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Hiding in the Spotlight: Commodifying Nature and Geographies of Dissociation in the Fur-Fashion Complex

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Hiding in the Spotlight: Commodifying Nature and Geographies of Dissociation in the Fur-Fashion Complex

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abstract

Multiple challenges plague actors that commodify nature and create markets around products made from natural organisms. Primary among these is the reputational risk that results from negative impressions and moral contestations such as animal abuse, bad labor conditions, or pollution. In this contribution, we draw on cultural economic geography, and in particular the concept of *dissociation*, to demonstrate how supply side actors deal with such threats to their reputation. *Geographies of dissociation* provide a spatial perspective on the social construction of economic value, with a particular focus on the purposeful obfuscation of practices and the disconnection of discourses. We use the fur-fashion complex as a single case study, representing an extreme but instructive example, to study the agencies and effects of dissociative practices empirically. During our in-depth qualitative research on both the production and consumption of fur fashion, we focus on proactive and reactive dissociative strategies of the most powerful commercial actors in the field: fur-breeder associations and retail brands/brand owners.

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It is not a new phenomenon that humans turn natural organisms into products and build markets around them. However, the industrial scale on which this is being done today is unprecedented. For instance, a record seventy-three billion birds (mostly chickens) were slaughtered for meat in 2018.[1] At the same time, the need for climate mitigation efforts and regenerative resources has led to a new wave of nature commodification involving, for instance, vast plantations of corn to make biofuels.

The commodification of nature brings with it multiple challenges for those who seek to reap commercial benefits from it. First, nature itself is resistant to commodification. Sophisticated technical assemblages, research, practical knowledge, and hard work are required for plant breeding and animal husbandry (Ouma 2015). Seasonal cycles and physical constraints limit the possibility of rapid growth, and regular adverse weather conditions, pests, and diseases annihilate yields. Second, in today's market environment, those who market nature face a confusing and often conflicting set of ethical and cultural value propositions, along with moral contestations. Attributions, such as *natural* and *regenerative*, work to recommend a product, unless powerful counter-narratives brand a product as exploitative (e.g., palm oil), environmentally destructive (e.g., avocados), or involving animal cruelty (e.g., Angora wool).

Such contestations can endanger businesses built around products of a natural origin but do not necessarily do so. Sometimes, natural goods achieve the highest prices, not despite the fact that they stem from endangered species but because they do and because their trade is considered immoral or illegal (Zhu 2020).

Furthermore, the economic conditions of nature commodification—low-skilled labor intensity, seasonality, price pressures on raw materials, and exposure to physical (e.g., pesticides) and mental (e.g., killing animals) health hazards—lend themselves to extremely precarious labor relations. These, in turn, bring about additional requirements for justification as well as opportunities for contestation in multiple sites (Kleibert, Hess, and Müller 2020). How do those who commodify natural goods and construct markets around them navigate this landscape of challenges?

In this contribution, we present a conceptual framework and an empirical case study to look at the

[1] Food and agricultural organization of the UN, http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/?#data/QL.

commodification of nature. Following the concept of *geographies of dissociation* (Ibert et al. 2019), we place our emphasis on the different forms of strategic agency of the producers and marketers of goods (among others) that serve to obfuscate, hide, downplay, reframe, and separate, thus protecting value propositions from adversarial messages and images. This perspective, although not fundamentally new, has received less attention than it deserves in terms of its power to explain why efforts of commodification can succeed. Our contribution is rooted in cultural economic geography. We draw on an array of diverse literatures: Recent works on the commodification of nature highlight the specific sociomaterial and political–economic conditions of this type of endeavor (Baglioni and Campling 2017). The marketization literature investigates how noneconomic entities, in general, are turned into tradable commodities (Berndt and Boeckler 2012; Berndt, Rantisi, and Peck 2020). The literature on branding and status markets shows how value propositions are built around symbolic associations and positions in relational spaces (Pike 2015).

We use the global fur-fashion complex as a case study because it is particularly rich across the different facets of dissociation. It includes both an animal-based raw material market and the fashion consumer market with its multitude of brand value propositions. It provides an example of a fundamental market remake after a deep reputational crisis that was led by raw material producers. Last but not least, it also provides examples of purposeful contestations and countercontestations.

The next section briefly outlines our conceptual framework, drawing on different strands within the cultural economic geographic literature, broadly conceived. This is followed by a section that outlines our multisited qualitative research methodology. The next section introduces our empirical case study of the structural transformation of fur from a craft-based, niche sector to a globally interlinked fur-fashion complex, before a section that presents the empirical findings of geographies and practices of dissociation, starting with dissociation practices of fur-breeder associations and then fashion brands. The penultimate section presents a discussion of the dissociations found in the empirical material, while the final section draws some theoretical conclusions and provides suggestions for future economic geographic research.

Commodifying Nature and Cultural Economic Geographies of Marketization, Branding, and Dissociations

The commodification of the environment and natural resources is inherent in the operation of many production processes, and is crucial to many global value chains. Recent political–economic perspectives drawing on historic materialism have shed light on the capitalist processes of appropriating and transforming nature in global value chains (Baglioni and Campling 2017). Empirical studies on the fishery industry in this field have largely focused on how value is produced in capitalist production (including the labor process) and how production networks are governed, including through the establishment of recognized standards of production (Havice and Campling 2017; Irarrázaval and Bustos-Gallardo 2019).

The ethics of commodifying more-than-human worlds (see Collard and Dempsey 2013) have not been central to this line of research, which is grounded in historic materialist understandings of capitalist relations. Nonetheless, debates around ethical consumption and multiple contestations around valuation affect contemporary global production networks (Kleibert, Hess, and Müller 2020). Ethics can even be *central* to the production of value in emerging sectors, such as lab-grown meat (Mouat, Prince, and Roche 2019). Different from sectors in which ethical practices are an *add-on* to existing products (e.g.,

fair-trade bananas), ethics in the lab-grown meat industry are at the heart of the formation of the industry and how value is formed within it (Mouat, Prince, and Roche 2019).

New economic models of constructing value through the commodification of natural materials, including leather or expensive and endangered species of wood, are also based upon the cultural capital realized by their affluent consumers (Gibson 2016; Gibson and Warren 2016; Zhu 2020). Here, capital accumulation is intimately linked to the scarcity of material from endangered species and natural material that cannot be replaced by synthetic substitutes, for example, tropical timber's unique acoustic properties in guitar production (Gibson and Warren 2020) or rosewood in furniture construction (Zhu 2020). The rosewood industry in China has undergone a major structural transition in the course of which classical rosewood furniture has turned into a speculative cultural commodity. Against the background of an oversaturated investment market, the cultural value attributed to rosewood attracts increasing amounts of accumulated surplus value (Zhu 2020).

Geographies of Marketization

Cultural economic geographers have provided important insights into markets and the geographies of marketization (Berndt and Boeckler 2009, 2012). The marketization literature develops a processual understanding of markets that casts them not as uniform objects "out there" but as constantly in the making (e.g., Ouma 2015). One strand of the literature has shown the performative nature of economic models that bring about the very economic realities they seek to describe (MacKenzie, Muniesa, and Siu 2007).

