Labouring Geography in a Global Pandemic: Social Reproduction, Racial Capitalism and World-Making Praxis

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with questions of praxis that are central to the subdiscipline of labour geography. Asking how the subdiscipline might engage the present conjuncture, we suggest that centring questions of social reproduction and historically contingent processes of racialisation is vital, and propose a praxis as *labouring* geographers which encompasses both situated processes of knowledge production, and activity as teachers, activists and workers – both within and beyond the institutions where we are employed. Our paper thus resonates strongly with calls by Ruth Wilson Gilmore and others for geographers to engage with the internationalist project of abolition of racial capitalism.

Introduction

In her analysis of unfreedom and social reproduction in the Caribbean, Beverley Mullings (2021: 156) raises a crucial question for the subdiscipline of labour geography: 'What does attention to the racial character of capitalism, the tyranny of free market logics, and our vulnerability as humans on an ailing planet mean for the future study of labour geographies?' Mullings' question is the prompt for this paper. Like her, we emphasise the current conjuncture and the stakes for labour geography as a worker-oriented endeavour within it. We also engage with a reverse question: what does the future study of labour geography mean for workers' struggles? In interrogating the political possibilities latent in the subdiscipline our concern is not about *study* alone, important as that can be. Labour geography is not simply an abstraction of pixels on a screen or patterned arrangements of black ink on a page behind an academic journal's paywall. In this paper we are concerned *both* with labour geographers' praxis as knowledge producers, *and* as teachers and activists – including labour activists – within and beyond the institutions where we may be employed.

In adopting this approach, we follow in the footsteps of foundational work exploring the normative orientations of labour geographers (eg. Castree 2007). From Herod's (1997: 26) initial proposition of a *labour geography* to replace a 'geography of labour', the subdiscipline has explored how centring the spatial practices and struggles of workers within geographical scholarship might 'aid the dispossessed and the oppressed'. In other ways, Mitchell's (2011: 584) reminder for labour geographers that workers act not in situations of their making was coupled with a case for producing 'clear, materialist analysis of conditions' in which varied forms of (constrained) agency are and are not possible. Mitchell asked two important questions about praxis: 'How is it even possible to struggle?' and 'Against what should struggle be aimed?'.

In this sense, questions of praxis are central to the subdiscipline: creating analysis both formed of workers' everyday, material struggles, and oriented towards possibilities for social transformation. There are multiple discomforts and awkwardnesses to straddling activist and academic worlds, a constant tussling with the question of how developing an analysis is not merely the act of going 'out there' to 'gather data', but is itself about the social relationships built and potentially implicated in transformative projects of the present: 'At specific conjunctures, theory and practice can come to be identified in a way that both heighten one another through an effort to interpret the world and simultaneously change it' (Loftus 2015: 185).

In a similar way David Featherstone (2012: 245) writes that solidarity emerges through collective activity, describing his own position as part of an 'alternative genealogy of left politics… which treats political activity and the spatial practices of left politics as generative, as productive'. Both are interested in how such practices can bring about new world-making possibilities (Featherstone 2012; Loftus 2015), which, as we will argue, resonates strongly with Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2020a) call for geographers to engage with the internationalist project of abolition of racial capitalism.

Our paper proceeds as follows.[1] In section one we elaborate further on the current conjuncture, in particular the political possibilities opened up by a) what the COVID-19 pandemic revealed about structural inequalities, and b) ways in which it also amplified them. Although our orientation is internationalist, our analysis here reflects our location in the UK and relates to the doubling down of racial nationalist politics in that nation state following the 2016 Brexit referendum.

Section two focuses on some of the productive ways in which labour geographers can and do integrate into their praxis insights developed in writings on social reproduction and racial capitalism. As well as drawing on the wider research literature to do this, we make reference to research we have ourselves conducted with 'unorganised' temporary workers in warehousing and electronics manufacture in different national contexts. We suggest that centring questions of social reproduction and further integrating historically contingent processes of racialisation into our analysis of labour's geographies provide important routes into how the subdiscipline might engage the present conjuncture.

