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Working at Living:
The Social Relations of Precarity

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Description of Project

In an increasingly globalized and technology-driven market place fueled by policies that promote privatization and deregulation, instability has emerged as a central feature of working life among the waged and salaried in the West. The idea of steady employment with social benefits, a voice at work through collective bargaining, and regularized conditions on the job emerged out of the political struggles of industrial workers and, in the United States, became codified in the New Deal, which promised these mostly white and male workers a “family wage.” That promise was always precarious for African Americans, most racial/ethnic immigrants, and single women and for those who labored in sectors “excluded” from the labor law, like domestics and agriculturalists but also many professionals. We are faced, as cultural studies critic Michael Denning has noted, with a situation worse than exploitation under capitalism: the absence of exploitation with the end of employment (1)—and the unraveling of the social contract between employers and the most privileged of workers in the global North.

This situation of precariousness, however, is not new even if it appears intensified. Instability long has characterized laboring conditions in other places and

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spaces, such as among peasants and agricultural workers, slaves and other bonded people, the over-educated in colonialized states, craft workers facing technological shifts, and the poor, outcast, and dispossessed. In the disappearance of prior means of livelihood, people have worked at living, finding various ways to get by, make do, and survive. They have occupied vacant lands, borrowed objects, circulated family (moving to where there were more resources as well as sending members to live elsewhere to send remittances or relieve the household of mouths to feed), grown and harvested food, and retasked the discarded. They have engaged in non-market forms of provisioning, self-commodification, and non-waged reproductive labor, like housework, that prepared others to go “out to work.” Their bodies have been their tools—pushing carts, gestating babies, giving milk, turning tricks, and fashioning refuse into the usable.

Examining the social relations of precarity requires analysis of transformations in conceptions of work and what counts as employment, one that critically interrogates divides between production and consumption, work and home, North and South, and public and private. Working at living entails a consideration of shifting dynamics within informal and family economies, encompassing transformations in consumption practices and community relations on both global and local scales. These relations are increasingly both fostered and constrained by technological development, which provides new forms of communication, labor, and consumption while dismantling others. Working at living occurs in a social context that shapes, even as it is shaped by, market forces and

ideological constructs of gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, ability, age, and citizenship. Beyond a consideration of how “sociocultural inequalities” are magnified during economic downturns, *working at living* examines various forms of precarious work and where they emerge, how they function, what their economic and social value is, and ultimately, the kinds of social relations they foster with case studies over time and space that provide building blocks to refine our conceptual tools.

Characterized by the deregulation of corporations and financial institutions, the inscription of free trade agreements, privatization of public resources and the resulting decline of the welfare state, neoliberalism as the dominant social and economic policy has gloried the market and the individual in designating the meaning of work over the past three decades. It has transformed the means of livelihoods in the industrial world, as well as the nations of the global South, which first felt the impact of structural adjustment policies. The need to secure livelihoods has entailed global flows of goods, capital, and people, creating new geographies of work that are frequently marked by contingency at all levels, from the “creative class” to service workers. Beyond the rise of contingent labor, neoliberalism and technological development have impacted categorizations of who is employable, with mothers or small children, for example, so reclassified lower down class and race hierarchies or during times of national need. With wealth inequality in the United States at record levels, unemployment hovering at one-in-five workers, and one in one hundred U.S. adults incarcerated, the categories of “excluded worker”

and/ “unemployable” must be examined as situated in labor markets saturated with underlying political and normative conceptions of social location and inequality. Thriving on a narrative of meritocracy and individualized entrepreneurialism, neoliberalism has resulted in the diminishment of labor unions, social programs, and many other productive, reproductive, and culture capacities. Its impacts are material, discursive, affective, and embodied.

