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Working at Living: The Social Relations of Precarity

Title

Making Do. Survival Strategies Under Precarity (Part C): Excess Bodies

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Author

Ameeriar, Lalaie

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Problematic C: Excess Bodies

Since the 1970s, we have encountered large-scale transformations the ways humans experience time and space. What we call globalization can be understood in terms of the increasing flow of trade, finance, culture, ideas and people created through technological innovation as well as the spread of neoliberal capitalism. Arjun Appadurai (1999) has conceptualized this process through the metaphor of “flows.” He writes, “the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models” (32). Instead, he develops a framework for understanding five dimensions of global cultural flows: ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples and ideoscaples to describe the flows of people, media, technology, finance, and ideas across transnational borders. Since the 1990s, neoliberalism has become a dominant ideology in guiding global processes. Neoliberalism promotes free trade, privatization, the open market, and the rolling back of welfare as a safety net for those living in precarious circumstances. In this section I consider what the constraints are of these global processes for the individual. That is, how do people negotiate these large-scale transformations in everyday life?

Scholarly writing around diaspora and globalization has attempted to show how mobile subjects disrupt the equation of “a people” tied to “a place.” These mobile subjects are imagined to destabilize the very construction of the “nation-state” by disrupting the idea of people tied to places. The notion of diaspora has been fundamental to understandings of migration in the contemporary era, by allowing for the analysis of the relationships between migrant groups in multiple places. Theorizations of U.S. race relations tend to understand the relationship between a minority group and the U.S. nation-state – for example, the relationship between Chinese migrants the state. Theorizations of diaspora allow for an analysis of the relationship between

different migrant groups around the world – for example, the relationship between Chinese migrants in New York, London, and Toronto all form part of the Chinese diaspora. This formulation does not assume one-way migrations and instead considers the global circulation of people and ties not just between diasporic communities and a recognized “homeland,” but also to other diasporic groups globally. People in diaspora migrate through processes of globalization, but it is an uneven process. Here, I take up the theme of this module, which is precarity. Precarity is also linked to notions of excess – that is precariousness in the neoliberal global economy produces excessive bodies. In the remainder of this section, I will theorize the notion of “bodies out of place” and the position of precarious workers in processes of globalization.

Theorizing Bodies out of Place

Mary Douglas (1966) conceptualized the notion of “matter out of place” in her text *Purity and Danger*. She examines the role of ritual in distinguishing the “pure” from the “contaminated,” which serves as symbolic boundary maintenance. “Dirt is essentially disorder...it exists in the eye of the beholder...In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea (2).” Certain kinds of immigrants (as I will describe below) in the global economy can be thought of as “matter out of place,” which marks their essential Otherness.

Multiculturalism has been implemented as a means to integrate or assimilate these racialized “excessive bodies” into Western nation-states. A number of theorists have examined multiculturalism as it impacts minority groups (e.g., Amit-Talai 1996, Kymlicka 1998, Walcott 2003). Some writers have championed multiculturalism as a success, the best case scenario

imagined to be the Canadian context, which has largely been considered a success story of global integration. Two of the leading scholars of multiculturalism, Will Kymlicka and Charles Taylor were writing on the Canadian context. Will Kymlicka (1998) argues that the multicultural model in Canada has been relatively successful, and that difficulties accommodating diversity are not insurmountable. With respect to immigrant groups, the multicultural model of “integration” which was adopted by the federal government in 1971, he argues is better than is commonly thought.

Other scholars of multiculturalism have been more critical of its successes such as anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli (2002). She demonstrates the ways that multicultural politics do not always operate through a politics of assimilation to a mainstream (imagined White) subjectivity. These complicated processes sometimes create conditions under which those deemed Other must perform their Otherness. She explores liberal multiculturalism from the perspective of Australian indigenous populations. She suggests that multiculturalism exacerbates unequal power relations by demanding that indigenous people identify with an impossible standard of “authentic traditional culture.” Thus, this neocolonial imperative does not demand assimilation in the conventional sense, but rather what she has termed a radical alterity.

To make sense of the relationship between the multicultural state and its subjects, theorists have proposed alternative conceptions of citizenship that go beyond legal papers. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1997) has proposed the concept of “cultural citizenship” to understand the negotiation between minorities and the state. Cultural citizenship refers to the right to be different in terms of ethnicity, language or religion without compromising one’s right to belong in the sense of participating in the democratic processes of the state. In *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*, Flores and Benmayor (1997) argue

that immigration from Latin America and Mexico has been perceived as a threat to the political, economic and cultural character of the United States, and therefore Latinos will always be considered outsiders.

