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Seeing with the Pandemic: Social Reproduction in the Spotlight

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has inverted capitalism's normal visibilities, bringing what were negative spaces to the fore and throwing the work of social reproduction into stark relief. Decades of neoliberal governance have scrapped state support for care and increased the pressures on families where every adult is working for pay. In response, reproductive labor has been commodified and racialized at scale, and those who care for and nourish others, whether unwaged or waged, have been left holding the bag for society as a whole. The virus's incursion has thrown a harsh light on this non-system. From the *New York Times* to Twitter to grocery lines, both pundits and private citizens have begun to take note of the labor it takes to make and sustain human life as well as the unfreedom of those who perform that labor. But even as appreciation washes through, reproductive care workers are increasingly stepping out to say that garlands are not enough.¹

This emergent public reckoning comes on the heels of an extended scholarly rethinking of capitalism, as a growing group of scholars argue that capitalism is always already embedded in gendered and racialized

1. Karleigh Frisbie Brogan, "Calling Me a Hero Only Makes You Feel Better," *The Atlantic*, April 18, 2020.

relations of extraction and expropriation.² Especially generative has been Karl Marx's remarkable historical account of capitalism's origins in a process he dubbed "primitive accumulation."³ Intent on forestalling moralistic justifications for the system's origins, Marx argued that elites used a combination of land expropriation and violent vagrancy policing to produce both the starter capital and the "free labor" needed to bring that capital to life.

Since Rosa Luxemburg, scholars have expanded that account to challenge the more abstract and teleological formulations contained in other parts of Marx's larger oeuvre.⁴ Rather than see primitive accumulation as focused exclusively on domestic processes and ownership relations, subsequent theorists have pointed to the transnational, racialized, colonial, and gendered processes that characterized its emergence, along with the persistence of these putatively time-limited processes throughout capitalism's existence.⁵ Prompted by the deep inequities of neoliberalism, David Harvey has argued that the present, in fact, is best understood as a new episode of primitive accumulation, which he names "accumulation by dispossession."⁶ These historical rereadings suggest that national ownership relations have never exhausted the range of power relations under capitalism and that the relationships between capital and other structures of power are historically contingent. Marx's more elegant formulations notwithstanding, exploitation operated from the outset on a bed of racialized, colonial, and gendered

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2. See especially Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004); Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Nikhil Pal Singh, "On Race, Violence, and So-Called Primitive Accumulation," *Social Text* 34, no. 3 (September 2016): 27–50.
 3. Karl Marx, "Primitive Accumulation" in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 of 8 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1867; New York: Vintage, 1977).
 4. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, trans. Agnes Schwarzschild (1913; New York: Routledge, 2003).
 5. For an illuminating reanalysis of primitive accumulation, see Robert Nichols, *Theft Is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
 6. David Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610 (March 2007): 22–44.

relations, which were themselves reconfigured, solidified, and sustained by those interactions.

This distinct understanding of capitalism as a system throws new light on the present. I will argue here that constitutively gendered and racialized social reproduction is one arena where primitive accumulation continues to operate within capitalism as a fundamental structural element of the system itself. The production of people is an arena of vital unpaid, underpaid, and formally unrecognized work that makes all the rest possible. It is this terrain of primitive accumulation, suddenly under such profound threat during the pandemic, that COVID-19 makes glaringly visible.

The term social reproduction first emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in the writings of Wages for Housework and Marxist feminist theorists.⁷ Focused on the work it takes to make and remake people, “reproductive labor,” these social reproduction theorists located an essential dynamic of capitalist accumulation in the production rather than the exploitation of labor power. Insofar as capitalism depends on the production not only of stuff, but also of the people who make it, they argued, the gendered and racialized apparatus of reproduction is a fundamental part of what makes exploitation possible. Under capitalism, this labor has generally been done at least in part by wives and mothers “for free,” often (and increasingly) supplemented by the quasi or unfree labor of feminized, racialized “others.”⁸ Since profits under capitalism are mediated by the