In the third and final section of the paper we ask how such questions of praxis might be formulated when we view ourselves not only as labour geographers, but, to paraphrase Strauss (2019: 2), as *labouring* geographers within increasingly marketised educational contexts and casualised labour relations. How do the conditions of labour geography's own production shape the subdiscipline as a praxis? We thus turn our lens to labour geographers' roles not only as researchers and analysts of workers' struggles outside the academy, but also our own actual and potential roles, as university workers, students, carers and life-makers, in struggles against precarity and more broadly against racial capitalism. The paper as a whole thus contributes to debates on how labour geographers combine *both* 'knowledge' about labour within contemporary

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capitalism*, and* also, potentially, practical modes of solidarity through teaching, research and activism oriented towards material social transformation.

1 Pandemic times and conjunctural change

Whilst in many national contexts the pandemic briefly elevated newly named 'essential' or 'key' workers to public prominence, such naming did not transform the deeply rooted intersecting inequalities shaping working lives. Rather, the spread of the virus made visible how interdependent relations of social reproduction are structured through articulated classed, gendered and racialised inequalities: the reproduction of some modes of life at the expense of others (De Genova 2020). In the UK, long-range, structural inequalities in employment, housing and the labour market were amplified by the pandemic, compounding the greater 'vulnerability to premature death' (Gilmore 2017: 228) which structural racism places upon racialised people (Meer et al. 2020). Many of the sectors deemed essential, and thus exempted from lockdowns, tended also to be those where racialised working-class people were disproportionately employed (health and social care; transport; manufacturing; food production and processing; warehousing and distribution). People reliant upon employment in these often low-wage sectors were being sent to work that made them susceptible to serious illness or death (Prasad-Aleyamma 2021). As Liebman et al. (2020) have argued: 'The discourse of the "essential worker" is inseparable from racialised essentialism that deems some bodies naturally disposed to risk and premature death.'

Nevertheless, some 'essential workers' organised to fight back, such as cleaners at the UK's Ministry of Justice, who campaigned for effective Personal Protective Equipment, full sick pay and equal annual leave rights to civil servants.[2] Beyond specific workplace struggles, 'pandemic times' have also brought historic revolt and uprisings. On 25 May 2020, two-and-a-half months after the pandemic had been declared, George Floyd was brutally murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis. Floyd's death was the latest in a long line of black people killed by the police in that country. The largest uprisings in US history followed, Black Lives Matter (BLM) mobilisations spread globally; and calls for police abolition found new amplification.[3] In the UK, with its own long history of state violence against black and other minoritised people, the statue of a slave-trader, Edward Colston, was torn from its plinth in the city of Bristol and rolled into the River Avon.

In response the UK government doubled down against BLM, introducing legislation to increase police powers at protests and to enable undercover law enforcement agents to commit crimes in the course of their work without fear of prosecution.[4] It also tightened already-stringent

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[2] The cleaners were organised by United Voices of the World (UVW). See http://www.uvw.union.org.uk/en/campaigns/ministry-of-justice/ accessed 14 June 2021.

[3] As Ruth Gilmore explains, abolition is about far more than prisons and de-funding the police: 'It is to figure out ways to generalize the resources needed for well-being for the most vulnerable peope in our community, which will then extend to all people https://theintercept.com/2020/06/10/ruth-wilson-gilmore-makes-the-case-for-abolition accessed 14 June 2021.

[4] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-intelligence-agents-crimes-undercover-b556205.html accessed 23 September 2021.

laws making seeking asylum in the UK outside of official settlement schemes all but impossible (Trilling 2021), and continued the detention of immigrants in makeshift prisons, including former army barracks in spite of COVID outbreaks there.[5] In March 2021 the government's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities concluded that structural racism was not the main cause of racial disadvantage in the UK. The report seemed designed to make the government's case in the ongoing 'culture wars' and ignored, amongst many other things, the structural reasons why disproportionate numbers of people of colour became ill and died of COVID-19 in 2020. All of these are examples of how the actions of the British state stoked the resurgence of racial nationalism just as its official discourse promoted a new formulation of a post-Brexit 'Global Britain' positioned to conclude bilateral trade deals with all-comers.

