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Working at Living: The Social Relations of Precarity

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/15g682w5>

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Publication Date

2013-10-06

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Making Do. Survival Strategies under Precarity¹

Fatima El-Tayeb²

A. Introduction

B. Problematic 1: Agency/Resistance

A. Introduction

This module aims, first, at showing that precarity is not a recent symptom of a crisis of late capitalism (to be potentially solved), but a long-term structural element of the modern capitalist system, securing its survival at the expense of various “disposable populations,” and, second, to point to strategies of resistance to this process of precarization, in particular those strategies that produce translocal and transdisciplinary coalitions.

[Precarity](#)³ can be broadly defined as the state of working under flexible, insecure conditions, something that effects a growing part of the global labor force, from Mexican maquiladoras to South Asian call centers to formerly unionized workers in West Europe turned into “independent contractors.” As this brief list already indicates, while it is important to point to the structural and structuring elements of precarization, it is equally important to pay attention to the specific conditions of precarity and their shaping by said structures along axes of class, race, gender etc. That is, while the global move towards precarity marks the end of the [Fordist](#) model of employment in the West, in the Global South and among marginalized populations in the West, precarity constitutes not a condition of labor but a condition of life.

This of course is no new development. The world order emerging with modernity created a global spatio-temporal constellation, in which the West was situated as the necessarily and sole location of progress. This resulted in the precarization of populations, namely those placed

¹ This project is part of a working group on “Working at Living. The Social Relations of Precarity” supported by the University of California Humanities Network on the Humanities and Changing Conceptions of Work.

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³ Hyperlinks point to further readings on the subject.

outside of the modern timeline of constant progress - colonized, enslaved, indigenous populations. But while capitalism produced precarity, it was also produced by it. The image of the “developing” world following behind on a path that the West has successfully carved out hides that the Global South needed to be subsumed under a Western [time-space](#) notion, so that internal contradictions could be externalized and a linear narrative of progress could be claimed by West. Colonialism did not represent a clash of modern and premodern societies. Rather, the mass mobility that Foucault among others identifies as central prerequisite for the change to modernity within Europe produced mass precarity, i.e. millions of uprooted people whose traditional relationship to the land had been transformed. A large part of this superfluous population was transferred to colonies, displacing/enslaving existing populations there. This allowed the emerging bourgeois nation-state to externalize mounting pressure, both through settlement and colonial wars.

If the new spatial ordering of Europe produced different co-existing time-zones globally, this was true internally as well, both in terms of gender (the nation itself is [gendered](#) and its population is made to reproduce progress as well as traditionalism via a system that fundamentally depends on the reproduction of particular gender roles that aligns [feminized](#) and precarious labor) and with regard to race. The transference of a global spatio-temporal hierarchy, separating Europe from its colonial Others, could smoothly be applied within the continent, because it always also had been a means of internally structuring [Europe](#) - by displacing its periphery, as almost but not quite in the here and now of “old Europe,” but also by marking certain bodies as necessarily deviant within this spatio-temporal order, i.e. bodies considered to always be “in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Precarity thus emerges as a [structural](#) element of our modern world, consciously placing populations and individuals in conditions of scarcity and insecurity. If precarity is not caused by unpredictable crises or personal failure but is a necessary element of the capitalist order, what are survival strategies to this structural condition and (how) can we identify larger patterns? In what follows, we address these questions from three angles: Agency/Resistance; Excessive Bodies and In/formal Economies.

B. Problematic 1: Agency/Resistance

Precarization is on the one hand produced by labor conditions within capitalism not as an exception but as a structuring element of the overall system and it is on the other hand at the root of the shift to a capitalist system since the enclosure of the commons in England made possible the process of industrialization by eroding communal property and creating a precarious, landless class. Our understanding of agency in late capitalism therefore must place centrally strategies of survival under precarity. Strategies, that is, that often exist outside of simple binaries of resistance and compliance and thus often remain undetected within a traditional Marxist analysis. In order to find methodological tools useful in addressing precaritized populations whose agency falls outside out the realm of the “properly political” (because they are undocumented, work in informal economies, do not participate in wage labor etc.), it thus might be necessary to look in new directions.

