

POPULAR  

---

INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 1 / 2021

**RESTRUCTURING REALITY  
– NARRATIVES OF WORK  
AND IDENTITY**

**Saara Mahbouda**

Independent researcher, Helsinki, Finland

# RESTRUCTURING REALITY – NARRATIVES OF WORK AND IDENTITY

**Saara Mahbouda**

## **Abstract**

Reality TV and the cultural industry exist at the forefront of the performative, attention economy. Examining the prevailing narratives of these two fields in comparison with their structural realities, highlights the power of narrative in shaping contemporary conditions of labor. Further, situating these fields within the context of two significant historical transformations of labor— primitive accumulation and the transition to biocapitalism— establishes how longstanding cultural narratives around difference and the needs of the market come together to shape the lives of individuals and the collective. This text situates the stories that have been told about labor— what counts as work, who should perform certain kinds of work, and which work is valuable— into the historical context of racialized and feminized labor. It examines how perceived divisions and definitions of work affect the organization and remuneration of labor, allowing for the widespread exploitation of precarized and feminized labor.

## **Keywords**

Biolabor, Feminized Labor, Exterritorialized Labor, Labor Division, Hypernarrativity, Performativity, Reality TV.

## **1. Introduction**

The number one lesson to learn from watching Reality TV is, deny, deny, deny baby. And if that doesn't work, deflect, deflect, deflect. In the world of RTV, every minutia of expression, conflict, or triumph is caught on camera, played back and analyzed over and over again. With such an abundance of accessible, recorded data, one might think 'returning to the facts' would be modus operandi for solving conflicts, proving points, or catching people in the act. In the world of hyper documentation, however, the exact opposite is true. In RTV, the truth no longer really exists. Rather, the overwhelming quantity of footage leads to such an overload of information that the final word is had by whatever storyline stands out the strongest. Whoever argues most vehemently, cries the most convincingly, or most stubbornly repeats a lie on camera, comes out as the truth teller of that episode, season, or lifetime.

For those who don't watch RTV, one can imagine it as a plot point in a bad legal show: an old school mobster is accused of tax evasion and his defense team is compelled by the judge to hand over all relevant accounting information. Suddenly, the prosecution finds themselves with a truckload of paperwork on their driveway. Somewhere in there, the truth might be buried, but who has the time to find it before trial? In TV-land, people are always better off spending their time constructing a convincing story than digging through the past for something as flimsy

as facts. At the end of the day, cold hard proof isn't any more powerful than the hint of a suggestion, if it takes the right tone.

To look at a more specific example of this rule in play, one can turn to Season 7 of Bravo's RTV series "*Below Deck*". The show follows the crew of a luxury charter yacht, living together confined on a boat for months at a time, working long hours serving the rude and demanding nouveau riche. Typically, one comes to learn, the interior staff (stewardesses) are young, hegemonically attractive blond white women, and the exterior deck crew are muscular boating bros. A culture of ubiquitous boat romances and excessive alcohol consumption leaks into the workplace hierarchy, creating a dramatic and frequently problematic environment. Season 7 reached RTV notoriety through the toxic masculinity that ran rampant onboard, leading to a widespread fan call out on social media. Throughout the season, male members of the deck crew used incredibly derogatory language towards the women onboard, undermined their work, physically intimidated, and sexually harassed them. The breaking point came towards the end of the season on a night out, when the black-out drunk bosun, Ashton Pienaar, forcefully grabbed the chief stewardess, Kate Chastain's, face and kissed her against her will (for the second time that season), and then later that night screamed and physically intimidated her in a taxi and punched the window.

All of this was addressed in that season's reunion show, a staple structure of the RTV genre wherein the cast of a show reunites after filming is over to discuss conflicts and review footage from that season. Reunion show hosts preside over these discussions, cast as a mix of authority figure, neutral party, and representative of the audience. On the Bravo network, this figure is typically Andy Cohen, an executive producer and celebrity in his own right.

