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Unfree Labor

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Abstract

This review examines the ambiguous condition of unfree labor in modern, Fordist, or postindustrial systems of exploitation. Unfree labor is reviewed across two multidisciplinary strands of research. The first pertains to forms of coercion and exploitation of labor in situations of human mobility or bondage—so-called modern-day slavery and human trafficking. The second attends to the effects of precariousness and dependency conceived at the interstice of recent theorizations of affect and belonging. Whereas the first case is framed as an exception, morally and legally condemned, the second is presented as a new ordinary form of inequality. A theoretical and empirical engagement that straddles both literatures under the prism of unfree labor consolidates this renewed anthropological focus on work. This review suggests that the objectification and dehumanization of labor should be placed back at the heart of anthropological reflection to pave the way for a refined scrutiny of exploitation, inequality, and dispossession.

INTRODUCTION

In the last *Annual Review of Anthropology* article on the topic of slavery, Kopytoff (1982, p. 223) remarked that the anthropological disengagement from slavery studies had largely deprived the field of theoretical interest. Though retaining its analytical pertinence to debates surrounding reparations, heritage tourism, surrogacy bondage, or the historical memory of enslavement (Allen 1998, Biondi 2003, Graeber 2007, Hartman 2002, Holsey 2008, Ralph 2015, Trouillot 2000), the problem of slavery is by and large absent from anthropological theorizations of contemporary labor. However, like a ghostly presence in dystopian visions of labor gone awry, slavery comes back to haunt and destabilize presumed assumptions about the nature of labor and the lives of workers across the world: slave laborers producing for global consumption, prisoners auctioned off into labor, or women trafficked and sold into slavery.¹ Although enslavement has long framed narratives of progress and emancipation, the category of unfreedom in formally free labor regimes sits uneasily in anthropological and social theory to account for unemployment, unpaid work, or the burden of debt.

This review brings together studies documenting the extraction of uncompensated or unpaid labor, commonly under the threat of coercive force (e.g., wage theft, forced domestic labor, debt bondage, human trafficking, forced migration), with a burgeoning literature in anthropology that examines the conditions producing what Allison (2013, p. 7) calls the “precaritization of labor and life.” Taken together, these fields of literature allow for a more detailed approximation to the conditions precluding emancipation or prefiguring social death, and in so doing, they allow us to understand the meaning people attach to changing labor configurations. This review suggests that more than an anomaly, the study of alienating, objectifying, and dehumanizing labor practices, or unfree labor, should be placed back into anthropological research to pave the way for increasingly refined depictions of exploitation, inequality, and dispossession.

Debates on work and dependence, wage labor, and unpaid work have gained an added prominence in the twenty-first century, exploring the tension between working less and the workless, the “specter of a wageless life” (Denning 2010, p. 97) and the new politics of distribution (Ferguson 2015). The central problem, however, remains that of the mutuality of dependency and autonomy, freedom and unfreedom. As such, an anthropological critique of capitalism’s inequalities and its unfreedoms that is able to examine work “not only as a machine for the generation of inequalities, but as a political problem of freedom” (Weeks 2011, p. 23) becomes all the more urgent. If shades of freedom and unfreedom permeate workplaces everywhere, what can an anthropology of unfree labor reveal about the trajectory of capitalism and modernity or about the complex and often antithetical conditions of dependence and bondage in debates on dispossession and oppression?

In what follows, this review builds from the multidisciplinary literature on coerced labor in processes of human mobility and debt bondage toward emergent forms of unfree labor. It further suggests a conceptualization of unfree labor that links property relations of domination and production to the qualitative experience of exploitative work, and it concludes with a reflection on the future of work as an ethical project of freedom and emancipation rooted in belonging and sociality.

¹It is frequently claimed that more humans live and work as slaves today than ever before in history. These estimates (of roughly 30 million people) are cited in both academic and nonacademic investigations, often underpinned by dubious calculations: Bales (2000, p. 484), for example, notes that despite the 27 million people living in slavery, “the value of slave labor is actually very small in the world economy.” The present review is motivated by this contradiction and the ethnographic context of my research in Angola, where artisanal diamond miners often compare their work to that of slaves, and wage-earning miners describe being deprived of freedom in prison-like corporate compounds. I owe my first foray into the domain of unfree labor to Professor Stephan Palmié, to whom this review is indebted.