[Queer of color critique](#) is one methodology that might offer new impulses to the study of precariousness and agency: “the mobilization of difference by women of color feminism and queer of color critique [is] intended not to erase the differentials of power, value, and social death within and among groups, as in a multiculturalist model, but to highlight such differentials and to attempt to do the vexed work of forging a coalitional politics through these differences.”⁴ Building on materialist critique, women of color feminism and [decolonial](#) thought, it resurrects queer as a term of [intersectional](#) analysis, not merely synonymous with LGBT but referencing processes of constructing normative and non-normative behaviors and populations, recognizing that the interaction of categories such as race, class, sexuality, gender, nation and religion creates more complicated groupings and hierarchies, between and within communities, than simple dichotomies suggest, and working with rather than against the complex, at times contradictory connections and coalitions this system of heteronormativity produces. See for example one of the earliest texts in this emerging field, José Esteban Muñoz’s [Disidentification](#) (1997, 11/12):

“The cultural work I engage here is hybridized insofar as it is cultivated from the dominant culture but meant to expose and critique its conventions. It is no coincidence that the cultural

⁴ *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racializations*, ed. Roderick Ferguson and Grace Hong (Durham: Duke University Press 2011), 3.

workers who produce these texts all identify as subjects whose experience of identity is fractured and split. The type of fragmentation they share is something more than the general sense of postmodern fragmentation and decenteredness. [...] Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopism), this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance."

How does this affect our understanding of resistance/agency as transformation from within? What are examples of the strategy "to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance"? Taking up these questions, here we look at the conditions of precarity in different locations, at bodies moving between these spaces, often to escape one form of precarity only to be subjected to new forms, but also at the new potential of collective action produced by this movement. The latest stage of capitalism dissolves borders between material and immaterial labor, public and private, the law and the market. At the same time, it produces new enclosures of the [commons](#). This makes it increasingly hard to apply traditionally Marxist categories to struggles around resources and modes of production, but it also opens new potentials of agency and resistance. The following three sections – Borderzones, Enclosures, the Commons - offer examples of these problematics.

Borderzones

Neoliberalism fetishizes mobility, flexibility and transnational border crossings. A closer look at this (not so) new model shows however that neoliberalism's diffusion of old binaries and borders merely reconfigures rather than destabilizes familiar forms of domination. Not all kinds of mobility are equally desirable: while the transnational entrepreneur and global bohemian exemplify the proper cosmopolitan subject, the capital-less labor migrant embodies its opposite. But while undocumented migrants become a target of discursive and material policing, presented as both criminal and economic threat, their work is central to neoliberal economies exactly because their precarious position allows for extreme exploitation: their illegalized status prevents

workers from using the only bargaining tool they have, their labor power, leaving them at the mercy of employers, landlords and security forces, all of whom can initiate their deportation at any point.

While deportations are framed as enforcing the law, they can also be read as another part of this economy of precarity: The rate of [privatization](#) in immigrant [detention](#) centers is significantly higher than in the other types of prisons: in the [United States](#) about half of the beds in detention centers are in [for-profit](#) facilities (as compared to 10% in federal and state prisons. In the UK, 7 out of 10 detainees are in private prisons, in Australia all migrant detention centers are run by private companies).

The global market in building and running refugee detention centers is divided among a handful of [corporations](#), most of them US American, some European, all of which also provide war related services, such as military technology or contractors. Ongoing violent conflicts provide a need for all of their services, from military equipment to private armies and centers to detain those fleeing from violence and the economic destruction it produces.

Global precarity, in the form of food scarcity, permanent war, refugee crises and illegalized labor migration is thus the very source of income for corporations like Blackwater (temporarily called Xe, now renamed [Academi](#)) who profit from both the privatization of war and the militarization of society. For an eco-system like this, the ideal situation is one in which wars are officially declared, but never officially end. Two prime examples of this new form of all-around warfare are the War on Terror and the [War on Drugs](#), which share a number of key characteristics and frequently overlap.

