

11. Milk: Material Entwinements and the Making and Unmaking of Healthy Bodies

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In January 2020, a video campaign funded by the Dutch government and the European Union entitled *Nederland draait op zuivel* (“the Netherlands runs on dairy”) was launched to promote national dairy consumption. A cheese sandwich is tossed on a plate, a glass of milk eagerly deposited next to it, with a voice-over proclaiming, “this is the way we have lunch in the Netherlands.” According to the campaign, if it were not for the strength that cows’ milk provided, the Dutch would not have been able to build their renowned sea dikes, and the landscape would have looked radically different. The land would not be inhabited by cows but by sea-cows because the country would be flooded with water.

What is this campaign telling us? In a near ludicrous manner, it reiterates a rhetoric with a long history, revering milk as a vital material, its strength reciprocally flowing between bodies and matter. Milk, in this instance, is mobilized affectively by being tied to the resilience and prosperity of the Dutch nation. A campaign such as this only exists because it has a rich reservoir of cultural meaning upon which to draw. In *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes called milk a “totem-drink” in the Netherlands, attributing its venerated position to the extensive mythology that surrounds it (79). In these mythologized tales of milk, there is a congruence between the land’s wealth, the cow’s health, the people’s strength, and the Dutch nation’s prosperity. Milk campaigning potentializes national belonging, articulating an affective appeal that continues to dictate milk’s popularity in the Netherlands today.

Milk, however, is a “leaky” material, and as with all resilient totems, there is also latency and excess. The white liquid ostensibly transforms the human body, providing strength and ableness, but milk also affects the animal body. Animal agriculture breeds animals to physical extremes, the impaired body is made productive and economically valuable, causing this industry to be the chief source of disability among animals (Taylor, “Animal Crips” 104). I aim to explore how milk as a material is used to make certain others and how milk itself is made.

Following Tim Ingold’s prompt that to “understand materials is to be able to tell their histories” (434), I will trace the advent of the popularity of cows’ milk and outline several examples from Dutch dairy advertising from the early and mid-twenti-

eth century. I examine the role played by these advertisements in configuring milk consumption as part of an affective economy shaping the materialization of certain bodies (Ahmed 121). As the healthy individual and national body became a prime focus of milk advertising, cows were subjected to extensive breeding programs intended to engineer the ideal “*melkkoe*” (“dairy cow”), to make an otherwise naturally varying substance into a predictable and hygienic resource. Arguably, when considering these realities as interwoven occurrences, we do not merely grasp milk as the naturalized and familiar object it is made out to be, but also encounter it as a “thing” that demands our attention and emerges in relation to other materials (Brown 4).

Cultivating the National Body with Milk

Milk of animal origin is subject to rapid spoilage if not handled, cooled, or preserved correctly. In the late nineteenth century, the Dutch milk industry started to flourish due to new dairy technologies, hygienic improvements, and selective breeding programs for cows (Reinders and Vernooij 19). Milk production and distribution became more efficient and hygienic as farmers transitioned to new industrial means. The “dirtiness” of milk was thus palliated through the development of scientific tools and knowledge that captured and modified the unpredictable material nature of milk, which further helped to consolidate milk as a Dutch commercial household staple. By the 1930s, dairy farmers were increasingly competitive, and more milk than ever was being produced. To stimulate the consumption of milk, the Dutch government nationalized large parts of the dairy industry and funded the establishment of the *Crisis-Zuivelbureau*, an organization tasked with creating propaganda for Dutch milk. Milk was not only marketed as a complete source of nutrition, but it was also promoted as being relatively cheap, very healthy, and, most importantly, of quintessential Dutch origin. After World War II, the *Crisis-Zuivelbureau* was renamed *Nederlands Zuivelbureau*, and the nationwide advertising continued. Sayings that are still often used today, such as “*melk is goed voor elk*” (“milk is good for everyone”), were popularized by these two national dairy associations.