FREEDOM AND LABOR: THE PROBLEM OF MODERN-DAY SLAVERY

The rhetorical force of a word such as slavery renders it apt for legal and policy-oriented discourse, and the concept remains a fundamental tool with which to analyze historical formations premised on the economic institution of human bondage. However, the use of concepts of slavery or forced labor to describe the complete control over an individual in contemporary labor regimes presupposes rigid categorizations (be they of contract, debt, or chattel slavery) and the exclusion of other forms of oppression (whether nonphysical or indisputably violent). Despite the seemingly clear denotation of slavery as a social category of practice (from the Roman empire to the plantation economy), the question of who or what actually makes a slave as a social category of personhood remains purposefully vague or analytically deceiving.²

The absolute deprivation of freedom squares uneasily with historical and ethnographic evidence of slaves' willful agentive capacity. If slavery was a germane concept for thinking about comparable labor situations (Palmié 1995), the analytical and conceptual reliance on modern-day slavery may inadvertently blanket important ethnographic and historical differences or overlook the subtler forms of coercion that preclude free, licit, and lawful labor in contemporary societies. Whether one calls it human trafficking, debt bondage, or indentured servitude, to label certain situations as enslavement or forced labor characterizes the domain of labor as invisible, unprotected, unregulated, or unlawful, and thus external to categories of acceptable or free labor. As we know, however, these domains of exploitative labor are the open secret of global commodity chains: They are imagined to be external but are actually integral to the functioning of these chains (Tsing 2009). And yet these cases of enslavement are often presented as symptomatic aberrations that produce a pretense of normalcy in a time of uncertain futures. In other words, a strict opposition between nominally free and unfree labor may end up reinforcing the perceived peculiarity of the institution of slavery (Patterson 1982) against a regime of free labor naturalized in capitalism. This formal binary conceptually and discursively marginalizes as exceptional free labor that is unpaid, uncertain, or actually nonexistent.

The relatively scarce engagement with the rich historical and anthropological literature on slavery in decades past stems from a perception of its diminishing ethnographic relevance. However, there is ample evidence to the contrary in recent studies of bonded labor and other forms of unfree labor, from South Asia (Bremar & Guérin 2009, Carswell & De Neve 2013, De Neve 2005) to service industry workers in the United States, who perceive the bond of debt as "a kind of slavery" (Gomberg-Muñoz 2010, p. 60). Although migrant workers are not hapless victims of their exploitative condition (De Neve 2005, p. 200), their vulnerability and exposure to debt lead many to become tied to their employers "as slaves" (Carswell & De Neve 2013, p. 446). Shunning some of its most problematic conceptual and analytical risks, the fields of development studies, human geography, and the migration literature have recently emphasized the notion of unfree labor (e.g., Berlan 2013, Fudge & Strauss 2013, Phillips 2013, Strauss 2012), joining a more established use of the term among historians (e.g., Archer 1988, Lovejoy 1994). There is also a dynamic multidisciplinary literature on forced migration and human trafficking, notably on the nexus between law enforcement and practices of deportation, incarceration, and undocumented migration (Colson 2003, De Genova 2005, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014).

²The legal ambiguity and definitional debates between forced labor and "conditions analogous to slavery" date back to the 1926 Convention to Suppress the Slave Trade and Slavery. Given its persistence and growing rhetorical traction in humanitarian and international legal frameworks, some have denounced this debate as having been "trafficked" (Mahdavi 2011, p. 211) by "harnessing" the rhetorical and emotional strength of slavery (Quirk 2011, p. 156).

Aside from studies of coerced mobility and the legal category of persons trafficked into forced and uncompensated labor (Brennan 2014, Peters 2015), anthropologists have been more receptive to the notion of smuggling than to the notion of trafficking (Chu 2010).³ Important anthropological work has been published on the commoditization and trafficking of bodies and body parts (Comaroff & Comaroff 2002, Sharp 2000), but the concept of trafficking is more widely used in other disciplines, such as sociology and feminist, legal, and migration studies (Anderson 2004, Hoang 2014, O'Connell 2013, Sanghera 2005, Weitzer 2015).⁴ Although striving for careful definitions, these analyses tend to undertheorize unfreedom and the production and sale of the commodity—the worker's labor power and the fruits of his or her labor. The result can be that a “sense of oneself as a commodity” (Pun 2005, p. 183) or of selling oneself or one's sexuality may be confounded in language and practice with the sale of one's labor, rooted in a dyadic opposition between the binary categories of free and unfree.⁵ Ethnographic research is well poised to destabilize simplified images of vulnerability and victimization and to denounce the violence of ready-made media and policy representations of sexual slavery or trafficking (Agustín 2007, Doezema 2010, Parreñas 2011).