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7. Primary theorizations include Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* (New York: Autonomedia 1996); Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012); Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (London: Falling Wall Press, 1972), 21–56; Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983; Leiden, NL: Brill Academic Publishers, 2013); and Evelyn Nakano Glenn, “From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor,” *Signs* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1992): 1–43. For more recent syntheses, see Tithi Bhattacharya, “How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class,” *Viewpoint Magazine* 5 (October 2015); and Susan Ferguson and David McNally, introduction to *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, by Lise Vogel, i–xl.
 8. Glenn, “From Servitude to Service Work;” Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

difference between the cost of making workers and the market value of the production their labor produces, then the cost of social reproduction—kept down through the intersection of patriarchy and white supremacy—is fundamental. As in the production of widgets, this set of costs, as well as who bears them, is determined by local processes of management and control. That is, the household, too, has a labor process that implies particular levels of extraction, in this case, most fundamentally organized by gender and race rather than (directly) through class relations. This puts historically specific structures of social reproduction at the heart of capitalism, an ongoing structure of primitive accumulation that feeds and sets the level of accumulation itself.

Like other elements of primitive accumulation, one of the distinctive features of reproductive labor is that it is not “free labor” in the sense defined by Marx.⁹ A fundamental feature of the workings of capitalist labor, he argued, was that “the worker leaves the capitalist to whom he hires himself whenever he likes . . . but he cannot leave the whole class of purchasers . . . without renouncing his existence.”¹⁰ Workers are “free” in the sense that, unlike the slave or the serf, their relationship with any individual capitalist is voluntary, even though their relationship to the class as a whole is not. Understood in this way, mothering and other elements of women’s labor in heteronormative households are not “free labor.” The work is intimately tied to a particular agent of patriarchy, and the cultural expectations around mothering are inherent in being a mother; there are no choices involved. In this sense, neither mothering nor wiving is “free labor.” This unfreedom has shadowed the work in its commodified form as well, as the expectation of “love” as part of what is bought and paid for makes normal work-hour time limits and overall job mobility seem “heartless.”¹¹ Even when paid, the work is understood as inherent in the person herself.

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9. Karl Marx, “The Sale and Purchase of Labour Power” in *Capital Volume I* (New York: Vintage, 1977 [1867]).
 10. Karl Marx, “Wage Labor and Capital” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 205.
 11. Cameron Macdonald, “Manufacturing Motherhood: The Shadow Work of Nannies and Au Pairs,” *Qualitative Sociology* 21:1 (1998); “Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value” by Arlie Hochschild in *Global Capitalism*, edited by Will Hutton and Anthony Giddens (New Press, 2000).

The Wages for Housework theorists argued that wages could make labor intelligible as labor. Although they were much mocked for the literal, money-grubbing implications of the phrase that defined their movement, their goal was more complex than it sounded. The fundamental problem they identified was that reproductive labor was coded as a kind of natural emanation of femininity, rather than as a form of work. Their response, to argue for “wages,” was not actually to charge by the hour but to make women’s private labor visible through the language of capital. This ideological tool was necessary, they argued, in order to respond to the naturalized form taken by women’s private labor, in which “housework” was presented as intrinsic to the womanly self and then doubly mystified by the rhetoric of love, which “mask[ed] the macabre face of exploitation.”¹² Focused on heteronormative families, on motherhood and heterosexuality and housework, they argued that women were coerced or duped into the devalued labor of caring for their families, proximately by their partners, but ultimately in service of a system that fed on the profits generated by their husbands’ profit-generating labor power. Their goal was to break this naturalized, sentimental coercion and make women’s work visible as the labor it was.¹³

As an increasing proportion of women in white, heteronormative families engage in paid labor, one might wonder if this earlier image of women’s obligatory familial role still holds. After all, Fordism’s normative, white, patriarchal family is history now, and in neoliberalism, it is every tub on its own bottom. In the United States today, nearly 30 percent of adults live alone.¹⁴ Neoliberalism’s *homo oeconomicus* protagonist is the risk-taking entrepreneur, off on his own, rationally calculating his personal self-interest. And lest we think this is only for men, the end of welfare in the 1990s was argued, even by mainstream, liberal feminists, as justified by women’s necessary, modern “independence” from men, and by analogy, from the state.¹⁵ But scratch a risk-taker, find a family!

12. Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction*, 28.

