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## Living Labor: Marxism and Performance Studies

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*Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor,  
and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.*

– Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1<sup>1</sup>

To live and to labor are the twinned imperatives to which we are always already given. Together, they animate a rhythm of material production and reproduction that extends over time. This special issue of *Women & Performance* examines how thinking about life and labor between Marxism and Performance Studies can help us attend to the world at hand. *Living Labor* began as a conference hosted by the department of Performance Studies at New York University, which took place 11–13 April 2014. It featured over 70 presentations, film screenings, artist presentations, and keynote addresses by Fred Moten and Sianne Ngai. The provocation of this conference was to ask what formal criteria could be articulated between aesthetic analysis and political economy. That is, how does performance analysis bring together the living body and the working body? How do Marxist and Marxist-inspired philosophies articulate and reimagine labor, value, and revolutionary struggle, particularly in relation to the social, aesthetic, and political dimensions of performance and performativity? How are theories of difference – which cut across the divisions of race, gender, sexuality, and disability – differently animated by the many histories of anti-capitalist critique? The collected essays, short texts, and artworks that comprise this special issue include versions of the papers presented at the conference as well as new contributions from cultural producers and theorists. They explore not only what Marxism and Performance Studies have in common, but also how these overlapping bodies of literature might act as provocations for one another, intellectual and otherwise.

In our contemporary moment of post-Fordist capitalism, and particularly within the spheres of cultural production, life and labor have become increasingly indistinguishable. The capitalist mode of production goes beyond the organization of social life reaching into the very structure and regulation of the subject itself. While these conditions could be understood as an indication of the inescapability of capitalist social relations, they

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also provide an imperative for renewed critical attention: they demand that we sharpen the tools with which we theorize the division between life and labor as well as the new configurations of their enmeshment. Such theorization will perhaps offer ways of being in the world that disrupt the production and circulation of value as well as the reproduction of ideologized subjectivities. We return to Marx's texts in order to unlock a sense of selfhood that is inextricably tied to the field of the social. It is our contention that anti-normative and anti-capitalist struggles must engage and contest the specific ideologies of subjectivity that are deeply embroiled in structures of patriarchy, heterosexuality, and white supremacy. To this end, our work is galvanized by scholarship that brings together critiques of capitalism with questions of subjecthood and difference – in particular, Cedric Robinson and Fred Moten's formulations of the black radical tradition;<sup>2</sup> Silvia Federici and Angela Mitropoulos's theorizations of reproductive labor;<sup>3</sup> Angela Davis's writing and activism around prison abolition and Premilla Nadasen's on the history of welfare rights<sup>4</sup>; as well as José Esteban Muñoz's and Sianne Ngai's mobilizations of the aesthetic as a critical and potentially utopian site.<sup>5</sup> We insist on the possibility of life in opposition to labor – that is, forms of life that resist the structuring axioms, ideologies, and infrastructures of capitalism. The collective project of *Living Labor* is to read between the lines of Marx's own thinking, to illuminate the many ways difference is organized under the rule of capitalism towards exploitations and oppression, and, perhaps most significantly, to explore ways we might think difference *differently*.

We write this introduction in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election – a moment that has crystallized a certain feeling among the Left of a world embroiled in crisis. Already, we have seen the hate speech that characterized the president-elect's campaign reproduced in acts of vandalism, intimidation, and physical violence, some of which have taken place on the university campuses where we work. Each day, overtly fascistic discourse becomes more normalized – a xenophobic, racist, misogynist, homophobic, and ableist rebuke to the ethic of non-violence with which we write and teach. For some the proximity to hatred is new, while for others it is a national amplification of the violence that is already part of daily existence. We have only just begun to think about where we go from here: how to parse the 2016 election through the much longer histories of repression and exploitation targeting minoritarian subjects; how to compare the ascent of a fascistic regime in the United States to larger shifts in neoliberal global politics that have reshaped life on an ideological, cultural, and subjective level. We work with the knowledge that visible enactments of violence are haunted by instances of violence made invisible, ignored conditions of inequality, dispossession, and abuse – many of which compose the foundation on which nations like the United States have been built. For us, the editors of this special issue, Marxism is not simply a science of working-class revolution, nor is Performance Studies merely the wholesale embrace of performativity and postmodern critique. Rather these two fields offer a shared imperative of reimagining the ways in which we both theorize and practice the social. It is in this light that we hope this volume will be a resource as we collectively struggle to process, organize, and respond to the world in which we find ourselves.