In 2007, protests prevented the creation of [Blackwater West](#) in San Diego County, but since 2008, a [Blackwater](#) facility, now called *Academi Southwest* is located in Otay Mesa, a San Diego neighborhood right at the border between the US and Mexico. The San Diego/Tijuana crossing is not only the world's busiest border, the region is also a center of the War on Drugs, the War on Terror and the war on immigrants, making it a prime site of the production and exploitation of structural precarity.

Known as a military town, San Diego's economy profits from the privatization of war and the militarization of society, drones produced here are used in "targeted killings" (i.e. illegal

assassinations) of “terrorists” in the Middle East and South Asia as well as in the surveillance of the border, that is, of people trying to cross from South to North. For multinational companies, the region is already supranational territory, with the maquiladora industry located in Tijuana providing access to cheap labor across the border.

The War on Drugs, extended to Mexico under President [Calderon](#) in 2006 (with a death toll of at least [60,000](#)), offers a rationale for the militarization of the border and the criminalization of migrants – and a profitable market, not only for drug lords, but also for (private) security forces and the weapons and defense industry. Simultaneously, the [racialized](#) enforcement of the US War on Drugs criminalizes precarious populations north of the border – San Diego’s only [state prison](#) is located in the immediate vicinity of Otay Mesa and Academi Southwest. Already overcrowded with more than twice the number of inmates the space was designed for, most of them non-violent drug offenders, the prison is designated for expansion – not to ease the overcrowding, but to house more inmates. These inmates in turn represent another significant source of exploited and precarious labor – not forced into mobility and constantly threatened with deportation like undocumented migrants, but instead forced into immobility with no recourse within a prison system in which slave [labor](#) is still legal.

Enclosure

In 1981, [The Military Cooperation with Civilian Law Enforcement Agencies Act](#) allowed the US military to cooperate with law enforcement, providing assistance in counterdrug operations, civil disturbances, special security operations, and in combatting terrorism. Since the mid-90s, [additional laws](#) allow the military to donate surplus equipment to local police forces.

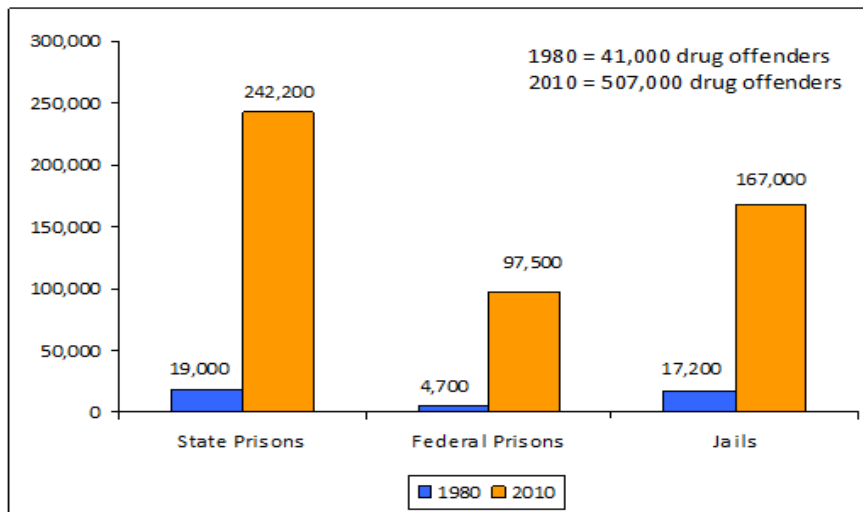
This not only blurred lines between police and military, but also expanded the market for defense contractors: rather than hoarding more and more weapons, the military can pass on materials to police forces, opening up space to buy the newest equipment. This inevitably leads to the militarization of local law enforcement, [armed](#) to the teeth with equipment not produced for police use: In 1997, 90% of cities with populations of 50,000 or more had at least one [SWAT](#) team, twice as many as in the mid-1980s.