The actual footage of the gendered violence and more subtle misogyny of the season was played over and over again and the guilty cast members doled out rote apologies lifted from PR handbooks. But as the show progressed, the acknowledgement of clear wrong doing started to get muddled. Minor petty instances of 'bad behavior' by the women onboard, such as the chief stewardess angrily and drunkenly dumping the deck crews' laundry on the ground after being called a derogatory name by one of the men, were amplified by Cohen as equal offenses to the sexism and sexual assault. Another glaring problem was the near omission of the experience of the only Black stewardess, Simone Mashile, in the show's history. The problematic racist and objectifying standards for stewardesses in the industry is openly acknowledged and at points on the show Mashile mentions the difficulty in getting hired by a yacht at all, let alone advancing or being treated with respect. In the reunion, Mashile's experience is given a quick talk over, without race once being explicitly mentioned, and then largely dismissed as her just not being good at her job. While the overall experience of the women facing sexism is woefully warped in the

final narrative, Mashile's experience with intersecting gendered and racialized workplace discrimination is almost entirely erased.

By the end of the episode, it seems that the overall narrative Cohen and the producers are trying to build is that nothing *that* bad really happened to anyone, and since there was fault on both sides, can't everyone just get along? The backlash to the reunion episode by fans was intense but by no means universal, and while Cohen issued a weak apology, there was never a strong and unequivocal condemnation of the misogyny of the season or the show's handling of it, even though the events in question had been documented and hyper visibilized.

These RTV reunion shows can be representative of how contemporary hyper narrative societies function. The facts might not vanish, they are probably more readily available and visible than ever before, but the reality is, that in a world with an overwhelming quantity of facts, they just don't matter.

A recent New York Times article offers another example, describing the insidious effects of greenwashing on holding big oil accountable for climate change. Writer Bill McKibben points to the culpability of P.R. campaigns and advertising firms "that help provide the rationalizations and the justifications that slow the pace of change."<sup>1</sup> McKibben goes into detail on campaigns by the B.B.D.O. and Universal McCann agencies for Exxon, highlighting the oil company's investment in the green future of algae biofuel. According to these campaigns, algae was a major investment and the focus for the company's future. But before these ads even came out, it had already been proved by numerous companies, and later admitted by Exxon themselves, that algae fuel never had the potential to be a serious fossil fuel alternative or make economic sense. Meanwhile, Exxon continued to lobby and invest in opposing any clean energy initiatives that might slow the production of fossil fuels. Despite the reality, the campaign succeeded in softening the brand's public image, allowing their production processes to continue with less public scrutiny. Society seems to have a problem with prioritizing a good story over reality. But is this problem unique to today?

This is far from the first-time narrative has overtaken reality to the great harm of a great many, despite the facts pointing to an altogether different reality. Perhaps the greatest narrative con projected onto society, which continues to function today, is the great myth of capitalist definitions of labor. The stories that have been told about labor - what counts as work, who should perform what kind work, and which work is valuable- have had untold influence in shaping social and economic structures in deeply violent and detrimental ways. Focusing on a few key points in the history of labor in comparison with contemporary industries that rely heavily on the power of narrative, RTV and the cultural industry, can elucidate how certain narratives about work have shaped the history of labor and social structures and continue to do so today.

## **2. Labor and the Weaponization of Narratives of Difference**

One of the major historical transitions in labor was the process of primitive accumulation. Tracing primitive accumulation through to the development of capitalism as the hegemonic system running much of the world, demonstrates how this system was built on and enabled by, constructed cultural narratives of difference.

Capitalism was built up by controlling the global labor force through assigning constructed narratives to identity groups that justified the exploitation of their labor and pitted them against one another. The complexity of existence in the world was flattened in the hegemonic narrative into easily exploitable identity camps and binaries that contained the entire world population in just a few categories and kept their bodies and labor locked in positions of permanent availability. The work of Silvia Federici and Maria Mies provides a framework for understanding the origins of narratives of “difference” and contributes to a deeper understanding of how difference is used by the market today.