As modes of inquiry, Performance Studies and Marxism both offer ways of thinking through the imbrication of life and labor. Performance Studies is an interdisciplinary discourse in which questions of life and labor are central, surfacing in notions of action, endurance, repetition. It offers a hermeneutic challenge to semiotic formulations of meaning and

value by asking not what things *mean*, but what they *do*. Similarly, Marxist theory attends to the capture and distribution of life: to the maintenance and reproduction of labor power, as well as to the processes of commodification and consumption that produce value for capital. In its many iterations, Marxist theory provides a methodology of thinking about materiality, temporality, and movement that revivifies an enduring question in Performance Studies: *What can a body do?* This question not only makes explicit the convergence between Marxist and performance theory, but also makes central critical traditions of black, feminist, and queer theory in which relationships between life, labor, and capitalism have never been incidental. The material experience and historical condition of race, gender, and sexuality is, in this sense, the premise that animates our Marxist considerations of what it means to live, labor, and perform. On the one hand, applying a Performance Studies methodology to Marxism adds an aesthetic dimension to abstract questions of labor, foregrounding the enflashed and emoting body as a locus of action. On the other hand, embracing Marxist and materialist critique in Performance Studies reinvigorates questions of live-ness, the event, and performative force in relation to larger frameworks of ideology and power. Such conjunctions operate in opposition to the conventional divide between (economic) base and (cultural) superstructure. They illuminate a new set of questions: To what degree are our social formations determined by prevailing economic conditions? How much can culture broadly play a role in the reorganization of economic structures that not only uphold but also reproduce the unequal distribution of wealth and the systematic exploitation and oppression of the many by the wealthiest few?

“Living Labor” is a term drawn directly from the work of Karl Marx. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx describes living labor as “labour-power in action.” An enigmatic concept, *living labor* marks a distinction between *labor* – the activity of work which is legible as productive, often producing goods, services, and commodities that uphold the global circulation of capital – and *labor-power*: the capacity to work, which is present even when not yet actualized, and can be sold by the worker for a wage. Specifically, living labor revivifies the products of expended labor through the enactment of their use value. As Marx writes:

A machine which does not serve the purposes of labour, is useless. In addition, it falls prey to the destructive influence of natural forces. Iron rusts and wood rots. Yarn with which we neither weave nor knit, is cotton wasted. Living labour must seize upon these things and rouse them from their death-sleep, change them from mere possible use-values into real and effective ones. Bathed in the fire of labour, appropriated as part and parcel of labour’s organism, and, as it were, made alive for the performance of their functions in the process, they are in truth consumed, but consumed with a purpose, as elementary constituents of new use-values, of new products, ever ready as means of subsistence for individual consumption, or as means of production for some new labour-process.<sup>6</sup>

Living labor is necessary to the reproduction of capitalism itself: it provides the vital energies, that “fire of labour,” that can revivify labor’s dead products, which are again “made alive for the performance of their functions.” The means of subsistence, which can be immediately consumed by the individual, are transformed into new means for production, which are consumed through the labor process. This illuminates a circular temporality wherein the product is both the result and animating condition of the process, and use value is dependent on the living labor that would utilize it. Or as Marx goes on to say,

“by incorporating living labour with [the commodity’s] dead substance, the capitalist at the same time converts value, i.e., past, materialised, and dead labour into capital, into value big with value, a live monster that is fruitful and multiplies.”<sup>7</sup>

Importantly, living labor stands in opposition to “dead” labor – which is *capital*, the accumulation of expended labor in the form of money. Dead labor is also the *means of production*, concretized in not only the machines and technologies which facilitate the expansion of capital, but the systems, order, and (super)structures which similarly facilitate the smooth flow of capitalist production. Dead, dormant, such tools await their use: they are valueless without their potential activation by the laborer. In this sense, dead labor is not quite dead, but vampiric – *hungry*. It depends on a purloined vitality, the “living blood of labour”<sup>8</sup> transubstantiated into value, an animate and re-animating circulation contingent upon the perpetual expropriation of life. Living labor gestures to the very contingency on which the entire circulation of value within capitalism depends. Without the *labor-power in action* of the laborer that puts the capital (dead labor) to work, the extraction and augmentation of value so central to the vitality of capitalism falls by the wayside. The bloodlust of dead labor for the energy of the living speaks to the ways in which capitalism has always been not only a project of exploitation but also of desire. Stories of vampirism always include the seduction before the bite. Living labor could in this sense be further understood as the performance of the body under the structures of capitalism and within the temporality of the capitalist mode of production – the lure of its promise of the good life always just on the horizon. In acts that do more than merely seize control of the mode of production, living labor bristles with a spontaneity capable of fracturing, stalling, and overwhelming the central drive of capitalism’s expansion.

