

# BEHIND THE BLOOMS:

## CONTRADICTIONS IN THE CUT FLOWER GLOBAL COMMODITY CHAIN

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This essay investigates the global commodity chain of cut flowers starting from their production on Colombian farms, through a time-bound distribution network, and finally to their consumption in the supermarkets and florists of Toronto. The contrasts between exploitative conditions in the Colombian flower industry and flower consumption practices are highlighted using the Marxist theory of commodity fetishism – the substitution of social relations between people with relations between objects. Cultural practices related to flowers have become so normalised that the commodity fetishism in their consumption draws attention away from where and how flowers are produced, allowing them to be preserved as natural, uncontaminated symbols of femininity, romance, and aesthetic enjoyment. The highly industrialized production process, hazardous manual labour, and complex speed of distribution networks that allow flowers to reach our local florist are pushed from consumer consciousness. This essay works to make transparent the exploitative labour conditions behind our blooms which have been obscured by social customs of consumer society.

### Introduction

In the rural outskirts of the Colombian capital of Bogota, women work up to 16-hour days on flower farms, bent over bushes, measuring stems, clipping thorns, and delicately packaging flowers. In just 72 hours, those flowers will be displayed in buckets lining the sidewalks of Toronto's flower district and purchased as a gift for a loved one or an act of self-care, likely ending up on an Instagram feed by the end of the day. In 2016, Canada imported \$103 million of roses, carnations, chrysanthemums, lilies, and orchids from Colombia (Statistics Canada, 2017). As with most commodities, the consumption of fresh-cut flowers is a part of social relations and practices that are tied to global geographies of power (Mansvelt, 2013). Although used as means of expressing identity, few consumers are aware of where their flowers originate from or the identities of those who produce them. In this study, I follow the global commodity chain of cut flowers from a production site on Colombian farms, through a time-bound distribution network centered in Miami, and finally to their consumption in the supermarkets and florists of Toronto. I argue that the commodity fetishism embedded in the consumption of flowers works to mask the exploitative labour conditions within the cut flower industry. My analysis works to expose these exploitative origins which have been hidden behind the social customs of consumer society.

## Theoretical Background

The relationship between processes of production and consumption in the context of global inequality involves exchanges that typically favour the global north or the dominant, industrialised regions (Ziegler, 2007). During northern winters, millions of fresh blooms are delivered to Canada, allowing people to express culturally accepted forms of social relations year-round. The global commodity chain analysis provides a lens through which we can examine the processes and networks that allow these flowers to be grown, delivered, and consumed more than 4000 km away. Consumption consists of a range of social relations, practices, and meanings “centered on the sale, purchase, use, and disposal of commodities” (Mansvelt, 2013, p. 379). In the 19th century classic *Capital*, Karl Marx first conceptualized commodity fetishism as the substitution of social relations between people with relations between objects (Bohm & Batta, 2010). Under commodity fetishism then, the social labour involved in the production of an item is objectified once the product enters the capitalist market and is given an exchange value. Today’s capitalist society is dominated by commodity fetishism, “producing a modern subject that constantly desires to consume more in order to constitute itself” (Bohm & Batta, 2010, p. 345). Through consumption practices shaped by desire, pleasure, and self-expression, consumers in the global north actively take part in the reproduction of capitalist social relations and exploitative labour conditions such as those in the Colombian Flower Industry (CFI).

Billig (1999) argues that social customs related to consumption work to erase the production process from general awareness. When buying flowers, consumers are often not told who produced them, the location of the farm, or the conditions of their labour. Marx argues that capitalist markets impose this impersonal objectivity by assigning monetary value to products, so that consumers only recognize a bouquet of flowers as a commodity and not as the product of human labour (Bohm & Batta, 2010). From this perspective, I analyse the consumption of flowers in contemporary industrialised societies as a practice of commodity fetishism. I focus specifically on Columbia because it has the second largest flower export industry in the world after the Netherlands and constitutes the largest share of flower imports in Canada (Ziegler, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2017). In the following section, I explore the range of exploitative labour practices used in the production of Colombian cut flowers.