Crisis-Zuivelbureau and *Nederlands Zuivelbureau* propaganda was extensive and not only limited to printed advertisements. It also included large-scale physical manifestations, such as dairy weeks and milk exhibitions, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors (fig. 1). Notable examples include “*De Melkweg*,” and “*De zuiveltentoonstelling*”. The Nijmegen dairy week of 1936 accompanied the festivities of the International Four Day Marches—the largest multiple-day marching event in the world. The city’s main road was transformed into a “*melkweg*” (“milky way or street”), and its grassy lawns were lined with life-size wooden cows and large billboards reading “*melk hoort bij sport*” (“milk belongs to sports”) and “*niets beter voor uithoudingsvermogen dan melk*” (“nothing better for stamina than milk”). A local news-

paper reported how these “symbolic [cow] figures show us the meaning and value of milk for our bodies” (“symbolische figuren die ons de betekenis en de waarde van melk voor ons lichaam doen zien”) and that more milk consumption will increase our national prosperity (“Zuivelpropaganda tijdens de Vierdaagsche,” “De Zuivelweek”). These dairy weeks included cooking demonstrations, milk bars, film exhibitions, and dairy parades. The milk-themed metamorphosis of Nijmegen is but one example of the dozens of dairy weeks that were organized from the 1930s to the 1950s. They are a testament to the comprehensive propaganda of the dairy associations that created them. By connecting milk to such grand and festive events, milk drinking became an affective endeavor—a form of ingestible belonging.



Fig. 1: “De Zuiveldagen Te Heerenveen,” *Leeuwarder Nieuwsblad*, 7 March 1936. This photograph of a dairy parade in Frisia in 1936 provides an example of what such parades looked like. The texts on the vehicle read “health” and “agriculture,” with a woman dressed in traditional milkmaid clothing sitting on a vehicle adorned with milk bottles.

Milk consumption was promoted to increase individual and collective work productivity, health, and happiness. Dairy campaigns attributed superhuman strength to consuming milk while rendering sickly those who did not consume enough. The

cartoons of the 1950s campaign *Met melk meer mans* (*More Power with Milk*) attest to this rhetoric, featuring short narratives of people suddenly capable of enormous physical feats after drinking milk (figs. 2–5). A sick man visiting a doctor is happy and full of health after drinking three glasses of milk as prescribed; a bedridden older man dances happily with a nurse; a man smilingly carries not only a piano but also its deliverer up the stairs; and a joyful mother lifts her two children so high up that they can feed a giraffe at the zoo, all after drinking a glass of milk. It is important to note that these campaigns were brandless, made to promote milk as a general material. Many advertisements did not even disclose their commercial nature, but presented themselves as informative articles backed by science rather than money.



Figs. 2–5: *Met melk meer mans* (*More Power with Milk*). Advertisements, Nederlands Zuivelbureau (Netherlands Dairy Agency), 1956.

Milk was marketed as an indispensable material for the cultivation of healthy bodies and a prosperous Dutch nation. Campaigns such as *Melk, onze nationale drank* (*Milk, Our National Drink*) in 1935 and *Néerlands Zuivel, voedt u goed!* (*Dutch Dairy, Feed Yourself Well*) in 1936 demonstrate the commercial alignment of individual bodies with a national body politic. Illustrated advertisements from the second campaign were accompanied by the phrase “*zuivel kweekt gezonde kinderen en een krachtig volk*” (“dairy breeds healthy children and a strong population”). The Dutch verb “*kweken*,” meaning to breed, grow, or cultivate, evokes a usage reminiscent of animal breeding and physical anthropology. This type of terminology evinces a material connection: dairy foodstuffs cultivate healthy bodies able to collectively create a strong nation. A tangible implementation of this narrative was the introduction of “*schoolmelk*” (“school milk”) in the mid-1930s. To foster physical and mental well-being, the Dutch government subsidized the country-wide provision of milk in primary schools. School milk became so popular that by the 1950s, almost every primary school in the Netherlands participated in the program (Reinders and Vernooy 119).