13. Federici, “Wages against Housework,” in *Revolution at Point Zero*.

14. Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, “The Rise of Living Alone: How One-Person Households Are Becoming Increasingly Common around the World,” *Our World in Data*, December 10, 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/living-alone>.

15. Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017).

Especially as the state steps back, families become all the more essential.¹⁶ Margaret Thatcher's infamous comment, "who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women," is in fact followed by another clause, "and there are families. . . ." Often left off this quote, that final phrase is in fact an essential element of her argument. Neoliberalism's boastful, risk-taking entrepreneur still has a secret safety net, the family at attention below, ready to catch him if he falls.¹⁷

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages across the country and across the globe however, the secret is out. The virus has brought the "safety net" into plain sight, and we see it is full of holes. News accounts are full of cute anecdotes about children popping up in Zoom work sessions, and then it gets less cute. Fathers claim they are sharing home schooling fifty-fifty, while mothers beg to differ, suggesting that perhaps fathers do not even grasp what the whole job might be.¹⁸ Working women with children at home report their goal is "just survival."¹⁹ Florida State University says workers are not allowed to care for children while working remotely, and mothers explode in response.²⁰ A *New York Times* article headlined "In the COVID Economy, You Can Have a Kid or a Job, You Can't Have Both" goes viral, with over 2,000 comments.²¹ Multiple anecdotal accounts of how the pandemic is undermining the employment gains women have made over the last two decades are substantiated by a study reporting that as paid childcare vanished, women's work hours have fallen four to five times more than their husbands'.²² It turns out

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16. See Caitlin Zaloom, *Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019) for a wonderful discussion of the way that debt ties children more tightly to their parents.
 17. For a more complete discussion of this argument, see Leslie Salzinger, "Sexing Homo Economicus: Finding Masculinity at Work," in *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture*, ed. William Callison and Zachary Manfredi (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).
 18. Claire Cain Miller, "Nearly Half of Men Say They Do Most of the Home Schooling. 3 Percent of Women Agree," *New York Times*, May 6, 2020.
 19. Emma Jacobs and Laura Noonan, "Is the Coronavirus Crisis Taking Women Back to the 1950s?" *Financial Times*, June 13, 2020.
 20. Lilah Burke, "Florida State Bars Parenting During Remote Work," *Inside Higher Ed*, June 30, 2020.
 21. Deb Perelman, "In the Covid-19 Economy, You Can Have a Kid or a Job. You Can't Have Both," *New York Times*, July 2, 2020.
 22. Emily Barone, "Women Were Making Historic Strides in the Workforce. Then the Pandemic Hit," *Time*, June 10, 2020; Alexandra Topping,

the “safety net” is neither the state nor the rational individual, but again women in the family, picking up the pieces. The unfree nature of this work becomes ever more apparent. Women don’t “choose” this work, it is simply part of the territory of being a “woman,” inherent in the feminized self. As the pandemic brings physical survival to the center of our attention and the fragile infrastructure that enabled mothers to perform “free labor” collapses, reproductive labor becomes visible as the underlying obligatory work that makes all the rest possible.

Part of what creates the stressed situations we see during COVID, of course, is that under normal circumstances, mothers are not doing all the reproductive labor themselves. On the contrary, even as the family’s importance as a backstop against disaster has grown under neoliberalism, women’s unpaid reproductive work is increasingly supplemented by commodified, racialized, transnational workers. In the United States, roughly 70 percent of mothers and 90 percent of fathers of school age-children were in the paid workforce as of 2016.²³ Although Black women have always been compelled to do waged as well as unwaged labor,²⁴ the proportion of both Black and white women in the paid workforce grew sharply starting in 1950 and even more dramatically after 1970.²⁵ As women and men alike work more hours across the race and class structure, paid reproductive labor outside the home has skyrocketed to supplement family care, and intimate attention has become increasingly stratified by class, race, and place.²⁶ As a result, food preparation, cleaning, elder care, and childcare are ever more intensively commodified,

“COVID-19 Crisis Could Set Women Back Decades, Experts Fear,” *The Guardian*, May 29, 2020; Caitlyn Collins, Liana Christin Landivar, Leah Ruppanner, William J. Scarborough, “COVID-19 and the Gender Gap in Work Hours,” *Gender, Work and Organization* 28 (July 2020): 101–12.