Along with the transformations in the concepts of structure and agency, consciousness, and personhood, the anthropological unease with the interrelated categories of slavery and unfree labor lies in the persistence of a contrast viewed both historically and structurally. The contrast is between a system operating on the basis of the ownership of producers and a system in which labor power is exchanged in return for a wage. In this sense, wage labor and the presumptions of capitalist property relations are treated as not slavery, despite the obscure logics of capital and its coercive forms of domination. The accumulation of value rests on the extraction of unpaid labor, to follow Marx's canonical definition, and waged or free labor is still coerced, “not by institutions like slavery, but by the imperative that it exchange itself for a wage in order to live” (Parry 2012, p. 150). And yet, capitalism should not be theorized according to a static framework that focuses entirely on the imposing or disciplining of social relations. As Marx (1973, p. 258) put it, “capital is not a simple relation, but a process, in whose various moments it is always capital.” Moreover, paid work can also be not only “less free” but also “differently unfree” (Dunn 2004, p. 167), and recent debates on dependency, the refusal to work, inequality, and the changing conditions of exploitation have thrown in bold relief the need to reconceptualize this divide.

The methodological and analytical distinction between slavery and unfree labor, whether in historical terms, context-based approaches, or by way of sliding categorizations (e.g., Goody 1980), has been addressed in the historical and anthropological literature on slavery. As Patterson (1982) suggested, slavery and freedom may be far more connected than we are ready to acknowledge, and the extraction of labor from subservient individuals is not unique to genuine slave societies (Finley 1980) nor to peripheral regions in the global economy. As a geographically expansive and ubiquitous phenomenon, slavery was never a monolithic institution. It oscillated between and coexisted with a wider spectrum of social arrangements and forms of bondage (Palmié 1995) in a

³ Parreñas (2011), for example, proposes the alternative concept of indentured mobility to overcome the quandaries of structural constraints and agency. For a recent review of the anthropological engagement with forced migration studies, see Chatty (2014).

⁴ This comes at the expense of methodological clarity, with frequent allusions to the paucity of data or a narrow focus on antitrafficking measures (Agustín 2007, Mahdavi 2011, Parreñas 2011).

⁵ A proposed continuum of plural unfreedoms (Bremen & Guérin 2009) generates new important questions but does not entirely resolve the issue. The analytic purchase of this continuum, with abundant examples in the literature, is summarized by Palmer (1998, p. xxvii) as stretching between the temporary arrangement of indentured servitude and slavery, which are on the opposite poles of the continuum.

shared cultural framework that bound the alienability of property rights in people and the creative and multidimensional responses to enslavement (Blackburn 1988). The authors of intellectually ambitious projects that sought to reveal variability and comparability across space and time were careful to avoid contrasting these situations with a liberal notion of freedom conceived as the antithesis of the deprivation of autonomy (Kopytoff 1982); rather, their preferred contrast was with a kinship-based form of relational belonging and “affective incorporation” (Kopytoff & Miers 1977, p. 17).

This multidisciplinary and collaborative intellectual tradition on slave cultures or the memory of slave trade (Graeber 2006, 2007; Palmié 1995; Shaw 2002) could be brought to bear on the recent and sparse theoretical engagement with the concept of unfree labor, which has been limited rather cursorily to reimagining modes of production “inside out” (Graeber 2006) and to the quandaries of freedom in wage labor (Banaji 2003). The historical and anthropological lessons of this literature are more relevant now than ever, lest we forget Mintz’s (1986) point about the interlocking histories of the plantation economy and the European industrial revolution. Thus the conundrum of where to locate freedom in the transition from slave economies to contemporary labor regimes is not entirely solved.

EMERGENT FORMS OF UNFREE LABOR

A revitalized anthropological engagement with work has prompted ethnographers to document the myriad ways in which contemporary forms of labor are being reconfigured. It is around these transformations and an emergent constellation of qualities, figurations, and expressions of work that unfree labor potentially coalesces, echoing the need to conceptualize studies of slavery “across the historical threshold between slavery and freedom” (Palmié 1995, p. xviii). In fact, there is an epistemic continuity between the multidisciplinary investigation of unfree labor and a burgeoning literature in anthropology on the experience of work framed around the quandaries of paid and unpaid, productive and reproductive labor, as well as the situational problem of belonging as opposed to the dehumanizing and objectifying practices of work.

The post-Fordist world, with its unrestrained capitalist competition and flexible labor regimes, has been the object of thorough anthropological investigation and theorization. Ethnographers have been attentive to the contradictions of late capitalism as manifest in worker-subject constructions (Freeman 2000, Pun 2005, Salzinger 2003) and in paid and unpaid, affective and immaterial labor (Han 2012; Hardt & Negri 2000; Muehlebach 2011, 2012). If deindustrialization, family relations, and feminized labor in blue-collar America (Dewey 2011, Dudley 1994, Rolston 2014, Walley 2013) command considerable attention, there is a concomitant interest in the loss of wage or job stability, debt, and insecure futures (Bear 2015, Gusterson & Besteman 2010). The lived effects of neoliberalism are not monolithic, and the picture that emerges from the new international division of labor is multifarious and not without its contradictions. This section attends to the changing nature of work as reflected in anthropological research on feminized work, migrant labor, and other forms of precarious and flexible labor. It concludes with a reflection on workplace subjectivities and the problem of belonging and domination.

