

The Dis/Appearing Body of Labor in Modern Capitalist Society

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Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*...

Marx 1844 (1988:68).¹

Work...is a deeply difficult subject to represent.

Scarry 1983:102

The Laboring Body

The laboring body is a curious thing: in the modern sense of *homo faber*, it connotes the psycho-physical activity through which human beings produce their modes of life, and in doing so, produce themselves as substantial, sensuous, value producing beings. If, in Western thought, the capacity for mindful work sets humankind apart as distinctive species, the endless need to generate their subsistence ensures that laboring bodies are incessantly immersed in a wider universe, both of living and of inanimate forms. For they must act upon this environment to sustain themselves, thereby making nature into their own “inorganic body,” to cite Marx’s suggestive phrase (Butler 2019:5). The more alienated human beings become from their own labor, the more reciprocally damaging is their mutual interdependence, and the more unstable appears the margin between them. Nineteenth-century novelists,

¹ Original emphasis.

Elaine Scarry (1983:96) shows, dwelled in exacting detail on the ways in which new habits of labor resculpted the toiling body and, in the process, injured it: "wounds-as-signs" made plain that "the human being in work puts himself, by the very depth of engagement, continually at risk – that he alters the world only by consenting to be himself deeply altered."

One might question the word "consent" here." But if we take bodily self-creation as a brute reality in the world, that body remains somehow obscure, occluded – both in life and in theory. This is especially the case in modern capitalist society, where human work increasingly becomes a tradable commodity, and hence participates in the strangeness of the commodity form itself -- like the fact that, in its visible incarnation, it tends to obscure the means of its own production. For commodities are animated as objects by the largely unseen productivity invested in their making. The ambiguous existence of embodied toil, its absent presence, is no accident then. It is all of a piece with the nature of labor itself, and the ways in which the working body and the value it creates move in and out of visibility and social reckoning, both as an instrument of production, and as the unacknowledged source of wealth as surplus value. The mystery of this generativity was captured in early modern tales like *The Elves and the Shoemaker* (from the brothers Grimm) and *Rumpelstiltskin* (Schneider 1989), or the Estonian figure of the Kratt.² Each is a popular

² A figure from Estonian folktale, concocted from hay or domestic implements so that it might labor ceaselessly for its "master," once he paid the devil three drops of his blood to bring the creature to life. I thank Daivi Taylor for making me aware of this figure. See "Kratt;" <https://www.bing.com/search?q=The%20Kratt%2C%20Estonia&pc=OBLN&ptag=C24N1832A27461191ED&form=CONBNT&conlogo=CT3210127>, accessed 4 October 2022.

rendering of the dark alchemy that turns labor into riches; just as, in other times and places, the figure of the zombie made palpable the visceral extraction of profit from racialized colonial bodies. These “appearances” serve as what Hylton White (2020:2, after Postone 2003) calls “proxies,” fetishized representations of the essential social and historical character of wealth production under capitalism.

This poorly credited feature of the laboring body continues to spook popular imaginings in our contemporary world. Take Jordan Peele’s celebrated movie, *Us* (2019),³ for instance. In it, a middle-class black family confronts its ghostly proletarian doubles who “appear one night in the driveway of their holiday home, clad in overalls and hard hats; the revenants proceed to invade the house and attack them with weaponized domestic goods. The body has had a similar enigmatic presence in social analysis: Foucault (1978) famously asserted that it had simultaneously been suppressed yet ubiquitously present in modern history. Thus the body has never actually been absent from debate; in fact, it has become an ever more marked scholarly concern, virtually an obsession in recent humanist writing. Yet it somehow remains “elusive” (Crossley 1995; Cecci 2014), “evaporate[ing]” Schilling 1993:80), “bracketed” (Lock 1993; 2017), melting into metaphor (Sontag 1978). In this sense, despite its vaunted materiality, it remains

³ See “Jordan Peele’s *Us* Turns a Political Statement into Unnerving Horror,” Tasha Robinson, *The Verge*, 22 March 2019; www.theverge.com/2019/3/9/18257721/us-review-jordan-peeel-get-out-lupita-nyongo-winston-duke-elisabeth-mosstim-heidecker-horror, accessed 23 May 2019. Also “*Us*’s Jason/Pluto Theory, Explained and Debunked,” Alex Abad-Santos and Aja Romano, *Vox*, 2 April 2019; www.vox.com/2019/4/2/18290380/us-movie-jason-pluto-tether-theory-explained-true-false, accessed 23 May 2019.

“indefinite” (Butler 1989:601), ontologically obscure, impossible to know as real object, apart from its infinite representations (Colebrook 2000; Davis 1997; Žižek 1989)

Of course, one might argue that the problem here is epistemological, born of a crypto-empiricist preoccupation with bodies as would-be discrete things, tangled up in discourse -- rather than as subjects inevitably enmeshed in social and material relations. It is instructive, in this regard, to examine more precisely where and how the laboring body moves in and out of sight and acknowledgement in the ordinary practices that configure particular modern capitalist worlds. In our own times, the cataclysmic COVID pandemic, for example, flashed unprecedented light across the contemporary global landscape, making visible “new” categories of essential labor -- like “front line workers,” who had, in fact, long carried out discounted forms of care and repair largely unrecognized. How have particular politico-economic conjunctures, like the onset of industrialization, colonization, and more recently, liberalization reconfigured patterns of in/visibility as they reshape the division of labor and the calculus of value assigned to human effort along lines of difference – such as gender, race, age, geography (Comaroff and Comaroff 2020)? The global supply chains wrought by expanding capitalist production, and the restless quest for profit often rest on earlier moments of dispossession and infrastructures of exploitation, among them the mining in the Eastern Congo of “blood minerals” vital to digital technology (Smith 2022; Fraser n.d.) And the Canadian fur trade that, as Joan Sangster (2007) shows, has historically been subsidized by the racial and

gendered labor of First Peoples; female trappers and preparers of skins here remain largely invisible, and often unpaid, beneath more visible, long-standing links of masculine command.

