

# **PRECARIOUS MIGRANTS: GENDER, RACE AND THE SOCIAL REPRODUCTION OF A GLOBAL WORKING CLASS**

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*'This guestworker program's the closest thing I've ever seen to slavery'.<sup>1</sup>*

*'No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them'.<sup>2</sup>*

Each of the quotes above speaks to a distinct aspect of contemporary capitalism in North America: the first refers to America's migrant labour system; the second references Mexico's *maquiladora* factory zone and the epidemic of murders of women working there. In truth, these apparently distinct systems form a unity. North America's 'guestworker' programmes and Mexico's deregulated labour regimes are interlocking spaces in the social geography and political economy of neoliberal capitalism. These zones of precarity comprise reconfigured spaces of capital, work, gender, race and social reproduction in late capitalism. Linked in obvious ways by flows of capital they are equally connected by movements of people, particularly the migrant workers who represent the ideal precarious labourer of the neoliberal era. Yet another spatial flow defines this economic geography: the cross-border movement of wages that connects otherwise separated sites of labour and domestic social reproduction. Wages rarely sustain just the immediate producer; they also reproduce her family members. And in the case of migrant workers, such reproduction frequently involves remittance across borders – and transnational survival networks. At least half a billion people on the planet receive wage remittances. The sending of the latter also follows a powerfully gendered pattern, as female migrants send higher shares of their earnings to family members in their countries of origin.

Small academic industries have emerged in the study of both migrant labour and *maquila* factory systems. And recently, economists have paid increased attention to the financial flows attendant on wage remittances.<sup>3</sup>

Studies that map out the complex interrelations between cross-border movements of capital, labour and wages in the social reproduction of class relations in all their multi-dimensionality are much less developed. This essay proposes some conceptual guidelines for theorizing those relations. While its frame of reference is global, its focus is on North American movements of capital, people and wages – and the associated regimes governing (gendered and racialized) migrant labour, border security, and financial remittances – as these are paradigmatic of genuinely worldwide social processes. In suggesting pathways toward theorizing the inner connections among these seemingly disparate phenomena, we explore patterns of primitive accumulation, dispossession, capital flows, migration, racialization, work and gender relations in an effort to illuminate crucial dimensions of the social reproduction of capital and labour today.

Our work in this area is inspired by a Marxist-feminist approach that understands social reproduction in terms of the inner connections of household, neighbourhood and community activities with the monetized social activities (predominantly wage-labour) necessary to market-dependent reproduction, wherein food, housing, transportation, clothing and so on must be purchased as commodities. The term ‘monetized activities’ points to the fact that, while wage-labour is the principal means of subsistence for the dispossessed, activities such as street-vending, selling sex and independent domestic production are also part of the social picture. As much as monetized practices are decisive in a capitalist market society, they are crucially interconnected with domestic and neighbourhood activities ranging from cooking and cleaning to childcare and recreation. An adequate theorization of the *total* social reproduction of the capital-labour relation thus requires a multi-dimensional analysis which, while acknowledging the decisive role of waged-work and other monetized practices, situates these within a nexus of practices through which working-class life is produced and reproduced.

In exploring the interconnections between workplaces and households, social reproduction theory as it developed within Marxist-feminism has enabled deeper understanding of the interrelations of gender and class in modern capitalism. While underlining this accomplishment, we are nonetheless dissatisfied that a considerable amount of work in this tradition has operated within a national framework by taking the nation-state as *the* macro-level site for the social reproduction of labouring people. The result has been a neglect of more global social processes (by all means bound up with relations among states) and patterns of transnational social reproduction. Fortunately, some important critical work has opened more promising directions in recent years by conceptualizing social reproduction

in its interrelations with the global political economy.<sup>4</sup>

The shortcomings of the ‘methodological nationalism’ within one influential strain of social reproduction analysis are threefold. First, in not situating the national within the global, this approach fails to grasp nation-states as determinate locations within a system of global economics and geopolitics.<sup>5</sup> The result is an underestimation of the global dynamics that significantly drive ‘national’ policies regulating labour markets, immigration, education and so on. Secondly, it loses sight of international processes of dispossession and primitive accumulation which, among other things, generate *global reserves of labour-power* whose cross-border movements are at the heart of the worldwide production and reproduction of capital and labour.<sup>6</sup> Finally, inadequate theorization of the global space of capitalist production and reproduction tends to obscure the *central* roles of racism and imperialism in the constitution of the actual relations of capital and of the complexly differentiated global working class.

This means situating the social reproduction of working classes in relation to the hierarchically structured *global market in human labour-power*. The distinct national spaces within the world market in labour are linked together as elements of a complex social whole constituted by racialized forms of citizenship and non-membership, and differentiated domains of ‘security’ and precarity, all governed by an overriding logic of control and exploitation of labour. Seen in these terms, the social reproduction of the global working class crucially entails processes of migration and racialization that are *inseparable* from its class and gender dimensions.<sup>7</sup> The deepening of a social reproduction analysis centred on the (hierarchically and racially) differentiated global labour market is thus vital to a robust analysis of working-class formation today.

#### PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION, DISPOSSESSION AND THE GLOBAL LABOUR MARKET

*‘Capital needs the means of production and labour-power of the whole globe’*

– Rosa Luxemburg<sup>8</sup>

Marx was well aware that capital has to ensure the reproduction of a working class sufficient to meet the demands of accumulation, thereby circumventing sustained labour shortages. He understood that capital does not directly produce labour power and therefore requires some specific social process to ensure adequate supplies of that crucial commodity. Yet his account of this process – what he described as ‘the capitalist law of population’ – is significantly flawed. In Chapter 25 of *Capital*, he argues that a section of the working class is regularly made redundant due to ongoing mechanization of

production. Since mechanization is labour-displacing, the capitalist mode of production will systematically generate a reserve army of labour – a mass of unemployed workers – whose growth in numbers is tendentially inexhaustible. The dynamic of labour-displacing accumulation constitutes, he claims, ‘a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production’. And because this surplus population is always available for exploitation, it ‘forms a disposable industrial reserve army, which belongs to capital just as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost’.<sup>9</sup>

All of this pivots, however, on a tacit assumption: that the rate of biological reproduction typical of early English capitalism will remain largely unchanged. Yet Marx does not provide any *social* account as to why this should be so, defaulting instead to a naturalistic assumption: when it comes to ‘the maintenance and reproduction of the working class’, he writes, capital ‘may safely leave this to the worker’s drives for self-preservation and propagation’.<sup>10</sup> This, however, treats workers’ generational reproduction as a *strictly* naturo-biological process, rather than as a biologically-grounded domain of human material life that is socially mediated and hence historically variable. Equally damaging, his naturalistic premise has been empirically refuted. Throughout nineteenth-century industrialization, working-class women in Europe and North America increasingly asserted control over biological reproduction, precipitating a sharp and continuous decline in pregnancies, childbirth and household size. This dramatic development, which halved the average number of children borne by married women in Europe, (once dubbed by Seccombe ‘The Great Proletarian Fertility Decline’) demonstrates that the generational renewal of the working class is a socio-historical process, powerfully influenced by women’s reproductive choices.<sup>11</sup> Instead of leaving this process ‘to the worker’s drives for self-preservation and propagation’, as Marx suggested, capital increasingly turned to the state, promoting laws that strictly regulated birth control and abortion, while also advancing immigration policies that reflected capital’s need for a substantial reserve army of labour.

To be sure, Marx’s ‘law’ looked more compelling during his own lifetime, as European capitalism experienced such growing labour surpluses that widespread emigration was the norm. Over the course of the century before the First World War, for instance, 50 million people left Europe.<sup>12</sup> While specific nation-states had especially high rates of emigration – Italy and Ireland, for instance – the trend also held for industrialized Britain and Germany. Much of this had to do with ongoing processes of internal primitive accumulation that displaced rural producers from the land and drove them into markets in wage-labour – something that does not figure

formally in the workings of Marx's 'law', and a point to which we shall return. Even when significant internal reserves were available, emigration coexisted with immigration, particularly of the casual, seasonal and low-wage variety. By the middle of the nineteenth century, European labour markets had begun to manifest patterns of ethno-national segmentation, with poorly-paid, casual and seasonal manual work often attracting large numbers of migrants from poorer zones of Europe, such as Ireland, Italy, Scandinavia and Russia.

Such patterns became increasingly significant in the twentieth century, particularly during the sustained economic expansion after the Second World War, when major industrial economies became systematic importers of labour-power. As with early modes of appropriating labour in the Americas, these patterns were profoundly racialized, with migration flows frequently tracking (in reverse) the paths of earlier colonization with, for instance, Algerians working in France, Indonesians in the Netherlands, Indians in Britain, Mexicans in the US. The demographic reasons for policies of incorporating migrant labour are clear enough, since, contrary to Marx's expectation, declining domestic birthrates have not been adequate to reproduce national stocks of labour-power in the Global North. The UN Population Fund estimates that without immigration the population of Europe will contract by nearly 125 million by 2050. Japan faces a similar conundrum. As for the United States, in 1970 immigrants made up five per cent of the workforce; forty years later, they made up more than 16 per cent. Equally significant, immigrants accounted for approximately half of the growth of the US labour force between 1995 and 2010. In other words, without large-scale imports of foreign-born labour, American capitalism would have experienced acute shortages.<sup>13</sup>

It must be insisted, however, that there is more than demographics at work here, especially in the neoliberal period. Much migrant labour, particularly when it comes under programmes that stipulate 'temporary servitude', or arrives in the form of undocumented workers lacking civil and labour rights, constitutes a vulnerable and hyper-precarious section of the working class whose insecurity contributes to the lowering of general levels of real wages and job and social protections. Only anti-racist forms of labour organizing show any real capacity for countering such tendencies – a point to which we shall return.