As a spontaneous activation derived from the body of the worker, living labor is both central to the function of capitalism, yet also offers a potential site of resistance. In the preface to their book *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri offer a useful affirmation of the potential of living labor. Noting the concepts of life and labor as inimical to the subject of capitalist exploitation, they write:

Living labor produces life and constitutes society in a time that cuts across the division posed by the workday, inside and outside the prisons of capitalist work and its wage relation, in both the realm of work and that of nonwork. It is a seed that lies waiting under the snow, or more accurately, the life force always already active in the dynamic networks of cooperation, in the production and reproduction of society, that courses in and out of the time posed by capital.<sup>9</sup>

Hardt and Negri posit living labor as a concept that troubles the temporal organization upon which capitalist expropriation depends – specifically the divide between working and non-working hours. How to reserve these ‘seeds beneath the snow’ from the mere exposure and cooptation by existing systems of value remains the crucial work of a number of the contributions to this special issue. In particular, Gregory Sholette’s “Swampwalls: Dark Matter and the Lumpen Army of Art” takes a critical look at the role of the non-productive within late capitalism, using art as a means to explore new ways of valuing the unproductive (the lumpen) underneath or around the machinations of a more formal economy. Similarly, Joshua Chambers-Letson’s “Performance’s Mode of Reproduction, Part I: Searching for Danh Võ’s Mother” closely reads the work of this contemporary artist, shifting the

paradigm from the question of production to reproductive labor and the absent figure of the maternal as the revolutionary work of performance theory. Fred Moten's "COLLECTIVE HEAD," which shares its title with a work by artist Lygia Clark, explores the work of Masao Miyoshi, José Estaban Muñoz, and Clark (among others) to consider "the real assembly or assemblage that is present outside and underneath the city's absence," or in other words, that life which is the precondition and irruption of any prescriptive models for valuing life and labor. First offered as a keynote at the *Living Labor* conference, "COLLECTIVE HEAD" is an exemplary instance of what performative writing can do. Moten's is a generous scholarship: one that takes seriously the call that beauty makes, one that finds a plentitude in the form of its demand.

In one of his more famous passages from the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Karl Marx writes that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."<sup>10</sup> Within the humanities – and particularly the field of performance studies – the question of how to enact change in the world is often theorized through art practice. Artists and artwork have become the "objects of study" for academic scholarship, and scholarship a "diagram" for art practice, one form of cultural capital becoming another. Seeking to examine and complicate this relation, a special panel was organized for the *Living Labor* conference titled "ART/WORK," bringing together five artists to show their work, do their work, and/or reflect on broader ideas on working and at work within the field of contemporary art and culture. For the experimental "&" section of this special issue of *Women & Performance* we have attempted to extend the space of this original panel, including writing, interventions, and artwork from a cross-section of artist and scholars whose work puts pressure on the epistemological function of both of these fields – works that not only attempt to disseminate knowledge but to produce it. Dyke Action Machine (DAM!) is a project by artist Carrie Moyer and photographer Sue Schaffner that combines the Situationist's practice of *detournement* with the slickness of 1990s advertisements to jam the seamless union between corporate advertising and cultural ideology. Their work powerfully explores the figuration of the lesbian through both presence and absence, "questioning the basic assumption that one cannot be 'present' in a capitalist society unless one exists as a consumer group." Artist Alan Ruiz's "Radical Formalism" revises the terms of formalist critique in order to explore the way in which form might perform today not only as a vessel of conservative beliefs, but also as a kind of subversive strategy for infiltrating the conditions of globalization and the reproduction of social hierarchies. Turning from the formal to the figurative, artist Juliana Huxtable's "Untitled (Lines Bodies)" brings fantastical imagery and poetic text to explore the mediated constructions of self – the cyborgian body whose lines of fracture are both a mark of her hyper-circulation as well as political potentiality. Lastly, utilizing recent work by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge on living labor, scholar and writer Soyoung Yoon attends to questions of the productive body, exploring the work of artist Judith Scott and the legacy of Institutional Critique.

