In recent years, both scholars and consumers have become much more adept at thinking critically about commodity chains. Of course, this work is not entirely new: Sidney W. Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985) on sugar production is now nearly forty years old. In different disciplinary hands, examining commodity chains reveals a variety of insights: from focusing on what environmental transformations underwrite commodity production or how consumer tastes are cultivated and ascribed, to addressing how the labor demands of commodity production can remake bodies, families, and communities. Geographer Andreas Gemählich’s book on the Kenyan cut flower industry draws attention to the relationship between local “social-ecological systems” and global corporate systems. Applying insights from actor-network theory, Gemählich examines how markets make and remake places and processes through production. Indeed, Gemählich corrects the notion that we should be studying commodity “chains” at all: at the heart of transnational corporations and the commodities they sell is a series of contingent, interdependent networks constantly coming into existence. As a result, while this is explicitly a story about flower farms in Nakuru, it is more accurately a story about the ongoing making of the flower market by Kenyan firms and buyers in Europe. The key transformation in that relationship in recent years has been the entry of corporate retailers and direct sales between farmers and retailers, leading to “new market encounters” between Kenyan growers and corporate buyers (p. 82). This new set of relationships has grown alongside and sometimes overtaken the important and interpersonal networks that have propped up the long-running flower auctions that used to solely govern buying and selling.

For centuries, the Netherlands has been the center of Europe’s cut flower industry. Gemählich shows how enduring the Dutch system has been, surviving attempts to create new market hubs in other European cities. Much of this endurance is due to the gravitational force of infrastructure and history (or what Gemählich refers to as “territorial
embeddedness” [p. 83]), but he notes that the Dutch system has staying power precisely because it has the capacity to absorb and change alongside transformations in the industry.

The industry in Naivasha comprises about fifty flower farms that have emerged in the past fifty years to make the region into a hospitable place for flower growing due to a mix of environmental, social, and legal factors. The high altitude and steady temperature of the region year-round fosters reliable growing conditions. The industry was not highly regulated for much of the 1980s and 1990s, allowing farm owners in the early years to profit hugely. Due to its historic role in colonial agricultural production, the region has also been home to labor migrants from other parts of Kenya. In this narrative of untrammeled growth in the early years, the introduction of international regulations—such as Fair Trade certification—intervened in labor and environmental conditions and has winnowed down profits so that firms today are often surviving by the skin of their teeth. In turn, flower prices have also decreased (European supermarkets expect to sell bouquets for three to five euros), and for an industry with immense capital costs, Naivasha firms now yield about thirty euros a square meter, with one hundred to three hundred stems planted per meter (p. 125). With such slim margins in Kenya, where labor costs are much lower and climatic conditions require fewer production costs, it is no big surprise that Dutch growers are unable to “compete.” Indeed, the roses that travel from the shores of Lake Naivasha to Amsterdam’s Schipol Airport and onto my local Sainsbury’s in Edinburgh are the essence of Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore’s notion of a “cheap” thing. For Patel and Moore, cheap is never a bargain but rather made inexpensive to consumers by suppressing the true ecological and labor costs of production—a sleight of hand historically produced through the entanglements of capitalism and empire.[1] What Gemählich does so well is to show how all-consuming the process of constantly producing “cheap things” is for the firms themselves. Cheap flowers require farm managers to develop contradictory aptitudes to scale up and remain lean and flexible. Technology that might aid in these transformations is expensive and does not obviate the need for a large labor force. Chapter 6 is an enlightening look at this constant process, particularly what it takes to try out new flower varietal. Trying out new breeds is both a necessity of an industry trying to entice its customers and a liability of being “locked in” to growing a flower until royalty payments are no longer due.

From my own disciplinary perch as an environmental historian, some of Gemählich’s terms left me cold, but I hesitate to critique them as an outsider. For example, Gemählich examines the “social-ecological system” (SES) of Lake Naivasha in his final chapter from the view of various “stakeholders” in the region. Essentially, this chapter is about what happens when the things that make other lives possible in Naivasha—water, fish, land—become economized by the flower industry and, in turn, what role a “stable” environment plays in market relations. But the terminology is deployed more self-evidently than I could grasp as an outsider to the field. “Stakeholder” in particular strikes me as a term that can slip imperceptibly between corporate speak and academic analysis and I lost purchase on it in that process. What happens when “stakeholders” are identified and when diverse groups are also made uniform or equal through such a term? Perhaps this is too expansive a demand to make on Gemählich, and yet this very process by which complicated histories (and networks) become flattened into stakeholder claims seems quite at the heart of this book’s exciting contribution to how we think about the production of commodities.

Note

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