This dialectic of dis/appearance is not merely a feature of a few specific, even dramatic, translocal histories of production. It also reveals the operation of “dis/appearance” in respect of labor under modern capitalism at large, which tends to mask the conditions of its own production. To grasp this, Marx (1974: 175; Fraser 2014) suggests, we must leave the “noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in view of all men” and enter “the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there stares us in the face ‘No admittance except on business’.” Here lies “the secret of profit making,” where, contrary to all appearances – i.e. that capital and labor work freely together to mutual advantage -- we discover not merely how capital produces commodities, but how it is that surplus value animates those commodities with apparent intrinsic worth. Here the laborer seems “timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but -- a **hiding.**” And a hiding, too, one might add, in the sense of obscuring this essential alchemy of profit-making, at least from ordinary street-level perceptions of reality -- although not necessarily from its eruption in fantasy forms, like the elves and zombies of a suppressed collective awareness.⁴

⁴ To this Nancy Fraser (2014) adds yet a further hidden abode that supplements capital, that of non-commodified relations of domestic reproduction and ecological exploitation.

In what follows, I seek to examine precisely how the laboring body surfaces and fades from social awareness at a particular historical moment: the consolidation of structures of work and world-making in nineteenth-century Britain and – complementarily -- in its African colonies; the two, as it turns out, were conditions of each other's possibility. It is this historical moment, this time and location, that was the birthplace, at once historical and conceptual, of most modernist theories of labor and its embodiment – and its iconic nightmares, like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, who moves to London for the European periphery to pursue his campaign of vampiric accumulation (see below). At issue is a dialectic of front and backstage work and value production, playing out both within the metropole and in relation to the distanced imperial periphery with which it became quite intimately articulated. How did this division of labor, already in a significant sense transnational at that time, take form amidst an increasing impetus to expand production and maximize profit? How did it emerge in prevailing public discourse and communicative practices? And what does it tell us about the location, at once spatial and value producing, of the laboring body and *homo faber* in a world ever more divided by class, gender, and ethno-racial marking? As we shall see in a moment, many theorists, following Foucault, have argued that the laboring body disappeared as tangible object from the representations of industrializing cities. But if so, where did it go? How might the secrets of its invisible life reappear in the collective awareness in other surreal guises, as the stuff of estranged recognition?

The concept of fetishism provides a particularly productive lens for examining these corporeal fantasies, for it rests itself on the forcefulness of a spectral body. As Rosalind Morris points out, de Brosse described the fetish as a material incarnation or source of power; a kind of “carnal faith.”⁵ In the Marxian tradition, as a thing enlivened by human labor, the fetish also implies various “returns” (cf. Morris *et al* 2017): as alienated labor, as profit, and as a recurrent figuration of the overall process of value production, i.e. as a re-presentation of the unrequited yield of the worker as a kind of second nature.

Proletarianization: The Body Vanishes?

I have noted that scholarly histories of the modern body have stressed its obtuseness as ontological object. In an influential account, Francis Barker (1984) argues that the birth of bourgeois selfhood was marked by the advent of what he calls the “tremulous private body,” a kind of subjectivity vividly exemplified in early modern texts like the diary of Samuel Pepys. Pepys’ plainspoken interrogation of desire, anxiety, and self-admonition centered on the physical person, both as source of base appetites and object of guilt and censure. His searching, often lewd account is testament, for Barker, of the gradual “de-realization” of the body as a site of public sensuality, exhibition, punishment, and its reconfiguration as text and discourse (p.12). In true Foucauldian fashion, the body as common spectacle is held to become “effectively hidden from history,”

⁵ Rosalind Morris, “Fetishism: Overview,” *Encyclopedia.com*; <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/fetishism-overview>, accessed 1 September 2022.

disappearing either into the private domain or into the great disciplinary institutions that enclose the mad, the sick, the poor, the criminal, and others deemed incapable of self-production. There, beyond the gaze of the bourgeois public, these bodies learn to labor as incarnations of a new regime of productivity, bio-political governance, and realist portrayal. Whether herded into the “closed factory” or made the object new, moralizing orders of medical, psychic, or sexual knowledge, the carnal body vanishes as a thing in itself (p.18).

