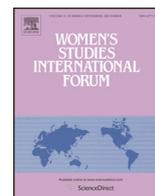




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Embodied contradictions: Capitalism, social reproduction and body formation

Sébastien Rioux

Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, 1984 West Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada

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SYNOPSIS

This paper argues that Marxist feminism offers a powerful approach to body formation theory. Building on social reproduction theory's key innovations, as well as its recognition that Marx's 'critique' of political economy is unfinished business, I develop my argument through a constructive critique of three manifestations of the fetishism of wage form, respectively problematizing the distinction between labor and labor power, the limits of the concept of labor within production-centered approach, and the embodied nature of labor power. In recovering the centrality of the body for critical social theory, social reproduction theory sheds new light into our understanding of the complex processes by which the contradictions of capital are displaced and ultimately embodied in specific ways, and therefore offers a powerful approach attentive to the ways in which the physical body shapes, and is shaped by, social and material forces.

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Introduction

Implicitly or explicitly, feminist praxis and theory have always been about the body. The first wave of liberal feminists struggled to make women's bodies visible in the 'public sphere' through their social inclusion and participation in the formal structures of political and economic life. With the emergence of the second wave in the 1960s, questions pertaining to sexuality, reproductive rights and normative heterosexuality were raised. Targeting both patriarchy and capitalism and distinguishing between gender, sexuality and race, from the second wave also emerged a powerful critique by Black and postcolonial feminists pushing against both the discursive and actual marginalization of their lives and struggles under the false universality of white Western feminism and Eurocentric discourses. They asked whose bodies were included in 'Western feminist' scholarship, thus calling for a truly common political project attending to power differences and situated knowledge. Informed by postcolonial and postmodernist thinking, the third wave of feminism brought with it a strong reaction against systemic, universalizing and totalizing discourses and knowledge. Through a radical deconstruction and destabilization

of normative categories and concepts, it reengaged the body through anti-essentialist claims about the plasticity and mutability of identities, as well as the ephemeral and transient nature of social relations. It emphasized the performative—and therefore repetitive—nature of identity and reaffirmed the social, cultural and discursive construction of gender, sex and desire.

Despite its discursive obsession with the body, however, postmodernist theory has relentlessly banished the real human body from its purview (Bruff, 2013; Callard, 1998; Fracchia, 2005; McNally, 2001). The ghost-like existence of the physical body haunts postmodernist discourse, its spectral presence continuously running against its physical absence. This is not to deny the importance of discursive practices, but, as David McNally (2001, p. 10) has argued, a reminder 'that we ought to think about language *through the body*'. In the same way that Marx had criticized 'German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth', McNally notes the failure of this new form of idealism to grasp 'the phantoms formed in the human brain' through embodied human activities and social/material life-processes. In a world plagued by hunger, homelessness, exploitation, disease and violence, to recover the

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physical materiality of the body is one of the most banal yet politically charged theoretical openings. Theories of body formation must start from real human bodies, highlighting both the historical geography and power relations underpinning corporal processes and dynamics, but also the extent to which the body is a biological entity with essential physical needs, including the need for companionship, physical contact and corporal and cognitive stimulus, the need to be loved and to be seen and recognized for who we are, and the need for protection, shelter and appropriate nourishment.

This special issue offers a unique opportunity to revisit the idea of body formation from a Marxist feminist perspective. Although it does not address this issue systematically, this paper contends that social reproduction theory (SRT), or social reproduction feminism (SRF), offers a particularly vibrant framework to develop this idea further. Its insistence that Marx's 'critique' of political economy is unfinished business, as well as its commitment to defetishization, makes it a powerful approach attentive to the ways in which the physical body shapes, and is shaped by, social and material forces. In order to do so, I develop my argument through a critique of three manifestations of the fetishism of the wage form in as many sections. The 'first cut' at body formation theory highlights the importance of Marx's distinction between labor and labor power, and constitutes the basis upon which SRF simultaneously preserves and sublates Marxism into a thoroughly feminist historical materialism (FHM). Through a radical expansion of the concept of labor, the 'second cut' highlights the necessity to move beyond states and markets when accounting for social reality and historical development. Finally, the 'third cut' at body formation theory returns critically to the notion of labor power, arguing that its corporal form has important implications for how we conceptualize race, gender, sexuality and class as overlapping elements of one and the same system of capitalist exploitation.