In societies with a dominant white majority, the battle against racisms is part of the class struggle, in the sense that white workers' class interests lie in anti-racism and a unified struggle by all workers for better working conditions and higher pay. 'Struggles for racial justice are sites of learning for white workers, of self-activity by workers of color, and of placing limits on capital's ability to divide workers' (Roediger 2017: 12). One crucial component of this involves political education about the entanglement of capitalism, slavery, colonialism and the state which, done well, can push back against racial nationalism. As David Featherstone has shown, for example, work by Antonio Gramsci on anti-colonial politics in 1918 'positions [anti-colonial] struggles as integral to new geographies of internationalist struggle' (2013: 71).

COVID-19's amplification of pre-existing structural inequalities, concurrent uprisings against historic state violence against racialised people, and states' multipronged efforts to push back against those uprisings suggest that pandemic times are associated with conjunctural change as understood via this formulation by Gramsci (1996: 178, emphasis added):

> *incurable* structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity), and… despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to *cure* them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts (since no social formation will ever admit that it has been superseded) form the terrain of the 'conjunctural', and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise.

In the next section we go on to show how labour geographers' growing engagement with, and elaboration of, social reproduction and racial capitalism as researchers and writers enables them to contribute to the 'forces of opposition' in the current conjuncture.

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[5] Detention in Napier Barracks was ruled unlawful in June 2021 https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jun/03/napier-barracks-asylum-seekers-win-legal-challenge-against-government

2 Social reproduction and racial capitalism in labour's geographies

As an analytic, social reproduction centres the social relations, processes and labours bound up in daily and generationally re-creating social life, as well as the 'conditions of possibility' for capitalist value production, including the daily, unwaged work of reproducing labour power (Meehan and Strauss 2015). Centring its scale-crossing perspective, Katz (2001: 711) locates social reproduction as both the 'fleshy, messy and indeterminate stuff of everyday life', and a set of 'structured practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension'. As the stuff of both our collective survival, its interdependency, and the hierarchical violence which currently structures who thrives, who survives and at whose expense, social reproduction is a profoundly pertinent framework for thinking through the contemporary conjuncture. In considering how labouring geographers engage the articulated crises of pandemic times, it is useful, then, to note the ways that analysis of social reproduction have emerged from, and fuelled, live political interventions.

Marxist feminist conceptualisations of unwaged reproductive labour as gendered exploitation underpinning capitalist value production emerged from, and were essential to, the 1970s Wages for Housework Movement (Dalla Costa and James 1976; Federici 2012). Indeed, as Weeks (2011) notes, demanding a wage for housework was both a radical intervention into how the wage itself was conceptualised and a transformative demand to abolish gendered and racialized systems of (un/waged) work as we knew them. More broadly, feminist geographers have highlighted long-range crises of social reproduction – born of neoliberal restructuring, and the multifaceted contradictions of a capitalist system which destroys and depletes the ecological and human 'resources' necessary for both accumulation and social life (Katz 2001; Rai et al. 2014). As Weeks (2011: 27) identified, these contradictions are generative terrain for critical political mobilisation: 'The competing requirements of creating surplus value and sustaining the lives and socialities upon which it depends form a potential fault line through capitalist political economies, one that might serve to generate critical thinking and political action.' The example of feminist researchers and activists, we want to suggest, raises questions about how the conceptual terrain of labour geography today is being formed through engagement (or not) with these contradictions and tensions as sites of politics.

Centring questions of social reproduction transforms the parameters of the subdiscipline – the 'what', 'whom' and 'where' of labour geographies – and opens them to new questions about praxis. In the feminist critique of bounded and reified notions of 'the economy' as separable from broader social life, social reproduction analysis breaks down the binaries which structure ideas of 'production' and 'reproduction' as mapped onto an 'inside' and 'outside' of capitalist social relations (Andrucki et al. 2017), or 'home' and 'work' places (Mezzadri 2017), instead proposing relational analysis centring their complex co-constitution (Katz 2001), or the blurred relations of 'life's work' (Mitchell et al. 2004). Integrating social reproduction into analysis of labour's geographies means going beyond its representation as the site of life or of care untouched by

exploitation, rather situating its relations as constitutive of labour regimes (Baglioni and Mezzadri 2020).