But does the substantive public body *actually* disappear in so definitive a fashion? Whose body, and in whose eyes? Does Barker’s subtle analysis does not fall victim to its own preoccupation with discourse and textuality at the expense of what, as representations, they strove to convey about the densely populated social world that produced them?⁶ Certainly, the rise of industrial society, urbanism, and modernist public spheres was mediated by expansive new regimes of print capitalism and realist depiction. Nineteenth-century urbanization also fostered novel forms of what Simmel (1903:14, 16) termed the “immediate sensuousness” of “bodily closeness and lack of space” – manifest in all manner of work and busyness, including the exertions of consumption, self-display, and bourgeois flânerie. The agglomeration of bodies at work and at play in city streets, both in the European metropole and its emerging colonial counterparts, is captured in picture, print, and (increasingly) photography.⁷ On the one hand, these

⁶ This concern is sharply captured in the poignant little poem, *Hogarth’s Girl*, by Ingrid de Kok (n.d.). It asks “Who saw her, who took her hurt, before or after he engraved her?”

⁷ See Images of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century European Streets; <https://www.bing.com/search?q=images%20of%20eighteenth%20and%20nineteenth%20century%20eur>

circulating images of city scapes portray genteel figures walking the streets, embodying the composed appearance of middle-class publicness. But, on the other, these streets were also peopled by working men and women pouring from the mouths of factories, gathered in Dickensian profusion on sidewalks, unloading coaches, or staggering under the weight of unruly bales – all the while dodging more polite persons taking center stage (Figures 1 and 2). The stylized composition of scenes of this kind – especially in England, ground zero of the industrial revolution – are often themselves iconic of an emerging semiotics of the moralizing bourgeois gaze, of an organization of space and social appearance that seeks to order the seemingly spontaneous press of the urban crowd according to class-based priorities (Figure 3). As such, these images were designed both as representations and re-presentations: they were to be consumed for the most part by a newly self-conscious spectator, at a comfortable personal distance from the close choreography of interdependent bodies across sharpening lines of class and gender on the teeming city streets.

[opean%20streets&q=n&form=QBRE&=%25eManage%20Your%20Search%20History%25E&s](#), accessed 10 September 2022.

Also Wood paving of the street of St. Louis

Wood paving of the street of St. Louis, America, illustration from the 19th century. (Photo by: Bildagenturonline/

Universal Images Group via Getty Images); <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/wood-paving-of-the-street-of-st-louis-america-illustration-news-photo/938606522?adppopup=true>, accessed 21 September, 2022; “Berlin Street Life at Christmas Time: Stocl Illustration. *Getty Images*;

<https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/illustration/berlin-street-life-at-christmas-time-royalty-free-illustration/1290864972>, Accessed 23 September 2022; see Also “Happy New Year! Our image of the week is from 19th century Australia.” *Bing.com/images*;

<https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid=pYI9VtVW&id=CA9F14BC2FB5EAA80DAF4B8AF0881A7F05C89BF5&thid=OIP.pYI9VtVWfyalmrOagopxbqHaFY&mediurl=https%3A%2F%2F>, accessed 23 September 2022.

The emerging structures and strictures of the bourgeois gaze became evident in works like Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), a "Cyclopaedia" of street life." A critical ethnography *avant la lettre*, this account casts penetrating light on the complex physical contours of urban labor – above all, on the lumpen "frontline" workers who subsisted by performing unsavory but indispensable civic services for a more entitled public. They toiled in full view of that public: from road sweepers energetically clearing the horse dung⁸ so that gentle folk might walk the thoroughfares in their fine clothes, to those transporting their listless bodies in sedan chairs or carting the copious possessions whose obsolescence marked the status of what Veblen (1899) called the leisure class. Note that the bodies that did not labor also performed -- in their evident languidness, their lack of urgency -- their independence from such toil, though work and worklessness were conditions of each other's possibility, in true Hegelian fashion. Yet upper-class persons appeared self-sufficient, as if their immediate material context left no mark on them and offered no resistance to their self-willed activity. Working bodies, in contrast, were immersed in their physical surroundings, fair and foul.

Mayhew provides painstaking details of the essential work of the sewer-hunters, waste collectors, and costermongers who provided for the necessities of urban life – from food, umbrellas, and religious tracts to dog collars, razors, and rat poison. Many of them had recently been expelled from the countryside. They

⁸ Of course, it was not only human bodies that were caught up in the intense productivity of early industrial production, although I am unable to deal with this matter here.

lived hand to mouth, as it were. “Of all modes of obtaining subsistence,” Mayhew notes (1851:6), “street-selling is the most precarious... it is painful to think of the hundreds belonging to this class in the metropolis who are reduced to starvation by three- or four-days’ successive rain.” He notes, too, how the intimate dependence of these bodies on close contact with the substantive world imprints itself on them – the walnut vender who “lifts her brown-stained fingers to her mouth, (p.9), the “black man half-clad in white” who is “shivering in the cold with tracts in his hand” (p.10). As the workers themselves make plain, they are never fully separable from the settings and substances they subsist on – the stinking mud, coal, and soot (“it’s a roughish smell at first, but nothink near so bad as you think”)⁹. The workers act on their elemental surrounds and the latter act on them in return. They are not accorded the liberal conceit of autonomous agency attributed to bourgeois subjects, whose reified bodies appear as independent loci of world-making (Harvey 2000:118). Informal manual workers, in contrast, are immersed in a form of production that has no “identifiable beginning or end” in time or space (Scarry, above), toil that usurps their entire identity as persons.