The geographies of marketization literature have predominantly focused on developing an improved understanding of variegated markets, in contrast to the orthodox logic and abstraction of *the Market* (Berndt, Rantisi, and Peck 2020). It is, moreover, concerned with the bordering process of the economic and the noneconomic (Berndt, Rantisi, and Peck 2020). Callon (1998) suggests that an economic entity does not simply exist, but has to be created artificially and with great effort by social actors, with the help of presentation and staging technologies. He calls this active separation of entities *framing*. However, as any created frame is inherently fragile and notoriously incomplete, it will fail in its function to separate the inside from the outside sooner or later. Situations in which elements from the outside intervene internally (or the other way around) are denoted by Callon as *overflows*.

Our focus is less on the construction of markets and the stabilization of market borders, as such, but is instead to understand how discursive constructions, also relying on spatial dimensions, are crucial to the transformation of nature into a commodity in aesthetic and/or status markets (see Rainer 2020). The production of market value in status markets depends upon the relational labor of creating symbolic value. This similarly requires the stabilization of value propositions that are in danger of overflowing through disruptions of their qualification and valuation by consumers. While so far only of peripheral interest in the marketization literature, crafting positive associations and branding, thus, become of central importance.

Geographies of Branding

There has been a historic shift from standard markets to status markets (Aspers 2009). In the clothing industry, the status logic of valuation becomes most visible in high-end luxury fashion and accessories (Crewe 2017). However, more recently, the logic of status markets has also pervaded traditional consumer or mass markets. Even

in formerly standard markets, competition through differentiation and exclusivity signaling are becoming the norm (Willmott 2010; Rainer 2020). In status markets, participants compete for relative positions rather than for absolute benchmarks. Value is, thus, a relational, continuously negotiated, and highly contingent category (Willmott 2010; Mason and Wigley 2013; Fasche 2017) that rests on highly uncertain criteria like taste, stylistic elegance, aesthetic appeal, and media attention. Crucially, it spans across different *orders of worth* (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) and, in its essence, involves reciprocal "translations" (Aspers and Beckert 2011) between different registers of valuation.

New actors have become involved in the creation of symbolic value. Increasingly, "regulators" (e.g., trademark authorities, administrations, governments, consumer protection agencies, and civil society organizations) and "circulators" (Pike 2013, 328) (e.g., marketing consultants, bloggers, and advertising agencies) cocreate symbolic value. Both serve to embed global circuits of matter and meaning organized according to capitalist rationales in territorial (often national) and cultural contexts. Moreover, consumers cocreate symbolic value by endorsing or rejecting value propositions made by sellers but also in how they integrate branded commodities into their daily practices (Willmott 2010).

A key premise advanced in the literature on branding is that actors construct brands or products as desirable, hence, valuable, by building associations (Dacin and Brown 2002; Pike 2013, 2015): stable, meaningful, and salient relationships between a tradable entity (a product, a brand) and market-external symbolic forms of worth carried and signified, for instance, by celebrities, (sub-)cultures, or lifestyles. These associations enable the reciprocal translations across registers of value. It, thus, becomes possible to charge a brand with value by creating and sustaining such associations with positively perceived entities, for instance, between a brand and an exciting sports event.

Geography is crucial for associative work, as the carriers of symbolic value are often spatial entities (e.g., the country known for skilled engineering, the hotspot of unconventional styles, etc.). As aesthetics and perceptions of value propositions vary not only between different consumer groups but also over time and in space, sellers find themselves confronted with "geographically differentiated kinds and degrees of commercial, social, cultural, and political resonance" (Pike 2013, 322). Symbolic value varies between different spatial contexts, and strategies of association-building make use of space in a highly discriminatory manner, for example, through location choices for flagship stores. Such associative practices have been studied extensively and across several sectors (Jansson and Power 2010; Ermann 2011; Pike 2015; Crewe 2017). Less extensively studied has been the question of how negative associations, vital in the commodification of fur, have been kept at bay and have been hindered from infringing upon symbolic value creation.

Geographies of Dissociation

The geographies of dissociation perspective has been introduced to complement the picture of the relational work undertaken to construct value (Ibert et al. 2019). This perspective adds relations and linkages that are obscured, hidden, and washed away in a brand's or product's public perception, lest uncomfortable knowledge tarnishes the brand's or product's reputation, and lasting negative associations permanently reduce their value. Disassociations represent a concealment or weakening of linkages between a product or service and those conditions of provision that most likely will spur moral doubts or discomfort for the consumer (Ibert et al. 2019).

Dissociations and associations are dialectically interrelated sets of activities that work in combination with each other (Bair 2019). They work in opposite directions, yet both serve the same purpose of enhancing and protecting the value of branded commodities. The translation across registers of value works in both directions; it can lead to value upgrading as well as downgrading. Hence, the forming of associations becomes a highly ambivalent venture. On the one hand, associations allow businesses and/or brands to extract value from elsewhere and to transform nonmonetary forms of valuation into monetary value. Yet, in the case of scandals or negative revaluations, a salient negative association to the brand jeopardizes the firm's good reputation. As a consequence, in many markets, brand owners and sellers feel the obligation to act upon their reputation or market positionality strategically and are particularly concerned with preventing reputation crises (Greyser 2009) through dissociative work. Such endeavors are, however, paradoxical in nature. While sellers can control what signals they send out (and which ones they suppress), they cannot predict the perception of these signals by external constituents. Only a reputation that has been ascribed voluntarily by independent agencies represents real, dependable value. Manipulated image, by contrast, can even have detrimental effects once publicly recognized.

Dissociating agency can be both *proactive*, seeking to avoid unpleasant connections from being created and *reactive*, responding to specific reputational crises (Power et al. 2009) as they occur, for instance, in emergencies, scandals unveiled by journalists, or contestations raised by competitors or activists. Strategic agency can be carried out by governments and consumer-side pressure groups yet is most actively driven by sellers and brand owners. Of course, competitors or nongovernmental organizations can, and often do, challenge value propositions made by sellers. Such *contestations* (Kleibert, Hess, and Müller 2020) are part of the dynamics of distributed strategic agency, which produces associations and dissociations.

The geographies of dissociation encompass a topological, territorial, and relational dimension (Ibert et al. 2019). In the topological dimension, "dark places" are the focus. Here, crucial parts of a business take place, but they are hidden behind walls and made invisible to consumers. The territorial dimension looks at territories with low social or ecological standards that play a crucial role in the value chain but are obscured in marketing. Finally, from a relational geographic perspective, different forms of relational distance become important, since they can be downplayed easily by pointing at their socially thin, external, or transient nature.

The agency that drives dissociations is not purely relational, however. Rather, as with any practice, agency responds to the structural inertia and the general dynamics of the markets the dissociations operate in. Ibert et al. (2019) argue that structural properties of the respective markets can be mobilized to prevent negative associations from becoming salient. For instance, the impossibility of understanding global value chains in their full complexity make commodities practically *unfollowable* (Hulme 2017), which can in turn provide a welcome *knowledge alibi* (McGoey 2012) in practices of dissociation. In a recent study on qualification in the global fine wine market, Rainer (2020, 15) reveals how dissociations are crucial for "disentanglement" of fine wine from less valuable table wine, and, thus, shows how the interplay of "geographies of dissociation and association provides a promising pathway for economic geography to analyze how aesthetic markets are enacted and bounded."

Drawing on insights from cultural economic geographies of marketization, branding, and dissociations, we focus on the interplay of the strategic agencies represented by the fur breeders and the fashion industry in order to understand individual practices and how they come together to produce the fur-fashion complex.