Thinking through cultural citizenship and the position of precarious subjects, many authors have examined these global processes from the “bottom up” or, in other words from the perspective of the everyday. For example, anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2003) explores how Cambodian refugees in the United States negotiate their claims to American citizenship. While in encounters with service providers, bureaucrats and employers they are encouraged to be “self-reliant.” In a neoliberal regime, the societal structure constrains them within marginalizing practices related to their ethnicity, race and socioeconomic class status exacerbating their precarious status. Miriam Ticktin (2011) examines the role of bureaucracy in containing immigrants to France. She examines the unintended consequences of humanitarianism, which allows sick and suffering bodies to cross borders, while limiting the movement of others. In a climate inhospitable to immigrants, pathology such as HIV, cancer, and sexual violence become a means of obtaining residency papers. She interrogates structures of global capitalism that determine the migration of some, and state practices that criminalize the undocumented.

The marking of dangerous and excessive Others is also subject to gender differentiation. Theorists of gender and multiculturalism (Povinelli 2002, Razack 1998) have examined the ways that women are subjected to disciplining by the state. Women’s bodies become an important site to witness the larger politics of gender and nationalism in contemporary North America. These gender politics are also importantly racialized in the context of contemporary post 9/11 society. In ‘Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?’ Susan Okin argues that in multicultural societies, individual rights are trumped by group rights. In particular, she argues that cultural rights trump

women's rights. In her article, a group largely configured as "third world women" are subject not only to the actions and behaviors of "third world men" but also to patriarchal traditions imported from an imagined East to an imagined West. In her analysis, women are positioned as bearers of culture to be read and understood through their subjection to archaic and oppressive cultural traditions. Okin's article can be read as a feminist analysis of the dangers of multicultural practice, however the piece not only denies agency and the voices of women themselves, it also vilifies immigrant men.

Precarious Workers

We can think of our modern economic system as being based on the rise of industrialized mass production – in particular the rise of the factory. Henry Ford introduced the five-dollar, eight-hour day in his Michigan assembly plant, which came with the standardization of clock time and the deskilling of assembly line work. Recent history has seen the transformation in the nature of work towards more "flexible labor" such that globalization and capitalism have changed what it means to work. David Harvey has written on the transformation in late capitalism from Fordism to flexible accumulation in which the nature of work has shifted to temporary, contingent labor. What is distinctive about this transformation is increasing precarity.

Naomi Klein (2000) in *No Logo* has argued that in the 1990s, almost all labor battles focused not on wage issues, but on the enforced casualization of labor. Corporate logic is increasingly moving toward a reserve of part-time and temporary laborers. This corporate logic has been successful in delegitimizing worker's claims to job security, livable wages, and benefits. Retail and service employees are infantilized as simply earning pocket money. In the United States, service and retail work now account for 75% of total employment. Many of the

same corporations not offering livable wages to their clerks are also the same corporations that do business in export processing zones (areas that are tax free zones, sealed from local governments where goods are manufactured with no import or export duties) meaning their obligations to workers are reduced at both the production and service ends.

Women in particular suffer at the hands of transnational capitalist systems. As Carla Freeman (2000) argues,

Why and how women's labor comes to be defined as "cheap" is in fact, a complex process in which gender is created, contested, and refashioned in particular, culturally specific ways. Women are no more "naturally" cheap labor than they are "naturally" docile or nimble fingered relative to men. And even when, as a group, they are defined in these terms across cultural locales, the ways in which women's work is defined as cheaper than or different from men's bear their own cultural and historically grounded marks. Understanding this process requires that we look not only at sexual divisions of labor and the structures of labor markets but also at the ideologies that underlie their "logic" (106).

There have been a number of works that explore precarious labor in the global economy. Rhacel Parrenas (2001) examines Filipina domestic workers in the global economy who must leave their own families to do "care work" for other families. Using ethnographic methods, she demonstrates the impact of globalization in everyday life. These workers experience downward mobility to do menial labor in the global economy at the expense of the care of their own children and families at home working in uncertain conditions for unfair wages and limited job security.

The goal in this section was to examine the notion of “precarity” as it relates to excess or excessive bodies, bodies that are perceived as “not belonging.” I examined theoretical writing on globalization, multiculturalism and diaspora, as well as examined the gendering of precarious work in the global economy. Please find below some texts and films for reference.

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