Mayhew’s account was said to have “fascinated and overwhelmed” the Victorian public. “Suddenly a strange new world was opened up to them, right under their noses,”¹⁰ he writes, of which they had “less knowledge than of the

⁹ “Henry Mayhew’s London Labour and the London Poor,” Mary L Shannon, *Discovering Literature: Romantic & Victorians*, 15 May 2014, British Museum; <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/henry-mayhews-london-labour-and-the-london-poor>, accessed 11 September 2022.

¹⁰ “Henry Mayhew’s London Labour and the London Poor,” Mary L Shannon, *Discovering Literature: Romantic & Victorians*, 15 May 2014, British Museum; <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/henry-mayhews-london-labour-and-the-london-poor>, accessed 11 September 2022.

other links in the growing supply chain that fed the appetites and affordances of the new metropolitan middle-classes (Mintz 1985; Beckert 2014).

The vertical stratigraphy of corporeal space, value, and virtue that served to organize the bourgeois urban gaze is archly captured by another set of representations of corporate city life: the pictures of Hogarth, in particular, his famous engraving, “The Industrious ‘Prentice: Lord Mayor of London,” from his series *Industry and Idleness* (1747; Figure 3). The scene depicts Francis Goodchild, the new Lord-Mayor, on the day of his inauguration, ceremoniously riding in the State Coach through the London streets. This public display is the crowning moment of a cautionary tale, captured in twelve scenes, in which vice is punished and virtue is rewarded.¹⁴

In the opening tableau, the two apprentices stand before their looms, one clean of face and jacket, with spindle in hand, surrounded by pious texts and virtuously focused on his work; the other, with swarthy face and soiled dress, snoozes on the job, a mug of ale on his loom and a cat playing with the spindle (Figure 6). As the story unfolds, the first apprentice’s steadfast labor is recognized. He promoted to overseer, marries the boss’s daughter, and becomes a partner in his textile firm, i.e., he embodies the cliché of the upwardly mobile and nubile, the canny entrepreneur. Sober industry permits him to climb the social ladder out of sweated labor while his idle counterpart, consumed by his

¹⁴ See “The Industrious ‘Prentice Lord-Mayor of London,” *History of Art*, <https://www.thehistoryofart.org/william-hogarth/industrious-prentice-lord-mayor-of-london/>, accessed 20 September 2022.

own appetites, descends into debauchery and crime, ending on the gallows. Printed copies of each of these scenes were made and sold to the public for one shilling each, aimed at a wider, less wealthy market than Hogarth's earlier works (Paulson 1965: 19). In the final engraving, the face of the unsubtly named Goodchild peers out of the window of a sumptuous coach, under an oversize top hat. He holds a large sword of office and looks down impassively on the swarming, riotous crowd below. Elevated high above the street, the richly clad city elite observe the scene in postures of languid amusement, each figure carefully spaced at a discrete distance from the next and framed by a window or canopy, secure within framework of private property. Only the servants, who stand behind them, cluster indistinguishably, their physical individuality rendered indistinct in the shadows.

Those servile bodies, both as lived and represented, would remain largely occluded within the nineteenth-century European world. They were pushed out of sight into the private, feminized domain of domestic service and reproductive labor, "downstairs" in the bourgeois household (Crain *et al* 2016). Or, if they toiled as wage laborers in Mayhew's "undiscovered country" of the urban poor, they existed in "labyrinthine obscurity"¹⁵ within the city, only fleetingly laid bare by the unsparing searchlight shone on them by social critics and moral reformers like Greenwood, Dickens, Gaskell, Gissing, and Engels. Often styling themselves as explorers – vide James Greenwood's travels in *The Wilds of London* (1874; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:315) -- they focused above all on the degraded

¹⁵ George Gissing, Introduction to *Oliver Twist* (1900: xvii); Williams (1973:224).

material conditions that 'housed' the working body in the factory, alley, or tenement – sordid circumstances incapable of nurturing virtuous human life. Children were depicted as cavorting (rather than sleeping) at night, wandering untended amidst the debauchery of drunken adults, or begging shamelessly in the streets (Figure 6). Such “pauper colonies,” wrote Beames (1852:2-4) produced “pariahs...of the body social.”

But perhaps the most damning portrayal of the effects of alienated labor on the reproduction of human life in itself lay in depictions of the working female body, in which production and nurture were in direct contradiction. Engels writes:

That the general mortality among young children must be increased by the employment of the mothers is self-evident and is placed beyond all doubt by notorious facts. Women often return to the mill three or four days after confinement, leaving the baby, of course; in the dinner-hour they must hurry home to feed the child and eat something, and what sort of suckling that can be is also evident ...The mother goes to the mill shortly after five o'clock in the morning, and comes home at eight at night; all day the milk pours from her breasts, so that her clothing drips with it...[O]ften wet through to the skin, and obliged to work in that state.”¹⁶

While child labor peaked with nineteenth-century industrialization, it also triggered mounting calls for regulation as the century wore on.¹⁷ Childhood was

¹⁶ See Engels 1969:165.

