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A Radical Journal of Geography

Kalindi Vora, *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780816693948 (cloth); ISBN: 9780816693962 (paper)

At what *subjective* cost to others are certain thriving human beings maintained in their privileged lifeworlds? Kalindi Vora's *Life Support* grapples with the "evacuation of one sphere in support of lives in another" (p.114), and presents the limits of "labour" as an analytic for reconstructing this. Comparable recent publications have somewhat de-privileged race and coloniality as factors in the post-Fordist division of labour, while still proposing to rearticulate a Marxist-feminism in a way attuned to biopolitics, and scrutinize capitalist fantasies of self-reproducing autonomy that are currently playing out on fresh frontiers like the cell and the gene (see Cooper 2008; Cooper and Waldby 2014). Although incorporating these to great effect, Vora intervenes with an assured new theorization which, in contrast, places uncompromising emphasis on the actuality of colonial power. Alongside others committed to the centrality of critical race studies (and particularly women-of-color feminism) to understanding capitalism past and present, Vora has sought a way to give due attention, political weight, and careful history to material effects appearing *in excess* of formal exploitation.

The reader of this slim volume is likely to be astonished in that Vora's book genuinely makes good on its title, delivering an original, dense, and entirely coherent theorization of biocapital whose confident elaboration tightly interlaces a mammoth quantity of critical literatures on value, affect, race, technology, and empire; three ethnographies of her own; and three well-chosen artistic artefacts (a play, a novel, and a short story). The disparate, but persuasively linked, people in India we encounter in these

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pages are the structurally cheapened global producers of “affective commodities”, in call centres, troubleshooting, software engineering and the biological mothering nurture sold in surrogacy clinics.

Life Support joins other monographs in the University of Minnesota Press series *Difference Incorporated*, edited by Grace Hong and Roderick Ferguson, which can and should be read across (and against) the disciplines. Vora’s argument repeatedly advances by showing how the newness of specific outsourcing technologies is only partially real and how the depletion of human lives they mediate is, unmistakably, an affordance of legacies of imperialism, continuous with that pre-neoliberal history. Amid a certain techno-utopic automationist turn (which now exists right across the political spectrum) it is sobering and salutary to read this kind of meticulous account of contemporary accumulation strategies as a matter of *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.

Life Support explains, in its own fresh language, how an affective and biological economy of “vitality” differentiates and stratifies the lives of people on different ends of various global care relations. In many ways, this straightforwardly builds on widely familiar claims about labour’s uneven geographies of flexibilization and feminization. But the types of care work that are marshalled here are newly illuminating simply by virtue of their unfamiliar juxtaposition: tech support; assisted reproductive “technology” (“womb renting” [p.120]); customer care. We come to understand, for example, the loss of self and of life of the call centre agent, suffering a permanent night-shift, fashioning him- or herself—perhaps irreversibly—into a credible, authentic, and empathetic North American. Likewise, the artificial futurelessness of Indian programmers, whose real mobility the H-1B visa, paradoxically, only seems to constrict, and whose inventive creativity is invisibilized, just as the “authorship” rights of gestational “carriers” are with

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regard to their fetus. In each case, India's costs are kept low with the help of a persistent sense of Indians as a boundless auto-replenishing source of servile mimicry and excess reproductivity.

The "life support" Vora describes historicizes a core dynamic in capitalism, insisting on the systemicity of something intuitive *and felt* that is too often analytically evaded (because it is non-empirical and unquantifiable): the fact of labours making some people's lives *not* worth living, even as they make others' comfortable, secure, and pleasant. It is this extra-economic, subjective, and political question that one could say is missing from, say, Jason Moore's (2012) discussion of cheap unwaged human life and surplus populations in *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. Unlike Moore, Vora steers clear of the category "nature", even when parsing the "limits of gendered labour", or when stressing the racial exclusions that have been intrinsic to "universalist" humanism as deployed by modern liberalism (including 19th century abolitionism). But her motivation for expanding on "Marx proper" is clearly comparable: both perceive "the life-making capacities that enter into the immediate production of value" (Moore 2012: 67) and, as Vora puts it, "the dependence of capitalism on both reproduction and the exhaustion of life past the possibility of its reproduction" (p.26).