It seems abundantly clear that heightened precarity of migrant workers is deliberate social policy. Consider, first, the case of the United States. Since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, Canada and the US, capital has moved more freely throughout the

area while labour, particularly racialized Mexican labour, has moved more unfreely. Each year, the H-2 programme provides over 100,000 migrant labourers for US business, more than half of them in agriculture – and under conditions of enormous civil and social restriction which are tantamount to bonded labour. In sheer numerical terms, of course, this ‘official’ inflow has been overshadowed by the tripling of undocumented (‘illegal’) workers in the US since the inauguration of NAFTA – from four to 12 million, the vast majority of them from Latin America. And the *proportion* of Mexicans entering the US without authorization has soared from one-quarter during the 1980s to fully 84 per cent by the 2000s.<sup>14</sup> Huge numbers are moving as a result of accelerated displacements from the land and destruction of state-industries and services induced by NAFTA. Some of the displaced move to places where US and other foreign capital has set up inside Mexico – overwhelmingly the *maquila* zones adjacent to the American border – while others cross over, with or without authorization, in search of work in the US job market. Whereas the Mexican-born population in the US was 2.2 million in 1980, it was 12 million by 2006, more than half of them undocumented.<sup>15</sup> So significant is this shift that one out of every three Mexicans working for wages is employed in the US, while one-quarter of all industrial workers in Mexico are either in the *maquilas* or other continentally integrated industries.<sup>16</sup> In short, there is a direct link between accelerated primitive accumulation under NAFTA and the construction of a truly continental labour market.

NAFTA and neoliberal policy have thus promoted continental flows of both capital and labour, one liberalized and the other punitively policed. Indeed, the deliberate thrust of US immigration policy in the NAFTA era has been to simultaneously criminalize border crossings by Mexican workers while methodically increasing the employment of unauthorized Mexican labour – and thereby to construct what has rightly been called a *crimmigration* system.<sup>17</sup> In 2012 alone, the Obama administration pumped almost \$12 billion into Customs and Border Protection, increasing surveillance systems and doubling the number of Border Patrol agents.<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding the growing number of deportations, the purpose of inhumane and punitive border enforcement is not principally to deport undocumented workers, but to deepen their condition of *deportability*. Rather than an end in itself, deportation is a means to intensify the profound vulnerability of workers who live with the knowledge that they are inherently deportable.<sup>19</sup> Deportability reinforces those deeply racialized forms of precarity under which migrant labourers comprise a ‘permanent labor force of the temporarily employed’.<sup>20</sup>

While the Canadian programme for promoting precarious migrant labour

is configured differently – in good measure because Canada does not share a border with Mexico – the effects follow the same neoliberal model in shifting from an emphasis on permanent settlement to modes of ‘transient servitude’. The latter is regulated through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), which ties work permits directly to employment status, restricts mobility rights, prohibits most temporary workers from applying for work permits or changes in immigration status while inside the country, and limits most workers to a maximum of four years in Canada. Hyper-precarious migrant labour under the TFWP has soared since 2000. In the early 1980s there were fewer than 40,000 workers in Canada under the predecessor programme of the TFWP; by 2012 there were nearly half a million, as the annual number of temporary migrant workers admitted tripled to 300,000 in the first decade of the 2000s. Moreover, temporary migrants were increasingly to be found in notoriously labour-intensive, low-wage and non-union sectors, such as retail, accommodation and food services, among others.<sup>21</sup>

While deportability is an ever-present threat, legally enforced *transient migrancy* plays the crucial role in the Canadian programme. The four-year restriction means that, ‘while the TFWP is becoming more permanent and persistent, the individual TFWs remain steadfastly temporary. Each year tens of thousands of TFWs leave the country as their work permits expire, only to be replaced by tens of thousands of new TFWs’.<sup>22</sup> Temporary migrant workers in Canada are thus meant to be fully disposable. Not only can they be ejected from employment; they can also be geographically expelled from the nation-state. As a result, they occupy the extreme end of the precarity scale. Large numbers are paid less than the legal minimum wage, are frequently unpaid for overtime hours and sometimes have costs for employer-provided housing deducted directly from their paychecks.<sup>23</sup> In every meaningful sense of the word, Canada’s temporary migrant workers are bonded labourers, tied to employers, deprived of basic civil rights and subject to systematic economic and social abuse.

The neoliberal phase of ‘free trade’ agreements, such as NAFTA, has thus involved a significant reorientation in global labour migration. Not only are the dominant capitalist nations systematic importers of surplus labour generated elsewhere (particularly the Global South); they have also constructed an array of coercive immigration regimes designed to cheapen migrant labour by restricting its social and political rights. Immigrant labour has always arrived with a variety of (frequently limited) legal statuses – from those who have been given a relatively straightforward track to permanent residence and citizenship (often for ethno-racial reasons) to those who come

as temporary foreign workers and experience forms of legal bondage in the ‘host’ country, to those who enter without documentation of any sort, making them hyper-precarious. As the US and Canadian cases demonstrate, the latter forms of temporary and undocumented immigration figure decisively under neoliberalism and its recent ‘age of austerity’.