By the early 1980s there were 3,000 annual SWAT deployments, almost all related to

hostage takings, bank robberies, mass shootings and other immediate threats to public safety. By 1996 there were 30,000 and by 2001 there were 40,000. About 80% of those deployments were to serve search warrants in drug [investigations](#). The 2001 Patriot Act made SWAT teams part of the permanent war on terror. The Act also authorized "Delayed Notice Search Warrants," allowing police to secretly search homes, only later (usually 90 days) notifying the homeowner. Between 2006 and 2009, 1% of these searches related to terrorism, 7% to fraud, and 92% to drugs.

Half of the inmates of federal prisons are charged with drug offenses and the overall number of drug related incarcerations has risen dramatically: since the beginning of the “war on drugs” in 1971, the US prison population has grown 700%.

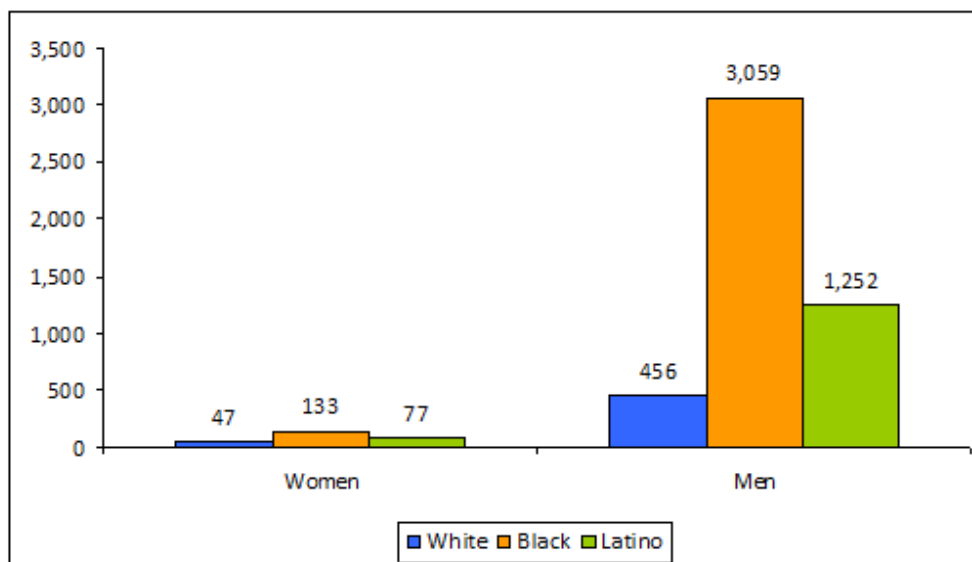
NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN PRISONS AND JAILS FOR DRUG OFFENSES, 1980 AND 2010



Sources: Guerino, P. M., Harrison, P., & Sabol, W. (2011). *Prisoners in 2010*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics; Mauer, M. and King, R. (2007). *A 25-Year Quagmire: The War on Drugs and its Impact on American Society*. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project.

More than 60% of those imprisoned in the war on drugs are people of color:

RATE OF INCARCERATION PER 100,000, BY GENDER AND RACE, 2010



Source: Guerino, P., Harrison, P. M., & Sabol, W. (2011). *Prisoners in 2010*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

African Americans are [estimated](#) to make up 12% of drug users, 34% of drug arrests and 45% of state prisoners sentenced for drug offenses.

There are other, even more explicit links between the urban drug warfare against communities of color and the “war on terror” directed against the Global South, such as the US Marine Corps’ Operation Urban Warrior, itself a direct result of the resistance against US troops in urban contexts like Somalia’s 1993 “Battle of Mogadishu.” After a small operation involving 80 marines in Chicago in 1998, the need to practice urban warfare under safe yet realistic circumstances in 1999 led to a large-scale military exercise involving almost 7,000 troops in Oakland, California, an ethnically diverse city with California’s second highest percentage of African Americans (after Compton). The operation had been rejected by a number of other US cities, but was invited to Oakland by the then mayor, current California governor Jerry Brown, citing an estimated \$6.5 million in contracts and spending. Operation Urban Warrior thus provides another example of war profiteering aligning with the militarization of urban areas.