But, in Chapter 1 Vora unapologetically, thoughtfully, and explicitly departs from Marx's value analysis, and for this she received, in 2009, an all too predictable (white male) castigation at the hands of Marxological gatekeepers (see Larsen 2009): "there can be no 'supplement' to the labor theory of value"! In fact, with this book, Vora shows that such supplements and contaminations may result in something more faithful to the purpose of abolishing the present state of things (akin to how Donna Haraway [1991] described cyborg consciousness as "unfaithful" to its forefathers in the Cyborg

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Manifesto). For Vora, “vital energy” seems to be a strategically useful name for an important qualitative inflection she perceives in imaginative, virtual, partially unconscious, and/or biological transmissions criss-crossing the globe, whose results are the common sense that (for instance) some identities and families truly *need* more care than others do. To make use of frames like primitive accumulation, dispossession, or rent, to refer to these flows would still not tackle the problem of the definitional humanity of the bearer of labour-power being precisely what dehumanizes many labourers. Here, as throughout, Vora bolsters her critical discussion of rights- and recognition-based models of humanist politics with afropessimist, women-of-colour feminist, and decolonial theory (glossing works by Jodi Melamed, Alexander Weheliye, Lisa Lowe, Kamala Kempadoo, Madhavi Kale, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others).

In life-support industries, the boundary between work and nonwork, work and worker, is particularly hard to locate (on this front Vora offers a brief, rich discussion of feminist debates about gendered labour [p.30-33]). In light of this, what are the stakes—for the people who matter here—of asserting that a gestational surrogate, for example, is one such *labouring* human? Vora’s view is that vindicating the “ownership model” of the body (conventionally required for Marxist workers’ power) will constitute only a first step. It is one with which surrogacy scholars Amrita Pande (2014) and Sharmila Rudrappa (2015) broadly concur. Accordingly, intersubjective forms of protest and resistance appear in each chapter: “strange affinities” that can be found through counter-flows of care that appear in unexpected places, such as over the telephone (in Chapter 2); collective open source “hacking around” and viral piracy (in Chapter 3); discursive challenges to biogenetic proprietary patriarchy (in Chapter 4). Thus Vora underlines the hopeful message that “biocapital [can be] smuggled against the flow of value from

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Global South to Global North and invested in the lives of those who are supposed to produce such commodities rather than consume them” (p.65).

In her (devastating) second chapter, Vora interweaves a play—*A Terrible Beauty is Born* (2006) by former call centre “accent trainer” Arjun Raina—with excerpts from existing ethnographies of call centres. The “social death” that occurs for the New Delhi call centre agent, Ashok, is illustrated through a form of methodical doubling, as his play-acting at being a (Black, African) American, “John”, becomes near-permanent (unlike that of the actor who “got out” and is performing the play). In Chapter 3, Vora again reads ethnographies of a sector (including her own), this time together with the novel *Transmission* (2005) by Hari Kunzru, which ends in a dizzying fantasy of a revenge of “the surplus”. In Chapter 4, “Transnational Gestational Surrogacy”, Vora distills more original fieldwork while re-reading a short story about a breast cancer-stricken and abandoned wet nurse and mother, “Stanadayini” (1980) by Mahasweta Devi (famously translated by Gayatri Spivak [1987]). So, Vora’s multi-sited study focuses with precision on outsourcing to—and within—India. But the implications of her “new history” are unmistakably broader than these industries. As Trung Nguyen (2015) says, “Vora provokes us to ask how vital energy is accumulated through other sites of depletion under global capital, such as temporary overseas labour, migrant seasonal work, and the precarious”—and, I would add, the suicide-stricken factory-dormitories of the contemporary (Chinese) industrial working class.

Notwithstanding headlines heralding robot-assisted surgery, milking, or bombing; kiosks vending everything; frictionless socializing with Google Glass; 3D printing; driverless cars; even ectogenesis, reports of the advent of automation are much exaggerated, in the sense that more people on earth are doing more work than ever

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before. Vora hints repeatedly at neo-feudal moments vital to capitalism. Customers' everyday, omnipresent contact with actual living *people* (in addition to their labour, as crystallized in every mechanical surface) disavows the life support ongoing therein—that naturalization of its ready, self-evident availability is the point. This is contact that is simultaneously *intimate* and *remote*, promiscuous and temporary. Less and less must customers experience a distinction between service agent and an equivalent machine. In what sense might this emergence, amongst the global few, of automated and/or virtual “surrogate” stand-ins for certain human workers (butlers, maids, cashiers, research assistants...) train our eyes to dehumanize still further the overwhelming majority who continue to perform these same services as (what else?) people? A forthcoming book, *Surrogate Humanity*, co-authored with Neda Atanasoski, promises to develop these themes (see Atanasoski and Vora 2015).