Anthropologists have recently begun attending to the multiple and changing paradigms of work and exploitation in ethnographic studies of job insecurity among white-collar employees (Ho 2009, Lane 2011, Molé 2012). This interest is coupled with the rapid feminization of migrant labor (Sassen 2000) and the growing relevance of the care industry, pivoting around the control of labor, the commoditization of affective and intimate domains, and the entanglements between sexuality and work. This has become one of the most thriving and theoretically promising avenues of anthropological research, revealing the deeply intertwined relation between desiring subjects

and economic activity, sex work, and labor. Truong's (1990) culturally situated interpretation of sexual work in Thailand or Allison's (1994) research on hostess clubs in Tokyo paved the way for an ethnographically oriented research detailing the lives of migrant sex workers in post-socialist China (Zheng 2009), Cambodia (Sandy 2014), or Japan (Parreñas 2011), as well as the "ordinary ethics" of former and current sex workers who come to inhabit the world by concealing their "socially dead" persons (Day 2010, p. 299) or struggle to be good mothers (Dewey 2011). The longing for a better future in ever-expanding networks of love, kinship, and transnational marriage migration has also been the object of considerable anthropological attention (Cole 2010, Kelsky 2001, Plambech 2010). These transnational economies of desire binding tourism, labor, and sexuality in the Caribbean (Brennan 2004, Gregory 2007) and parts of Southeast Asia (Agustín 2007) are often framed as instances of sex and human trafficking. However, the label of trafficking is dismissed by different authors because it reinforces morally powerful narratives of vulnerability and fails to capture the heterogeneous continuum of abuses, including women who seek in prostitution a way out of coerced domestic labor or better living conditions (Agustín 2007, Mahdavi 2011).

In the global management of a highly flexible labor market, low-wage jobs and the exploitable labor of subcontracted or migrant workers have also been the locus of ethnographic investigation. Increasingly, research on call center night jobs (Patel 2010), day-labor markets (Dohan 2003, Purser 2012), and "body shops" demonstrates how these labor recruitment agencies are endowed with the capacity to place, pass around, or sell workers across the world (Biao 2006).⁶ Despite Benson's (2012, p. 168) reminder that "farm labor conditions have remained hidden from the public eye," undocumented migrant workers have become the object of considerable study in the United States. Researchers have detailed, for example, the lives of migrant Jamaican women and undocumented Mexican workers in the service industry (Thomas 2008, Gomberg-Muñoz 2010), migrant women in strawberry farms (Sanchez 2013), the laboring conditions of tobacco growers and migrant farmers in North Carolina (Benson 2012), or migrant labor in low-paying industries more generally (Dohan 2003, Striffler 2005). Similarly, recent studies have added much-needed ethnographic detail to the complex and perilous journey of migrants crossing the border into the United States (Holmes 2013, León 2015).

The study of poverty and inequality, social disempowerment and dispossession has been most prolific on the concepts of precariousness and precarity (Allison 2013, Das & Randeria 2015, Hébert 2015, Muehlebach 2012, Stewart 2012). Charted alongside the rise of an affective labor economy, these studies seek to detail a wide spectrum of situations framed in terms of destitution, exploitation, and vulnerability but also new emergent forms of "ethical citizenship," or unpaid labor that is at once exploitative and generative of new forms of belonging (Muehlebach 2012, p. 49). As such, the emerging care industry (Paerregaard 2012, Wright 2013), new forms of labor embodied by trial subjects in drug and clinical tests (Cooper & Waldby 2014) or the widespread plight of unpaid interns forcefully reposition the problem of what constitutes work, from the surplus of affective labor in Italy's voluntarism (Muehlebach 2012) to faith-based volunteer workforces in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (Adams 2013).