The poor in feudalist Europe, connected to the land and a communal lifestyle, presented a constant source of struggle against the hegemonic class and were a force which had to be broken for a greater accumulation of wealth. By the end of the 15th c. the state was hard at work consolidating its power across social and political life. The bourgeoisie of the cities joined forces with the nobility and crushed the popular revolts and social movements. Serfs were externalized from the land (their source of survival), and from each other, leaving them entirely dependent on the wage. In the 16th and 17th centuries, merchant capitalists were able to take advantage of this cheap and desperate labor force to break the power of artisan guilds in cities. Meanwhile, wealthy landowners could use their new holdings to commercialize agriculture and send more food to market and for export. This accumulation of land, wealth, and tradable goods provided funding and drive for colonization, as part of a search for new markets and resources.<sup>2</sup>

The colonial campaigns consisted of a plunder for resources, land, and labour, presented as a “civilizing mission of the Christian nations.”<sup>3</sup> The enslavement and extermination of indigenous peoples was justified through a campaign of othering meant to dehumanize racialized indigenous peoples as godless and immoral beings.

Defining the aboriginal American populations as cannibals, devil-worshippers, and sodomites supported the fiction that the Conquest was not an unabashed quest for gold and silver but was a converting mission [...] It also removed, in the eyes of the world and possibly of the colonizers themselves, any sanction against the atrocities which they would commit against the “Indians,” thus functioning as a license to kill.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the earliest days of capitalism were built on creating a narrative of the racialized Other in order to justify the theft of resources. Colonists tightened control of the labor pool by way of land expropriation strategies learned at home, with local people forcibly transported to various mines and worksites. Colonial violence was of course not quietly accepted, and colonized peoples revolted in many ways, including the use of narrative as an incitement for resistance:

In Peru, as well, the first large-scale attack on diabolism occurred in the 1560s, coinciding with the rise of the Taki Onqoy movement, a native millenarian movement that preached against collaboration with the Europeans and for a pan-Andean alliance of the local gods (*huacas*) putting an end to colonization. [...] The threat posed by the Taquionqos was a serious one since, by calling for a pan-Andean unification of the *huacas*, the movement marked the beginning of a new sense of identity capable of overcoming the divisions connected with the traditional organization of the *ayullus* (family unit).<sup>5</sup>

Colonized peoples in the Americas reclaimed the narrative of racial unity that had been imposed upon them, and re-configured it into a defensive strategy. The colonial forces countered with an even stronger attack on local religions and culture, and with the creation of gendered social hierarchy to break this new unity. “It was women who most strongly defended the old mode of existence and opposed the new power structure, plausibly because they were the ones who were most negatively affected by it. Women had held a powerful position in pre-Columbian societies.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, multiple intersecting levels of narrative and counter narrative around race and gender were formed in a cultural struggle underlying the literal struggle of colonial violence and indigenous resistance.

Meanwhile, in Europe, the poor’s resistance had been largely broken with the wealth accumulated through plundering the colonies, and the wage was reduced to a minimum. This resulted in extremely poor conditions and widespread death in Europe, which combined with the genocide in the colonies, led to a demographic and labor crisis. This crisis spurred the development of Mercantilism and the assumption that the wealth of nations is proportional to the quantity of laborers available to them, bringing about new narratives of humans as “raw materials, workers and breeders for the state.”<sup>7</sup> In the mid-16th c., enabled by these new narratives, the state increased surveillance of women’s bodies (via attempts to control reproduction and ban contraceptives) and began the horrors of the large-scale African slave trade.

These structural changes were once again justified through dehumanizing racial narratives, with enslaved African peoples assigned tropes of “bestiality” and as existing outside of moral bounds, in order to assign them to a permanent labor role of exploitation, outside of the waged economy. Systems of control were based on violently transplanting a population to a work site, breaking communal structures and ties to the land, and horrific physical violence and large-scale death.

To replenish the pool of the laborers perishing from exploitative work conditions in Europe, new social narratives also had to be constructed at home. “The female body was turned into an instrument for the reproduction of labor and the expansion of the work-force,” “from now on their wombs became public territory, controlled by men and the state.”<sup>8</sup> To achieve this, women’s collective power, knowledge, and social status had to be broken and every aspect of life and personhood redefined. This was achieved through a campaign of cultural denigration, legal infantilization, and the violence of the witch hunts, targeting any forms of sexuality outside the confines of heterosexual marriage, attempts to limit or control reproduction, and any women living independently outside of the direct control of a man. In the new monetary regime, only production for market was defined as valuable, whereas reproduction and care labor, to which women had been limited, were considered valueless and workless, invisibilized and naturalized.