Fetishism of the wage form 1: Marx, capital and the body

The first manifestation of the wage form is contained in Marx's crucial distinction between labor and labor power. As early as in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx contended that the crucial importance and enduring contribution of Quesnay's physiocratic doctrine were its recovery of the 'subjective essence of wealth', further noting that with the Physiocrats 'the necessary step forward has been made in revealing the *general nature* of wealth and hence in the raising of *labor* in its total absoluteness (i.e., its abstraction) as the *principle*' (Marx, 2001, pp. 130–1). It prefigured Adam Smith's recognition of the general character of labor as the source of all wealth. What Marx came to realize was that labor, as an abstract category, represented the key to all hitherto human history or active life-processes of the species: 'the entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the creation of man [sic] through human labor' (Marx, 2001, p. 145). The condition of all hitherto human life, the universal condition of life itself, is labor. 'Indeed, labor, *life-activity*, *productive life* itself, appears in the first place merely as a *means* of satisfying a need—the need to maintain physical existence. Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life' (Marx, 2001, p. 113). What distinguishes humans is that their life-activity

is *conscious*, the activity of laboring itself being an object of consciousness.

As every serious reader of Marx knows, the body is everywhere in his writing, both historical and theoretical. Indeed, Marx was particularly attentive to the ways in which capital is inscribed on the bodies and in the flesh of laborers, documenting as he did how long hours of work, unregulated environment, and dangerous working conditions produced tired, diseased, maimed, unhealthy, overworked, stunted and injured bodies. On this basis, Joseph Fracchia has argued that we need to grasp Marx's method by its 'corporeal roots' and recognize that human corporeal organization is the 'first fact' of historical materialism: 'the corporeal capacities that are essential to the making of history and the needs, wants, limits and constraints that establish the outer boundaries of possible human histories' (Fracchia, 2005, pp. 56–7). The physical materiality of the body is the most concrete and irreducible aspect of the human being and constitutes the fundamental premise of historical materialism (Rioux, 2009, pp. 592–601).

Since we are dealing with the Germans, who are devoid of premises, we must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that men [sic] must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history." But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life. (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 47)

Fracchia's important contribution helps us to shed light on Reecia Orzeck's (2007) argument that there are two bodies in historical materialism. The *natural body* refers to our biological and physiological condition. Not only do we have bodily capacities, but also basic, non-negotiable human needs that must be met to survive. The maintenance of our physical integrity indeed passes through our ability to secure the satisfaction of certain foundational human needs. That is not to say that human needs are fixed and unchanging, but simply to point out, following Ian Bruff (2011), that at this level of abstraction the natural body constitutes a 'foundational materialism' positing foundational needs. 'We may admire the power of culture to elevate mind over body,' Joseph Fracchia (2005, p. 51) notes, 'but we should not forget that rejection of food because of cultural taboos will ultimately lead to the pyrrhic victory of the body over mind — death.' This, in a nutshell, is Marx's devastating critique of idealism and anti-foundationalism.

The importance of the natural body lies precisely in its foundational, transhistorical character. It constitutes the unwavering 'opening', the scene upon which the acts and daily performances of social life are played. And it suggests, too, that not everything is reducible to a social or discursive construction, and that the plasticity of identity is itself dependent upon the very existence of a body made of bones, flesh, organs, blood, muscles, sinews and nerves. At

that level of abstraction, people are biologically determined by life-requirements. It is only by recognizing the vital importance of the natural body that Marx's second body reveals its existence, namely, the *laboring body* engaged in the social production of material life by metabolizing nature through labor in order to meet human needs and survive. 'The constants of bodily existence', says McNally (2001, p. 7), 'take shape through manifold and pliable forms of social life. This is what it means to describe the human body as an indeterminate constancy; and it's what it means to talk ... about *historical bodies*.' At the most fundamental level, then, Marx's emphasis on the dialectics between bodies and nature through labor is already a theory of body formation. For while it recognizes that the very existence of the species is determined by biology, it also argues that the ways in which people meet their needs are socially produced.

In the opening pages of the *Grundrisse*, Marx argues that production—or, for that matter, labor—is a general abstraction, which, while being the proper starting point of historical analysis, hardly tells us anything about its specific determinations. As a historically specific epoch or mode of production, capitalism represents a dynamic stabilization of certain determinations that are unique to this form of social organization, and which produce bodies in historically specific ways. Central to the capitalist mode of production is the commodification of labor power. For David Harvey (1998), the need to sell one's capacity to labor posits at the outset the body as an 'unfinished project', rather than a closed and sealed entity. Implicit in Marx's concept of variable capital, Harvey argues, is a theory of body formation. As he notes:

the creation of unemployment through downsizing, the redefinitions of skills and remunerations for skills, the intensification of labor processes and of autocratic systems of surveillance, the increasing despotism of orchestrated detailed divisions of labor, the insertion of immigrants.... and the coerced competitive struggle between different bodily practices and modes of valuation achieved under different historical and cultural conditions, all contribute to the uneven geographical valuation of laborers as persons. (Harvey, 1998, p. 410)

The circulation of variable capital in time and space is therefore intimately linked to the dynamics of capital accumulation, and to the existence (or not) of institutions capable of mediating the worst effects of labor market dynamics. For Harvey, the differentiated valuation of labor power and bodily practices must be understood through the uneven geographical development of capital and the shifts that it registers in the (de)valuation of labor power. As Orzeck argues, building on Harvey (2006) and Neil Smith (2008):

Insofar as both uneven development and the division of labour are essential features of the capitalist mode of production, then, the social differentiation between bodies is equally essential. And, insofar as socially differentiated bodies perform different types of concrete labour, and occupy different locations in the nexus of social relations, their corporeal differentiation is inevitable. (Orzeck, 2007, p. 503)

In short, the uneven historical geography of low-income jobs, poor working conditions, economic downturns, market insecurity, deindustrialization, skills and (un)employment are many manifestations of the ways in which capital shapes the body.