¹⁷ See "What is child labour?". International Labour Organization. 2012; <https://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/lang--en/index.htm>, accessed 3 October 2022.

increasingly being viewed as a state of innocent pre-maturity, properly given over to socialization and nurture, at a safe distant from the market. The juvenile working body became anathema to a morally nourishing domestic order. Engels again:

Children and young people who are employed in transporting coal and iron-stone all complain of being overtired... It is constantly happening that children throw themselves down on the stone hearth or the floor as soon as they reach home, fall asleep at once without being able to take a bite of food, and have to be washed and put to bed while asleep; it even happens that they lie down on the way home, and are found by their parents late at night asleep on the road.¹⁸

The intensifying competition for cheap labor and limited, repetitive skills pitted the working body against the machine,¹⁹ making the former the residuum of the latter: it redefined the human person by assigning worth only to the discrete body parts and tasks needed to complete the capacities of mechanical manufacture. Thus did nimble fingers become metonymic of exploitable labor power, and the gigeconomy a reality before the fact, as it were:

¹⁸ Engels 1969:167.

¹⁹ This process is immortalized in the “Ballad of John Henry,” one of the first even recorded country songs in the US, in which a man with a hammer pits his strength against the newly introduced steam-drill. The song is thought to refer to a black prisoner in the Virginia State Penitentiary, sent to work on the C&W Railroad in 1866. *The Ballad of John Henry Documentary*; <https://balladofjohnhenry.com/true-story/>, accessed 18 November 2022.

The human labour, involved in both spinning and weaving, consists chiefly in piecing broken threads, as the machine does all the rest. This work requires no muscular strength, but only flexibility of finger. Men are, therefore, not only not needed for it, but actually, by reason of the greater muscular development of the hand, less fit for it than women and children, and are, therefore, naturally almost superseded by them. Hence, the more the use of the arms, the expenditure of strength, can be transferred to steam or waterpower, the fewer men need be employed; and as women and children work more cheaply, and in these branches better than men, they take their places.²⁰

David Livingstone, soon to enter our story, was himself once a child piecer in a Scottish mill.

Discrimination – by gender, age, physical dis/ability, and so on – is built into the core workings of capitalism as it sizes up the human body to maximize the surplus value that body can yield. Race, too, was becoming an ever more salient vector as English industrialists sought to discount labor and cultivate a growing “reserve” army of workers – most immediately Irish immigrants, held to be of different in physiognomy, willing to work for lower wages than their English counterparts.²¹

²⁰ Engels 1969:109.

²¹ Engels 1969:81-2.

Those seeking to draw the attention of a distracted urban public to the momentous upheaval occurring just beyond their lines of sight often enlisted the signifying power of the body to amplify their call. Dickens was especially adept at mobilizing corporeal qualities to highlight the conditions of labor exploitation. Thus, his account of the fictitious Coketown in *Hard Times*, whose brick facades were like “the painted face of a savage,” and whose monstrous steam-engine “worked monotonously up and down...in a state of melancholy madness.” Again, we find masked reference to a racialized imperium in the dehumanization of local populations, whom Dickens describes as the unacknowledged source of the town’s real wealth.²² Coketown’s polluted rivers and “interminable serpents of smoke” make plain the cynical corruption of the once nurturing relationship between laboring bodies and their natural environment.

At the same time, the European countryside became a more palpable foil to the industrializing city, notwithstanding the rapid disappearance of a traditional peasantry and the growth of agrarian capitalism (Williams 1973:2). Here pastoral nostalgia served as a lament for the vanishing of unalienated work. Writers like Hardy paid homage to a lost world of harmony, fulfilment, and plenitude vested in the image of a sustained symbiosis of *homo faber* and natural fecundity.

What [Giles] had forgotten was that there was [sic] a thousand young fir-trees to be planted in a neighboring spot which had been cleared by the wood-cutters, and that he had arranged to plant them with his own hands.

²² Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, Chapter 5:16-17.

He had a marvelous power of making trees grow. Although he would seem to shovel in the earth quite carelessly, there was a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak, or beech that he was operating on, so that the roots took hold of the soil in a few days.²³

The spade here seems almost an extension of the body as it enables the soil to admit the sapling to its nourishing bed.

Yet the nineteenth century countryside was also the mise-en-scene for disturbingly dystopic images of an immiserated population of landless rural wage workers, epitomized by bodies broken in servitude.

Look at the arm of a woman labouring in the harvest field – thin, muscular, sinewy, black almost, it tells of continued strain. After much of this she becomes pulled out of shape, the neck loses its roundness and shows the sinews, the chest flattens... There is so much in the wheat, there are books of meditation in it... Behind these beautiful aspects comes the reality of human labor -- hours upon hours of heat and strain.... The wheat is beautiful, but human life is labor.²⁴

This was Richard Jefferies, an increasingly radicalized chronicler of the English countryside, in 1885. The sylvan image of the wheat, in this account, seems sustained by the fat drawn from the laboring body, while the blackening of the

²³ Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* Chapter 8: 99; chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://freeclassicebooks.com/Thomas%20Hardy/Novels/The%20Woodlanders.pdf, accessed 28 September 2022.