This process of subjugation was enabled by new cultural cannons delineating the difference between women and men, “the main female villain was the disobedient wife, who, together with the ‘scold’, the ‘witch’, and the ‘whore’ was the favorite target of dramatists, popular writers, and moralists.”<sup>9</sup> Women were made out to be an “unreasonable other” during the early days of suppression until resistance was broken. It then became convenient to repaint white European women, collectively, as the chaste, submissive housewife, raising her in status, at the expense of the externalized racialized woman as her counterpart. “While African women were treated as ‘savages’ the women of the white colonizers in their fatherlands ‘rose’ to the status of ‘ladies’, these two processes [...] are not simply historical parallels, but are intrinsically and causally linked within this patriarchal–capitalist mode of production.”<sup>10</sup> As white European men of the upper classes “appropriated land, natural resources and people in Africa, Asia and Central and South America in order to be able to extract raw materials, products and labour power, they began to build up in their fatherlands the patriarchal nuclear family.”<sup>11</sup>

Identity became the definition of every aspect of life and narratives around gendered and racialized identities were re-constructed, based on the need for a constantly replenished and more easily exploitable workforce. By creating distinctions within the subjugated, European men over European women, Europeans over colonized men and women, colonized men over colonized women etc., “it becomes possible to externalize or exterritorialize those whom the new patriarchs wanted to exploit.”<sup>12</sup> Hierarchies of difference were firmly locked into place, ensuring the constant availability of cheap or free labor, enabling the vast accumulation of wealth. The interconnectivity of these systems demonstrates, from the earliest days, how significant the use of narrative can be in constructing and perpetuating power structures that have resulted in centuries of violence and loss.

### 3. Performativity and Narratives of Change

Jump back to today, and there is currently a wide spread reckoning with this history, there are popular protests and uprisings against the after and ongoing effects of these structures. Parallel to the many political struggles, labor movements, feminist, anti-racist, and independence movements that play out via direct actions and protests, are the politics and protests of representation. Struggles over claiming and defining narratives for different groups and protesting the images and representations of otherness that are allowed to dominate the cultural discourse have been ongoing and on a surface level, seem to finally have been heard.

When taken at face value, the interests of the art world and wider world of popular culture, seem in many ways to be diametrically opposed to the colonial ideology of hierarchized difference. One can hardly turn around without running into an art university, curatorial program, exhibition text, or editorial mission statement that does not claim to prioritize decoloniality and intersectional feminism. The consensus seems to be that difference really does matter, and even more than that, it should be centered, highlighted, praised, elevated, and highly visibilized.

Scrolling through the social media pages of major museums in the U.S. such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, Guggenheim, The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Denver Art Museum, LACMA... there is a definitive change in media presence. The work of BIPOC artists is highlighted on every Instagram, websites show a plethora of new exhibitions about otherness, and every museum has released some kind of statement committing to access, diversity, inclusion and equity.

But the reality underneath this spectacle of acceptance doesn't seem to match. The Instagram account *Change the Museum*, a page “pressuring US museums to move beyond lip service proclamation by amplifying tales of unchecked racism”<sup>13</sup> and *For The Culture*, “a coalition of current/former Black and Brown employees and allies united together to call out systemic racism in cultural institutions”<sup>14</sup> offer the public copious evidence of the performativity of these gestures. Posts by employees from the above named museums describe numerous instances in which their advancement in the field has been blocked in favor of white hires, race based discrepancies in pay, blatantly racist comments that have been reported to museum structures and ignored, the prevalence of BIPOC employees restricted to the lowest paying positions as museum guards and maintenance crews with this staff also being the first to be fired (particularly relevant in the time of pandemic with museums laying off huge numbers of front line workers rather than making pay cuts at the highest tiers or deacquisitioning), countless descriptions of racism and cultural ignorance in exhibition texts and displays of problematic art works even after official complaints were made by staff members. The racism also extends to the experience of museum visitors, as stories are chronicled of outreach focused only on white wealthy audiences while ignoring or actively discouraging



BIPOC residents from local communities to visit, and youth education and outreach programs treating BIPOC youth as security threats. The list goes on and on.