But while the purchase and sale of labor power on the market has important implications for the way in which people survive, it presupposes the existence of a class of workers without access to their means of subsistence and means of production and with nothing to sell but their labor power. 'To put it more viscerally, capitalism's emergence and perpetuation is founded upon transhistorical human needs that must be satisfied in order to survive, and this manifests itself on an everyday basis in the compulsion to sell our bodies on the labour market in order to live' (Bruff, 2013, p. 68). As Bruff suggests, capitalist exploitation is premised upon the historical separation of people from their means of subsistence and their dependence upon the market for survival. But contrary to Adam Smith who saw the development of capitalism as the peaceful removal of barriers to trade, Marx documented the extent to which Smith's 'so-called' primitive accumulation erased capital's violent origins. Marx painted a bloodier canvas, documenting how theft and the fraudulent appropriation of common lands, the corporal disciplining of a nascent proletariat, and the horrors of slavery, colonialism and imperialism were invoked in the process, effectively attending to the corporal nature of capital's emergence, which 'comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt' (Marx, 1990, p. 926; see also: Perelman, 2000; Federici, 2004). Arguably, these processes of violent uprooting and their ongoing developments (Commoner, 2001; De Angelis, 2004; Harvey, 2005, pp. 137–82) have powerful shaping effects on people's bodies, identities, and overall sense of self and security.

Fetishism of the wage form 2: reconceptualizing the laboring body

The second manifestation of the wage form emerges out of a comprehensive critique of the first and its narrow conception of labor, which in turn informs its limited notion of social reproduction. Of interest here is that Marx's critique of political economy remains *within* the production-centered framework of classical political economy. This is reproduced in *The German Ideology* as Marx and Engels put forward the foundation to their materialist conception of history. Essentially, they contend, all hitherto history is simultaneously composed of three 'moments': (1) the production of material life; (2) the production of new needs; and (3) the production of human beings. What becomes increasingly clear, however, is the extent to which the third 'moment' soon falls outside historical analysis, conceived of as 'history of industry and exchange'. The family is thus excluded from it on the basis that it represents a 'sheep-like or tribal consciousness' whose *natural* sexual division of labor is derived from its dormant state. The history of humankind, and the rise of a consciousness capable of emancipating itself, thus finds its origin in the *social* division of labor in production (Marx & Engels, 1998, pp. 47–51; Mies, 1994, pp. 49–52).

In the *Grundrisse*, the exclusion of reproductive activities from conscious, socially mediated life-activity is fully embraced.

Starting from material production, Marx argues that 'production is the point of departure and, accordingly, predominates not only over itself ... but over the other moments [distribution, exchange and consumption] as well. The process always returns to production to begin anew' (Marx, 1993, pp. 99–100). It follows that individual consumption and the creation of new needs are functions of the productive process: 'As soon as consumption emerges from its initial state of natural crudity and immediacy – and, if it remained at that stage, this would be because production itself had been arrested there – it becomes itself mediated as a drive by the object' (Marx, 1993, p. 92). The one-sidedness of this relation is revealed even more boldly as Marx contends that 'the concluding act, consumption, which is conceived not only as a terminal point but also as an end-in-itself, actually belongs outside economics except in so far as it reacts in turn upon the point of departure and initiates the whole process anew' (Marx, 1993, p. 89). It is because Marx conceives of *social* production as determining the myriad social relations surrounding the act of *natural* consumption that, like his bourgeois fellows, he can so confidently strip off the latter from its subjectivity, that is from its active, conscious contribution.

The same logic operates in *Capital*, Volume 1 as Marx argues that 'every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction' (Marx, 1990, p. 711), further noting that while 'The maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital', 'the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker's drives for self-preservation and propagation' (Marx, 1990, p. 718). Even though Marx, like his predecessors, understood the centrality of the cost of human reproduction for capital accumulation (Bakker & Silvey, 2008; Bezanson, 2006a; Picchio, 1992), he also tended toward the naturalization of (especially women's) reproductive labor and activities, thus portraying them as ahistorical, unconscious life-activity (Mies, 1994).