Methodology: Encountering Dissociations

The aim of our methodological approach is to identify the strategic agency of dissociations in the commodification of fur. The research traced strategic agency through interconnected instances of social construction of value in permanent sites like a farm but also temporary events like trade fairs. We asked how and by whom these instances are shaped, brought in conjunction, highlighted, obfuscated, or ignored. Empirically, the work we conducted is best described as a qualitative, partly ethnographic, multisite case study (Yin 2014) of value construction.

We began our research by approaching the most visible actors, fur-lobby associations and antifur groups, and the most visible sites of fur trade and consumption, fur-fashion retailing and fur fairs. Wherever possible, participant interviews were conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Observations were documented in field notes, pictures, and video recordings. Promotional materials, both in paper and online, were collected and analyzed. These encounters served to produce an overview of contemporary fur production, trade, and consumption, and specifically its shifting geographies and business models. They unveiled key geographic impressions imbued in fur-related political and commercial messaging. They also led us to broadly understand the roles of different actors and to identify those with strategic agendas.

Strategic actors include (Western) fur-breeder associations and their marketing organizations, other industry associations, and animal rights pressure groups, as well as high-profile fashion and consumer goods corporations. Less influential actors include traditional furriers and related producers, fashion designers, consumers, the classic fashion media, and independent fashion brands. This knowledge enabled us to then delve deeper and observe key activities, such as fur farming, auctioning, wholesaling, and antifur campaigning and its commercial implications, as well as fur design and marketing. The key method of data collection was conducting on-site observations and interviews, complemented by collecting documents online and offline that conveyed commercial and political messages.

In researching dynamics of dissociation in a field as controversial as fur, field access and our positioning vis-à-vis informants posed continuing challenges. While antifur campaigners more readily shared their perspectives, representatives of the fur industry initially perceived our partially critical research agenda as hostile and biased in favor of antifur politics. Suspicion on the side of the organized fur industry, in particular business associations (rather than individual furriers and vendors), accompanied us throughout our fieldwork, which we conducted as a two-person team. Eventually, we gained the trust of central informants by communicating proactively and making our research goals, financing, and ethical standards transparent.

We conducted forty qualitative interviews with a total of forty-five respondents representing the (raw) fur industry and trade, furriers, design and fashion, animal protection groups, and academic experts. Observations and interviews were conducted at sites of fur production, design, trade, and consumption. These included strategic places in the industry: a fur farm, an auction house, and a design center in Denmark; a fur wholesale market in Shenzhen; antifur campaigning, retail, and fur trade during the Hong Kong Fur Fair in 2016; and the Fur and Leather Fair (MiFur) of 2016 in Milan. Since our focus was on the arenas where messages of value are communicated between the broad spectrum of sellers and buyers, we also looked at sites of retail, trade, and design in London, Berlin, Seoul, and Stockholm. However, we also sought to generate a coherent picture of raw fur production, fur processing, and fur garment production—areas we perceived as potential objects of dissociation.

Wherever possible, we triangulated data and the recounting of particular occurrences across multiple sources. We then analyzed the qualitative data by teasing out discursive themes and strategies used by different actors. Crucially, we also focused on what remained unsaid or was actively evaded to bring forward the various dissociative strategies.

The Rise of the Global Fur-Fashion Complex

Surprisingly to most observers, after decades of antifur protests and a rise in the number of vegetarians and vegans, the production and consumption of real fur garments and accessories continues to rise. After a deep crisis in Western consumer markets, peaking in the 1990s, fur has made a remarkable comeback. European fur production, for instance, increased by almost 40 percent, from 27.5 million skins in 2005 to 45.4 million skins in 2015 (Fur Europe 2015).

The fur industry has a long history. In Canada, it was intricately linked to settler colonialism and constituted an important economic sector that today remains only a marginal, craft-based economic activity (Colpitts 1997; Rantisi 2014a, 2014b). Traditional fur consumption in Western societies, established largely during the nineteenth century, combined use value—fur garments such as coats and caps were winter clothes—with the signaling of status difference, wealth, power, femininity, and attraction (Skov 2005). High prices for fur garments were legitimized by the scarcity of the raw materials, together with the great amount of skilled labor, that is, professional furriers and fur sewers, required to produce the garments. Value appreciation rested in the trusting, long-lasting relationship between furriers and customers, in conspicuous public displays, and in practices of maintenance and inheritance (Magee 2015).

This traditional model of capturing value came under attack in the 1970s—not just by antifur protesters but also due to broader shifts in consumer values on a global scale. Fur, as a traditional signifier of social status, was extremely vulnerable to the changing environment. Notably, when activists had successfully stigmatized the fur-wearing consumer, oftentimes represented as a cruel and superficially beautiful female, it was impossible to escape this negative association, particularly given the aesthetic—visual, tactile—uniqueness and conspicuousness of fur. The fur industry continues to be highly contested beyond spaces of consumption and involves struggles over value(s) at multiple sites of production and circulation, including at fur farms and trade fairs (Kleibert, Hess, and Müller 2020).

However, since the 1990s, the relationship between fur and fashion has been transformed radically. Fur-marketing organizations have successfully rebranded and recombined fur to make it compatible with branded luxury and mass and fast fashion (Skov 2005; Rantisi 2014a). In addition, new consumer markets were developed in East Asia. Today, 97 percent of Danish mink is exported, predominantly to China (Hansen 2016); Denmark is the world's largest fur exporter, and mink is the most common fur animal. Also, in Western markets, fur has had a comeback. New modes of circulation have been established with branding strategies and design interactions becoming increasingly important, albeit in highly differentiated and multifaceted ways.

Talking about the fur industry is a difficult matter, as multiple actors are involved in the production, processing, circulation, usage, and consumption of fur. Nevertheless, there are key actors. On the raw material side, the fur-breeder associations and, partly, also trappers and hunters, along with their marketing and lobby organizations, can be defined as the fur industry in a narrow sense. Farming of purpose-bred fur animals, such as mink (the most common fur animal), fox, chinchilla, and raccoon dog, is by far the dominant modus (85 percent) of fur-skin production today (Hansen 2016). Hunting

and trapping, as a second source of fur, occur predominantly in areas where specific fur-bearing animals require population control, such as coyotes in the United States and Canada or possums in New Zealand.

To integrate fur in the industrial processing of fashion, it was necessary to organize a steady flow of raw material in a predictable quality. It, thus, became necessary to farm fur-bearing animals (for early efforts to create "modern" fur farming in Canada, see Colpitts 1997) to transform living animals into packages of raw material, to assess the fur quality, and to pool and sort these packages according to quality. The raw materials were also traded for different types of further processing. A shift of power and control from consumption to raw material supply occurred in the case of fur, shifting the power more toward fur breeders and their associations.

Fur-breeder associations in many production countries run auction houses, where the bulk of raw fur production is auctioned to brokers, who in turn cater to garment producers. Denmark leads the world in fur exports and, consequently, houses the biggest fur auction in Copenhagen (Hansen 2016). In addition to auctioning (which includes logistical support to traders, i.e., shipment, storage, and customs support), the fur-farmer associations provide a number of services, notably, marketing and lobbying, but also customized feed production plants in Denmark.