This publication comes out almost three years after that event – late, even by academic publishing standards. In revisiting the questions that prompted us to organize the conference – particularly the question of time and its relation to both labor and performance – we have been reflecting on this idea of late-ness, on the larger implications of what it means to be too late, to lag behind, to be out of time with the rhythm of capital. Lateness may be said to permeate any number of the key terms taken up by this special issue. There is

the belatedness of performance scholarship and writing, especially in its relation to the live event. There is also the lateness of a revolutionary struggle that is, at least according to Marxist critique, already underway and at the horizon of social life. Showing up late to work can even be one way of asserting agency against the demanding rhythm, the ticking clock, of capitalism. A number of the authors in this special issue focus on the radical potentialities latent in the bodies performing in and out of time. Harmony Jankowski's "Ted Shawn's *Labor Symphony*: Aesthetic Work and Productive Performance" closely examines the work of Ted Shawn's all-male dance company from the 1930s, troubling the parallel most conventionally drawn between the productive body and masculinity. On a similar note, E. Hella Tsaconas' article "Bad Math: Calculating Bodily Capacity in Cassils's *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*" mobilizes the sketchy arithmetic of Karl Marx as a generative resource in reading the concept of bodily capacity in and beyond the work of artist Cassils, showing the degree to which timing and measurement can not only codify but reorganize the concept of the body itself. Liz Kinnamon's article "Attention Under Repair: Asceticism from Self-Care to 'Care of the Self'" examines another type of durational bodily capacity in the form of recent corporate discourses on "mindfulness" – the worker's capacity to pay attention – exploring asceticism's dual function as both a tool of capital accumulation as well as self-fulfillment. Finally, "Pulses from the Multitude: Virtuosity and Black Feminist Discourse," a co-authored work by Maya Winfrey and Beth Stinson, organizes time in a different way, reminding us of the *longue duree* of racist and misogynistic violence within capitalism. Staging a critique of the authoritarian State and racialized capitalist formations, they explore alternative models of collective resistance in a dialogue that brings together Paolo Virno's concept of the multitude with two arenas of black feminist protest that took place on social media in the latter half of 2013. These articles – though utterly timely – arrive to publication late. Nonetheless, we ask readers to experience these collected works against the conventional demands for newness within art and academia. Reading late can be one small way of breaking open the rigid control capitalism maintains over the body.

Still, *Living Labor: Marxism and Performance Studies* is overshadowed by an even more explicit lateness – that of a mentor and friend. What began as a conference originally organized in collaboration with our advisor José Esteban Muñoz, quickly became an event of celebration, remembrance, and mourning after he passed away quite suddenly in December 2013. Muñoz's work and teaching continues to be a guiding resource for a vast array of scholars seeking critiques of capitalism that go beyond a vulgar class reductionism, and that depart from the conventions of a revolution that would simply propose to seize the mode of production. His scholarship abounds with references to the idea of lingering, delaying, staying or being with, and other ways of showing up late to demands of the present-ness as both an affective and political condition that goes far beyond a simple aversion to normative temporality. Among the many things that Muñoz's work has taught us is that the queer way legacy works is by orienting us towards a figure that is gone and also not yet here – past and present shackled up together, falling outside of a strictly productive time, giving time over to creating something else between them. There are many specters that haunt this special issue, some more personal and powerful than others. All of which call on a different way of imagining how knowledge is produced, shared, and mobilized across space and time. Spread out in this way, the project of *Living Labor* extends far beyond this special issue or the conference on which it is based. It is a project that many

scholars will sense and activate in different ways. To live labor is to negotiate the extended processes of reproducing ourselves and others. To live labor is to engage the material conditions that traverse personhood and thinghood. To live labor is to attend to the forces, resonances, and energies that intertwine the affects and objects of everyday life.

### Notes on contributors

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Aliza Shvarts is an artist and writer whose work deals broadly with queer and feminist understandings of reproductive labor. She is currently completing a Ph.D. in Performance Studies at NYU.

### Notes

1. Marx (1887, vol 1. 163).
2. Robinson (1983) and Moten (2003).
3. See Federici (2004) and Mitropoulos (2012).
4. See Davis (2003) and Premilla (2011).
5. See Muñoz (2009) and Ngai (2012).
6. Marx (1887, 130).
7. Marx (1887, 136).
8. Marx (1887, 175).
9. Hardt and Negri (1994, Preface 1).
10. Marx (2002).

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