From the 1844 *Manuscripts* ('the productive life is life-engendering life') to *Capital* ('production is at the same time reproduction'), Marx continuously relies on an autonomous and self-reproducing sphere of production by which is maintained the bourgeois myth of the male self-birth (McNally, 2001, p. 12). In other words, while Marx saw the *social* character of commodity production, he proved unable to go beyond what he perceived as the *natural* labor involved in the daily and generational reproduction of the working population, thus dramatically narrowing the material foundations of social life. Because consumption is taken for granted, the conditions of production, or capitalist class relations, are also the conditions of reproduction of the whole system (Marx, 1990, p. 711). As such, Marx's conception of social reproduction is uniquely rooted in the sphere of production (Mitchell, Marston, & Katz, 2003, pp. 419–29), a conception also adopted by many socialist feminists (Edholm, Harris, & Young, 1978, p. 105; Himmelweit, 1991, p. 198).

Emerging out of the Marxist feminist literature and the domestic labor debate of the 1960s and 1970s, SRT is rooted in a growing dissatisfaction with explanations of women's oppression either through the functionalism typical of traditional Marxism's tunnel vision or through dual systems theory and its conception of capitalism and patriarchy as distinct systems with their own specific logics (Beechey, 1987; Laslett &

Brenner, 1989; Maroney & Luxton, 1987; Secombe, 1993, 1995; Smith, 2004).¹ This required coming back to the very foundations of historical materialism as a method of analysis premised upon the view that 'the ways people co-operate to provide for their daily and future needs, combined with the techniques and materials at their disposal, establish the framework within which all human activity takes place' (Pat and Hugh Armstrong, cited in Ferguson, 1999, p. 4). At the core of this approach, then, is a radical broadening of the concept of labor itself, which feminist geographers Katharyne Mitchell, Sallie A. Marston and Cindi Katz aptly refer to as 'life's work' (2003).

Value-producing labor, social reproductionists argue, while central to 'the ways people co-operate to provide for their daily and future needs', is a necessary yet insufficient condition of historical analysis. Also necessary is 'the daily and generational reproduction of the commodity labour power and the social processes and human relations associated with the creation and maintenance of the communities upon which all production and exchange rests' (Bakker, 2002, p. 16). Thus, while accepting the concealment of the division of the working day into necessary labor and surplus labor, SRT goes further, arguing that it also conceals a whole cluster of social relations essential to the maintenance and reproduction of life itself, which constitutes the second manifestation of the fetishism of the wage form. By emphasizing the importance of the daily and generational production and reproduction of labor power, SRT in fact recovers what is 'a defining historical feature of capitalism: the separation of production from consumption (or reproduction)' (Ferguson, 1999, p. 4). Marx's otherwise powerful distinction between labor and labor power 'overlooks that domestic production, the other half of the proletarian condition, which the wage both underwrites and conceals. For the household, too, is a 'hidden abode' obscured by the deceptive appearance of capitalist relations' (Secombe, 1993, pp. 7–8). By challenging Marx's narrow concept of labor, SRT reconstitutes *de facto* and *in toto* the material foundations—and therefore conceptual realm—of social reproduction, now repositioned as the *total social process* pertaining to both productive and reproductive activities.

One of the main outcomes of SRT is its ability to offer a trenchant critique of the reified nature of 'the economy' as reducible to states and markets (Bakker & Silvey, 2008). Instead, social reproductionists argue for a broader notion encompassing the totality of social and material activities and processes underwriting the ways people co-operate to meet human needs. Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill aptly refer to this broadening of 'the social' as a feminist historical materialist ontology. This 'social ontology', they argue, posits 'an historical and human process, a process that involves human agency in the creation of the institutions and structures of social life in a given period' (Bakker & Gill, 2003, pp. 19–23). Moreover, and building upon this broader conception of social/material life, Bakker and Gill (2003, p. 19) have made an important distinction between work and labor. As the latter two point out: while work 'broadly mediates relations between social and natural orders and combines the theoretical and practical activity of human beings in an understanding of movement and change', labor 'is a particular aspect of work which in a capitalist social formation is that part which is appropriated and controlled by capital in the labor-capital relation'. (In the context of this paper, however, I

prefer the terms labor and labor power, largely because they identify clearly what is specific about capitalist social relations, i.e. the commodification of labor power.) Again, and contrary to Marx, in arguing that both paid employment and unpaid domestic labor 'are part of the same socio-economic process' of household livelihood (Luxton, 2006, p. 37), SRT effectively argues that reproductive labor is conscious life-activity.

It is on the basis of this broad conception of labor that feminist Marxists have sought to conceptualize women's oppression. Iris Marion Young's call for a thoroughly FHM or Lise Vogel's challenging plea for a unitary Marxist theory encapsulates the willingness to develop a theoretical framework that simultaneously preserves Marx's insights while overcoming his inability to address women's oppression (Vogel, 1987; Young, 1980).