It follows that global processes of dispossession and migration should be considered central to the capitalist law of population. In fact, Marx may have sensed this when he rounded out his discussion of the ostensible ‘law’ with considerations on Ireland and its migrant workers. Here, he touched on colonialism, centralization of land ownership in Ireland, massive emigration and the vital role of wage remittances from Irish-Americans.<sup>24</sup> In the course of raising questions of colonialism, dispossession, displacement from the land and migration, Marx gestured toward a considerably more productive line of theoretical investigation, one that analyzes the social reproduction of labour power in relation to global processes of primitive accumulation and the movements of labouring people they induce.<sup>25</sup>

Marx’s tantalizing – but theoretically underdeveloped – comments in this area remind us that the coerced mass movement of peoples is nothing new to the neoliberal era of capitalism. In fact, in many non-capitalist modes of production slavery has been a key social mechanism for appropriating labour-powers developed outside a given society. Historically, the enslavement of women, for their reproductive capacities as well as their direct labour, has loomed particularly large in this regard.<sup>26</sup> And throughout the bourgeois epoch, the dispossession of workers on the peripheries of the capitalist economy has consistently served as a means of producing additional (and massive) supplies of labour-power, particularly for the colonial extensions in the Americas. During the rise of capitalism, notes one historian, ‘The creation and survival of economic enterprises across imperial borders in mining, agriculture, distributive trades and services, depended on the availability of coerced unfree labour’.<sup>27</sup> Today, this predominantly takes the form of precarious (and intricately bonded) migrant labour.

Speaking schematically, we can identify three main forms of appropriating massive supplies of dispossessed people from the peripheries of the system: 1) slavery and indentured servitude in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which saw probably hundreds of thousands of Irish children, women and men sold as slaves, only to be dramatically exceeded by the sale of about 12 million enslaved Africans; 2) the so-called ‘coolie labour’ system, under which at least 12 million workers from India and another five to six million from other parts of Asia were sold into contracted servitude; and 3) the modern system of hyper-precarious migrant labour.<sup>28</sup> Each of these modes



of appropriating labour-power has pivoted on global regimes of racialization and colonial and postcolonial subordination.

What is unique about the neoliberal period, therefore, is not that racialized labour-power is appropriated from the peripheries of the global system. That has been a constant of the capitalist mode of production. Instead, the key development has been the massive expansion of the global labour reserve as a result of the most accelerated and extensive processes of primitive accumulation in world history. This has facilitated the construction of neoliberal forms of migrant precarity, which contribute centrally to the reorganization of the global labour market in ways that facilitate the reproduction of capital at the expense of the reproduction of working-class households.

### GLOBAL DISPOSSESSION IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA

A central feature of the neoliberal era has been the *globalization of primitive accumulation*. Unrelenting, large-scale processes of dispossession have dramatically swelled the size of the global labour reserve, while also rendering it more international than ever before. Capital has increasingly moved to where such reserves are to be found – China and East Asia generally, Mexico, Eastern Europe and many other regions – at the same time as it has repressively incorporated tens of millions of migrant workers into the spaces of the Global North. Precise measures of either the global working class and/or that component of it that comprises the world reserve army of labour are of course impossible. To begin, social classes are dynamic formations in time, their boundaries shifting with reconfigurations of life and labour. Nevertheless, the basic trends can be grasped statistically. The global working class has grown by at least two-thirds (and has perhaps doubled) across the neoliberal period, from something between 1.5 to 2 billion people reliant on selling their labour-power in 1980 to over 3 billion today – with half or more of this number making up the global reserve army.<sup>29</sup> This is a stunning increase in dispossession and proletarianization – and one that has been utterly crucial to the neoliberal reorganization of the capitalist world economy.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, capital does not set out to dispossess people as an end in itself. Dispossession is a means to an end: the transformation of economic ‘assets’, particularly land, from common or public ownership or non-capitalist usage (e.g. by peasants) into elements of capital, i.e. means of production mobilized for the production of surplus value. Neoliberalism has dramatically deepened myriad social processes that dispossess small producers for just such reasons, in the process driving forward worldwide proletarianization. As it is

impossible to provide here a comprehensive overview of these processes, we shall merely itemize some of them:

- Land grabs, including giant land leases, for purposes of export-oriented agribusiness, large-scale mining and oil exploration, and conversion to bio-fuels<sup>31</sup>
- Giant dam projects and land enclosures for industrial development that displace communities of rural producers<sup>32</sup>
- Migration due to climate change that renders whole regions less capable of sustaining agriculture and pasturage<sup>33</sup>
- Appropriation of land in order to monopolize (and privatize) sources of fresh water, or to develop lucrative eco-tourism<sup>34</sup>
- Privatization of communal lands and neoliberal reforms (including government exploitation of ‘natural disasters’) that dispossess agrarian producers<sup>35</sup>
- Use of civil wars and armed conflicts as means of displacement<sup>36</sup>