Aside from the mandatory milk consumption in schools, dairy promotions were often directed at children. For instance, the *Melkbrigade* (“milk brigade,” also known as *M-Brigade*) was a pseudo-militaristic campaign of the 1950s and 1960s resembling a youth movement, with over 400,000 Dutch children as members during its heyday (“Ere-Brigadier”). When children drank at least three glasses of milk daily, they acquired cotton patches with an “M” to proudly display their membership. The *Melkbrigade* organized milk quizzes, fieldtrips, parades, and theatrical shows in concert halls with famous Dutch people who endorsed milk. In these instances, an emotive sense of being is formulated through specific consumption patterns. In the case of the *Melkbrigade*, milk was made desirable, connected to entertaining experiences for children and adults, and constructed as an integral part of “Dutchness.”

In this way, the article or commodity being promoted accumulates affective value. Sara Ahmed explores how certain emotions stick to objects, considering how affect is a form of capital and how the circulation of objects and their emotive associations shapes the material world. Accordingly, feelings appear in objects or, indeed, as objects (Ahmed 121). Ahmed argues that affective economies help to align individual bodies with communities and can thus shape “the body of the nation” (121). As such, the affective circulation of milk enables the articulation of an imagined community. Importantly, which emotions “stick” to particular objects is also “bound up with the ‘absent presence’ of historicity”—that is, affective economies normalize certain objects by obscuring particular aspects, such as their histories of production, exchange, or circulation; in other words, their material entwinements (Ahmed 120).

Making the Milkable Body

By taking milk as a relational fluid that shapes Dutch bodies and matter, the campaigns discussed above bring into play affective economies and create a realm of imagined national belonging. However, what happens if we truly consider milk as the relational fluid it is, and not just in the way it has been served up to us by these campaigns? When we consider milk not as a static object but as a particular subject-object relation, we may better grasp its “thingness” (Brown 4). Bill Brown writes how things are “what is excessive in objects” as the force by which objects become “values, fetishes, idols and totems” (5). Whereas an object is banal and naturalized to us, it becomes a thing when we encounter its unfamiliarity. Tim Ingold notes how “things can exist and persist only because they *leak*” (483). Thingness thus leaks into the demarcation of a material as an object and, in so doing, amounts to latency and excess (Brown 5). In the vast symbolism of the object, we find hints of its thingness—its unfamiliarity—because of the inherent relationality of material.

Let us return to milk and attend to its latency and excess. While the national dairy associations were marketing milk as a way to increase bodily health and national productivity, the cows producing that milk endured severe physical transformations. From the 1950s onwards, the Dutch dairy industry has been amply subsidized by the European Economic Community and the European Union, a funding that continues to this day (“EU-subsidies” 5). By the mid-twentieth century, the milk production of Dutch cows was the highest in the world (Theunissen and Jansen 280). Decades of intensive breeding, veterinary interventions, and agricultural engineering had paid off in “veeverbetering” (“cattle improvement”). Whereas the average Dutch cow produced 2500 liters of milk annually in 1910, this had increased to 4000 liters by the 1950s and is now over 8000 liters per annum (“Nederlandse landbouwproductie 1950–2015”; “Meer melkvee”).

The cows’ milk we know today is the product of an appetite for pure and perfectible cattle and the result of a long and complex genealogy of breeding practices. The preoccupation with clean and purebred (“*raszuiver*”) cattle frequently mirrored and informed broader societal discussions and practices concerning human racial and hygienic purity (Theunissen and Jansen 282). A harrowing example is the recruitment of cattle breeders by National Socialist officials for social policy-making (Bauman 258). Richard Walther Darré, a leading *Blut und Boden* (“blood and soil”) ideologist, compared the breeding of cattle to the breeding of humans and took inspiration from his years of working in livestock genetics (Zelinger 372).¹ An article in the Dutch anti-Semitic paper *De Misthoorn* from 1940 similarly reports how a farmer