The war on drugs, just like the war on terror is implicitly boundless and endless and can be redirected and targeted at different groups, allowing for the management of precarious and disposable populations and resulting in a racist war against the poor that is particularly effective as it pits marginalized groups against each other: Blacks and Latinos are channeled away from

higher education into the school-to-prison pipeline through the war on drugs, but also into the school-to-military [pipeline](#) through the war on terror.

The Commons

In her reflections on [The Origins of Totalitarianism](#), linking the rise of fascism in early 20th Century Europe to the continent's colonial practices, Hannah Arendt wrote about those lacking not only rights, but the very ability to make claims to rights:

The prolongation of their lives is due to charity and not to right, for no law exists which could force the nations to feed them; their freedom of movement, if they have it at all, gives no right to residence which even the jailed criminal enjoys as a matter of course; and their freedom of opinion is a fool's freedom, for nothing they think matters anyhow . . . The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective. (Arendt 1951, 296)

Georgio Agamben's analysis of European fascism builds on this notion, focusing on the rightless [homo sacer](#), object but not subject of law, produced by a "state of exception" that has the Nazi death camp as its paradigmatic site. Achille [Mbembe](#) reestablishes the connection to colonial violence, lost in Agamben's text, by pointing to the slave plantation as an earlier, no less paradigmatic site of the state of exception, and the slave condition as characterized by a triple loss: of a "home," of the rights over his or her body, and of political status. This state, reflecting Arendt's notion of rightlessness, has become permanent, Mbembe argues, in large parts of the contemporary world, primarily but not only in formerly colonized spaces. He identifies

necropolitics and necropower to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*. (39)

This in-between state of the living dead – in refugee camps, detention centers, prisons and among the larger populations marked as always already on their way there – is what makes them [exploitable](#) in the ways described above.

Mbembe concludes that these “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics) profoundly reconfigure the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror” (39). This is visible in the criminalization of resistance – inevitable for those who are denied legitimate claims to rights, but increasingly extending to those in Western nations used to being subjects of the law. The latter happens on the one hand through the extension of state power and on the other through an erosion of the very sovereignty used as a marker to separate failed and functioning states.

The enclosure of the commons and the war on the poor have created new levels of precarity, new borders and new enclosures, but they have also produced [new commons](#), new, often unanticipated spaces of resistance. From indigenous movements in Canada or Bolivia to the revolutions in [Tunisia](#) and Egypt, these new commons emerge in direct reaction to the violent [livepage.apple.com](#) processes sketched above, ignited by neoliberal “[structural adjustment](#)” programs enforced by supranational organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. [Programs](#) that create and profit from populations living in structural precarity, without the right to have rights, in a permanent state of exception. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, these programs begin to enter formerly privileged spaces such as the European Union: at the same time that nations like Greece, Spain and Italy are charged with protecting Europe’s borders from refugees and “economic migrants” pushed into precarity by [protectionist](#) and [exploitative](#) European policies, the continent’s southern periphery has become the target of punitive financial “adjustment” programs formerly restricted to the Global South. As a result, new translocal commons emerge, manifest in concrete sites of resistance, Tahrir [and](#) Taksim square, [Puerta del Sol](#), [Gezi](#) and [Zucotti park](#), in [digital](#) networks and ongoing local struggles for alternative visions of community.

However, precarity is related not only to scarcity - of wealth, resources, bargaining power, time, representation - but also to excess, manifestore specifically, precariousness produces excessive bodies. In the sense of superfluous populations - third world nations framed as producing global overpopulation, migrants destroying a national equilibrium, poor women producing children out

of wedlock - and in the sense of individual racialized, gendered bodies being necessarily excessive, too much: too aggressive, too sexual, too crass, too fat etc. Precarity thus produces bodies that deviate from the norm. This is the problematic explored in Section C.