Huge numbers of people dispossessed by such means relocate as *internal* migrants within the nation-states to which they legally belong. China has at least 150 million rural-to-urban migrants, who suffer from systemic discrimination in housing, access to social services and legal rights while living outside the towns or villages from which they have moved. Similar patterns prevail in Mexico, where internal migrants suffer related forms of oppression. Not all displaced migrants head to the Global North, of course. The states of the Persian Gulf are massively reliant on migrants, particularly from South Asia, importing 8.5 million by the early 2000s.<sup>37</sup> One observes similar patterns in other parts of the ‘newly industrializing’ world. In Brazil, the number of migrant labourers increased 50 per cent in just two years (2010 to 2012), while in Chile the number of migrants tripled in a decade.<sup>38</sup>

As for Mexico, during the 1990s alone at least one million small farmers were displaced, as trade liberalization and imports from agribusiness undercut local producers. Such processes continue, as increasingly marketized and liberalized economics drive ongoing dispossession and profound polarizations of wealth and poverty. Large numbers of dispossessed agrarian producers have migrated to the *maquila* zones in search of wage-labour, with women forming an increasingly significant proportion of this internal migration. This has given Mexico an internal low-wage export manufacturing zone, often described as having four essential characteristics: 1) feminization of the workforce; 2) extreme workforce segmentation with less ‘skilled’ and feminized workers earning much less; 3) reduced real wages across the

board; 4) extreme anti-union policies.<sup>39</sup> Displacement has also driven mass processes of cross-border migration. And, contrary to official rhetoric about border protection, the impetus of US capital has been to draw ever-larger reserves of cheap labour into the US itself, including six million Latina/Latino immigrants during 2000–08.<sup>40</sup>

As is always the case in the capitalist mode of production, the relation between capital and labour is two-sided. While labour constitutes a source of surplus value and profit for capital, it is also true that, for labour, capital comprises a source of wages with which working-class households can be reproduced. Each in short is a means to the reproduction of the other, albeit in a massively unbalanced and exploitative relation. In the case of migrant labourers, much social reproduction occurs at sites significantly separated from the spaces of capitalist production – and frequently by way of geographic separations that involve cross-border movements. The result, as we discuss in the next section, is a spatial rescaling of households in which cross-border wage remittances figure centrally in reproducing labour-power at sites where the costs of doing so are sharply lower than they would be near the sites of waged employment. In the decade prior to 2012, wage remittances tripled worldwide, topping \$530 billion for officially recorded flows – more than three times global aid budgets. For countries such as El Salvador, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Jordan, Yemen and Eritrea, wage remittances boosted gross national product by more than 10 per cent.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, relative shares of remittances vary according to gender and status: women typically send a larger share of their wages to their home country than do men, and temporary migrants send a larger share than do permanent ones.<sup>42</sup>

In the Mexican case, the sums involved are striking. According to the World Bank, wage remittances from Mexican workers in the US nearly quadrupled in the first eight years of this century, from \$7.5 billion to \$28 billion per annum – an amount equivalent to nearly three per cent of Mexican GDP.<sup>43</sup> These cross-border movements of workers and the counter-flows of their wages via remittances doubly benefit capital: first, by bringing precarious and relatively cheap migrant labour to sites of work in the United States and Canada; and second, by enabling the reproduction of the next generation of labourers in Mexico, where the costs of life are lower and for whose public services capital in the US and Canada pay nothing. But in addition to benefiting capital, these reverse flows of labour and wages rescale relations of gender, childhood, kinship and social reproduction.

## TRANSNATIONAL HOUSEHOLDS: NEW CONFIGURATIONS OF GENDER AND CLASS

Thus far, we have only addressed what might be termed ‘first-order’ social reproduction: the biological and daily regeneration of migrant workers themselves, and their households. In this section, we focus on migrant paid domestic and agricultural labour in the US and Canada, two sectors that have figured prominently in the social organization of North America’s precarious workforce. Research into these workers’ survival strategies reveals the otherwise hidden practical activities and relations undergirding global labour reserves. It reminds us that the tripartite dynamic of the flow of capital, labour and wages across borders involves very real social relations sustained by people who strive to meet their needs by acting (through their paid and unpaid labour) within a world in which capital’s drive to accumulate is a persistent limit.

Many studies explore how the constrained forms of migrant workers’ self- and household reproduction rely on and reproduce systems of racism and sexism. Our aim here is to shift the lens slightly, in order to show how their (complexly racialized and gendered) survival strategies figure in the global social reproduction of *class*. Theorizing first-order social reproduction of migrant workers, in particular the establishment of transnational households, as integral moments in the renewal of waged labour highlights the variegated forms in which capitalist social relations radically separate sites of production from sites of social reproduction. And precisely because this spatial rescaling occurs in and through a world that is segmented into hierarchically ordered nation-states policed by immigration and border regimes, we must conceive of the contemporary working class as formed in and through gendered *and* racialized relations. Such an approach can also clarify the ways in which racism and sexism are reproduced through global dynamics of dispossession and accumulation. In other words, a global social reproduction perspective facilitates an understanding of class in which dynamics of gender and race are internally related parts of a complex social whole.