Scandinavian fur-breeder associations are key actors in the reshaping of the global market for raw furs and fur products. In addition to their leadership in productivity and exports, this is in particular due to their role in reshaping the relationship between fur and fashion. In the 1990s, Saga Furs, the marketing organization of all Nordic fur breeder associations, began investing in new collaborations with fashion designers. Saga's design center collects and makes accessible—through various schemes of in-house teaching, material supply, and external collaboration—new techniques for working with fur that go beyond the traditional, heavy, and monofunctional full-fur garments. Such techniques (like plucking or shearing) serve to make fur garments lighter, to change the appearance of fur (e.g., making it more velvet-like), and to combine fur with other materials (including faux fur), untraditional styles, and new colors.

In the early 2000s, the Danish association established its own marketing organization called Kopenhagen Fur. Through its design center (Kopenhagen Studio) and marketing hub (KiCK), it pursues a combined strategy of sponsoring design, cobranding, and business development for fashion brands that use fur. This approach has been adopted by the industry as a whole more recently. Since 2013, for instance, the International Fur Federation, together with Vogue Talent and Vogue Italy, has run the so-called REMIX competition that invites young fashion designers to integrate fur elements into their designs. In a field characterized by extremely precarious careers (McRobbie 2015), this strategy is highly effective in mobilizing design labor for creatively reconnecting fashion and fur (Rantisi 2014b).

Turning its attention toward China was the second major strategic shift initiated by Saga in the early 1990s. The organization anticipated the potential of a growing Chinese luxury consumer market and began actively developing it. In China, Kopenhagen Fur collaborates closely with educational institutions, for instance, by sponsoring a design center located at Beijing Tsinghua University. China constitutes the biggest import market for raw fur and probably fur garments due to its still growing luxury consumption. At the same time, it is the world's largest garment producer and, thus, an important location for fur processing. Official export statistics show a dominant flow of raw furs from Denmark to China (36 percent of global trade volume in raw furs in 2013) as well as a strong flow of fur garments from China to Russia (38 percent of global trade volume in fur garments in 2013) (Hansen 2016).

According to the fur industry's own estimates, today roughly half of all raw fur skins auctioned go into the production of branded fashion items—clothes, shoes, accessories, and bags that are not fur products in the narrow sense, but fashion items that contain fur components for aesthetic reasons (interview with auction house representative). Thus, fur has transformed from a small, yet clearly demarcated craft-based industry into one of manifold suppliers of aesthetic compounds delivering to the global complex of branded fashion production and consumption.

Practices of Dissociation: Tactics and Strategies

The increasing number of bans on fur farming,[2] following campaigns that specifically attacked the various forms of fur-skin production, pose an existential threat to the fur industry that is heavily concentrated in a few highly productive producer countries, mainly in Northern Europe and North America. Animal rights organizations single out the fur industry as morally illegitimate for being exceptionally cruel to animals for the production of a luxury commodity with no practical necessity. Antifur messaging involves several motifs: caged, oftentimes crippled animals in distress, and the killing and skinning of animals. The disputes surrounding such images and allegations are highly visible to the public. However, dissociation comprises a plethora of distributed agencies by multiple actors, in which the most visible conflicts are but the tip of the iceberg. In this section, we will show that key actors in the fashion and fur industries employ reactive tactics and proactive strategies of dissociation.

Dissociative Agency by Fur-Breeder Associations

Taking the very influential Danish association as a reference point, we first discuss activities by fur-breeder organizations, beginning with the most visible issue: the response to allegations of animal cruelty in fur farming. Crucially, all activities in this vein reproduce the key narrative that only healthy and well-treated animals will give excellent fur, thus, farmers have a vital interest in treating animals well. Excellent fur quality, in turn, is the precondition for successfully competing in the fur-fashion market since fur is inherently a luxury commodity. This narrative is underpinned by spatial practices at various levels. The most localized of these is the fur farm as a site of discursive and material contestation (see Kleibert, Hess, and Müller 2020).

Invoking a High-Standards Space. In Denmark, ostentatious transparency has been the norm for over a decade as a response to controversial TV reporting on fur farms in 2009. It involves open farm days and a general readiness to show visitors "the truth" about fur farming (on the condition of providing advanced notice). Fur farms can be experienced—as we did during a visit accompanied by a Kopenhagen Fur representative—as sites of highly professional practices, and indeed as sites of good animal welfare in the context of an advanced agricultural economy. Within this context, the relationship between farmer and animals is actively portrayed as a close and emotional one. "We live for the animals," the farmer told us near the end of the site visit. Such controlled openness is clearly a response to imagery portraying the farm as a dark place, but it also proactively sets the scene for future responses. For example, animal welfare conditions are routinely framed as exceptions or deviations from the

[2] Fur farming is entirely banned in Austria, the UK, Slovenia, and Bulgaria, and legislation has been passed to phase out fur farming in Croatia and the Czech Republic (both 2017), Bosnia-Herzegovina (2019), and the Netherlands (2024).

rule for which there must be specific causes (such as alcoholism or mental illness on the side of the farmer).

Demonstrations of openness and transparency are complemented by further efforts to create the perception of a regulated, high-standard space of responsible fur farming. The first such effort was the creation of the Origin Assured label issued by Scandinavian fur-marketing organizations and distributed to manufacturers who buy furs at their auctions. The label was intended to signify to consumers that all furs used for a garment come from countries with animal welfare regulations in place. Animal rights activists criticized that no specific minimum standards for obtaining the label were specified, nor is there any evidence of verification effects or procedures. Cases of malpractice in Origin Assured countries were documented by activists, and the label was, thus, quickly devalued.

Meanwhile, key actors in the fur industry have distanced themselves from Origin Assured and are currently developing a new approach named WelFur that visibly associates itself with academic experts. WelFur is a formalized, point-based animal welfare assessment system for fur farms, differentiated by species and composed of a set of quantified farm-level indicators across the areas of feed, health, shelter, and natural behavior. Together these result in a point score, invoking ideas of proven expertise and rationality, thus, (reactively) counteracting emotional or *irrational* messages. It also displays an effort in (proactive) self-regulation, which critics perceive as an attempt at preempting stricter legislative regulation—such as the ban on fox fur farming in Denmark introduced in 2009. Both the visible relationships with academic institutions and the objective appeal of a quantified metric invoke an image of professionality, control, and attentiveness. The usage of an abstract, composite point score, meanwhile, conceals the large variety of animal welfare conditions, since a bad score in one area can be compensated by a good one in a different area, especially given that only a very low overall score will result in a verdict of *unsatisfactory* farming practices.

Both concepts, Origin Assured and WelFur, conjure the idea of a largely homogenous, regulated European or Western space of good farming practices, a message also distributed widely by fur lobby organizations such as the International Fur Federation. However, while some international regulations exist, such as the ban on trade of endangered animals, animal welfare regulation is mainly based on national legislation and its enforcement. Approaches at the EU-level typically serve as recommendations. Hence, all efforts to create the image of a homogenous territorial space of good practices serve to dissociate the regulatory diversity within and between territories related to farming practices.

Scapegoating Chinese Farming, Downplaying Chinese Production. Crucially, the spatialized self-branding as a responsible industry mirror images the construction of China as a spatial proxy for low animal welfare standards, bad farming practices, and, in line with the overarching narrative, low quality. Western fur producers seek to brand themselves as providers of high-quality fur in China, engaging with the Chinese design and consumer cultures. At the same time, they seek to downplay the quantitative and qualitative role of Chinese raw fur production and to blame China for documented animal abuse in fur farming. In combination, scapegoating and downplaying China's fur production serves as a strategy to discursively marginalize Chinese competition and maintain the idea of fur as a predominantly Western high-standard, high-end commodity.