As India has moved to “ban surrogacy services for foreigners” (BBC, 25 November 2015),¹ the world is set to see changes in the geography of private transnational “reproductive care” that has emerged since the turn of the century. In the near future, it seems, Indian surrogates will work exclusively for their nation, which is to say, in reality, for India's urban transnational capitalist class; people who, as Vora already noted, “share a similar earning differential with surrogates” as the tourists who have now been barred (p.37). This major regulatory blow to the Indian industry—hitherto the most competitive “baby destination” for “fertility tourists” on earth—is almost certainly attributable to some uneasy combination of conservative or “repro-normative”²

¹ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-34876460> (last accessed 1 December 2015).

² In 2001, legal scholar Katherine Franke coined the term “repro-normativity” to describe the—always culturally specific—social forces that incentivize motherhood to the point of pathologising women who live

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elements within India and, on the other hand, feminisms such as the lobbying efforts of women's health group SAMA (also referenced by Vora [p.33]).³ The announced government ban is bound to elicit comment from those who, like Vora, albeit with different epistemic tools, have conducted ethnographies of the booming gestational workplaces in cities like Delhi, Anand, and Bangalore, where the babies being built on commission were often of non-Indian nationality (see Pande, 2014; Rudrappa, 2015).

While it becomes clear that wealthy British would-be parents can no longer make their much blogged-about pilgrimages to India to receive “the gift of life”, and shall have to turn elsewhere—to Guatemala, Mexico, and Ukraine, for instance—their sympathizers and critics in the media and universities shall disagree about the merits of assisted procreation laws and policies that affirm the nation and its borders in this way. Certainly, the political affordances of practising “domestic-only” reproductive technology are likely to be various and even in tension with each other. We should look forward to Vora's contribution. According to her website, a forthcoming study (provisionally entitled *Unsettling Reproduction*) shall distil, further, the author's research on commercial gestational surrogacy in India, interweaving this with an excavation of imperial histories of medical intervention, law, and contemporary science (Vora's important frame for apprehending the racialized post/human “subject” of reproductive rights).⁴

For these reasons, this review concludes with some remarks on the politicization of the work of pregnancy. “How is a fetus produced?” (p.41)—and how *should* it be?

non-reproductive lives.

³ SAMA has conducted grassroots research and produced policy recommendations around surrogacy for the last 15 years. See <http://www.samawomenshealth.org/surrogacy> (last accessed 1 December 2015).

⁴ See <http://www.ethnicstudies.ucsd.edu/faculty/vora.html> (last accessed 1 December 2015).

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Babies, insofar as they take the form of commodities, do not command the same political freight as isolated organs, or computer programming, or the affects of personal telephonic support. Yet the practice of transferring embryos and entire pregnancies to settings where “life” is cheap (the better to nurture the lives that are extracted there) forces us to reckon with a workplace politics of gestation which necessarily points *beyond* surrogacy as an “exception”, towards the work of so-called natural gestation (see Lewis 2015).

Meanwhile, to come at denaturalizing the matter from a different angle: the development of methods of mitochondrial splicing now promises the possibility of increasing, beyond two, the number of a baby’s direct genetic parents. It is more pertinent than ever before, then, to further weaponize gene biologist’s Richard Lewontin’s already political claims that “DNA is not self-reproducing...it makes nothing...and organisms are not determined by it” (quoted on p.41).

Within this struggle for a liberatory mode of reproduction, it may not always be strategic to argue that care-based livelihoods are comprised of “labour” rather than something else (“vital energy”, “biology”) in order to win victories. In surrogacy, gestators may develop their challenges to “the assumption that the end product is a form of contract-protected property belonging to the originators of intention and DNA” (p.41) in different vocabularies. The Indian open-source programmers in Chapter 3 of *Life Support* had a collective notion of authorship at the same time as “the desire to keep the fruits of their labour ‘at home’” (p.101); as such, it would be interesting to inquire into possible analogous desires on the part of Indian gestational surrogates vis-à-vis the newborns they hand away; desires that may already have helped shape the 2015 ruling against private transnational “outsourcing” in their domain. What is “home”? How can we remake this world as a life-support for all its inhabitants? Might a demand to keep the

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strange fruits of hi-tech gestational labour “at home” articulate favourably with Haraway’s (2015) call to “make kin, not babies”?

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