Migrant workers’ transnational households and networks, and the state policies supporting these, institutionalize dramatically lower costs of social reproduction. Capital and the state in North America regularly draw from a pool of effectively ‘cost free’ labour power on whose past social reproduction they have not spent a dime. And because they deny or restrict migrant access to state resources and services, receiving nations also invest comparatively little in the current migrant workforce’s *ongoing* regeneration. Undocumented workers, having the least access to resources, and being most vulnerable to criminalization and employer abuse, are generally the

most cost-free workers. Yet legal migrants too, particularly those governed by seasonal and temporary worker programmes, have limited and uneven claims on social services. Working disproportionately in industries, such as agriculture, that typically fall outside regular labour protection laws, they are vulnerable to significant medical costs while largely deprived of basic employment standards around overtime, unionization and vacation pay. Domestic workers have had greater success in their quest for improved employment standards in recent years. Yet because they perform affective care work in private households, and are subject to hyper-personalized supervision, violations of those standards are not uncommon.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, with transiency, secondary citizenship status and labour immobility built into their contracts, all migrants have little leverage when it comes to challenging these conditions of social reproduction.

Such restrictions perpetuate migrants' socio-spatial segregation from the citizen population, and impose a lower overall standard of first-order social reproduction. Crowded housing (the median space per person in US-residing Latino households is 350 square feet, 80 square feet less than that of the average family living below the poverty line), inadequate schooling and healthcare, lack of health and safety protection in workplaces all contribute to defining a new, cheaper, norm.<sup>45</sup> Not only do these conditions devalue migrant workers' status and worth in the popular imaginary, the new norm places competitive pressure on what the citizen workforce can demand in wages and benefits. Substandard conditions of migrant workers' social reproduction thus simultaneously rationalize and institutionalize a racialized regime of cheap labour.

This is not to deny that the low-end, 'first-world' wages migrants receive improve their monetary standard of living as well as that of their households back home. For the most part, they do.<sup>46</sup> But geographically dispersed households suffer greatly from emotional and social costs of separation. Migrants have responded to policies disallowing or making it difficult to immigrate if pregnant or accompanied by dependents with complex transnational survival strategies.<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, transnational households and community networks represent creative cross-border survival strategies designed to meet the socio-material and affective needs of the workers and their families. Important as they are to resisting or managing capitalist imperatives as well as gendered and racialized relations, transnational families and other cross-border practices and institutions nevertheless constitute a central mechanism in perpetuating the cheap social reproduction of the current and future working class.<sup>48</sup> Sustained by wages paid to migrant workers which are divided between their self-reproduction

and that of families back home or elsewhere, transnational households are imbricated in the workings of global capitalism, all the more so as the flow of remittances from the more to less capitalistically advanced societies has become deeply embedded in the social and economic fabric of the sending country. Remittances to Mexico in 2005, for instance, represented 160.7 per cent of net foreign direct investment, and have continued at such levels.<sup>49</sup> Because they are primarily spent on private consumption, they raise local living standards and shore up local economies. More than this, the Mexican government encourages migrants (with promises to match contributions) to funnel a proportion of remittances into what would otherwise be state social reproductive services such as community infrastructure projects, thus boosting public investment as well.

As a way to encourage the export of labour power, many states in the Global South have assumed an ever-growing proportion of skills training and worker recruitment costs. For example, in 2006 the Philippines implemented the Household Service Workers policy (HSWP) intended to ‘professionalize migrant domestic work and minimize vulnerabilities’.<sup>50</sup> The policy regulates worker recruitment and deployment processes, while also establishing state assessment, training and upgrading programmes (including both domestic skills accreditation and cultural and language training) for potential migrants. Similar state support for foreign recruitment and deployment of local labour power is intensifying in the Caribbean. Such policies simultaneously relieve receiving nations of key social reproductive costs associated with training and culturally preparing workers to enter their labour markets *and* deepen the sending country’s investment in and commitment to migrant labour as a ‘development’ strategy.