Official fur-trade figures seem to indicate a limited role for China as a fur producer. However, they do not show the share of Chinese fur production that goes directly into

domestic consumption. Likewise, figures on domestic and imported fur and (other) raw materials that go into garment production are absent. As garments containing fur elements are not counted as fur garments, the statistics hide figures that would show the full volume of fur exports and reimports from China to Europe. Furthermore, the official statistics on Chinese fur production may greatly underestimate the real production volume, as fur production and trade in China is more informally organized. Small-scale fur farming often provides a secondary income to farmers, furs are traded in regional fur markets, and intermediaries connect fur farms with garment producers. As we were able to verify during a visit to a fur trade fair, Chinese garment manufacturers use their ties to domestic raw fur sources to offer scalable, low-cost production of (part) fur garments and accessories to international retailers. Hence, the informality predominant in the market, the presences of multiple intermediaries, and the reporting routines in trade statistics together conceal China's strong role as a fur-producing country.

Representatives of the European raw fur trade, however, maintain the notion that China's production of mink furs continues to suffer from quality problems and, thus, remains low. They have mobilized the narrative that good animal welfare equals good quality when it comes to fur and have (proactively) typecast China as the negative mirror image of high-standard Europe, pinning bad practices (reactively) on China. In a video called "The Truth About Fur," International Fur Federation chairman Mark Oaten makes explicit references to horrendous images of raccoon dogs being skinned alive, referring to footage circulated on the Internet from what was quite apparently a Chinese fur farm (Hong Kong Fur Federation n.d.). Oaten explains that such events took place outside the regulated fur industry that he represents, once again invoking the idea of a regulated, high-standards space and a rogue, nonrepresentative outside space.

During our conversations with people in the fur trade, we repeatedly encountered the notion that Western customers' demand for ethical fur could be satisfied by abstaining from Chinese fur. We are unable to verify the *true* state of Chinese fur farming. While one activist and former insider in Chinese fur farming stated that conditions were indeed dire in terms of animal welfare (and multiple documented cases of cruelty point in this direction), an academic animal welfare expert pointed at recent Chinese legislation and efforts to improve standards. Undoubtedly, however, the discursive equalization of good or bad practices with particular territories serves to establish a moral order to justify high prices and returns for Western fur producers. Finer differentiations are, thus, left or made opaque such as good practices in China, bad practices in Europe, the uncertain substantiation of these large territorial categories, and the role of functional integration across territories.

Creating Positive Narratives of Fur. The key success achieved by fur-breeder organizations since the 1990s was the reinvention of fur fashion through design collaboration and sponsoring and disseminating novel styles and techniques. By drastically expanding the range of appearance of fur clothing, fur was liberated from the fixed set of associations attached to the traditional fur coat. As evidenced by the fur industry's relentless exultation of fur clothing appearing on catwalks, it seeks to claim a legitimate place for fur in contemporary fashion design.

In an effort to brand fur as a high-value commodity distinct from, and superior to, other materials used in fashion, a range of positive associations have been created that are both reactive (distracting from and overwriting negative images) and proactive (enabling fundamentally new value propositions in fashion markets) forms of dissociation. For instance, in the case of trapped coyote (and other) furs from North America, industry publications do not limit themselves to defending the use of trapping devices in terms of animal welfare, but invoke ideas of indigenous craft and culture in conjunction with

geographic origin to enhance the status of trapping practices. Fur craft is often represented as embedded in an appreciation of nature and the animal spirit that have been passed on across generations within indigenous communities that practice trapping. Such invocations of traditional cultural and moral bonds between people, land, and animals directly counter allegations of cruelty and displacement (wild animals in farms).

Of course, representations of fur production as an indigenous craft are free of any references to the colonial history of the fur trade, which transformed indigenous practices into a scaled-up, highly centralized commercial practice. Such linkages to indigenous nations are considered attractive to the fur industry. Scandinavian and North American fur organizations act as advocates of Inuit seal hunters—whose merchandize is exempt from the EU ban on seal skin imports. Kopenhagen Fur, furthermore, promotes its collaboration with Swakara[3] sheep farmers in Namibia. Praised for successfully fostering rural development and employment, this collaboration secures both market access to Namibian sheep farmers and the supply of Swakara furs to the fur auction in Copenhagen.

Scandinavian breeders follow *origination* (Pike 2015) strategies both toward Chinese customers and toward the home audience, cultivating images of a Scandinavian origin and history of fur use. Kopenhagen Fur collaborated with the Danish National History Museum in a recent exhibition dedicated to the historic use of fur. Specifically, the association between Vikings and fur clothing is actively reinforced in the popular media. Through design collaboration and cobranding, a domestic Danish ecology of fur-using fashion brands has been cultivated, which, while not being commercially viable in the home market alone, serves to forge a link between Scandinavian lifestyle aesthetics and fur that is visible at home and in export markets.

Substantive efforts are invested in cultivating the notion that *fur is green*. The narrative stresses that fur is a renewable resource, in contrast to petroleum-based substitutes. Indeed, artificial or faux fur is the subject of intense attack by profur organizations, frequently being labeled as fake fur or simply plastic and critiqued for being a waste and for resource squandering. Fur farming, the narrative goes, is embedded in organic cycles of matter, using leftovers from the fishing and meat industries that are used to produce feed and provide animal fat for biofuel production. The logic goes that fur products themselves are durable, as well as functional, serving their owners through cold and rain over generations if kept well. Finally, when discarded, fur disintegrates organically.

Silencing Potential Contestations of Fur Processing. If scrutinized, these diverse value propositions unveil their latent contradictions (e.g., quickly changing fashion cycles and sustainability through long-term use). Maintaining such precarious value propositions requires the dissociation of the problematic and potentially contentious environmental and labor conditions in fur garment production chains as well as the reality of fur use in fashion. A key question that serves as an illustrative example is that of the chemical treatment of raw furs postauction. All raw fur skins require *dressing*, a process like leather tanning, through which skin and hair are freed from residual fat and made resistant to decomposition. In further steps, furs can be dyed in various colors (as happens much more frequently today) or otherwise refined. These processes require chemical compounds reaching from extremely acidic to extremely alkaline, can involve toxic heavy metals like bromine, and are both water and energy intensive.

[3] The word *Swakara* is an acronym for South West African Karakul. Karakul sheep stem from Central Asia and were introduced to today's Namibia by German colonialists.

We identified several large tanneries in Turkey and Greece, but despite our efforts, we were unable to obtain permission to conduct interviews or site visits. According to an academic expert close to the industry, fur dressing and dyeing was largely relocated from traditional fur manufacturing centers like Kastoria in Greece, to Asian countries, particularly China. There, plants have in turn been relocated from densely populated coastal regions to the more thinly populated West due to their excessive pollution. A Chinese garment wholesale trader explained that he was able to offer brightly colored fur garments due to lax environmental regulations in China.

In trade publications circulating in the more traditional fur sector (e.g., Ars Artoria), environmentally friendly dressing and dyeing options are discussed. However, there are no publicly available assessments of labor or environmental impact along global fur value chains and no efforts to create transparency for the end consumer (e.g., labeling). In public relations' materials, the fur industry makes almost no reference to chemical refinement processes, and where they occur, they remain superficial, providing general hints that the industry encourages the use of environmentally friendly procedures. This relative silence represents a stark contrast to the industry's communication on fur breeding and trapping practices. While fur-marketing organizations advertise their close collaboration with fur farmers, hunters, trappers, artisans, and designers, relations to the tanning industry remain obscure.