Worker dormitories exemplify these complex articulations of waged and unwaged time and space within the reproduction of systems of migrant labour, and the centrality of workers' social reproduction to the ways labour regimes operate. In the Czech Republic's export-orientated electronics manufacturing sector, for instance, mobile and migrant workers from Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania are routinely housed in employer-provided dormitories by the temporary work agencies which recruit, transport and employ them. Whilst the dormitory appears as 'free accommodation' facilitating labour mobility within the EU, it is central to labour control practices. Its provision is contingent upon continued employment through a specific work agency, with loss of work or quitting meaning immediate eviction from the dormitory. Tied housing compels work, including during illness, given that agency workers pay for accommodation on sick days when not earning a wage from which the agency can deduct housing costs. The tying of migrant agency workers' daily social reproduction to the precarity of dormitory housing seeks to lengthen the working day, extract compliance with exhausting regimes of 12-hour shifts and facilitate unpredictable shift scheduling in which these hourly-paid workers become a pool of 'always available' workers. The organisation of workers' daily social reproduction through the dormitory system, then, is central to the ways in which globally-integrated electronics factories in the Czech Republic seek to assemble and extract workers' 'flexibility' for the fluctuating and lean operations of 'just-in-time' production (Schling 2017).

From embodied unwaged labours to labour regimes, attention is increasingly being paid to the ways that social formations of social reproduction, and their uneven classed, gendered and racialised relations, vitally shape terrains and systems of exploitation. At the same time, geographers have turned to social reproduction as both formed through struggle and as a site of transformative potential, which in turn shapes modes of labour 'agency'. Herod's (1997: 4) proposition for a 'labour geography' was grounded within attention to the ways capitalism's economic geographies are formed also by workers as 'active spatial agents' who 'seek to make space in particular ways to ensure their own self-reproduction'. Yet such geographies of struggle, negotiation, survival and their attendant landscapes, extend through relations of both waged and unwaged work, encompassing full working *lives* within and beyond the workplace. Mullings' (1999: 294) analysis of women data entry workers in Jamaica showed how social reproduction in the extended household provided forms of 'wage subsidy' central to women workers' means of resisting demands for 'docile, disciplined and efficient' workers. Mullings argues that in their cumulative form, these 'unorganized' labouring practices shaped capitalist landscapes, impacting expansion of the export-orientated information-processing industry in Jamaica.

Others have situated concepts of 'constrained agency' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011) within a 'nexus' of gendered migration regimes, waged work and social reproduction for live-in domestic workers (Schwiter et al. 2018). Smith and Winders (2008) analyse Latino workers' struggles against casualised labour in the US South within located practices of social reproduction and of 'place making' as community members. In turn, analysing garment factories' demand for

'flexibility' alongside workers' precarious housing in tenements in Gurgaon, India, Cowan (2021) explores gendered, contested forms of 'rooted flexibility' inhabited by migrant working-class women. In the Czech dormitory labour regime, EU agency workers deploy 'quitting' strategies which leverage tight labour markets and insecure contracts, in search of better wages or less tedious employment. Workers transform the dormitory space into a site for exchanging knowledge and information about employers (which to avoid, and where to find the best hourly rate), in the process sometimes building relations for quitting in larger groups in ways which open potential for more direct demand making. Centring conditions and relations of social reproduction helps us understand both what compels workers to participate in unsafe and underpaid work and what equips them to push back, to find more and less organised forms of resistance. Doing so also opens up broader terrains of demand making and struggle undertaken by 'unorganised' temporary workers.