Despite its recent coinage, the concept of precarity has proven germane for a broader register of spaces of affect (Stewart 2012). At the root of the "precariatization of daily life," Allison (2013, p. 54) writes, is the "feeling of being 'dispossessed' by a capitalism that is encroaching ever more insidiously into the life, and lives, of those, the new denizens, for whom everyday security is becoming increasingly precarious as a result." In the expanding sway of voluntary and unpaid work,

⁶Biao (2006, p. 75) tells the story of visiting a placement agency where he was "handed a card reading 'Sell your friends!' promising a spotter's fee of AUD 250."

precariousness and contingency, debt and job insecurity, this has become for some the unavoidable condition of pauperization (Cho 2012) or boredom as a “persistent form of social suffering” among Romania’s homeless population (O’Neill 2014, p. 11). In China, the work of waiting (Kwon 2015) enables long-term and distant transnational relations in South Korea, either producing a future for the family or deferring it into a present that sinks ever deeper into precariousness. This new ordinary of exclusion reinstates the intricate problem of home and belonging in the analysis of contemporary forms of unfree labor: The antithesis to unfreedom, as Kopytoff & Miers (1977, p. 17) reminded us long ago, is a relational form of affective belonging. Studies have focused on temporary service workers in rental residences (Amason 2015), the loss of home ownership in the aftermath of the financial crisis in Barcelona (Palomera 2014), or the labor camp system in Louisiana’s offshore oil and gas industry, where workers are “in no way forced to stay . . . but neither were they entirely free to move beyond the camp” (Higgins 2005, p. 16). The problem of belonging is all the more critical when the right to live and reside is often contingent on a legally recognizable relation of production, as is the case for migrant domestic work (Frantz 2013, Mahdavi 2011).

Forms of labor control and gendered disciplinary regimes on the shop floor and across other workplaces have been well documented (Donham 2011, Dunn 2004, Kondo 1990, Molé 2012, Ong 2010, Salzinger 2003). Disciplining bodies and consciousness, Rofel (1992) notes, produces subversive and unintended effects that reposition the assumed valences of modernity and the constitution of worker-subjects. In this research on the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which working bodies interpolate and are engaged by economic and social forces of domination, the nature of domination remains purposefully diffuse and ill-defined. This obscurity reflects the complex and contradictory manifestations of global capital and the abstracted conceptualizations of power. For example, Pun (2005) pointedly highlights the paradox of alienation and subjecthood in young rural women’s desire to escape home to become *dagongmei*, the feminine casual and temporary laborer for hire most prevalent in factories in Shenzhen, China. The hidden, invisible, and obscure disciplinary power and tactics revealed in constituting the worker-qua-*dagong* subject are reminiscent of Dunn’s (2004) account of the insidious power that can transform workers into flexible and invisible subjects in a Polish baby food factory.

Implicit in this conversation is a debate about worth, recognition, and the language of labor and emancipation. The dawn of a postindustrial America, Dudley (1994, p. 181) reminds us in her ethnography of a car factory closing in Wisconsin, is not a “unitary consensus” but a “cultural debate about . . . the value of the work we do and the worth of the people we are,” a struggle for meaning that is familiar to those who lived through the demise of Chicago’s steel mill industry (Walley 2013). This debate harks back to the Enlightenment view of manual labor as the basis of human happiness and of the separation between mechanical and fine arts. If the emancipatory narrative of the Enlightenment had been turned into a “system of universal oppression” (Harvey 1989, p. 13), Wong (2013, p. 10) flips the problem on its head by defying the Romanticist “universal belief in alienation of labor in copying and the individualizing power of creativity.” Describing with rare insight Dafen’s iconic painting factories, Wong suggests that the division of labor in large workshops does not entail the loss of skill. In fact, it can become generative of creativity and artistic originality, such as when a painting is considered the production of an individual after being touched by multiple hands. The important point, Wong reminds us, is that the language of wages or exploitation is misguided for presuming that “Dafen is a monolithic industrialized factory in which salaried assembly line laborers were merely repeating the same limited tasks” (Wong 2013, p. 74). This “condition of work” is “exactly like the flexible, specialized, and bespoke mode of global production in which contemporary artists function, and it is exactly unlike the industrial mode of manufacture or mechanical production” (Wong 2013, pp. 15–16). In inherently unstable

and contradictory work imaginaries, such as when human labor itself is engendered as a biosecurity threat in factory-like farms (Blanchette 2015), what amounts to a meaningful expression of labor consciousness, alienation, and subject formation begs further ethnographic inquiry.