Antifur organizations, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), only occasionally broach the issue of the environmental and human impacts of fur processing. During the 2016 London Fashion Week, a protest was staged featuring naked women wearing gasmasks and brandishing the slogan *Fur Is Toxic*. This was a reference to repeated discoveries of formaldehyde in fur products (a substance also used in fur processing) and, thus, foremost addressed an alleged health risk to consumers. Wider environmental and labor-related considerations, although periodically mentioned, are secondary in the communication of animal rights groups on fur. Hence, the tanning and fur industries, through their silence, make the matter a nonissue. The relocation of processing plants to areas far from the eyes of the media and consumers aid this approach of proactive dissociation.

The silence is further aided by the established modus of the raw fur skin trade. Fur skins distributed via Western auction houses are made traceable through an elaborate system of coding, tagging, and information processing. This traceability, however, extends only from farm to auction, as its main purpose is to supply breeders with critical data on quality gradings. No statistics or tracking systems exist to document which processing and manufacturing steps skins went through after auction. Intermediaries who buy furs at auctions—by now the majority are Chinese and work for Chinese buyers—organize their processing and direct them toward their use in garment production. These trade intermediaries are decidedly secretive about their clients. The organizational distance enacted by a brokerage system creates plausible deniability of knowledge, although it remains uncertain how much raw fur producers know about the flow of their merchandise postauction.

The example of chemical treatment resonates with a wider set of consequences that the (re-)marriage of fur and fashion has brought about and that creates both the necessity and the opportunity for dissociation. Fashion production markets are extremely opaque and involve long chains of subcontracting (Aspers 2010; Brooks 2015). As Skov noted already in 2005, fur has reached the realm of planned obsolescence: now that it is a part of fast fashion cycles, claims of sustainability (through durability) lack credibility. The deficiencies of the fashion system as a whole apply to fur, too, such as extremely precarious working conditions, as well as unsustainable levels of pollution, resource use,

and waste. However, the agency of dissociating such potentially harmful perceptions is distributed across the core actors of the fur industry (breeder association) and the much wider set of actors subsumed under the term *fashion industry.*

Dissociation by Fashion Industry Actors

The fashion industry encompasses a large array of actors. The actors most visible and most exposed to antifur protests are fashion retailers and brands. However, there are substantial differences in the degree to which the latter make fur a part of their value proposition or brand identity and the way they do so. By extending the view from fur producers to fashion brands and retailers, we discover new dimensions of mostly proactive dissociation regarding fur use.

Valuing Controversy. Traditionally, fur garments were marketed by specialized furriers who once occupied prominent positions catering to the social elite. In some countries, such as Germany, furriers have all but disappeared from the market. Traditional furrier quarters, such as Frankfurt am Main's Niddastraße, are in severe decline. In other countries and cities, such as Italy, Greece, and Hong Kong, however, some furriers have persisted, mostly by catering to tourists from Russia and Mainland China. The fur craft has suffered from its inability to evade antifur protests but also from a general shift toward branded fashion. With an estimated 50 percent of raw furs now going into branded fashion (which translates to a much higher number of garments, since, for instance, only one fur skin is needed for a fur collar or trimming), furriers have lost their position as the leading revenue generators within the fur trade. Among the remaining furriers, some have taken on the challenge of reinventing themselves as fur-fashion designers, adopting novel styles and techniques. To counter attacks, furriers tend to replicate the core industry's narratives of sustainability, craft, origin, and love of animals. Even the outdated Origin Assured label is still present in furrier shops.

Branded luxury, as well as mass-market fashion, is the more effective channel for marketing fur today. Crucially, the way in which fashion brands incorporate fur into their brand identity strongly influences the ways in which they dissociate negative perceptions related to fur. The Canadian winter clothing brand Canada Goose, for instance, actively constructs a Canadian identity, focusing on an arctic outdoor aesthetic supported by real coyote fur trimmings. Despite being clearly consumed by a young urban clientele, the brand seeks authenticity in visibly associating itself with the traditional practice of fur trapping. On social media, the brand receives fierce criticism and protest but also vociferous support from trappers and its brand community. Hence, by actively taking a stance in the fur controversy and by using real fur to invoke ideas of craft, origin, and authenticity, the brand creates symbolic value for its customers.

Positionings of this kind do not have to be affirmative to fur use. Some brands, such as Stella McCartney, are clearly positioned against fur. As Kleibert, Hess, and Müller (2020) show, even for a cosmetics company, such as Lush, aligning with an antifur protest can raise a consumer brand's profile. Fashion brands, especially those with a history of fur use, are under intense pressure from activist groups to "change sides." In recent years, several spectacular shifts have occurred. In 2016, Armani, a Milan luxury fashion house, announced it would refrain from using fur in the future. In 2018, Gucci, a luxury brand from Florence, to the applause of antifur activists, likewise announced it would stop working with fur.

Crucially, such highly publicized moves are not necessarily permanent; they often represent responses to the *Zeitgeist* or to specific scandals. Scandals frequently elicit

vows from companies to stop working with individual suppliers or a type of raw material altogether. Antifur vows can be conspicuously reversed when conditions change. The fashion model Naomi Campbell, for instance, became famous for posing naked for PETA in the 1990s as part of the "I'd Rather Go Naked" antifur campaign. In 2009, however, she starred in fur designer Dennis Basso's campaign. Such shifts are either celebrated or condemned, depending on the commentator's position and the direction of the move.

A common theme in discussing such events with informants was the attention such moves generated. In an industry depending on attention as much as fashion does, controversy and/or scandal are sometimes deliberately sought (Hubbard 1993). The fur controversy, fueled by emotional fervor from both sides, provides a red line whose crossing is inherently attractive in an attention-driven economy. All actors involved, pro- or antifur, share an interest in addressing visible reference points and mobilizing emotional patterns. Dissociation, here, rests on the polarized and monodimensional nature of the controversy: everything outside the narrow scope of pro- and antifur sentiments disappears from view.

Creating symbolic value by positioning brands in public controversies is connected to systems of cultural values that are situated in history and at the same time are also inherently spatial in character (Pike 2015). Stances that are seen critically in one spatial context might be valued as progressive in another (Kraidy and Goeddertz 2003). Hence, multinational brand owners face manifold opportunities (and challenges) to launching spatially segmented campaigns, highlighting particular sets of values, while disguising others in different territorialized consumer markets.

Blurring the Boundaries of Fur. Counteracting and diffusing the polarized fur controversy, fashion brands and retail outlets have together created consumption contexts in which fur can be consumed (through buying, wearing, or displaying it, often all at the same time) almost unbeknownst to customers, as the boundaries of what counts as fur and what its ethical implications are have been blurred. This blurring includes, of course, well-documented cases of mislabeling, that is, the declaration of real fur as faux fur (Stiftung Warentest 2016). However, blurring also involves the creation of—often comfortable—uncertainty and ambiguity. This uncertainty is in part based on the well-curated copresence of real fur and artificial fur but also *classic* (e.g., mink) and *secondary* (e.g., rabbit or lamb) furs in consumption contexts.