It is not biology *per se* that dictates women's oppression; but rather, capital's dependence upon biological processes specific to women – pregnancy, childbirth, lactation – to secure the reproduction of the working-class. It is this that induces capital and its state to control and regulate female reproduction and which impels them to reinforce a male-dominant gender-order. And this social fact, connected to biological difference, comprises the foundation upon which women's oppression is organized in capitalist society. (Ferguson & McNally, 2013, p. xxix)

Does this provide a fully reconstructed theory of women's oppression? The obvious response is 'no'. But as Vogel (1987, p. 138) puts it, 'it is necessary to establish these material foundations...[as] the indispensable basis for further work.' Of course, experiences vary enormously across and within societies in terms of how reproductive labor is conducted, including the specific way in which households, communities and states are mobilized. Because biological processes are inherently historical, the analysis and explanation of women's oppression demands that we interrogate social relations and institutional practices underpinning specific gender relations. However, with McNally (2001, p. 12) social reproductionists would 'insist that a reinstatement of the body within critical theory must begin with the maternal body—understood in both its biological and social senses—as the body which subverts the myth of male autonomy by exposing its dependence on another and its relation to social labor.'

Moreover, in stressing both the importance of the commodification of labor power and its daily and generational reproduction, social reproductionists not only argue that gender and class are constitutive of the link between the production of life and the production of the means of life; they further maintain that there is a fundamental contradiction between capital accumulation and progressive (let alone stable) conditions of social reproduction of the laboring population (Bezanson, 2006a; Katz, 2001, p. 711; Luxton, 2006, pp. 35–40; Picchio, 1992; Rioux, *in press*; Strauss, 2013). And while SRT insists on the determining role of the formal economy in asserting the mandate over the process of social reproduction as a whole, it also stresses that households are not mere functional units geared towards the dictate of capital accumulation.

Unlike the market, however, households are oriented to fulfilling human need—a mandate antithetical to capital

accumulation. As a result, households are not purely functional units but are themselves the source of a distinct set of dynamics put in motion by the impulse to meet the human needs of social reproduction—that is, the human need to reproduce daily and, in the case of households with children, generationally. (Ferguson, 1999, pp. 6–7)

This fundamental contradiction has important consequences for the ways in which we problematize social change and development. For instance, Laslett and Brenner (1989, p. 385) have showed how families are not 'passive agents of sociohistorical transformations but...actors consciously working toward their own goals.' Because they make key decisions (e.g. number of children, timing of marriage, distribution of its labor force outside and within the household, caring for the elderly), family strategies have real social, demographic and economic consequences for society.

Similarly, Sallie A. Marston's (2000) study of domestic feminism in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century US suggests that women's political activism, rooted as it was in a discourse of domesticity and maternalism, was central not only to the emergence of the modern state with new responsibilities, but also to the stabilization of new identities. Marston's argument thus reinforces Laslett and Brenner's view that households shape, and are shaped by, states and markets, and that the scale of the body and the scale of the household are actively engaged in the production of space and scaled social processes (see also: Brenner & Laslett, 1991). It follows that Harvey's discussion about the circulation of variable capital is heavily underwritten by family choices and strategies of reproduction, which, while connected to the formal economy in important ways, are also determined by other concerns. Choices over rent, housing, public transport, car ownership, daycare, neighborhood and schools, for example, are mediated by considerations to meet human needs, themselves informed by the specific history and biography of the different members of the household.

Marston's emphasis on the role of social reproduction as scale-making, when combined with Neil Smith's conception of 'scale as the geographical resolution of contradictory social processes of competition and cooperation' (Smith, 1992, p. 64), is particularly insightful in probing the dynamics of body formation under neoliberalism. The latter, Cindi Katz (2001, p. 709; see also: Bakker & Silvey, 2008) argues, can be described as 'vagabond capitalism' because of the ways in which 'an increasingly global capitalist production can shuck many of its particular commitments to place, most centrally those associated with social reproduction.' In this respect, Erik Swyngedouw's (2000, p. 70) conceptualization of neoliberalism in terms of a 'double rearticulation of political scales' (downward, upward/outward) is helpful. On the one hand, it is a scaling upward and outward of governance through global institutions (e.g. WTO, IMF, World Bank) geared towards liberalization and the management of trade, investment and scalar processes of uneven development through international agreements, restrictive fiscal policies and the legal dismantling of the Keynesian macroeconomics institutional heritage (Brenner, 1998, 1999; Smith, 1995; Swyngedouw, 1997, 2000). On the other hand, in the context of budget balancing, social cuts and regressive fiscal policies, it is a scaling downward of state responsibilities through the rescaling of the national form of territorial organization,

either through the reintroduction of forms of competition and flexibility among cities, urban areas and regions to recapture flows of capital amidst heightened geopolitical competition, or through the legal dismantling of the institutions of the welfare state, the privatization of social services, and labor market restructuring (Mitchell et al., 2003, pp. 429–433).