When comparing the public narrative put on by these culture institutions with the day-to-day realities of their neocolonial cultural models, it becomes pretty clear that there is a marketing strategy of co-opting resistance movements into a salable product. The market has after all found a use for protest and calls for change, recuperating them into a trend that extends far beyond cultural institutions. Social influencers make their names off of superficial demonstrations of wokeness and major corporations have joined in, virtue-signalling wholeheartedly, while doing little to nothing to change their own problematic structures.

But the thing is, this process has happened many times before. In her article *The God of Big Trends*, Noy Thrupkaew writes about the publishing world in the 90s when “Color had become a marketing boon. Interviewers probed into a writer’s upbringing, seeking out ethnic factoids for a voracious public,” and again in the early 2000s when “bookstores would create pretty displays of books by authors of a ‘hot’ ethnicity.”<sup>15</sup>

The problem with important issues becoming trend, is that while there can be noticeable short-term change in the center, trends tend to slip away quickly, without leaving anything meaningful behind, only to come back again in ten or twenty years to complete the same cycle of tokenized surface level initiatives. Thrupkaew addresses this point too:

Literary trends can be good for women writers of color. At least more voices are finding their way onto the store shelves; one can’t protest the fact that Americans are expanding their reading horizons, or that female authors of color are receiving much deserved attention [...] Still, it’s hard to balance those sweet and sour sensations each time the next ethnic girl wonder stakes it big with her book. Happiness over her success is often marred by the onslaught of exoticized marketing. After a while, ethnicity seems as much as a commodity as anything else.<sup>16</sup>

Even when narratives center marginalized or Othered people, they don’t necessarily do anything to rectify geographic, racialized, gendered, classed, or any other identity based social and labor divisions. At times, they can serve to further entrench these systems, as they are made into tokenized “success stories,” and used to argue that the system couldn’t possibly be rooted in identity-based exploitation when these individuals have made it to the top. This system is built on capitalizing on a few tokenized performances of difference, meaning the vast majority, or the “group” can never win. While the messaging might be the exact opposite of what it once was, it doesn’t really mean anything has changed.

But this too seems confusing. How can there be a widespread fetishization of otherness, while the colonial system of externalizing and denigrating marginalized groups is still intact? How can the underlying structure support the exact opposite of the values promoted by popular language? Looking at another major turning point in the history of labor can explain some of the disconnect between proclaimed narrative and structural reality.

#### **4. Restructuring Labor and Identity**

The 60s and 70s, were a time of major transformation with the advent of biocapitalism and neoliberalism. This period marks a departure from the rigid identity and geopolitically defined labor roles established by primitive accumulation, into something more insidious.

The 1960s was an era of a rise in working class power and demands, and this time, the labor revolt was very nearly global. In capitalist countries at the center, workers revolted against the conditions and remuneration of factory work. Student movements demanded more flexibility and freedom, and greater valuation of the types of labor that capitalism had marked as “non-work,” or existed outside of the waged production economy. Feminist and racial equality movements demanded equal treatment under the law and access to employment. In the ex-territorialized regions, “Decades of revolutionary struggle from the Chinese Revolution to Vietnam and from the Cuban Revolution to the numerous liberations struggles throughout Latin America, Africa, and the Arab world had pushed forward a proletarian wage demand that various socialist and/or nationalist reformist regimes had to satisfy and that directly destabilized the international economic system.”<sup>17</sup>

The simultaneity and accumulation of workers’ struggles in the dominant capitalist countries and anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles in exploited countries led to global economic destabilization, as they “undermined the capitalist strategy that had long relied on the hierarchies of the international divisions of labor to block any global unity among workers.”<sup>18</sup> The imperialism of the past hundred years meant that nearly the entire globe was subject in some way to capitalism and made it impossible to shift the greater burden of exploitation and exteriorialize the struggle as had been done up until this point.

The social struggles “forced a change in the quality and nature of labor itself.”<sup>19</sup> By applying pressure to the capitalist and forcing change, “the proletariat actually invents the social and productive forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future.”<sup>20</sup> No longer able to explicitly enforce control through colonial, imperialist violence and abject defamations of difference, capitalism was forced to adjust labor structures, or at least the narratives around why the structures are the way they are. Within the labor pool, people could no longer overtly be assigned to unpaid reproductive work or enslaved for manual labor based on gender and race.