Real fur and advanced synthetic fur are hard to distinguish for the untrained observer, and labeling, even legally correct labeling,[4] is usually insufficient for consumers to understand the origin of a material. We encountered real and faux fur presented without differentiation on clothing racks in department stores. In addition, many clothing retailers and well-known brands have gone *fur free*, thus creating the impression that real fur is absent from today's fashion market. Indeed, conversations we conducted in consumption situations indicated that customers who buy fashion products containing fur are often unaware of its animal origin.

Not surprisingly, faux fur is not universally applauded by antifur campaigners. Activists perceive it as an endorsement of the *fur look* and, thus, a statement that supports the use of fur. In addition, synthetic fur can provide an entry point to real fur consumption. Furriers interviewed reported that customers frequently ask to have a synthetic fur trimming replaced with a real one following the synthetic piece's loss of aesthetic appeal after a period of use. Thus, both the symbolic and the material qualities of artificial fur vis-à-vis real fur are ambiguous and subject to ongoing

[4] In the EU, fur, like leather, wool, or silk, must be labeled as a nontextile material of animal origin.

contestation. Their copresence and copresentation in consumption contexts, meanwhile, create comfortable uncertainty about the origins of materials.

This uncertainty is further enhanced by altering the physical appearance of fur in such a way that it distracts from its animal origin (and at the same time drastically increases the need for chemical processing). Most fashion brands that use fur focus on a narrow set of garment styles and cuts that are augmented with highly conspicuous—yet not necessarily natural looking—fur applications. Common examples marketed by a range of brands include a fur hood trimming (natural or dyed in flashy colors) on an otherwise plain jacket or parka and a fur pompon on a bag or cap. These uses exploit the conspicuous aesthetic of fur, thus justifying higher prices, but do not foreground its animal origin. While bright colors give fur an artificial appearance, small fur attachments to garments or bags can easily be rationalized as remnants from *actual* fur-garment production.

Fur in garments is very frequently complemented and, in part, also substituted by furs that, like leather, stem from livestock breeding that serves the meat market, for example, lamb and rabbit. Although leather and fur usage are guiding elements in the economic rationale of, for instance, sheep breeding, in the public perception they are usually considered secondary to the purpose of meat production. Rabbit fur, due to its superficial similarity, is sometimes used to imitate mink fur in jackets and coats. Confusingly for consumers, *fur-free* retailers do occasionally market garments with real rabbit or lamb furs.

The brand Burberry can serve as an example of how alienation and material remixing can serve to obfuscate the use of real fur. Burberry constructs a nationally defined brand identity, in this case *Britishness* (Pike 2015). Although Burberry uses real fur as a way of aesthetically underpinning the value appeal of its products (e.g., by attaching a fox fur collar to a duffle coat), this element is not actively advertised and hardly ever discussed. Real fur usage is sometimes further obfuscated by layers of alienation. For instance, Burberry marketed a rabbit fur coat with a leopard print.

Along with the material identity of fur, as well as its ethical implications, the traditional value hierarchies have been blurred as well. Traditionally, fur was a high-value commodity and a clear physical marker of a luxury garment. Indeed, handcrafted fur clothing is still expensive, but the staging of the most exclusive experiences of luxury in today's market environments does not depend on the materiality of real fur. Typically, within one consumption context (one brand, one store), garments with real fur tend to be more expensive than garments with fur substitutes. Hence, the conveyed hierarchy of original and imitation still exists within market segments.

However, real fur does appear in all market segments today, including mid- and low-price markets. The Swedish retail chain Salt is an example of a low-price fashion brand that utilizes real fur. Bags, garments, keychains, and caps with fur applications sold at street booths serve as examples of very low-price uses of real fur. In this market segment, mislabeling or nonlabeling are common, and switching between real and artificial fur as a matter of convenience does not damage brands. On the other end of the spectrum, very high-quality synthetic fur approximates the experience of real fur but is in many cases more expensive than real fur and, thus, is a luxury commodity in its own right. Consequently, consumers making choices based on outdated assumptions about fur are easily misled.

Fetishizing Brands. Brands are constructed as carriers of meaning and value (Willmott 2010; Pike 2015). The brand name is made recognizable as a stable reference point across multiple contexts, from the catwalk to the flagship store, from Vogue to the duty-free catalogue. It is, therefore, not surprising that brands serve as focal points in the fur controversy. The positioning of brands vis-à-vis culturally charged values and norms

evokes an impression in the mind of the consumer that each brand is unique and that the choice of a brand makes a great deal of difference. However, in the context of brand ownership structures, these distinctions become blurred. Most major fashion brands are owned by a small number of conglomerates that together constitute a fashion oligopoly. The largest of these are Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (LVMH), seated in Paris, with a turnover of € 37.6 billion in 2016, and the Kering Group, likewise seated in Paris, with a turnover of € 11.6 billion in 2015. Both corporations hold a diverse spectrum of fashion brands ranging from mass market to luxury fashion and from everyday wear to functional clothing. Rather than internal coherence, the business logic of such brand holders appears to be to develop diversified portfolios of profitable brands. Within such a portfolio company, all possible stances on fur are represented by the varied individual brands. For instance, Alexander McQueen, a brand with visible and pronounced fur usage, belongs to Kering, as does Gucci, which recently shunned fur and is connected to vegan fashion designer Stella McCartney through a joint venture. LVMH owns both Fendi, a brand heavily focusing on fur, and Edun, a sustainable fashion brand with only peripheral usage of artificial (and no real) fur.

While brands seek to convey meaning or, one could argue, are the preeminent carriers of meaning in today's economy, brand-owning companies are barely known to consumers. Since they do not actively engage with the fur controversy, being part of a brand portfolio is not damaging to the individual brand. The economic linkage between a brand actively promoting fur and one opposing fur remains obscure. Since the profit realized by a brand-owning conglomerate depends on each brand's ability to appeal to specific consumer identities, this represents a dissociation in the sense of the definition.

Discussion: Geographies of Dissociation

In this article, we set out to explore the multifaceted role of dissociations in the commodification of fur. Within the complex, multistakeholder constellation around fur, we identified fur-breeder associations and fashion brands as key actors of practices of dissociation (see Table 1). They have invested heavily in campaigns that have helped to associate fur with positive values and to stage it as an aesthetic, functionally superior, sustainable, and traditional material. These two groups of actors have played the most active and inventive roles in establishing a (for them) highly profitable, globally growing fur-fashion complex that has emerged in the past two decades by marrying fur craft with fashion design (Rantisi 2014a).

The geographies of dissociation (in plural!) found in the fur-fashion complex are distinct from the geographies of origination (Pike 2015). Practices of dissociation mobilize a distinct spatiality, involving topological, territorial, and relational dimensions (Ibert et al. 2019; see left column in Table 1) that interact in complex ways.

In the topological dimension, for instance, we find dark places, such as polluting chemical treatment plants, are hidden from the eyes of the consumer by being located in peripheral regions. At the same time, highly transparent places, like showcase farms, are used to control the messages more effectively about "the truth" of fur farming shared with consumers. In curated consumer environments, real and faux fur are presented in ways that make them indistinguishable. Geographies of dissociation evoke territorial imaginations—the professional and regulated realm of Northern (European) fur production vs. the vast and widely unchartered terrain represented by the informal Chinese fur-farming sector.