²⁴ Richard Jefferies, 1885, in *The Open Air*, cited in Williams 1973:194-195.

worker links her in the flash of an image to other racialized bodies, simultaneously despoiled by toil in the colonies; by this stage, only a small percentage of the agricultural products consumed in England were produced at home (Williams 1972:2). Why do they toil so? Jefferies mused. “Because Hunger and Thirst drive them: these are ...the whips worse than the knout, which lie at the back of Capital and give it power.”²⁵ As with Marx’s “hidden abode,” Jefferies seeks to render visible the shrouded dynamics of expropriation that compel ostensibly free rural workers to labor in the field almost to the point of extinction. Hidden behind the fetishized images of picturesque rural life – the rippling wheat, the healthful grain – lies the slavedriver’s’ lash.

Relevant, too, to the imaginary appearance of working bodies, both rural and urban, was the popular genre termed “supernatural realism” in nineteenth-century Britain (Smajić, 2009): the folk myths of poltergeists that took possession of repressed young female servants to imbue the ordinary objects in their care with false life, this to wreak havoc on domestic order.²⁶ Or the ghosts in popular Victorian fiction, like Dickens’ Jacob Marley (*A Christmas Carol*), a figure eternally tortured by the weight of what might be called “dead labor:” cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses. Or Mrs. Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story,” spinning spooky yarns about the ill-gotten wealth of the family to which she

²⁵ Richard Jefferies, “Thoughts on the Labour Question,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 November, 1891;

²⁶ Assault, Robbery, and Murder: The Dark History of “Bedsheet Ghosts,” Lucas Reilly, October 20, 2017, *Mental Floss*; <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/507440/assault-robbery-and-murder-dark-history-bedsheet-ghosts>, accessed 29 November 2022; Ghost stories: why the Victorians were so spookily good at them,” Kira Cochrane, *The Guardian*, 23 December 2013; <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/23/ghost-stories-victorians-spookily-good>, accessed 29 November 2022.

was bound in servitude. Or, most epically, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), in which a foreign aristocrat, who lives by sucking the blood of the living, makes his home in Britain to create a new order of beings. As Franco Moretti (1982:73) points out, he is the very embodiment of Marx's image of capital "which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor." He has no substantive body: he "is an Un-Dead...impelled towards continuous growth" in his adopted home. His manic monopolism terrifies the local, ostensibly gentler brand of bourgeois capitalism that lies to itself about the monster it has created, and "hides" its factories and extractive institutions beneath dignifying feudal architecture and pious family values (p.75). Here we find an uncanny return to capitalism's hidden abode, and also to a prefiguration, perhaps, of other kinds of specters – like the zombie of the imperial theater of production.

The supplement: the body of colonial labor

I have already noted that the presence of coerced, ethnicized labor in nineteenth-century England is evident not only in the swelling Irish workforce, but as a subliminal presence, in the public consciousness, of enslaved and indentured black bodies toiling in imperial fields elsewhere: cutting the cane, picking cotton, and plucking the tea leaves that had become staple commodities of everyday Victorian life. The economies of modern states have always drawn heavily on the surplus value of *hominem sacri*, the bare life of immiserated, non-citizens -- populations both unfree and

often unwaged (Gordon 2020; Denning 2010; Robinson 1983; Federici 1975) that supplements the wealth of nations. Alienated labor is inherently a condition of displacement, an existential and spatio-temporal exile from rooted, self-possessed being. The ground zero of such estranged labor, of course, was the Atlantic slave trade, which was integral – both structurally and historically -- to the evolution of capitalism as a planetary system. “Black workers of America bent at the bottom of a growing pyramid of commerce and industry,” wrote W.E.B. Du Bois (1935:10-11), enabled “new dreams of power and visions of empire.” What is more, as Amy Dru Stanley (2012:119) points out, “the “most intimate human relationship” lay at the heart of the connection between American slavery and the global economic transformation of the nineteenth century: the reproductive labor of black women in breeding chattel slaves for profit.

For abolitionists, both religious and secular, slavery was the original sin against the ethic of liberal humanism. It confused sentient with bestial labor, and persons with chattels to be owned, inherited, sold. Yet classic liberalism remained decidedly ambiguous on the matter. Thus Locke, in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690:27), famously declared that:

“[E]very man has a property in his own person: this nobody has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his.”

But Locke also invested in the African slave trade and advocated, consequentially, for the inalienable rights of Carolinian planters over their human property.

For Christian abolitionists, like the Nonconformist churchmen who bore the message of emancipation into the Southern African interior in the 1800s, the task was to turn the “evil traffic” into civilizing commerce, grounded in the gospel of free labor. Work that was voluntarily given and justly requited was the prime medium of salvation, the means to turn heathen superstition into liberating truth, righteous personhood, just ambition (Roscoe 1787-8:31). In many ways, the aim was to recreate an idealized Christian peasantry -- rapidly vanishing from the English countryside – in the African “wilderness.”

Mission stations, like the one established in the 1840's by David Livingstone in what was to become Bechuanaland, were microcosms of a colonial order of production. Above all, they were designed to tutor African bodies in the motives, habits, and ethical orientation of virtuous labor (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:198). The Tswana people to whom Livingstone had attached himself were agrarian pastoralists, living in complexly structured settlements that centered on a court of hereditary rulers, surrounded by concentric bands of fields and cattle posts. To the evangelical eye, the native division of labor was “topsy-turvy:” herds were the property of adult males, tended by younger men and

Sarwa ("Bushman") serfs (i.e. ethnically marked vassals) rooted beyond the bounds of civil habitation. Women did the bulk of what the Europeans considered to be male work – cultivation, brewing, and house building -- while manly occupations, the stuff of politics, law, and ritual, were largely invisible to the evangelical eye. As Mary Moffat (Philip 1828,2:189), missionary wife and mother-in-law of David Livingstone, put it;

Picture to yourself tender and gentle women...bending their delicate forms, tearing the rugged earth...dragging immense loads of wood over the burning plains, wherewith to erect their houses, thus bearing the double weight of the curse on both sexes.