Focusing upon the relational interdependencies highlighted by social reproduction requires unpicking interlinkages between different workers' exploitation and struggle, and possibilities for solidarity (including for academic workers, as we explore in section three below). For example, Strauss (2012) highlights how exploitation within the food supply chain produces low-cost food increasingly central to the reproduction of low-wage workers across UK sectors. Rogaly's (2020) research in the English city of Peterborough reveals connections there between the exploitation of agricultural workers and that of an expanding warehouse and distribution workforce. Both *continuities* and *changes* over time were identified in the model of management-through-algorithms (Reid-Musson 2018). Conceived of in this way, such conditions can most clearly be seen as the subject of struggle at multiple interacting scales, from the international to the local. People who worked at Amazon and other warehouses in Peterborough reported the continuities in modes of recruitment through agencies with the agricultural gangs that had been prominent in the region's labour regimes for decades. Seeking out racialised people for temporary work had long been the practice in agriculture, including the use of workers with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller heritage. '[O]nerous and condescending' micro-management (Seymour 2021, no page numbering) has an equally long history. Warehouse workers interviewed by Rogaly in the 2010s spoke of a callous disregard for workers' safety with, for example, several instances of health and safety related induction training being merely performative. Key changes were the role of performance targets and ever-tougher sanctions whereby non-achievement of targets or minor infringements of break-time rules could easily lead to dismissal. It was the use of digital methods such as 'barcoding of everything, including the workers' that enabled Amazon and other businesses to put in place and double down on 'the inhuman power that reduces these workers to computational components' (Seymour 2021, no page numbering).

Peterborough workers also spoke of how they fought back for their dignity, at times coming together across racialised difference to challenge supervisors' attempts to drive workers towards ever higher targets. Racialised hierarchies and other differences between workers could at other times militate against even such informal organising. Nevertheless, workers also came together in Peterborough through informal social activities organised around living in proximity to each other,

lift-sharing and exchanging conversation briefly during breaks, creating the conditions for common action. There were instances where those working as supervisors combined with ordinary workers to undermine the intense digital scrutiny of this form of racialized surveillance capitalism. As Madhumita Dutta (2020) has shown elsewhere, care work and other elements of social reproduction can and do occur at the sites of employed work as well as beyond it.

Uneven geographies of social reproduction, and the relational interdependencies which structure them, quickly unfold into questions of racial capitalism. Colonialism and plantation slavery has long been centred within the historical emergence and provisioning of metropolitan working classes (Williams 1944). Extending analysis from the unwaged gendered labours of reproduction, Federici (2004: 104) identified plantation economies as another way in which the 'metropolitan wage' operated as 'an instrument of accumulation, that is, as a lever for mobilizing not only the labour of the workers paid by it, but also for the labour of a multitude of workers hidden by it, because of the unwaged conditions of their work'. In analysing the racialising segmentation of workers within British Colombia's fisheries across the late nineteenth and into the twentieth Centuries, Muszynski (1996: 13) focuses upon a fishing industry 'built on notions of race and gender…[and] intimately linked to the global expansion of capitalism.' In the production of canned salmon, settler colonialism and racialised migration regimes created 'a proletariat...in order to feed the British working class', facilitating the differential devaluing of labour which kept the cost of canned salmon low. As Werner (2016: 87) articulates, it is imperative to understand the ways labour regimes operate through 'subject production that does not simply occur in space but rather is dynamically articulated with, and is part of remaking, sociospatial divisions of labour'. At stake here is to understand changing geographies of global production as constitutively related to geographically and historically contingent processes of racialisation.

Racial capitalism and uneven development in the conjunctural crises of 'pandemic times' reveal yet more forcefully ways in which social reproduction is neither inevitable, nor inevitably 'successful'. Gilmore's (2007: 28) formulation of racism as 'the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death' indicates the ways that 'race' itself is reproduced through uneven geographies of social reproduction (Bhattacharyya 2018). Concepts such as 'depletion' (Rai et al. 2014), 'limits to labour' (Mullings 2009) or 'disposability' (Wright 2006) indicate precisely the hierarchical ordering of human life – as 'analytics that capture the racialized dynamics of global capitalism today' (Gidwani 2018: 200).[6] Moreover, as Freshour (2017, n.p.) has analysed in relation to poultry plants in the USA, exploitation 'not only shapes but also depends upon a continual crisis of social reproduction for its Black and immigrant Latina workforce' – a crisis articulated through social processes of racialisation and gendering.