## Production

The high savannah area surrounding the Colombian capital of Bogota has rich soil, an abundant groundwater supply, 12 hours of daily sunlight, and consistently moderate temperatures, producing an ideal climate for growing flowers year-round (Ziegler, 2007). This eliminates the need for expensive greenhouses, costly heating, and artificial lighting, avoiding the seasonal and climatic challenges limiting North American growers. The large supply of labour accustomed to working for low wages due to high unemployment rates was another main attraction for the establishment of flower farms in Colombia during the 1960s (Patel-Campillo, 2012). Over the 1970s and 1980s, flower growing declined in the US and Canada as cheap imports increased through the development of a global flower trade made possible by jet transportation, new cultivation and communication technologies, and international financial arrangements (Ziegler, 2007). In the 1980s, the flower industry shifted from its historic center in the Netherlands to Colombia, and by 2004 the CFI had grown to export more than US\$703 million annually (Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007). However, high annual sales revenues and increases in productivity were made at the cost of worker’s rights (Balch, 2015).

Labour represents 50% of production costs in the flower industry, as human labour is required for cultivation, selection, and cutting where machines cannot be used in the narrow, delicate spaces of greenhouses (Miller, 2012). The industry employs over 100,000 people, 70% of whom are women who are the sole earners of household income or supplement their family income (McQuaid, 2011; Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007). Gendered divisions of labour on CFI farms allocate women to jobs involving detail and obedience in the production and care of flowers, whereas men are concentrated in management, supervision, and technical positions. Most field workers are racialized peasant migrants escaping violent conflicts and rural poverty, from indigenous, mixed-race, and African backgrounds, whereas middle and upper-class workers in administrative and managerial roles are from urban areas, of European descent, and are western educated (Friedemann-Sánchez, 2006; Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007).

Pressures of the highly competitive global flower trade drive employers to exploit their workers. Long shifts of up to 15 hours ignore women's roles in the private sphere, as they balance paid labour with unpaid social reproduction work. Workloads are intensified by the absence of government support systems such as daycare, health care, and schooling (Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007). Although women are happy to be wage earners, dangerous working conditions, instability, and low pay do not allow for the advancement of their own or their children's socioeconomic status (Patel-Campillo, 2012; Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007). The hard work at plantations leaves women little time to take care of themselves or their children and participate as social beings in the wider community, thus the ability of these jobs to empower women is highly limited (Friedemann-Sánchez, 2006; Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007). Although labour power has been key to the growth of CFI, minimum wage salaries of field workers are below the poverty line, at \$0.48 an hour, covering only 40% of a family's monthly expenses (Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007).

Labour conditions in the CFI are also a source of numerous health complications. The heavy use of chemical pesticides and lack of protective clothing in closed greenhouse environments are a major cause of higher rates of miscarriages, stillbirths, and birth defects among female workers and the wives of male workers (Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007). 21% of the chemicals used in the Savannah are carcinogens and toxins that are banned in the US, while employees chronically suffer from asthma, carpal tunnel syndrome, and posture problems due to cramped working conditions and the quick pace of production (Miller, 2012). Women also face psychological issues due to long hours, verbal abuse, extreme pressure from supervisors to be more productive, and instances of sexual harassment by male coworkers (McQuaid, 2011; Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007). High temperatures and humidity, low levels of clean air circulation, and little drinking water produce a harsh work environment (Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007). National labour rights standards are not enforced on CFI farms, and workers can be fired for falling ill, organising a union, complaining to government authorities, showing high levels of pesticide exposure, or requiring maternity leave (Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007; Miller, 2012). As workers are given short-term contracts to maintain employer flexibility, the fear of not being granted an extension of contract creates instability and insecurity which disempowers workers and inhibits them from forming labour movements to demand better standards (Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007).