These transformations have had important impacts on dynamics of social reproduction. Drawing on the work of Brigitte Young, Bakker (2003, pp. 76–80) has identified four dimensions supporting a rising neoliberal gender order. First, the reprivatization of reproduction and the downloading of the costs of social reproduction onto individuals, and leading either to the rise of (especially women's) domestic labor and responsibilities or to greater economic constraints for households hiring reproductive services in the formal economy (Bezanson, 2006b). Second, the decline of the family wage model as a result of growing labor market insecurity, unstable employment and declining real wages, especially for men, leading to the feminization of the workforce, including the normalization of substandard working conditions, the casualization of work, low-wage jobs and precarious employment (Cobble, 2007; Vosko, 2011; Vosko, MacDonald, & Campbell, 2009). Third, and as a result, the spatial boundaries delimiting the public from the private and production from reproduction are increasingly overlapping, with homework, for example, constituting an important family strategy to weather the neoliberal economic storm. And, finally, increasing polarization among women within and between states, informing global trends towards both the feminization of poverty and transnational migrations. The combined effects of these transformations have informed a dual process of both gender erosion and intensification (Bakker, 1996).

As capital restructures spaces of accumulation and stabilizes around new geographical scales, it not only reconfigures power relations but also produces new forms of consumption and reproduction, which crystallize around the production of new identities and sense of self (Smith, 1992). According to Bakker and Gill (2003, p. 33), the neoliberal period has marked an important reconstitution of the self.

This subject or person is his/her own proprietor (of his/her person/body and capacities) and does not owe society, and vice versa. By implication a possessive individualist program of reform for society would involve a minimum or no socialization of risk at the level of the individual or the community in so far as it entails the private self-regulation of both production and civil society and the limited competence of the state.

In stressing the extent to which the neoliberal subject comes to consciously produce and reproduce forms of control over itself, Bakker and Gill emphasize the central importance of the role of ideas and cultural norms in body formation. The dynamic repositioning of the self in relation to shifting structures of accumulation and social reproduction demonstrate the complex determinations underpinning body politics and identity.

As this brief discussion suggests, the laboring body is located at the nexus of states, markets and households, embodying neoliberalism (Guthman & DuPuis, 2006) and contesting the fundamental contradiction between capital

accumulation and progressive forms of social reproduction. This further means that crises of social reproduction are also crises of the body.

Fetishism of the wage form 3: embodied labor power

The third manifestation of the fetishism of the wage form arises from the tendency to reduce labor power to an abstract economic unit, which in turn promotes a dual systems approach whereby race, gender and sexuality are conceptualized as externally related to capitalist social relations. At best they are 'added' to an otherwise 'pure' conception of capitalism; at worst they are portrayed as distinct systems with their own respective logic. In both cases, however, they are ultimately *explained by* a more fundamental experience of class, rather than being integral to it. These ideal-typical constructions dismember lived experiences into discrete, reified analytical categories. If we are to avoid the pitfalls of functionalism and economism, then race, gender, sexuality and class must be present at the very beginning through a conception of social reality as a single matrix of mutually-mediating social relations (Camfield, in press).

It is useful to consider briefly the work of Ellen Meiksins Wood, which is illustrative of the tendency to erase the physical materiality of the laboring body. Capitalism, Meiksins Wood argues, 'is uniquely indifferent to the social identities of the people it exploits...as capital strives to absorb people into the labour market and to reduce them to interchangeable units of labour abstracted from any specific identity.' By referring to gender and race as extra-economic goods, Meiksins Wood opposes a notion of class as analytically tied to the sphere of production against a conceptualization of gender and race as originating from the sphere of circulation and therefore external to labor exploitation. Meiksins Wood does not deny that capital can 'use' particular social oppressions, yet insists that 'capitalist exploitation can *in principle* be conducted without any consideration for colour, race, creed, gender, any dependence upon extra-economic inequality or difference' (Meiksins Wood, 1995, pp. 266–7, my emphasis). In short, 'class is constitutive of capitalism in a way that race is not' (Meiksins Wood, 2009). The theoretical and political implications of this approach are, of course, all too familiar. Meiksins Wood's ahistorical treatment of class as existing outside of gender, sexual and racial oppression effectively creates a hierarchy of lived experiences giving an ontological status to class politics over struggles against gender oppression or racism in the battle for human emancipation. While her argument that these struggles should not be detached from class struggle is an important one, Meiksins Wood's economic approach to capitalism reproduces the very fragmentation of 'the social' she criticizes. Indeed, by maintaining a sharp analytical distinction between class as an economic category and gender and race as extra-economic ones, Meiksins Wood undermines her own call for unity by subordinating struggles against gender oppression and racism to anti-capitalist struggle.