Another European observer dubbed these women the local "working class" (Lichtenstein [1811] 1973:77), underlining how this productive system seemed to invert the gender logic of its contemporary European counterpart. Not only were the women doing men's work; the toll taken by their toil was shamelessly visible. Thus, while in some ways Moffat's account anticipates Jefferies' critical exposé of the blackened woman of the English countryside, there are telling differences. The latter was depicted as wholly consumed by servitude, while African women, despite their exertions, seemed quite well in control of the circumstances in which they toiled. Contemporary accounts describe the forceful response when their fields were invaded by cattle and sheep, deemed the responsibility of men. The women -- including recent converts to Christianity -- set about hacking the beasts to death; though their action resulted in their being "cut off" from the

church, their response was seen as fully within their rights by traditional authorities (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:130).

African women also offended the naked mission eye by being brazenly underclad as they went about their business.

Unsurprisingly, the evangelists sought to “domesticate” them. They urged them to don the dark, durable garb the Christians associated with female modesty, and to confine themselves to the secluded, “private” abode of dutiful housewifery – in precisely the manner that a rising bourgeois society in Europe sought to move women into the moralized interior of the home. As Tswana women were coaxed to move “indoors” and pick up the broom and needle, men were encouraged to take to the fields and assume command of the plough; in short, to accomplish the “revolution” required to turn cultivation into a profitable business (Campbell 1822, 2:60).

The biblical horticultural idiom here (“a rich harvest of immortal souls;” Moffat 1842;588) was harnessed to the rationalizing terms of pious ambition – the latter primed by the power of “British commodities” to stir bodily appetites (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:24) and whet the taste for accumulating wealth. These commodities – the tools, fabrics, blankets, household utensils produced by working people a world away -- were displayed in the windows of tradesmen on the mission stations to kindle a “sacred

hunger” (Unsworth 1992). And stimulate industriousness (Philip 1828:1, 204f; Mackenzie 1887,1:31). For, as one European observer lamented, “there [was] much to encourage idleness in native life, such as the absence of any motive for working” (Lloyd 1895:169). Yet again, a largely invisible matrix of value-generating transactions was set in motion to link the newly laboring, desiring, consuming bodies at the centers and peripheries of Empire.

At issue, on the Southern African frontier, was not merely the reorganization of an existing division of labor or the refiguring of the semiotics of a lived material realm to mimic the binary world of Euro-modernity: male versus female, public versus private, visible versus hidden. What the crusading imperialists proposed was a sacralized economy in which ‘honest’ commerce would draw African converts into the universal Christian commonwealth, both in this world and the next. “Society” became the masculinized world of public transaction and personal appearance, the domain of church, work, and market, whereas “home” became the secluded, private sphere of female consumption and nurture. At the core of this moral configuration was the laboring body, engine of purposive expenditure in acts of production and reproduction, processes that turned physical effort into tangible evidence of virtue – the currency of civility and salvation. While the mills of gods ground slowly, they ground exceedingly fine.

Hard work also yielded the small change of everyday life in a commodified world. Protestant evangelists were avid agents of monetization as the material recompense for “proper” work in the world outside the home (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:170). The good Christian life was immersed in a moral economy of earning and spending whereas, in the metropole, “everything [took] place on the surface and in view of all men” (Marx 1974:175, above). Here, money would serve as a universal equivalent, making all things fungible, urbane, graspable. But this pragmatic ontology, which the evangelists hoped would displace the shadowy specters of “superstition,” was to prove no more plainly transparent.

Here, again, a particular understanding of the laboring body was the key: the dictum that all men --- in the marked, gendered sense -- were equally in possession of their labor power and could alike turn it into the currency of life in a commodified world. The mission gardens served as the first, exemplary sites for teaching Africans “proper” work as fairly recompensed, self-possessed, “rational” productive activity. David Livingstone (1940:92; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997;134) describes one such “object lesson:”

We have a man and his wife as servants, and a girl as nursemaid. The man is waggoner driver and everything else he can do, his wife a servant of all work. These form our

establishment. But they are not all we require. Grinding corn, baking, washing, etc. are done by calling an assistant from the [African] town... These supernumeraries²⁷ are taught reading as well as washing etc...They are paid in beads, a variety of which costs 3/- a pound.

These employees are learning the rudiments of what counted as labor: that it was a commodity to be husbanded, voluntarily brokered, subject to a contract, and worthy of just recompense -- although Livingstone's account makes plain that the bead currency used along the colonial frontier at the time bore no real relation to the value of the services rendered. But the conceit of fair trade, calculation, and accumulation, here part of a Christian economy of grace, was premised on the assumption that labor extended in righteous service was inalienable, being the means of redemption. The symbolic investment in the surplus virtue generated by wage work in these early days along the proletarian frontier is worthy of notice: before colonial commerce made money available in the Southern African interior, the missionaries went so far as to mint their own coinage so as to establish a semi-autonomous regional market as the expanded realm of commodification in trading goods and services (Campbell

²⁷ This term, with its connotation of extra, or unskilled help might express Livingstone's slight guilt at his large staff, justified here by the fact that these servants are being educated and paid.