The other major impetus for change was the development of new technologies that caused a transition in production from Fordist assembly lines, to a post-Fordist system wherein the traditional factory is replaced by a far-flung global network of “subcontracting productive chains, marked by cooperation and/or hierarchy.”<sup>21</sup>

In this new system, the value of a product is no longer necessarily inherent in that object but more than ever can be found in intangible relational networks around it, like brand names, market fluctuations etc. As a result, capitalism pivoted to valuing relational and knowledge-based labor over production-based labor, building up more visibility, higher remuneration, and social value in this area.

The new predominant form of labor developing from these technological, political, and social changes can be termed biolabor, defined by Cristina Morini and Andrea Fumagalli as the “use of the relational, emotional and cognitive faculties of human beings” and often resulting in immaterial products, goods, or services.<sup>22</sup> Workers are no longer expected to function as machines, but to self-engage with work, they should incorporate every aspect of their social beings, their feelings, desires, fantasies are the grounding sites of their value. With biolabor, all of life has been put to work. Labor has shifted to evaluate every aspect of a person’s identity, experience, and being, as part of their value as a laborer. Emotional labor and the ability to relate to and appeal to others becomes central. Biolabor refers to a labor market in which it is no longer simply the amount of time a laborer spends working or their training for one specific skill that is valuable, “but rather subjectivity itself, in its experiential, relational, creative dimensions” that is exchanged.<sup>23</sup>

With biolabor, there is little to no delineation between the time spent working or time spent “living.” Similarly, work is not limited by a location, such as an office or factory floor, but can occur anywhere. There is no longer any separation between production and reproduction, circulation, consumption, and self-expression or social communication. The commodification of subjectivity results in a global imbalance wherein, “the value produced by labor structurally exceeds its monetary retribution.”<sup>24</sup>

But to understand how this change in valuing one type of work over another morphed into subsuming all of life into value production and how narratives around identity play into that, it is helpful to look more specifically at one of the widespread social movements that brought about these changes. Mariarosa Dalla Costa’s writings on the wave of feminist struggles in the 1970s and the capitalist response, visibilize how the interplay of narrative and readjustment of labor roles can be used to avoid making substantial change, while still appearing to do so.

The 1970s saw a new organization of production and society, with women working outside of the home in larger numbers than before. The new labor market’s interest in more flexible and mobile labor power worked with the increasing unwillingness of women to accept the

burden of unwaged reproductive and care work. As women left the home to work in the waged market, the figure of the housewife, forged through bloody witch hunts, receded, but the labor she had been made responsible for did not magically vanish, it simply shifted in visibility, and distribution. The outcome of these struggles was largely the “compromise” of precarious employment for all, with capital expanding its pool of labor to include low-wage work for all, rather than a true emancipation from the wage and capital for everyone. This crucial pivot away from uniformly equating identity to labor role opened up a new level of individualization, that elevated the living standards of some, at the expense of the continued exploitation of the many.

This redistribution of reproductive and care labor followed several avenues but resulted primarily in an externalized market of care. The externalization of the home encompasses a broad range of sectors and professions from food service, sex, custodial, mental health, and social workers, to the educational sector, nursing, retail, and textile industries. All of these fields perform professionalized and waged versions of work that was once performed in the home as unpaid care labor. When this work entered the market, it became a part of constructing the attention economy, wherein “attention, exchanged for money in function of a temporal pattern of measure, is separated from incarnated communication, that which produces lasting relations, trust, and cooperation, and turns to a functionalized and uninvested exchange of codes (words and gestures).”<sup>25</sup> Care, listening, and communicating have been turned into commodities exchanged on the market.

Though this new market of work seemed to attach a wage to reproductive work and de-link it from belonging to specific identity groups, in reality much of this precarious work is still gendered, classed, and racialized. This work is largely invisibilized, performed in many fields with no contracts, job security or benefits, much of it being shift work with low hourly pay.