PROPERTIES OF LABOR, QUALITIES OF WORK

If unfreedom is produced, how is it made manifest, and what qualities of the thing produced do we embody? The problem here (and this is not new) is, first, how structures of domination and feeling are abstracted and thus, we claim, are hidden and obscured from the agents of production, and second, how these invisible structures come to bear on and become perceivable through social life. This dilemma is not entirely solved by a production-centered analysis of capital accumulation (wage labor), by the analytic and methodological privileging of the commodity and its cultural imprint, or by an analysis of worker-subject transformations in the workplace inspired by Foucault's conceptualization of power at the level of diffuse and capillary tactics. In the view suggested here, the value of labor lies not in the finished good but in a mode of relational and productive action. This entails, in other words, a conceptualization of unfree labor that links property relations of domination and production to the qualitative experience of exploitative work, which is to say an understanding of how the subjects of labor can become the objects of work, and vice versa.⁷

By reconceptualizing unfree labor as manifest in the specific qualities of working and the properties of things worked, it becomes possible to articulate disparate social processes in which a quality of unfreedom is at work, be it debt, illegality, flexibility, or the myriad of feelings enmeshed in working lives. Echoing an early literature dealing with the qualities and styles of work, from the practice of hustling (Valentine 1978) to Willis's (1977) ethnography of "lads' culture" where work is marked as an activity such as joking or having a laugh, I posit these diverse experiences across a range of qualities and value transformations in the making of workers' lives. For example, there is a convergent sense of abjection, as experienced by Zambian copper miners discarded from the promises heralded by modernity (Ferguson 1999) or by those who suffer from mobbing in the Italian workplace (Molé 2012, p. 9). These structures of feeling are anchored in a multiplicity of experiences of dispossession, exclusion, and loss, and further attention should be paid to how these sensuous qualities align with or orient the practice and experience of unfreedom.⁸ In this reading of unfree labor, a productive space emerges to theorize the dynamic linkages among labor processes, property relations, and the properties of objects.

Different authors have highlighted the generative potential of theorizing work and commodities in tandem. In both Coleman's (2012) study of hacking and Wong's (2013) analysis of Dafen's painting factories, for example, the producer is extended onto the product itself, be it a digital artifact or painting, co-creating value that can be recirculated in the author, person, and the commodity itself. Chu (2010), for example, unveils to great effect the unseemly entanglements of human smuggling and paperwork in the work that goes into making persons in circulation, and Rolston (2013) explores how the lives of coal miners are bound by their intimacy with machinery, mining equipment, or the properties of natural resources. Similarly, Hanks (2014) examines the labor of multiculturalism to trace the shifting and elusive recognition faced by many Burakumin in Japan, caught in the dilemma of becoming full, liberal citizens and losing the economic stability

⁷This perspective is in contradiction with the classical distinction between abstract labor and work, which pits the fabrication of an object "whose end has come when the object is finished" against labor as the "condition of life itself" (Arendt 2000, pp. 171–72).

⁸In semiotic terms, these qualities can be understood as *qualia*, or indexes that materialize as qualities in human activity and provide "points of orientation in social action" (Harkness 2015, p. 574).

of tannery work upon which their discrimination rests. In detailing the labor of producing signs and its effects on those who labor and the objects they produce, Hankins moves between the polluting qualities of tanning leather and the production of a social and identity category, between masculine factory labor and the femininity of activist work and care, all within the same frame of evaluation.

Consider the metonymical association deployed by migrant tobacco farmworkers between remuneration (the paycheck) and *el campo* (standing in for various aspects of life and farm work). When workers describe pay as being *muy campo*, Benson points out (2012, p. 167), the “paycheck becomes a synecdoche, an illuminative fragment of the mean face of depravity and structural violence.” But more importantly, the linkage between a paycheck and the qualities of living and working in a labor camp comes to denote “an experiential aspect of farm labor, the feeling of being ‘other’ and on the ‘outside,’ that is produced and naturalized in relations of economic exploitation” (Benson 2012, p. 177). In other words, these material, aesthetic, and sensorial fragments of labor are collated as specific experiential qualities of work, indexing the ways in which unfree labor can be controlled, contested, or encoded. This framework approaches the apparent materiality of objects with attention to the seeming immateriality of process and the signs that orient social life through specific qualities (Calvão 2013, Chumley & Harkness 2013, Munn 1986). This means extending the analytically available domains’ objectification to include the semiotic and performative purview of other materials and practices in ethnographic points of intersection, be it the junction of paperwork and cosmologies (Chu 2010), the sale of fish as a nexus of migrant labor and citizenship (Fikes 2009), or the insecurity reproduced in job training as a condition for ethical mining in Canada’s diamond fields (Bell 2010).