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[6] Earlier in the same piece, Gidwani (2018, p.194) explicitly combines social reproduction and racialization analytically when he draws on Achille Membe's formulation 'the *Becoming Black of the world'* to present India's waste workers as 'the new racialised Others of neoliberalizing cities, whose daily toil subtends the aesthetics, economics, and ordinary functioning of those urban formations even as their humanity is denied, their labour devalued, and their claims to dignified existence persistently denigrated.'

Bhattacharyya (2018: 42) has suggested that '[t]he hidden and unvalued work that surrounds and precedes waged labour, and which allows waged labour to be possible, is a matter at the heart of how humanity comes to be divided and allocated differential value.' Drawing on Katz's (2001) focus on social reproduction as producing *differentiated* workforces within the labour market, Bhattacharyya argues that geographically differentiated and uneven conditions of social reproduction '[offer] a naturalised rationale for the racialised differentiation of workers and even for a racialised understanding of uneven development' (2018: 50). This scholarship opens up possibilities to situate processes of racialisation centrally in labour exploitation as stretching across relations of both waged work and social reproduction.

In this sense, then, we can view workers' dormitories in the Czech Republic as labour regime infrastructures (re)producing racialising segmentations: facilitating both the spatial separation and social demarcation of a 'foreign' workforce, and manifesting a temporal border regulating EU agency workers' presence as 'permanently temporary' (Schling, *in press*). Low and fluctuating wages alongside imperatives to send remittances meets a generalised xenophobic refusal to rent to 'foreigners', foreclosing the costs of private rental accommodation for many. Although they are central to reproducing the labour force, dormitories do not accommodate children or non-working family members. This dormitory organisation of social reproduction operates to solidify labouring segmentation as a matter of citizenship or migrant status, reproducing these ideological and material categories as socio-spatial segmentations of labour and life for different workers. The dormitory becomes the site of 'foreignness', whilst Czech citizenship is itself reproduced as an exclusive category of 'normative' domestic space. Moreover, the geographies of low-waged work which the dormitory labour regime shapes are at stake in reproducing broader unevenness in the economic geographies of Central and Eastern Europe: the movement of labour and production across sites of integration and disarticulation from global production networks.

Centring questions of social reproduction and social differentiation, including their articulation within plural and geographically and historically attentive conceptualisations of racial capitalism (Strauss 2019), opens up political imperatives, modes of praxis and solidarity, for us as geographers based in the academy. We turn to these imperatives in the next and final section.

3 Abolition: towards praxis-based labouring geography

Examining the praxis of labour geography, and situating ourselves as *labouring* geographers, draws attention to the conditions and relations in which academic work is itself undertaken. As labour journalist Sarah Jaffe (2021: 210) puts it: 'The question of what higher education is for is intimately tied up with the questions of the conditions of its work'.

Doing labour geography as academic employees of UK higher education institutions, therefore, requires alertness to the multiple contradictions of such employment. Being located in a former colonial metropole often means working at campus locations that are surrounded by symbols of colonial domination and housed in buildings funded by resources accumulated through

slavery and colonialism. Universities in the UK, in spite of variations in location, student body and ethos, mostly retain a 'tiered, hierarchical structure' (Jaffe 2021: 197), a fact highlighted by Rogaly and Taylor's (2015) oral histories with the working-class residents of social housing estates abutting the University of East Anglia campus. One resident who worked as a cleaner in one of the university's halls of residence, recalled waking a student who risked missing an important exam, vital to the reproduction of his middle-class life and the likelihood of a professional or managerial occupation. Yet, since the second half of the twentieth century, university has not only been about the reproduction of already existing class privilege, but also, at times, a 'path to upward mobility for a small but growing fraction of the working class' and even a 'home for dissent and rebellion' (Jaffe 2021: 200). In Gramsci's terms, therefore, such contradictions show how the university can be seen as a 'terrain of the "conjunctural" upon which the forces of opposition organise' (1996: 178).

Pandemic times have brought a central contradiction of the UK's marketised system of higher education into sharp relief. Online teaching and distance learning during the pandemic threatened university business models dependent upon student fees, and rents received for university-provided accommodation. With the easing of 'lockdown' in the lead-up to the 2020-2021 academic year in the UK, students were encouraged to return to campuses. However, when it became clear that face-to-face teaching would increasingly become the exception rather than the norm, students organised widespread rent strikes and demands for full or partial fee refunds.