¹ Darré was a race theorist who wrote *Neuadel aus Blut und Boden* (1930), in which he developed the *Blut und Boden* ideology about the mutual relationship between a people and the land they occupy and cultivate, and formulated a systemic eugenics program to actualize this

proudly keeps a milk registry for his purebred cattle (“*De zuivere bron...*”). Dutch soil is described as flowing into the purebred cows whose health, in turn, infuses their pure milk and ultimately feeds the strength of the “Germanic spirit” and “*volkskracht*” (“nation’s power”) of the (White) Dutch people. This passage parallels the contemporary *Nederland draait op zuivel* campaign, except that it overtly reiterates a racial rhetoric that usually remains latent. Here, we see spelled out something intrinsic in many of the milk campaigns previously discussed—that milk signified Whiteness and that it not only served to affectively consolidate national identity, but also racial identity.

Milk is negotiated discursively through ideas of purity and hygiene, calculability and economic profit, and such ideas materialized in the breeding of cows and the production of milk. The dairy industry creates hyperproductive beings in one very specific environment with one particular goal—producing the most milk. In her seminal work *Beasts of Burden* (2017), writer, activist, and artist Sunaura Taylor addresses how the animal agricultural industry generates disability. Writing at the convergence of disability studies, animal ethics, and ecofeminism, Taylor elucidates the material interwovenness of various dis/abled bodies. Namely, the milk industry normalizes and commercializes forms of impairment, making the disabled animal body productive and desirable while simultaneously obscuring that disablement. By specifically selecting the genes of cows who produce the most milk, their udders become almost too heavy for their bodies (Taylor, *Beasts of Burden* 32). Aside from their congenital corporeal status as the result of rigorous breeding practices, many cows suffer from psychological distress and additional ailments. A healthy cow in a factory farm is an oxymoron (Somers and Soldatic 38). The material environment of the factory farm is in itself disabling, with small enclosures that inhibit movement and slippery, feces-laden floors that cripple cows. Whereas cows can live up to twenty years, cows in the dairy industry are “milked to death” in a matter of a few years, easily replaced by one of the many female calves they give birth to.

Taylor also addresses the effect on humans performing manual labor on farms and in slaughterhouses, who are disproportionately exposed to distressing conditions. The milk industry relies on low-paid migrant labor, where the proximity to impaired and dead animals places them at greater risk of zoonotic diseases and dangerous pathogens and where the high-paced machinery and pressure to be ever more productive leads to bodily injuries (Timmermans and Clevers). Pollution and antibiotic resistance generated through factory farming put the health of many more people at risk (Marchese and Hovorka 3). Milk is heralded as the key to productivity, health, and able-bodiedness, but it also brings illness, disability, and death to those implicated in its production. Arguably, the “thingness” of milk is present both

ideology. *Blut und Boden* became a key slogan in Nazi ideology, legitimizing the implementation of unspeakable violence.

in its excess—the surplus of expendable (animal and human) bodies it creates, and in its latency—the underlying senses of White supremacy that easily transpire.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have sought to understand what is made with the material of milk and what the material itself is made of. Milk as a material is configured vis-à-vis specific bodies, enabling certain (able, White, human) bodies to be affectively aligned with Dutch national identity, while other bodies are made disposable. The cultivation of the perfect dairy cow has changed their physicality to a point where their bodies support a kind of material determinism, confined in their flesh to fulfill the role that was instilled in their very anatomy through decades of selective breeding. Exploring these aspects in tandem shows how a bodily substance is both made and expected to make others. Within the vast state-sponsored promotion of milk as a vital material for the health of the nation and its corporeal constituents, we can sense that milk's visceral connection to other—human and nonhuman—bodies is never far away. The health and productivity ascribed to milk ingestion by humans stand in stark contrast to the reality of a cow's existence. In the matrix of making and unmaking desirable corporealities and various degrees of able-bodiedness, some material realities remain largely unseen.

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