This framework is particularly compelling for the methodological repositioning of the work of invisibility and transparency. As both vehicles of and evaluative states of signification, invisibility and transparency become attached to the properties of specific objects and qualitative experiences, or, to follow Hebdige (1979), to the semiotic quality of ideology that can render production legible or “invisible by its own transparency” (Stuart Hall, cited in Hebdige 1979, p. 11). In studies of labor, the analytical purview of liminality and continuum has been reinstated to capture the porous and deceiving distinction between paid and unpaid labor. Among worker peasantries in northern Italy, for example, workers straddle different liminal groups in worlds of enchantment and disenchantment (Holmes 1989; cf. Chu 2010), and Purser (2012, p. 30) shows how the day labor industry sustains “liminality through the temporal expropriation and spatial retention of labor ‘on demand.’” One point frequently mentioned when examining unfree labor is the challenging analytic purview and metonymic resonances of a category deemed invisible, such as the voluntary but de facto forced migrant farmworkers described by Seth Holmes (2013, p. 188), with no “valid separation between the political and the economic forces impelling them.” The literature abounds with examples, from suffering bodies as “invisible” social actors (Fassin 2007, p. 278) to the social “invisibility” of refugees (Ong 2003, p. 280) or of domestic and sex workers who are kept out of sight, notwithstanding their “hypervisibility in global conversations on human trafficking” (Mahdavi 2011, p. 62). Discussing the work of Paul Farmer, Benson (2012, p. 169) rightfully suggests that the “problem is not that suffering is invisible or its causes unknown, but rather that individuals and whole groups can have something at stake in actively overlooking and taking distance from other people’s suffering.” This approach should bear on the ethereal condition of domination in the “transcendence abstraction of the corporate form,” as Graeber (2006, p. 81) would propose in his unfinished thesis on modes of production.

With an eye toward the study of unfreedom, consider this interplay between transparency and hiddenness in corporate settings and global supply chains (e.g., Tsing 2009, p. 163). This comes at the point, inadvertently, when large corporations are increasingly facing public, legal,

and criminal scrutiny over the use of slave labor, despite their appropriation of ethical discourses from activists and development agents (Kirsch 2014, Welker 2014) and their continuous portrayal of themselves as horizontal, transparent, and seamless spaces of labor relations.⁹ This interplay—and the contradictions it represents—is particularly salient across mining economies of the Global South, where an important strand of research details the labor of extracting value from nature in the entanglements between corporate and state actors, indigenous populations, activists, and local communities, each space revealing its own particular mutation of neoliberalism (Ferguson 2006, Li 2015, Sawyer 2004). Recent ethnographic work on mining in Melanesia, for example, offers a theoretically sophisticated and empirically grounded framework with which to conceptualize the co-constructed enactment of the corporate industry in its discursive and relational engagement with other actors and critics (Golub 2014, Kirsch 2014, Welker 2014). If the history of these moral economies and the social and gender-based politics and tactics of identity in mining compounds have been well documented (Donham 2011, Moodie 1994), recent research points in different directions. For Appel’s interlocutors in Equatorial Guinea, for example, the experience of working in oil rigs is framed around the perceived qualities of “work[ing] like an American” or “work[ing] like an African,” each accorded different properties of stability, security, and labor time (Appel 2012, p. 705). In the case of Angola, diamonds can be perceived as voracious creatures or capricious commodities (Calvão 2013, De Boeck 2000) while seemingly exposing the bare life of miners in gripping accounts of slave work. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, militias have forced many to “slave labor” (Smith 2011, p. 19), and the collaborative qualities of movement can serve as points of reference between the extractive work and the time of digital economies.

This speaks to Mbembe’s (2006, p. 302) point on the “osmosis” between “extractive activity, warfare and mercantile activity” in enclave mineral economies. The violence of such labor regimes and the extraction of brute value partake in increasingly connected transnational networks of technology, bureaucracy, and activism, as demonstrated in the Burakumin plight of being a minority or embracing a multicultural Japan (Hankins 2014) or in Kirsch’s (2014) analysis of an emergent coalition of critics against the inexorable destructive path of mining corporations. And yet, speaking about the disciplinary effects of control in a South African gold mine in the wake of apartheid, Donham (2011, pp. 102–8) describes the bureaucratic attempt by the mining corporation to impose an ethnic identity on its workers, which ultimately led to a series of violent conflicts. The problem, thus, can be resituated along the lines of rendering work transparent, legible, and visible by giving empirical attention to its performative and material qualities, a point that recent studies of audit cultures have aptly demonstrated (Kipnis 2008). As Hetherington (2012, p. 243) puts it, “if transparency fails to empower an ideal individual that it takes to pre-exist its own ministrations, it does succeed in redistributing agency in a variety of other ways.” By following the experiential linkage of things and qualities in a spectrum of modalities that go from embodiment to sensuous experiences around the same quality of unfreedom, these concealed and hidden forms of labor domination may be revealed, which are themselves productive of an expanding spatiotemporal nexus of relations (Munn 1986).