Universities have largely found themselves in the position of needing to have students back on campus as a result of reforms dating back to 1998 that have brought widespread outsourcing, especially of non-academic university roles, large-scale borrowing by universities for the development of speculative, high-rent student accommodation that entails long-term financial obligations to corporate property developers, and the purchase of expensive apps and software systems developed by private-sector corporations for outward-facing university websites and virtual learning platforms. The result was that teaching and research have become commodified in ways that have intensified the precarity of doctoral and early career researchers conducting 'hope labour' (Jaffe 2021: 207). As fees rose, so did a reliance upon the work of precariously-employed academics so that the 'teaching load being removed from the fancier professors fell on the shoulders of . . . those same graduate students, adjuncts or junior professors scrambling for permanent positions' (2021: 205). With some variations across the different countries of the UK (for example, fees were not introduced for Scottish students attending Scottish universities), the reforms were part of a much deeper and wider neoliberalisation of public-sector workplaces.

Higher education struggles are vitally important to academics on insecure contracts, for whom reproducing a future as labouring geographers is itself constantly under threat. Involvement in collective struggles (especially when they entail collaboration between different university workers' unions and students) can be more broadly transformational and a powerful part of conjunctural counterforces of rebellion and dissent because of what the process of struggle reveals about the workings of neoliberalism more generally. A recent example in the UK was the successful combined struggle by the International Workers Union of Great Britain, the University

and College Union and the National Union of Students for the University of London to bring previously outsourced cleaning and security jobs at its central Senate House building back in-house.[7] Here struggle was situated around the very labours of reproducing the university itself. This mobilisation by and with a largely migrantised workforce, highlighted the university's reproduction as also underpinned by racialising dynamics of labour segmentation. Bringing the adjunct academic in the neoliberalised university together with differently positioned university workers, Caitlin Henry (2018: 1367) highlights how 'plenty of socially reproductive work is involved in making academic work possible – from education to emotional labor and care work to the housekeeping staff that keep university buildings clean'. Reflecting upon the work of Silvia Federici (2012), Henry argues that centring social reproduction 'offers principles for how to live and resist *together*' and 'the possibility of crafting an alternative set of social relations' (2018: 1366, author's emphasis).

The UK state's attempted 'cure' for the contradictions of the current conjuncture extends to its approach to universities, particularly humanities and social sciences departments within them, as locations which encourage alternative visions to capitalism, and that insist upon making public the racist violence of colonialism and its legacies. Yet, for labouring geographers seeing ourselves *as* workers within a struggle – not only over the university but also over wider social relations – should encourage us to (continue to) push back against the hierarchies of academia and towards alliances with non-academic workers, students and recent graduates who, in the UK, often leave university with debts of around £50,000. In the UK at least, many of those classified as students have to earn money to afford to be at university, whilst others are unpaid carers. Engaging with students as students-and-workers is a pedagogical approach to labouring geography that can enable deeper analysis and understanding of the conjuncture and help build the grounds for solidarity between differently positioned workers. The teaching and learning goes both ways. It is those who 'with their precarity and uncertain futures, are highly politicised and remarkably quick to mobilise, their younger comrades even quicker' (Bhattacharyya et al. 2021: 81-82). Even during a global pandemic, many took part in the Black Lives Matter protests in the UK in summer 2020, something Bhattacharyya et al. (2021: 188) refer to as a 're-awakening of the street'.

Labouring geographers can thus resist racial capitalism not only through their research and through their involvement in active struggle for the transformation of higher education, but also through teaching. This educator role, according to Henry (2018: 1368):

> is social reproductive work… the institution of education and the everyday practices that animate that institution inform the making of new citizen-worker subjects. What material these subjects engage with in the classroom matters at least some to what reproduction happens.