Adolph Reed Jr has convincingly argued that the ideal-typical and either/or nature of this framework tends to yield a radically impoverished history. As Reed puts it, the problem is not so much Meiksins Wood's formalistic definition of capitalism 'as a distillation of features shared by all social orders reasonably characterizable as capitalist [...] [than] that its disregard for

historical specificity forces us away from the domain where race and class actually emerge and interact mutually as concrete social relations' (2009, p. 29). Meiksins Wood's notion of capitalism is a form of idealism; as it descends from heaven to earth, her conception remains unchanged, forcing its fixed categories onto history and in abstraction from lived realities and experiences. It constitutes a rupture in the dialectical movement of concept formation, grasping definitionally what is transient, and choreographing history according to an abstract developmental logic impervious to social change. As Ralph Ellison (2001, p. 3) wrote in *Invisible Man*:

I am an invisible man. ... I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. ... That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.

It is precisely Meiksins Wood's inner, theoretical eyes and the 'pure' definition of capitalism that they promote which render invisible vast swaths of social practices and experiences. The result is a clear shift towards Marxist economics, which signals the failure to uphold Marx's commitment to defetishization.

As a way out of this conundrum, I begin from Ferguson's powerful insight that because biology matters, 'the *type* of laboring body (eg., the concrete particularity of bodies) is critically significant to underwriting the experience of gender [and race] in a capitalist world' (2008, p. 50). Combined with Himani Bannerji's understanding of Marx's method as a dialectical process of consciousness-raising intervention into reality, this approach offers a strong solvent against idealistic conceptualization of capitalism.

In every social space there is a normalized and experiential as well as ideological knowledge about whose labor counts the least. The actual realization process of capital cannot be outside a given social and cultural form or mode. There is no capital that is a universal abstraction. Capital is always a practice, a determinate set of social relations and a cultural one at that. Thus "race," gender, and patriarchy are inseparable from class, as any social organization rests on inter-subjective relations of bodies and minds marked with socially constructed difference on the terrain of private property and capital. (Bannerji, 2005, p. 149)

For Bannerji, it is axiomatic that nobody experiences life 'intersectionally'; the real difficulty is to capture in thought social relations that are always already transient and fluid. Yet, by inviting us to contemplate the concrete, embodied nature of capital, Bannerji demonstrates the social and historical problems associated with the reduction of labor exploitation to an abstract, economic category.

In contrast, Bannerji reminds us that capital is no more a 'universal abstraction' than history is lived 'in principle'. Capital is a concrete practice, which is always already saturated by

historically and geographically specific social relations of power and exploitation, which demonstrate the difficulties associated with reducing the concept of labor power to an abstract economic unit. True, Marx identified the commodification of labor power as both the most distinguishing feature of capitalism and the source of surplus value. But it does not constitute a concrete, historically determined category. No more than the concepts developed in Marx's *Capital* form a blueprint rigidly applicable to historical analysis. The commodity labor power is not a disembodied category existing independently of the concrete physical properties of the body it inhabits. 'We mean by labour-power, or labour-capacity, the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he [sic] sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind' (Marx, 1990, p. 270). Labor power is not an abstract 'thing'; rather it is a socially mediated aggregate of corporal capabilities embedded in, and accomplished by, a laboring body with concrete particularities. Workers do not leave the color of their skin, their accent, citizenship status, religious beliefs, sexuality or gender at the door when entering 'the hidden abode of production'; rather the value of their labor power is already determined by a complex unity of differences producing them as historically specific subjects confined to specific spaces, workplaces, social roles and civic orders.

The corporal nature of the commodity labor power defines its uniqueness. The ability of capacity to work is always specific to the body it inhabits (e.g. old, unskilled, illiterate, sick, disabled). By affirming the physical materiality and biological processes of the laboring body, feminist Marxists begin with what has long been forgotten, diminished and denigrated within bourgeois thought (McNally, 2001). In relation to the third manifestation of the fetishism of the wage form, however, it also means a rejection of the commodity labor power as an abstract economic unit, disembodied from workers' lived reality. The 'third cut' to the fetishism of the wage form thus suggests the *double character of labor power*, according to whether it expresses its capacity to generate a surplus in production or the reality of its differentiated valuation in circulation.

