Native, heritage and rare breed poultry farming in Italy and Australia: a degrowth solution for alternative futures?*, PhD thesis, The University of Western Australia.

Weber, A.
2019 *Enlivenment: Toward a Poetics for the Anthropocene*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Wilkie, R.
2010 *Livestock/Deadstock: Working with Farm Animals from Birth to Slaughter*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.