The CFI has destroyed many attempts to unionise by refusing to bargain with unions, firing unionised workers, declaring bankruptcy, and abandoning plantations without unemployment compensation when workers attempt to organize (Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007). The Florverde Sustainable Flowers seal is an association of Colombian flower exporters marketed as being environmentally and socially responsible through employment protections, health and safety requirements (Balch, 2015). However, enforcement is lax and voluntary codes dependent on

each farm owner provide little protection. Florverde workers report 15-hour work days, unpaid pensions, and no health insurance (Miller, 2012). The financial success of the cut flower global commodity chain thus relies on the underpaid, precarious, and exploitative work of Colombian women, while plantation owners sell flowers at low prices. The following section explores the highly efficient and profitable distribution networks that allow these flowers to be sold to consumers in the global north.

### Distribution

Cut flower circulation is a race to cheat death in which low temperatures and high humidity must be continually maintained to slow flower metabolism and delay the decaying process (McDaniel, 1999). Retailers want to receive cut flowers as soon as possible after harvest to lengthen vase life and increase customer satisfaction. Cut flowers are distributed through a “cold chain” in which transportation, handling, and storage are temperature controlled in order to make the supply chain as long as possible. Flowers are cut at dawn and set in buckets of preservative solution in cooling warehouses to condition them for shipment (McDaniel, 1999). Tied bunches of flowers are then packaged into boxes, loaded into refrigerated trucks, and sent to El Dorado Airport in Bogota from which 20 daily cargo planes fly shipments to Miami (Haragan, 2015). After inspection by U.S. customs for pests and drugs hidden in flower stems, flowers are shipped to wholesalers and distributors across North America (Ziegler, 2007). An extensive cold chain infrastructure is located in Miami with 24-hour inspections, fumigations, and distribution (Haragan, 2015). Flowers typically take 48 hours to travel from a field in Colombia to a warehouse in the US, and one or two more days to reach a retailer (McQuaid, 2011).

Because of the perishability of flowers, timely sale is critical and requires tight buyer-supplier coordination (Raynolds, 2012). Wholesale florists and importers are essential to the process as they unload shipments into cold storage, divide large quantities of flowers into smaller bunches, and deliver them to local florists, supermarket chains, and convenience stores in refrigerated trucks (Ziegler, 2007). The flowers arrive dry packed, which means they have been dormant during the journey and must be “woken up” using a hydrating solution that preserves freshness (McDaniel, 1999). To account for this expensive flower logistics while also maintaining low retail prices, growers often cut wages to reduce overall costs (Ziegler, 2007). Thus, at the expense of Columbian flower producers, consumers are able to perform their relationships with fresh, inexpensive, imported flowers, without having to acknowledge the inequitable conditions behind their blooms.

### Consumption

Commodity fetishism not only obscures the social labours of production but also works to mediate relationships with special social meanings tied into flower consumption. With the widespread availability of cheap South American imports, Ziegler (2007) argues that although still a luxury item, flower consumption has been “democratized” to include more working-class people. Today, women are the primary consumers of flowers, and most flower purchases occur in supermarkets and street vendors, destabilizing elite spaces of traditional florists (Ziegler, 2007). Although cut flowers are not necessary to life and have no utilitarian function, they are used to express cultural and social meaning, shape class status, relationships, and self-presentation of identity. Flowers are used for domestic decoration, romantic gifts, and marking important life events such as births, weddings, funerals, and graduations (Patel-Campillo, 2012). Because these cultural practices have become so habitual and normalised in consumer society, the com-



modity fetishism in their consumption draws attention away from where and how flowers may have been produced.

Using flowers to communicate emotion to others and nurture relationships makes their consumption embedded in processes of cultural reproduction of social relations. Relationships are thus mediated by objects, rather than by social relations between people, in the process of commodity fetishism. Consequently, the labour behind flowers is transformed into objective monetary value, as “custom, or habit, fixes a price to commodities and in consequence, the hidden secret [of labour] disappears from awareness” (Billig, 1999, p. 316).