TOWARD ETHICAL WORK

Dwelling on the spaces of vulnerability and abandonment and the generative potentiality of “a new ethics of life and sociability,” Povinelli (2011, pp. 109–10) asks if “theory and practice [should]

⁹See, for example, the recent lawsuit against Nestlé’s use of child slaves in Ivory Coast’s cocoa plantations, or the Brazilian conglomerate Odebrecht, proven guilty in a Brazilian court of enslaving its own Brazilian workforce in Angola.

celebrate these spaces as fostering (or more minimally, providing conditions of) practices of freedom in Foucault's sense." In line with the renewed attention to the ethnographic and historical representation of unfreedom proposed here, it seems fitting to conclude this review of emergent forms of unfree labor with the ethical problem of freedom and the divide Povinelli (2011, p. 110) identifies between those who reflect on and those who lead their lives in relationship to ethical substance. Instead of approaching unfree labor from the standpoint of negative exclusion and marginality or moral connotations (be it by criminalizing or victimizing), the prism of unfreedom allows anthropologists to reposition center stage the "ethical problem of practicing freedom" (Foucault 1997, p. 284), and thus to contribute to a burgeoning reflection on ethics and freedom (Keane 2015, Laidlaw 2013).

Although freedom has been the object of limited anthropological reflection (Laidlaw 2002), the increasing saturation of accountability, evaluative transparency, and standardization in a new "ethical life" (Keane 2015) bodes well for the ethnographic study of unfree labor. This should be informed by thought and reflection (Laidlaw 2013) and the multiple "arrangements of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexuality, age, and citizenship status" (Tsing 2009, p. 158) at play in social interactions of self and others (Keane 2015). Given the conceptual limitations of agency for the study of ethics and freedom (Laidlaw 2002, p. 315), a new theorizing of resistance alongside the aspirational and heterogeneous work of "practicing freedom" may indeed be necessary. This would invite "a poetics of transgression that should be more creative, multifronted, and penetrable to the power matrix of capital, state, and the effects of sociocultural discourses in this increasingly globalized world" (Pun 2005, p. 195). As such, an anthropology of a "new form of commonwealth" that "attempts to humanly and collectively survive precarity" (Allison 2013, p. 18) could start by asking what sort of collective historical actor is thus constituted and whether it is attached to a class, the transcendental corporate, or a new common.

For Marx (1978, p. 197), the total social power of individual producers could not be set apart, for if labor exploitation is collective, so is the constitution of new and potentially liberating social relationships: "Only in community . . . is personal freedom possible." This common is the key to political action, Hardt & Negri (2004) suggest.¹⁰ But what exactly does this entail for emancipation as recognition of value and power—of the true nature of labor? The end of an inside-out dialectic does not represent the end of exploitation—now in the Möbius-strip shape of a biopolitical, undulatory process of social constitution—but its resistance implies "desertion" or the "evacuation of places of power" (Hardt & Negri 2000, p. 213). If "new productive forces have no place" and the "universality of human creativity, the synthesis of freedom, desire, and living labor, is what takes place in the nonplace of the postmodern relations of production" (Hardt & Negri 2000, p. 210), the prospect of truly emancipatory, free labor would be irrevocably confined to a nonplace of undisputed hegemonies in the new capitalist project of fusing immaterial production with biopower. Rather, an understanding of labor as a relational and creative process enabling the production of value in people avoids the pitfalls of a free individuality positively charged with will and intentionality. This study of free, ethical work should be further attentive to the blurring between work and nonwork, forms of self-exploitation in the so-called sharing economy, and the diversity of singularity within capitalism (Tsing 2009). If the problem rests upon nontransparent relations of production in "some higher sphere, whether of economic values, or idealist abstractions" (Graeber 2006, p. 75), new forms of collaborative research (Pun & Chan 2012) and ethnographic

¹⁰Insofar as the multitude is neither an identity (like the people) nor uniform (like the masses), the internal differences of the multitude must discover *the common* that allows them to communicate and act together" (Hardt & Negri 2004, p. xv).

attention to collective intimacy (Watanabe 2014) or “hedonopolitics” (Kivland 2014) bode well for an increasingly refined anthropological understanding of exploitation and domination.

This review has suggested that objectifying and dehumanizing labor practices should be placed back at the heart of anthropological reflection to pave the way for an increasingly refined scrutiny of exploitation, inequality, and dispossession. Further research is needed on the conditions creating unfreedom as well as on the unintended qualities and experiences of unfree labor. If transparency and invisibility may appear insurmountable, the future cannot be molded on the basis of a precarious present (Hébert 2015); indeed, the future may hold an encouraging promise for new and emerging collaborative experiences (Cepek 2012). If constituted as a relay node between formal and informal work, paid and unpaid labor, licit and illicit economies, unfree labor may help demystify presumptions about capitalist property relations and their subtle but coercive forces of domination.

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