23. “Labor Force Participation Rate of Mothers and Fathers by Age of Youngest Child,” Women’s Bureau, US Department of Labor, accessed August 2, 2021, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/latest-annual-data/labor-force-participation-rates#Labor-Force-Participation-Rate-of-Mothers-and-Fathers-by-Age-of-Youngest-Child>.
24. Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1981).
25. Leah Platt Boustan and William J. Collins, “The Origins and Persistence of Black-White Differences in Women’s Labor Force Participation” (working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, May 2013), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w19040>.
26. Mignon Duffy, *Making Care Count: A Century of Gender, Race, and Paid Care Work* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

thus outsourcing the work of survival even as its complex coordination generally remains in the hands of women in families.²⁷ Neoliberalism is often recognized as a shift in the boundaries between “public” state and “private” capital. We see a similar border movement in the realm of social reproduction, as much of the work of care is commodified and moved into the market.²⁸ Neoliberalism restructures reproduction as well as production: everyone works more hours for pay, and the resources allocated for the work of producing and reproducing people are increasingly unequally distributed across space, race, and class.²⁹

Into this overextended, patchwork “system” of social reproduction intrudes the virus, undermining the finely tuned rhythms of family care arrangements.³⁰ In the face of the pandemic, schools shut down unpredictably and childcare centers have closed around the country. Nursing homes locked down, allowing no one in or out, with families who could manage to do so bringing older relatives into their homes. In-home childcare workers and home health aides who cared for elderly patients were deemed possible disease vectors and laid off. Many restaurants remain closed around the country. More men are helping with childcare and housework, as being home all day reveals aspects of reproductive labor they had been able to ignore previously,³¹ but women are still picking up the pieces. Families are on their own, and everyone is grappling

27. Judith Shulevitz, “Mom: The Designated Worrier,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2015; Allison Daminger, “The Cognitive Dimension of Household Labor,” *American Sociological Review* 84:4 (2019).

28. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Outsourced Self: What Happens When We Pay Others to Live Our Lives for Us* (London: Picador Press, 2013).

29. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, “Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers and the International Division of Reproductive Labor,” *Gender and Society* 14:4 (August 2000); Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (London: Verso Books, 2019).

30. See Karen V. Hansen, *Not-So-Nuclear Families: Class, Gender, and Networks of Care* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005) for examples of the dizzying complexity of childcare arrangements in contemporary American families.

31. Daniel L. Carlson, Richard Petts, and Joanna R. Pepin, “US Couples’ Divisions of Housework and Childcare During COVID-19 Pandemic,” *SocArXiv*, May 6, 2020; Martin Gelin, “The Pandemic Has Reshaped American Fatherhood. Can It Last?” *New York Times*, June 21, 2020.

with the amount of work that takes.³² These days, the frazzled terrain of social reproduction is in full view, and it is not a pretty sight.

Homes are stressed, but truly in the eye of the viral storm are paid reproductive care workers. Newly extolled as “heroes,” they find themselves responsible for the public work of feeding and caring for others in a moment where direct human contact itself has become perilous. Healthcare, groceries and other food services, residential and private care work all are “involved in maintaining people on both a daily basis and intergenerationally,” and all have been defined as “essential” in executive orders during the pandemic.³³ Today, as in the past, these workers are mostly women of color, and they earn well-below US median income.³⁴ The United States has a notoriously inadequate welfare state, but even here, as COVID-19 hit, unemployment benefits were made widely available to laid off workers, who were asked to stop going out to work and stay home in the interests of community safety. All except “essential workers,” that is, who were “allowed” to continue working and hence were not eligible for state support if they chose to shelter in place. As the virus emerged as a life-threatening force and the state stepped in to forestall total economic collapse by providing unemployment benefits for laid-off workers, the irony that doing “essential work” meant not having the option to stay home proved glaring.³⁵ With no new jobs available and no access to unemployment, being lauded as “essential” during