This externalization of the home extends the exploitative working conditions of the housewife to entire economic sectors, leading to the housewifization of wider society. “The public space as a whole is progressively feminizing itself, since it incorporates more and more visibly some of the most traditional and stereotypical elements of the feminine (maternity, care, seduction).”<sup>26</sup> It also reinstates the other main classification of difference put to use during primitive accumulation: racialization, which never disappeared but was simply adjusted and reaffirmed as a neocolonial global structure of exploitation.

The paid domestic help and precarious service work found in the market reflect “a new division of reproductive labor worldwide, whereby women coming from the so-called developing countries or countries ‘in transition’ ... increasingly come to do the reproductive work in advanced countries.”<sup>27</sup> In order for the women of the Global North to take their place in the waged economy, the Othered women of the Global South, or the local poor have to take their place in exploitation.

The reproduction of the areas considered ‘more peripheral’ has been devastated ... the plan is to produce cheap labor power to be employed in the reproductive sector of the more developed regions. In this way, the state avoids having to confront the emerging reproductive problems and, crucially, can avoid taking on the financial burdens that should be its responsibility.<sup>28</sup>

The continued racialization and exteritorialization of labor structures and the new housewifization of entire swathes of society also extends to production based labor. With the rise of biocapitalism, the material side of production was undervalued, and remunerated less, shifted to the Global South and invisibilized as much as possible. In a similar vein to the 15th c., when women were confined to reproductive work just as it ceased to be valued and only production was remunerated, the Global South has recently been made the main grounds of material production, just as it ceases to be valued. Yet, despite new narratives of its unimportance, material production has not disappeared and continues to be a necessary part of economic cycles.

In fact, the high profits that allow for the higher remuneration and social value of relational-cognitive work in the Global North, rely on the low labor costs of invisibilized production in the Global South. Furthermore, these high wages also appear to be greater than they really are, because the low cost and availability of the local externalized care market to perform necessary reproductive work, allows for longer work hours by relational-cognitive workers.

Biocapitalism continues to exploit all workers, and continues to exploit women, racialized peoples, and other marginalized identities at higher rates. It simply disguises this exploitation by creating narratives around certain types of work as more valuable than others and reducing essential work to the worst possible conditions so that other sectors can appear more valuable. This myth is perpetuated by convincing workers that their labor roles are no longer due to race, gender, geopolitics etc. but simply the type of work they do.

Shifting the narrative of identity as equivalent to labor role, to a system of individualization has allowed the labor structure to exist in largely the same format as before, simply having made room for a segment of women in the global north, and a select few from various identity groups, to take their places at the top of the pyramid, while the structures at the bottom remain largely the same. These narratives of progress can be just as dangerous to actual progress as not moving at all, as they can serve to disguise struggles, making it seem that collective struggles are personal ones, as the system appears to have evolved past them.

## **5. Reality TV and the Erasure of Labor**

To narrow this wider assessment of the effect of narrative on actual labor structures to a specific example, one can return, at last, to Reality TV. Alison Hearn has written extensively on how RTV

shows function as products, but also as sites of production, exhibiting all of the interconnected global narratives and structures around labor within biocapitalism. Her work on the production practices of these shows demonstrates how perceived divisions and definitions of work affect the organization and remuneration of labor, and allow for the accumulation of huge profits through the exploitation of widespread precarized and feminized labor.

The narrative that the work of being an RTV star - the work of turning oneself into a branded persona - is “workless” and “natural,” is the primary deception that allows for the exploitation of all of the other labor within its supporting networks. But the reality for an RTV star is a perpetual existence of living under scrutiny and doing the work of meeting societal expectations for the type of identity they present as. The work of being an RTV star centers on transforming the body, life, and persona into the most commercially salable version of their lives to target market demographics. Unsurprisingly, the subtexts that are most consumable fall into many problematic gendered, racialized, and class-based tropes with persistent underlying consumerist messaging. Writer Roxane Gay describes it succinctly:

If reality television has any connections to reality, it is that women are often called upon to perform their gender, whether through how they present themselves and their sexuality, how they behave, and how they conform (or don't) to society's expectations for women. The repetition of gender acts in reality television becomes grossly stylized through artificially tanned skin, elaborate hair extensions, dramatic makeup, surgically enhanced bodies, and chemically injected faces. The acts become grossly stylized though bad behavior, often carefully orchestrated by producers.<sup>29</sup>

The production of extreme emotional affect, i.e., drama, is really the most universally acknowledged point of reality television and at the core of being a successful RTV star. The shows are built around pushing people to emotional extremes and filming the fallout, often by contriving forced confrontations fueled by alcohol, and based on the vested interest of everyone on and off camera in creating as messy a situation as possible.