Emphasizing the centrality of the body upholds Reed's conceptualization of race as 'a label attached to a form of presumptively fundamental human differentiation held to be recognizable phenotypically and naturalized through a narrative anchored in biology and common descent' (2009, p. 32). The practices of racial identification, argues Paul C. Taylor (2010, p. 186), 'assign meaning to our appearance and ancestry. They do so directly when we consciously use race-thinking to mediate our interactions. They do so indirectly when stratifying mechanisms, like a history of discriminatory mortgage lending, systematically impact different populations differently.' Such practices inscribe meaning to human bodies by imparting the physical with social significance, and therefore produce racial stratification by ascribing value to appearance, bloodlines and ancestry. As Bruce Baum (2006, p. 40) observes, the invention of the concept of 'race' by Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while rooted in earlier ethnic distinctions, 'constituted a historically novel *naturalizing* of differences between group of people, a "new epistemology of human difference".' In this very sense,

race can be seen, following Bannerji (2005, p. 148), as 'a way—a power-inscribed way—of reading or establishing difference, and finding a long-lasting means for reproducing such readings, organization, and practice.' As a new epistemology of human difference, then, race is read *from*, and inscribes *on*, bodies.

But race is not reducible to skin color and physiognomic attributes. For instance, when French speakers in Canada are told to 'speak white', the plasticity with which the corporal basis of 'whiteness' is repositioned from skin color to language is revealed. Moreover, as Ferguson (2008, p. 52) has argued, although the spatialization of labor is central to gendered social relations through the separation of productive and reproductive activities, it also informs the ways in which race becomes part and parcel of the very definition of the laboring body without reducing it to the color of one's skin (a move that fails to explain, for instance, British discrimination against the Irish). People become racialized insofar as they are *associated* (by skin color, cultural identity, language or accent) with *other* socio-geographic spaces. The 'other', of course, is relative—and determined largely by the historical configuration of geo-political and social relations.

In this respect, Carolina Bank Muñoz's (2008) ethnographic fieldwork in two tortilla factories located in Mexico and the United States documents the extent to which shop floor politics and class exploitation is respectively accomplished through, and inseparable from, gender and immigration factory regimes specifically located in the historical geography of capitalism (Bank Muñoz's, Carolina, 2008). Thus, her study suggests that 'the *location* of our laboring bodies as well as their biophysical attributes are crucially important in determining how individuals and groups take part in the process of social reproduction [broadly defined]' (Ferguson, 2008, p. 51).

Biology matters precisely because power relations and social hierarchies are read from, and imposed upon, socially differentiated bodies whose concrete particularities become the source of their social, political, economic, institutional and cultural exclusion and marginalization. These differences, sanctioned as they are by a corporeally rooted epistemology of human difference, constitute as many barriers that limit the spatiotemporal movement of bodies, control their biological functions and capacities, impose heteronormative identities and practices upon them, and define the value of their labor power. An anti-racist queer feminist materialist approach to body formation rejects both the idealism of postmodern 'signontology' and the abstract, thing-like conceptualization of the commodity labor power of orthodox Marxism. It insists that racial hierarchies, gender orders and heteronormativity are not constructed out of thin air but rather through biological processes, corporal practices and physiognomic attributes that are mobilized as physical markers of differences, and which support an uneven geography of exploitation, oppression and discrimination actively engaged in body formation.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Marxist feminism offers a powerful approach to body formation theory. Building on SRT's key innovations, I have developed this idea further through a constructive critique of three dimensions of the fetishism of the wage form as a way to simultaneously preserve Marx's

materialist conception of history and insights into the specificity of capital, and overcome some of its limits. A feminist historical materialism recognizes that Marx's theoretical work is unfinished, and as such upholds his commitment to defetishization and to the critique of political economy, including the frozen categories of orthodox Marxism. In the context of this argument, however, I have shown that in recovering the centrality of the body for critical social theory, SRT can make an important theoretical, conceptual and methodological contribution to our understanding of the complex processes by which the contradictions of capital are displaced and ultimately embodied in specific ways.

Of course, there is more to say, add, nuance and develop about what is anything but an exploratory paper. For instance, political ecology remains underdeveloped within SRT, even though climate change, resource exhaustion, environmental collapse, and a growing level of environmental toxicity, including food and water contamination, demonstrate the foundational ecological constitution of social reproduction and body formation. In relation to this, a materialist approach to body formation needs to engage with the literature on environmental racism and environmental justice that does talk about the body and environmental problems (Daschuk, 2013; Smith, 2005). While elaborating in full a reconstructed theory of body formation is an important task, it is unfortunately one that exceeds the scope of this paper. But if the materials provided here can bring greater theoretical and conceptual clarity and contribute further to the development of SRT, then the main theoretical goals of this intervention will have been realized.

Yet, coming back to the 'first fact' of historical materialism is not merely a theoretical endeavor, it is also a political act. And if the point is to change the world, then, surely, real human bodies are the necessary starting points. At a time of economic hardship and growing inequalities, on a planet where more than three billion people are living for the most part in poverty and near-poverty, returning to the body as a concrete site for resistance and struggle is a strong reminder of the corporeal nature of how we make our own history.

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Endnote

¹ For a genealogy of SRT, see: Ferguson, 1999; Luxton, 2006; Bakker, 2007; Ferguson & McNally, 2013.

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