Resources for Section B:

Visual artist **Alex Rivera's Cybracero** is a fake website representing a company profiting from the border regime characterized above, just a little bit further into the future: *Cybracero* offers cyber-braceros, workers who, thanks to modern technology, do jobs north of the U.S./Mexican border, but physically remain south of it, thus eliminating the need for minimum wage or workplace safety costs. The model faked by Rivera was attractive and convincing enough to lead to repeated inquiries by employers interested in hiring cybraceros.

Rivera's 2008 movie **Sleep Dealer** storifies the Cybroacero concept by following a young Mexican whose family was forced into depended labor when scare water resources were diverted from farmers to multinationals through a giant dam. Any (suspected) resistance is punished by drone attacks initiated in the US and after his family home becomes a target, the protagonist is forced to migrate to Tijuana to find work as a cybracero.

While *Sleep Dealer* effectively shows the entanglement of ecological and economic violence in the militarization of the border, in some respects it ignores developments already taking place: multinational treaties like NAFTA and TPP open the borders to capital and facilitate the move of production south, eliminating the need for cybraceros through an elaborate maquiladora system that draws largely on multiply precarized female labor. **Vicky Funari's Maquilapolis** collects the stories of some of these workers by handing them cameras, allowing them to document their daily struggle for survival and dignity.

Drones at Home and the **Drone Readymade** are activist reappropriations of drones made in San Diego for various purposes. In the first case, a poetry reciting surveillance drone is sent to accompany drones surveying the border, in the latter, a predator drone container becomes a mobile war protest site.

Brooklyn-raised Palestinian poet **Suheir Hammad** explores many of the issues addressed in this section in her work as an artist and activist. The poem **fly away** shows how complicated and messy agency, resistance and solidarity become under precarious conditions. **First Writing Since** acknowledges the divisions among communities of color caused by the “war on terror” (which started long before 9/11) but refuses to give in to them.

The **Racism Still Exist** project creates **posters** that deconstruct the precarious conditions of African American life as structural and willfully maintained:

5 BLACK-WHITE WEALTH DISPARITIES

How to Destroy Black Wealth in

4 EASY STEPS

- 1 Have White people own property; Have Black people be property.
- 2 Deny Black people homes for decades. No mortgages by banks (redlining); no loan backing by the federal government.
- 3 After a while, allow banks to make loans, but mostly subprime loans with very high interest rates.
- 4 Watch as Black homeowners face foreclosures, lose their homes, and thus their wealth.

You're done!

Feel free to call Black homeowners irresponsible and blame them for the housing crisis.

Racism
Still Exists
RISE
racismstillexists.tumblr.com



The revolutions in [Tunisia](#) and [Egypt](#) were in part reactions to the economic devastation produced by SAPs and free trade zones. In Egypt, a wave of [strikes](#) of largely female maquiladora workers, starting in the mid-2000s helped initiate a mass movement. The [April 6 Youth movement](#), central to the Egyptian [revolution](#), was founded in 2008 in support of the striking workers of [Mahalla's Misr Spinning and Weaving Company](#), the center of the nationwide labor [protests](#). The workers [continued](#) their activism after the fall of the Mubarak regime and in December 2012 announced the "[Independent Republic of Mahalla](#)."

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Film/Video etc

Disposable Heroes of HipHoprisy, "Famous and Dandy (Just like Amons'n'Andy)"

Stephen Frears, *Dirty Pretty Things*

Maquilapolis (http://www.maquilapolis.com/project_eng.html)

Neukoelln Unlimited (<http://indifilm.de/en/documentary-films/completed-projects/neukoelln-unlimited/>)

Alex Rivera, *Sleep Dealer* (<http://sleepdealer.com/>; <http://alexrivera.com/project/sleep-dealer/>)

Vittorio de Sica, The Bicycle Thief