This working group explored the social relations of precarious labor, both formal and informal, from an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach that considers how sociocultural inequalities are and have been magnified and countered during times of financial crises, technological development, and increasing unemployment. Haunting employment is not only the lack of jobs but also our very notions of what counts as work and who counts a worker. These classifications not only have shaped law and social politics but scholarship and the academy’s own self-perception as a place outside of the labor contract that teaching assistant unionism and the political assault on the university have exploded. To probe work as human labor separated from jobs demands analysis that the humanities and humanistic social sciences can ferret out by engaging with our imagination as well as considering a wide range of texts, from fiction and films to law cases, ethnographic field notes, bureaucratic memos, and political declarations. This project requires historical, theoretical, and global/comparative perspectives. In focusing on the historical construction of the distinction between working and employment and the subaltern as well as elite understandings of work and labor,

living and working, it fits squarely in the theme of the humanities and changing conceptions of work. By bringing together history, humanistic social science, feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer studies, and cultural studies, it exemplifies the kind of dialogues across the university crucial to tackle the fluidity between working and living.

Since we are associated variously with women, gender, and feminist studies, ethnic studies, and cultural studies through our institutional locations and/or research, we brought to this conversation critical insights sometimes missing from investigations of the informal sector and too often ignored in discussions of the global economic and employment crisis. (2) Among these are the concept of “intimate labor,” which Boris and Parreñas deploy to consider “the proliferation of labors, both paid and unpaid, that sustains the day-to-day work that individuals and societies require to survive—and flourish,” that connects labor that requires touch and other forms of personal closeness or knowledge of the other, including sex, domestic, and care work. (3)

Furthermore, the reproductive labors of women, we contend, form the scaffolding not only for the continuation of wage labor but the maintenance of households. Indeed, women’s household labors appeared as a resource for income generation when the United Nations and its technical organizations pushed a “new world order” through “development” in the 1970s, no matter the impact on locales. During the last quarter of the 20th century, as a reserve army of labor to assemble

goods in maquiladoras, to make up for the lost wages of husbands by selling at Wal-Mart or typing in secretarial pools, or to cook, clean, and care for urban households, women served national, class, familial and capitalist developments in multiple ways depending on their class, race, age, nationality, marital status and other factors. “Global householding” may not be new, but it takes intensified forms as the labor of women stretches across national boundaries and flows from the unwaged to the waged, the familial to the commodified. (4)

With structural adjustment programs designed to put the weight of debt and financial crises on the backs of those most vulnerable, we also ask, how are people getting by and making do? “To speak repeatedly of bare life and superfluous life can lead us to imagine that there really are disposable people, not simply that they are disposable in the eyes of state and market,” Denning argues, and we take his observation seriously. (5) It is inadequate to just look at what shifts in work do to people. The understandings of those always under the table—“the excluded workers” of domestics, farm and plantation laborers, day workers, prison laborers, welfare to work participants, and those misclassified as “independent contractors”—have much to teach us about resistance as well as survival. (6)

Pushing against the privatization that has marked the global expanse of neoliberal flows of capital, how can we consider a politics of resistance by drawing connections between shifting conceptions of work and relations of power, especially those defined by gender, race, sexuality, citizenship, and embodiment, and forging alliances in unexpected places?

The workgroup had scholars who offer breath and depth. They considered working at living through home labors, transnational and national migration, plantation work, resistance under slavery, theories of race and gendered bodies, professional precariousness through marketization, new technologies, (including surrogacy) in the global economy, and practices of thrift. Our purpose was three-fold: to stimulate theoretical and empirical research, encourage creation of additional modules, and model a practice of scholarship that is both collective and accessible.

1. Michael Denning, "Wageless Life," *New Left Review* 66 (Nov-Dec 2010), 79-97.
2. A notable exception and excellent summary of the approaches to informal economies is V. Spike Peterson, "Informalization, Inequalities, and Global Insecurities," *International Studies Review* 12 (2): 243-69.
3. Eileen Boris and Rhacel Parreñas, "Introduction," *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 1,3.
4. V. Spike Peterson, "Global Householding Amid Global Crises," *Politics & Gender* 6 (2010), 271-304.
5. Denning, "Wageless Life," 80.
6. Excluded Workers Congress, *Unity for Dignity: Expanding the Right to Organize to Win Human Rights at Work*, December 2010, last accessed October 12, 2011, at <http://www.excludedworkerscongress.org/>