Yet the limits to such a strategy are clear. To begin, in exporting their nation’s labour power, sending countries effectively lose a potential productive resource, one in which they have made at least some degree of social investment. Moreover, sending countries, which are usually heavily dependent upon commodity export markets, march to the beat of an international drummer – in this case, the more capitalistically developed states which orchestrate the terms of free trade agreements, IMF loans and structural adjustment policies, and which impose restrictive immigration and border control regimes. The latter insure that the flow of foreign capital into labour-exporting countries does not disrupt the continual reproduction of precarious labour, but instead consolidates migrant precarity. For instance, rather than diversified socio-economic development, foreign capital in Mexico fosters differentiated forms of precarious labour, suspending social and legal rights in *Maquila* zones, to such an extent that the hardships of

international migration and/or lack of status in another country is often viewed as preferable to working legally within one's own borders. But as sending countries pursue development strategies linked to exporting cheap labour, they are likely to continue and possibly step up efforts to facilitate the migration of their native population, and reproduce and intensify their subordinate position in the world capitalist economy. As a result, unlike the children of citizen households in receiving countries, children of migrants' transnational families are largely destined to join the global reserve army of labour. Rescaled survival strategies (e.g., transnational families and other networks) are thus a crucial mechanism for the relatively cheap social reproduction of not only current precarious labour power, but also that of the future.

To grasp the significance of this shift toward institutionalizing degraded conditions and cheaper social reproduction, it is helpful to compare the contemporary immigration regime of transient servitude to earlier periods in which immigration frequently led to full citizenship and assimilation. During the 1910s and 1920s, for instance, US state and community resources were leveraged to educate immigrant women in the art of promoting supposedly American values and morals in their child-rearing and other domestic work.<sup>51</sup> The goal was to develop an immigrant workforce that approached American citizen norms (which while deeply racialized, gendered and class-differentiated nonetheless did not legally differentiate immigrants from citizens in terms of access to state and employment-based social reproduction support).<sup>52</sup> Today, however, the neoliberal capitalist goal is to create and sustain a temporary migrant workforce that is differentiated from the citizen workforce, whose everyday life and longer-term expectations are so degraded that they can often be viewed and treated as *disposable*.<sup>53</sup> The disposability of such workers rationalizes and promotes the neoliberal era shift in the institutions and practices of social reproduction. As we have outlined, this shift involves policies designed both to offload social responsibility, and where migrants are concerned, to outlaw, discourage and/or offshore biological reproduction. Instead of instruction in parenting, many women migrants today are either denied reproduction rights by the terms of their migration or, as in many *maquilas*, plied with birth control pills by their bosses.

The concept of disposability involves the devaluation of household labour of social reproduction as much as degradation of waged labour in the workplace, highlighting the multiple sites of capitalism's essential impulse to treat labour power as merely a commodity. The fact that '[f]oreign labor is desired but the person in whom it is embodied is not desired' is a fundamental

contradiction that the current regime of transient servitude is designed to manage.<sup>54</sup> In so doing it draws on and reinforces deeply racialized and gendered institutions, practices and ideologies. Capital does not simply need labour power to function, it needs exploitable labour power. And the more desperate, anxious and insecure a life is – the closer it resembles ‘bare life’ – the more susceptible it is to exploitation. In other words, ‘social processes of abjection ... [produce] subjects that can be exploited not only because they are able to sell their capacities as labor power ... but also because they bear *second skins* that command a low price’.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, a feminine ‘second skin’ is crucial to the *maquilas*’ reliance on disposability as a central strategy. High female turnover in the factories is attributed to women’s lack of interest and loyalty to their jobs, which in turn justifies withholding skills training from them. Yet managers will routinely engage in sexual harassment of pregnant women and surveillance of reproductive cycles to justify firings. The Mexican woman worker in the *maquilas* is a ‘subject formed in the flux between waste and value,’ suggests Melissa Wright. ‘She can be nothing other than a temporary worker, one whose intrinsic value does not mature, grow, and increase over time ... [one who represents] the permanent labor force of the temporarily employed’.<sup>56</sup>

Such cultural devaluation has put women at risk of even more violent forms of oppression. Since 1993, at least 1,400 girls and women have been murdered (and frequently raped and mutilated) in the Chihuahua free trade zone of Ciudad Juarez – many of them during late night commutes to and from the factories.<sup>57</sup> Juarez also has the highest rate of domestic violence in Mexico. Prior to the *maquila* development of the early 1990s, however, murders of women were extremely rare in the city. But as the state withdrew services in line with NAFTA policies, drug cartels competed with state military might to patrol the region. At the same time, gender relations were being rescaled as many young, mostly single women experienced the partial financial and sexual empowerment and independence that comes with their status as wage earners. Such a disruption of gender norms has, in many cases, heightened male insecurity, contributing to a hyper-masculinized culture in which the sex trade flourishes alongside the drug trade, and in which women workers tread a jagged path between economic value (as breadwinners) and social devaluation (as disposable workers).<sup>58</sup>

While clearly not all migrant workers negotiate femicidal circumstances, the spatial rescaling and debased conditions of their social reproduction ensures that they all do bear second skins, based upon gender and racial oppression. Their abject status, reproduced through longstanding forms of domination, works to perpetuate the same: insofar as migrants’ below-standard wages,



work and life conditions are culturally devalued yet economically critical to capitalist expansion, they are set up to be both loathed and feared, a threat to 'citizen' morals and jobs.