1813:256). They even encouraged children in the mission schools to “pay” their fees by assigning monetary value to eggs and firewood.²⁸

Again, it was the fantasy of a virtually extinct British yeomanry that drove mission pedagogy, a population supplanted as producers, in large part, by more exploitable counterparts in the colonized peripheries. The fate of laboring bodies at home and abroad was intertwined, long before the era of “globalization.” Already then, those bodies were being used to discount each other in the endless quest to render labor cheap and abject, more or less unaware of itself as a class. Meanwhile, in South Africa, most black farmers -- including the minority most immediately affected by the “civilizing” mission -- would end up in servitude on large, white-owned commercial estates.

Of course, these colonizing quests often were eluded, refused, or remade in queer ways. My purpose here is to explore the overall thrust of these early moments in the interpolation of racially marked bodies into the modern capitalist imperium. Nonconformists like Livingstone (1857:46) denounced the Transvaal Boer settlers for forcing Batswana into servitude on their farms, while the latter appear to have been very willing to work in properly paid jobs. There

²⁸ Hodgson, Wesleyan Methodist Mission Society (1829-31) Bostchuana Country: Extract of a letter from Mr. Hodgson, dated Bootchnaap, November 24th, 1828. *Missionary Notices Relating Principally to the Foreign Missions*, 6 (164):120.

is plentiful evidence to suggest that most Africans preferred to toil independently beyond the market. But even before industrialization sped colonial overrule in the late nineteenth century, intensifying the quest for tractable black labor, mission observers noted that their converts had begun to travel to the colony in search of paid work; “experienced capitalists,” they said, regarded mission stations as “great depots where labor may be obtained” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:199).

All too soon, settler encroachment, overrule, taxation, and the intentional undermining of the African peasantry would drive ever more men, women, and children to sell their labor on farms, in small towns, at the mines, and in the industrial conurbations surrounding them (Bundy 1979). The influx of migrant workers into towns and public space would increasingly be regulated by legislation: curfews, vagrancy laws, master-servant statutes, and the infamous “pass system” were designed to make black workers vanish into crowded compounds, dormitories, and townships, or into servants’ quarters tucked behind white-owned homes. While race was the dominant principle of expropriating resources and labor from indigenous populations in settler colonies, settlers tended themselves to affect the conceit of being native, seeking to make indigenes disappear – as exploitable labor, urban exiles, or populations otherwise expendable (Englert 2020). Here, where race and class overlapped

almost completely (Wolpe 1972; Fanon 1963:39), colonial capitalism operated in terms of a double in/visibility, locating the brute alienation of black labor – the not fully guiltless open secret – beyond the scope of the bourgeois gaze.

Yet again here, it was the surreal popular imagination that seemed to grasp the full dehumanization of the laboring body. The corporeal effects of toil on the body among black wage workers in South Africa was made especially evident in the poetics of ordinary communication (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:157; van Onselen 1973). Early migrants from Mozambique, for instance, spoke of the Witwatersrand mines as places where witches (*baloyi*) extracted their “life essence,” forcing them to toil underground for days at a time as *dlukula* (living dead), existing on a diet of mud (Harries 1994:221). It is not merely that such labor is coerced. It transforms the worker into an alien being, one whose work is “mortifying,” (Marx 1977:71) rather than self-constructive. In that regard, early Tswana proletarians developed a contrast between the domain of wage work, referred to as *mmérékò* (from the Dutch *werk*) as against *tiro*, socially contextualized, intersubjective action of the sort that built social relations (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:169). They spoke of the way in which contract labor reduced men to draft animals, even to “tinned fish.” This last image captures the notorious spatial congestion and regimentation of the mine hostels in which workers were enclosed, sleeping in bunks like sardines in a can. Again, the sense, here, a flash of insight as the

lid is momentarily drawn back to reveal the hidden abode of value extraction, of existence as a state of invisibility, of living death.

* * *

And so we return, once more, to the core questions that animate this essay: the nature of the laboring human body as it takes shape under the conditions of modern industrial capitalism. That body, I have argued, presents a paradox, both in life and in theory. It is, at once, the *fons et origo* of selfhood and human world-making, and yet somehow remains obscure, often invisible – at least in its laboring capacity -- to the liberal bourgeois eye. This paradox, I suggest, is inherent under conditions in which work becomes a commodity, and hence participates in the nature of the commodity form itself: that is, when it obscures the essence of its own production as an object of value. Tracking, ethnographically, the ways in which the working body moves in and out of visibility and social reckoning enables us to cast light on the specific shape of this process in particular times and places. The hidden secret of how human work produces wealth might elude liberal ontology, but it has frequently bodied forth, over the long history of modern capitalism, in the estranged recognition of collective fantasies about the dark process that turns straw into gold. And labor into objectified value. While my story is located in the context of early modern British industrialism and its imperial backstage, it could as easily be told in the myriad other locations in which capitalism -- as an ever evolving, diversifying social form -- is embodied in ordinary existence.

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