*Figure 1:* The flower-saturated Instagram feed of a popular Toronto based lifestyle blogger with over 100,000 followers (Instagram: @thiswildheart, 2018).

Several ironies exist in the contrast between flower consumption and the lived realities of production. Whereas Mother’s Day is a major holiday for flower purchases, the CFI treats motherhood as a means for dismissal, as female workers who become pregnant are fired or must continue working in toxic chemicals out of economic necessity, often leading to miscarriages and stillbirths (Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007). This link between custom and lack of awareness conceals the labour involved in the production of commodities, which Marx argued to be the process of “social forgetting” (Billig, 1999). Commodity fetishism confirms that objects such as flowers have symbolic value, allowing consumers to convey meaning in their relationships (Ziegler, 2007). Advertising campaigns for Valentine’s Day perpetuate gendered gifting practices which work to normalise consumer behaviour. Pressure on workers is intensified before major holidays such as Valentine’s Day, during which women must work 16-hour shifts under

strict monitoring with little opportunity to rest while working at incredible speeds to keep productivity high (Balch, 2015). The social amnesia, however, allows these exploitative origins of one's Valentine's Day roses to be pushed from collective awareness and forgotten (Billig, 1999).

In recent decades, the global commodity chain of cut flowers has responded to new needs and desires in consumer culture, as more people now purchase flowers for themselves and for domestic decoration (Ziegler, 2007). These needs relate to conceptions of the self and the way consumer goods are employed in identity expression. Advertising and marketing industries promote the necessity and desirability of goods with personal and cultural value, as consumption provides a medium for identity to be shaped and reproduced (Mansvelt, 2013). Ziegler (2007) argues that identity creation is fundamental to mainstream flower consumption practices as individuals search for reassurance about who they are and how they fit into contemporary society through their purchasing choices. Her interviews with flower consumers showed that women bought flowers to change their emotions and ideas of themselves, and to make one's space their own by choosing a product that represents their tastes.

New flower consumption practices are also a consequence of media industries' emphasis on individual identity and self-expression. People's choices to consume flowers are influenced by magazines, movies, and social media; structural cultural forces which encourage flower consumption through "images of flower-saturated existences and celebrity lives" (Ziegler, 2007, p. 14). Although Ziegler's research during the early 2000s identified magazines as a major influencer of flower consumption, today that impact can be seen more strongly in the exhibitionist world of social media. A search for flowers on the popular social media platform Instagram produces over 116 million image results (Instagram, 2018). Fresh-cut flowers are commonly used imagery to beautify the online portrayal of daily life by fashion and lifestyle bloggers, who are often labelled as "influencers" within the sphere of online, social media-based marketing (Abidin, 2016).

Successful influencers also recommend fresh-cut flowers as props that aspiring bloggers should include in their feeds to increase follow counts and user engagement (McKillop, 2017; Happy Grey Lucky, 2017). These depictions of flowered life indicate a particular social status and a disposable income able to afford the luxury of flowers, making visible the intangible signs of status, wealth, and cultural capital (Ziegler, 2007). The burgeoning literature on identity creation on social media shows that users partake in conspicuous consumption of goods online in an effort to express their class identity (Abidin, 2016; Taylor & Strutton, 2015; Sinanan et al, 2014). Through such practices, flowers assist in creating and sustaining individual identities and become a part of the stories used to "tell ourselves and others about who we are, where we belong, and the lives we would like to live" (Ziegler, 2007, p. 194). Since commodities are consumed as a means of pleasure and identity creation, their continued circulation is dependent on rendering invisible the exploitative labour conditions involved in their production (Billig, 1999).