32. Kim Brooks, “Forget Pancakes. Pay Mothers,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2020.

33. Glenn, “From Servitude to Service Work,” 1.

34. Celine McNicholas and Margaret Poydock, “Who Are Essential Workers? A Comprehensive Look at Their Wages, Demographics, and Unionization Rates,” *Working Economics Blog*, Economic Policy Institute, April 19, 2020, <https://www.epi.org/blog/who-are-essential-workers-a-comprehensive-look-at-their-wages-demographics-and-unionization-rates>; Hye Jin Rho, Hayley Brown, and Shawn Fremstad, “A Basic Demographic Profile of Workers in Frontline Industries” (Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research, special report, 2020), <https://cepr.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-04-Frontline-Workers.pdf>.

35. Sarah Jane Glynn, “Coronavirus Paid Leave Exemptions Exclude Millions of Workers from Coverage,” *Center for American Progress*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/news/2020/04/17/483287/coronavirus-paid-leave-exemptions-exclude-millions-workers-coverage>; Campbell Robertson and Robert Gebeloff, “How Millions of Women Became the Most Essential Workers in America,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2020.

the pandemic has meant being stuck to one's job; in this sense, "essential workers," like mothers in another register, are no longer free labor.

This unacknowledged element of coercion has been paired, in another disturbing echo of mothering, with waves of praise and admiration. Essential workers are heroes! Childcare and teaching are hard! Being a nurse is brave! Selling groceries is a service to the community! Early in the pandemic, around the country, grateful adults and gleeful children stood at windows and on front stoops to clap and bang pots and pans every night at 7 p.m. in honor of "essential workers." It is striking how, even when commodified, the unholy duo of love and devaluation continues to shroud reproductive labor, framed by its simultaneous gendering and racialization.

Sociologists and organizers alike have repeatedly identified these dynamics in care work, with child- and eldercare workers expected to treat their work as a "labor of love" even as these jobs do not legally qualify for overtime or normal minimum wage protections — and much of the work is done in the shadow of the formal economy overall. What is so striking about the current moment is to see this echo beyond the realm of care work and into what Mignon Duffy calls "nourishing reproductive labor," such as cleaning, cooking and food preparation.³⁶ Grocery store clerks (without masks) and nurses (without protective equipment) point out that they signed up for a job, not a death sentence. In response they are called heroes and kept at work.³⁷ In a telling echo of motherhood, "essential workers" find themselves simultaneously coerced, unprotected, underpaid, and sacralized.

Life is a precondition and sometimes a byproduct of capitalism, but the system itself is organized for profit. To see in and through the pandemic is to wonder about the possibilities for human survival within a capitalist logic. Neoliberal capitalism's signature enticements — autonomy and freedom — have little resonance in the realm of social reproduction. Instead, obligation and love are the coin of the realm. COVID-19 has made evident anew that autonomy depends on community and freedom depends on love and obligation, but we are only supporting the first parts of these equations. Just as the purely self-interested, disembedded

36. Duffy, *Making Care Count*.

37. Ryan Kost, "Essential and Ignored: Working in a Pandemic," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 19, 2020.

homo oeconomicus is a gendered and racialized fiction, so is the idea of formal exploitation as a self-sufficient process. Capitalist exploitation is a parasite; social reproduction is its host, and right now the host is not thriving. Seeing the consequences of this in the brutal light of the pandemic pushes us to ask: how might the arena of social reproduction look if it was not organized to feed exploitation but instead to nourish its occupants? Might the pandemic push us to center human flourishing?

Marx thought free labor would be its own undoing. Time has proved him wrong, COVID-19 helps us see why. With brutal clarity, the pandemic reveals how the unfree, gendered, and racialized work of reproductive labor undergirds the system's survival when it is thrown into question. In so doing, the pandemic also invites us to look ahead, to ask not when we will return to "normal," but what the world we would like to build as we emerge might look like. Challenging capitalist logics is necessary for survival. Questioning the logic of social reproduction, of normative care relations inside and beyond the family, is part of the necessary world-rethinking the disease both incites and requires.³⁸

38. Kathi Weeks, "Hours for What We Will: Work, Family, and the Movement for Shorter Hours," *Feminist Studies* 35:1 (2009); Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (London: Verso Books, 2019).