In the third of three recent reports on Labour Geography for *Progress in Human Geography*, Kendra Strauss (2019: 1215) draws attention to the 'urgency… born of the current conjuncture'

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[7] https://londonstudent.coop/uol-brings-staff-in-house/, last accessed 11 June 2021.

for engagement with material that recentres 'uneven development' and its roots in capitalism and white supremacy. Strauss points readers to 'germinal work' by Ruth Wilson Gilmore. We agree and would argue that Gilmore's work on abolition geography is multiply important for teaching as well as informing and inspiring political organising and academic writing. She has much to teach labour geographers both in terms of her analytical critique of racial capitalism as a system and, more broadly, as a 'militant scholar' (Gilmore 2020b: 174) organising (alongside others such as fellow professors Angela Davis and Robin Kelley) for the struggle to abolish it. In a chapter in the edited collection *Futures of Black Radicalism*, Gilmore (2017) defines the agenda in terms which apply both within her home academic discipline of geography and well beyond the world of academe:

> Abolition geography is capacious (it isn't only by, for, or about Black people) and specific (it's a guide to action for both understanding and rethinking how we combine our labour with each other and the earth). Abolition geography takes feeling and agency to be constitutive of, no less than constrained by, structure. In other words, it is a way of studying and of doing political organizing, and of being in the world, and of worlding ourselves.

The idea of worlding is especially important during periods of resurgent nationalism as in the current conjuncture. In a critique of liberal anti-racism which focuses on unconscious bias training and representation of minoritised people, Bhattacharyya et al. (2021) take anti-racism out of its nation-state frame and call instead for an internationalist version informed by histories of anti-imperialism:

> anti-imperialism understood its goal as breaking the global colourline. This meant dismantling the world system in which states compete for power and building a new world system based on solidarity and co-operation… The question therefore is how can the visible injustices often most easily illustrated by a lack of representation be used as an avenue for a more material anti-imperialist and anti-racist political praxis, in a world which is no longer decolonising, and in which new internationalist possibilities need desperately to be affirmed? (2021: 92 and 93).

In an interview with Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah for their edited book *Revolutionary Feminisms*, Gilmore (2020b: 174, our emphasis) doubles down in her insistence that scholarship is bigger than the academy and that people working or studying within academia need to be engaged with the project of urgent radical change beyond as well as within it. 'There are militant scholars everywhere… [We] *all* have to be able to see the details and then think about how those connect or articulate with other things, and then figure out how to organise. And I think there's always a possibility for organising'.

Gilmore's insistence upon 'the details' and their connections and articulations with 'other things' could be seen as close to Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis' and in particular to that aspect

of his method which moves 'between the conceptual and particularities of history and geography' and which has 'animat[ed]… new forms of praxis-based research' (Eckers and Loftus 2013: 18-19). As with Gilmore some eighty years later, Gramsci was interested *both* 'in detailed study of particular historical and geographical conjunctures' *and* in '[w]hat political strategies and institutional forms would be necessary and adequate for developing solidarity across all members of a social class' (2013: 29). Both of these required an attentiveness to conjunctures – 'historical moments that articulate the punctual temporality of the event with longer-term forms of historical duration… In Gramsci, the close affinity between history and geography emerged from a method – a mode of writing and reasoning – which prioritized the analysis of concrete moments and situations in arriving at theoretical and political conclusions' (Kipfer 2013: 86-87).

The original emphasis of the subdiscipline of labour geography on the power of workers to shape landscapes of capitalism (Herod 2001) has been much revisited by writers who have taken the analysis well beyond unionised, long-settled, male workforces in the global north (Buckley et al. 2017; Cowan 2021; Mullings 1999; Strauss 2019). Such analytical engagements with workers' agency are in keeping with praxis-based research influenced by Gramsci as well as with Gilmore's elaboration of abolition geographies in as much as they too are interested in specific instances where such agency is constitutive of structure. Our argument in this paper is that the current conjuncture, the global pandemic and the existential threat posed by climate change, make it urgent that we understand ourselves as labouring geographers, and as acting in solidarity with the broader agenda of abolition through our teaching, activism and research within and beyond the university. As Gilmore (2020a, no page numbering) puts it:

> Abolition has to figure out ways to generalize the resources needed for well-being for the most vulnerable people in our community, which will then extend to all people. And to do that… it has to be international. It has to stretch across borders so that we can consolidate our strength, our experience, and our vision for a better world.

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