Commodities must be separated from the bodies which have created them in order for the object to truly be "mine" and enjoyed as such. My sense of possession and drive to consume more would be diminished if I imagined the exploitative conditions which have produced my flowers. Billig (1999) views consumer capitalism as a form of repression in which such disturbing thoughts are pushed from consumer consciousness. By looking at a beautifully arranged bouquet of flowers, it is difficult to discern the living conditions of the Colombian women bent over rose bushes, developing repetitive strain injuries, and breathing in toxic chemicals. Such images

would interrupt the consumer's enjoyment of the commodity, so the flowers must be viewed objectively by only their exchange value. This forgetting at the core of commodity fetishism is socially shared and engrained into the daily patterns of life in capitalist societies (Billig, 1999). Ziegler's ethnographic research on the cut flower consumer market in the New York Metropolitan Area confirms many of these arguments:

“Very few buyers of today's flowers know their origins. Sidney Krauss's comments were typical: “I never think about where the flowers come from,” he responded, surprised by my question. “I assume they are grown locally. There are a lot of nurseries. Where do they get flowers?” (Ziegler, 2007, p. 226).

This ambiguity of flowers' origin allows consumers to imprint their own notions of pleasure and luxury onto the commodity. Sanctioned by capitalist relations, this pursuit of pleasure demands a repression of the social realities of flower workers in order to erase a moral and ethical guilt which would spoil the act of consumption (Billig, 1999). Ziegler argues that the conception of purity in naturally grown flowers is transferred onto commodified flowers, turning them into objects that seem to exist beyond the realms of capitalist production. Consumers thus fail to see the highly industrialized production process, exploitation of the environment, difficult manual labour, and complex speed of distribution networks which have allowed the flowers to reach their local florists. These processes are objectified once the flowers become a commodity in the market. Masking the production of cut flowers allows the commodity to maintain its cultural meanings and be preserved as sublime, uncontaminated symbols of femininity, love, romance, and aesthetic enjoyment (Ziegler, 2007). It is this commodity fetishism engrained in the consumption of flowers that allows the exploitative production process to be hidden from awareness and to continue quietly.

### Conclusion

The availability of fresh cut flowers is intimately tied to the exploitation of workers in the global south. When commodities are objectified and seen only for their monetary value, the human labour involved in their production becomes hidden in the process of commodity fetishism. The CFI is plagued by meager wages, precarity, occupational hazards, forced overtime, gender discrimination, and lack of union representation (Raynolds, 2012). Commodity fetishism in the consumption of flowers drives the global commodity chain and allows the exploitation of labour to persist. The future of socially responsible flowers however, should not consist entirely of locally grown flowers. Miller (2012) found that Colombian women urged Northern consumers not to boycott their flowers since the industry provides employment and helps sustain some livelihood for themselves and their families. Instead, they asked consumers to demand retailers to supply flowers with better social responsibility and certification seals such as Fairtrade which has been shown to improve working conditions, labour rights, social benefits, and the standard of living for workers on Ecuadorian flower farms (Reynolds, 2012). However, Fairtrade farm owners question the commitment of mainstream consumers as low demand for certified flowers has inhibited the sustainability of their ethical practices and decreased interest in fair trade (Reynolds, 2012).

This speaks to the power of commodity fetishism in flower consumption which has obscured the realities of production so much so that consumers have failed to support ethical flowers despite their availability. The cut flower global commodity chain is driven by consumer demand and making this process more transparent can impact the lives of CFI workers if consumers

make informed choices to purchase fair trade flowers. Furthermore, this exemplifies the importance of global commodity chain research as a means of exposing exploitative labour conditions, breaking down commodity fetishism, and bringing greater awareness to consumers. Further research on the cut flower commodity chain should examine the role of wholesalers, importers, and other distributors in controlling the demand and availability of socially responsible flowers. We must remember that the fetishized commodities, which are integral to our sense of self and the expression of our relationships, are produced by unnamed "others" under conditions of exploitation.

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