Finally, dissociations enact and make use of different forms of relational distance. The auction houses are the key institutions in this respect (and at the same time also key places). Here, raw fur is collected, sorted, distributed, and traded into diverse

Table 1

Overview of Practices of Dissociation in the Global Fur-Fashion Complex

	Geographic Reference	Type of Strategy	Effects of Dissociation
Practices by fur industry			
Invoking a high standard space	Topological: staging the farm as a site of good practice; establishing a science-based animal welfare assessment system at the individual farm level	Reactive: to create a counternarrative for past scandals Proactive: to be prepared to frame future cases of animal abuse as deviant behavior or individual misconduct	Distancing the Western, farm-based fur industry as a whole from negatively charged associations that become salient
Scapegoating Chinese farming	Territorial: invoking the idea of China as an unregulated (and low-quality) territory for fur farming	Proactive: constructing a scapegoat to be responsible for future scandals; creating a causal link between the quality of the material and animal welfare	Relegating bad practice and poor quality to distant territories
	Relational: national import/export statistics make flows of money and materials visible	Proactive: selective statistics obscure the amounts of informal fur trading within China, the reexport of fur integrated into Chinese manufactured fashion articles, and fur consumption by Chinese consumers	Creating knowledge gaps to make economic relations untraceable
Silencing contestations of fur processing	Relational: close functional integration of the fur sector in industrial processing (e.g., tanning and dyeing) and the fashion industry	Reactive: respond immediately to contestations from animal rights activists, but remain silent on contestations related to other potentially problematic issues Proactive: the relocation of processing plants to peripheral locations with low social and environmental standards	Exclusive focus on animal welfare underpins a widely shared ignorance of social and environmental issues around fur processing; creating *dark places* in unknown regions; physical distance makes the processing plants less visible to Western consumers
	Topological/relational: establishment of auction houses as sites of redistribution and intermediation	Proactive: enhancing the traceability of fur from farm to auction; obscuring postauction relations through intermediaries	Creating knowledge gaps that make fur unfollowable during processing
Practices by the fashion industry			
Valuing controversy	Territorial/relational: making use of different territorially embedded cultural frameworks	Reactive: responding to short-term shifts in the *Zeitgeist*; provoking attention by overstepping normatively charged *red lines*	Benefitting from media attention and authentic affects, no matter if they had negative or positive connotations
Blurring the boundaries of fur	Topological: staging of real and faux fur in curated consumption environments and in the public space	Proactive: normalization of the fur look in the eyes of consumers; making real and faux fur undistinguishable; casting doubt on the moral superiority of faux fur	Making fur invisible through abundance; creating ambiguity around the natural origin of fur

(*continued*)

Table 1
(*Continued*)

	Geographic Reference	Type of Strategy	Effects of Dissociation
Fetishizing brands	Relational: Positioning brands vis-à-vis each other and pooling several brands in brand portfolios	Proactive: long-term investments in building up distinct brand images, focus attention on brands, while brand owners behave discreetly	Obscuring the ownership relations within brand portfolio companies

Source: the authors.

channels. Again, auctioning practices create functional ties that allow the establishment of a steady flow of raw material for the industrial process of garment production. At the same time, a multitude of intermediary traders create quickly shifting links between buyers and producers to make the postauction processing of fur unfollowable (Hulme 2017).

We have identified reactive and proactive practices of dissociations (see middle column of Table 1). The former practices have a short-term orientation and are reactive to instances in which negative associations become salient, while the latter practices seek to avoid negative associations from becoming salient at all. When looking at the data, however, both types are not easy to disentangle. Reactive tactics of dissociation seem to work much more effectively if they are embedded in proactive strategies. For instance, the geographic complexities of the global fur-fashion complex, together with the limited traceability of fur for further processing after auctions, provide rich opportunities to build knowledge alibis (McGoey 2012) for producers and consumers. In conjunction, existing and alleged knowledge gaps give rise to a collective system of nonresponsibility (Te Velde, Aarts, and Van Woerkum 2002).

Our analysis reveals the dialectics (Bair 2019) of associations and dissociations (see far right column in Table 1). Both fur-breeder associations and fashion brands are active in creating positive associations around fur to support fur's value proposition (Pike 2015). Yet, these positive associations work hand in hand with practices of dissociating fur from negative associations. These encompass the creation of knowledge gaps and ambiguity, the distraction of consumer awareness, and the obscuring of relationships. Both associations and dissociation are clearly distinguishable; they operate in opposite directions, yet have similar intentions. For instance, by mobilizing moral indignation, animal rights activists continue to attract public attention to the use of fur and to charge the material with authentic emotions and affects. Yet, the fur industry and fashion brand owners have learned to deal with such contestations. By turning the spotlight onto issues of animal welfare, activists in a sense help fur-farming associations to create collective blind spots around ecological problems related to tanning and dyeing as well as the social precariousness of the working conditions important in garment production. Fashion brand owners, likewise, have learned to take advantage of any kind of attention, negative or positive. They refer to both positive feelings of moral superiority, in the case of fur-free fashion, and negative feelings related to conspicuously consuming real fur. As both types of fashion statements create

attention and mobilizes authentic emotions, brands can be dissociated from potential value-depreciating connections. Here, the dialectics of associations and dissociation have created ambiguous *cracks* of meaning that support different value propositions at the same time.

Conclusions

We have used fur as a case example to trace the multiple ways a natural resource becomes a commodity that is traded in markets. As in many previous empirical studies on the commodification of nature, we observed that fur is also resistant to commodification. A number of technologies, like farming, tanning, and dyeing, as well as calculative devices like auctions, have to be put in place to transform a part of a living organism into a raw material that can be processed in industrial manufacturing before it can eventually become integrated into branded products that are sold in markets. For most furs (excluding those from endangered animals), scarcity or limited access are subordinate challenges in the process of commercial exploitation. Value contestations by external stakeholders based on widely shared moral indignation have ascended to existential issues in the fur industry, which may even trigger political legislation that prohibits fur production altogether (Kleibert, Hess, and Müller 2020). Thus, the fur-fashion complex illustrates that in approaches to commodifying nature and in establishing a market for the products, it is crucial to (re-)gain and maintain control over the public interpretation, media representation, and consumers' perceptions of the material.

The fur-fashion complex is widely distributed geographically. It creates functional links between fur farms located in peripheral regions in Northern Europe, North America, and Western China; fashion manufacturers mainly located in China but also in Greece and Turkey; and shrinking traditional consumer groups mainly concentrated in the Western hemisphere as well as emerging consumer groups located in China and Russia. It encompasses highly visible places, as well as *dark places* located in peripheral areas, and takes advantage of regionally variegated legislation. These geographies are enacted by long chains of subcontractors and flexible production networks. A range of intermediaries continually (re-)arranges functional links between otherwise disconnected parts of the industry. Due to its complexity, the fur-fashion complex is ripe with opportunities for strategic ignorance (McGoey 2012) and for dissociative strategies.

We focused on a single case study of a—very particular—industry. Therefore, only with great care can these findings be generalized beyond the scope of the fur sector. There are, however, interesting parallels to studies of other types of commodification of nature that also clearly show that the more ethically contested the access to the raw material is, the more it becomes necessary to control public perception and the interpretation of practices for the producers. Fur confirms a general shift of the locus of symbolic relational work that is usually thought to take place at the front end of the value chain and in the cultural centers of the world, toward an increasing involvement of actors on the raw material side of the value chain who are often located in peripheral regions. Future research could analyze this tentative generalization in greater depth, for instance, by conducting comparative empirical studies.

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