A social reproduction feminist approach is attentive to such dehumanization because it extends and historicizes Marx's theorization of the two-sidedness of labour power. While capitalism requires labour power *qua* commodity, it has no (internal) mechanism to create and sustain it. Rather, the commodity labour power can only be reproduced *socially*, by (geo-politically, bio-physically differentiated) people with needs and emotions that exceed their mere reproduction. The state can and does aid and abet capital in meeting its need for labour power of course, but the drive to accumulate puts continual pressure to deny the (costly) humanity of real people, to deny the 'excess' needs thrown up by socially embodied human life and to impose 'bare life' instead. Capitalism's drive to proletarianize labour is thus bound up with a reliance on gendered and racialized relations that mark the processes of replenishing this and succeeding generations of workers.

#### MIGRANT JUSTICE AND WORKING-CLASS POLITICS

If working classes are to be understood as formations, rather than structures, this is in part because of the *making* of class relations and experience by workers themselves.<sup>59</sup> And, as we have argued, these relations and experiences are multi-dimensional, while also governed in this society by an overriding social logic based on market dependence and capital accumulation. By tracing the patterns of gender and racialization that are constitutive of working-class formation *from the start*, we can illuminate the ways in which movements for gender and racial justice are central features of class struggle. It follows that most significant social struggles are not uni-dimensional: however much they may exhibit class features, such struggles also frequently express challenges to gender, racial and sexual orders.<sup>60</sup>

It is in this spirit that we have insisted on delineating the complex patterns by which labour migration has become central to the reproduction of hundreds of millions of working-class households, whose wellbeing relies on wage remittances. But labour and the wage system always involve conflict. And since in the case of migrant workers these conflicts almost always raise issues of racism, sexism and political inequality, this underscores the strategic importance of migrant justice for any meaningful working-class politics today. This is especially so because anti-migrant politics function as a cutting edge of right-wing mobilizations internationally, be it those of Golden Dawn in Greece, the Front National in France, the Tea Party in the US or conservative forces in Canada. It would be naive to deny that considerable

numbers of ‘native-born’ working-class voters have been attracted to such politics. Part of the responsibility for this lies with trade union leaderships that too often revert to a nativist protectionism – particularly in North America – rather than championing the full political and social rights of all migrant labourers. Notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, of ‘citizens’ and ‘foreigners’, are deeply inscribed within the ideological relations of nation-states. Genuinely working-class politics requires an opposition to these categories of bourgeois common sense. Not only do racial and gender justice dictate defence of migrant rights; so does solidarity of workers. When national media in Canada created a furor over temporary migrants ‘taking jobs’ from Canadian-born workers, one astute analyst observed that the challenge of solidarity involves putting forth demands that turn ‘the logic of neoliberalism on its head’ and undercut the racialized segmentation of rights and status – by demanding permanent residency for all workers who enter the country.<sup>61</sup> The demand to ‘normalize’ or ‘regularize’ the status of all migrants explicitly challenges racialized discourses of ‘us’ and ‘them’ by arguing for the equality of *all* workers.

As important as is the struggle for migrant justice in public arenas, no less important are the on-the-ground struggles of migrant workers, who are increasingly fighting back. If the May Day 2006 strike by millions of migrant workers in the US was the most visible manifestation of such struggles, it was far from the only one. Campaigns and strikes in Los Angeles by drywallers, carpenters and janitors have been hugely significant, as was the sit-down strike in Mississippi by migrant workers from India at Signal International, along with the farmworker organizing campaign in the same state.<sup>62</sup> It is also difficult to overstate the importance in the US of the campaigns by the National Domestic Workers Alliance, which have led to the adoption of domestic workers’ bills of rights in New York, California and Hawaii. Consistent with the transnational movement of domestic workers, the International Domestic Workers Network has built significant national organizations in Argentina, Brazil, Jamaica, Uruguay and Colombia.<sup>63</sup> Movements of migrant workers have also demonstrated that it is possible to make substantial gains even during the period of global slump that commenced with the financial crisis of 2008–09. A ten-month ‘strike’ and occupation by 6,000 *sans-papiers* in Paris in 2009 won guarantees of full legal status after five years of residence. And in March 2013, a strike by thousands of mostly immigrant warehouse workers in Italy won regular work permits for many workers using ‘illegal’ papers.<sup>64</sup>

Writing in 1866, Marx argued that unions,

must now learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation ... Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society [people] into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades ... They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions.<sup>65</sup>

As working-class social reproduction becomes increasingly entangled with new patterns of gendered labour, repressive border regimes and racialized ‘crimmigration’ policies, genuinely radical working-class politics must challenge assaults on the rights of any and all groups of workers. This can only mean developing a working-class movement that champions every struggle for enhanced social reproduction. It requires seeing working-class struggles based in communities and neighbourhoods – around housing, police harassment, childcare and schooling – as having equal strategic importance to those centred on workplace issues. And it means supporting the struggles of unorganized workers and the unemployed as much as the battles of the organized.

## NOTES

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- 22 Foster, 'Making Temporary Permanent', p. 40.
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