RTV stars are well aware that their continued presence on these shows, their pay rates, and future career options depend on delivering usable, ratings grabbing performances, no matter the emotional toll. The work of being an RTV star is rooted in the labor currently deemed most valuable by biocapitalism: doing the relational - emotional labor of cornering the attention economy by constantly transforming the self to become more valuable.

The contracts and business strategies of the networks behind these shows reflect the importance of this brand building labor. Under RTV contracts, “a celebrity's public persona is considered to be a form of property” and its ownership is a vital driver of profit for networks.<sup>30</sup> They

work to “cultivate mini-celebrities in ‘house’ and lock down a percentage of participants’ future money-making potential via endorsements and brand extensions.”<sup>31</sup>

In the RTV labor model, the individual laborer shares ownership of themselves with a corporation, like owning stocks in a company. The star becomes an employee of their own brand, managing the business of their own life. The brands these RTV stars create do not belong to them, yet are completely entangled with their bodies, lives, and subjectivities and as such, is a type of work that the RTV star can never quit. With huge profits at stake, the lives and beings of these stars have to be directed down very specific paths. According to a former production supervisor:

ALL of the wives are in on this. We discuss popular storylines from the season before, storylines that need tying up, and also ways of threading in new storylines that look organic to the story. Do you really think we spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on just following these women around with no plan? No, the season and the storyline have a basic outline from the first day.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the reality of a branded self is not a life of worklessness that draws in wealth simply for existing in the public eye. The entire existence and personhood become subsumed into task fulfillment on behalf of the brand, resulting in alienation from a sense of self, as life and subjectivity become work on behalf of the company.

Yet, one of the primary on screen tropes of RTV is the invisibilization of work and the categorization of certain types of work as illegitimate. The marketing of these shows is as reality, meaning that inherent to the show is the minimization of any appearance of artificiality, or constructed lives. Thus, the central purpose of the show is built around the erasure of the work of building it. By coding this work of self-branding as leisure, the shows erase this labor and making biolabor appear to be natural and workless, and therefore undeserving of remuneration for RTV stars or anyone else performing similar work. The erasure of this labor trickles down into the rest of the production practices of the genre as well.

RTV does not simply refer to a genre of television determined by content, it “names a set of cost-cutting measures in broadcast television production.”<sup>33</sup> This refers largely to practices built around bypassing unions such as The Writers Guild of America, The Screen Actors Guild (SAG-AFTRA) and others, “in order to avoid having to provide industry-standard wages, benefits, and appropriate working conditions.”<sup>34</sup> By shifting from traditional scripted dramas to ‘unscripted’ RTV, the industry can claim it doesn’t require writers or actors whom are protected by unions.

This shift in language and public perception allowed outside workers to be brought in, breaking the power of those in the center, and allowing for a new level of low wages to become the accepted industry standard. The narratives promoted to the public about RTV revolved around the

democratization of the field, with “regular people” finally allowed to appear on stage, conveniently masking the cost benefits of onscreen talent no longer having to be paid by professional standards.

The basis of RTV is cheap production with high profits for the network, parent company, and corporate sponsors, “with an average cost per episode of US\$300,000, as opposed to budgets in the millions of dollars per episode for scripted dramas.”<sup>35</sup> The shows also capitalize off of bypassing writers and “rely[ing] on editors to build the story in the editing bay [...] simply renam[ing] writers segment or field producers.”<sup>36</sup> By renaming labor, the industry is able to invisibilize the labor of production and undermine the bargaining power of the entire field.

Below the line workers such as production assistants, drivers, interns etc. are unrepresented by unions and face extremely exploitative working conditions, “often asked to work 18 hour days, seven days a week, and to go without lunch and dinner breaks, healthcare, benefits, pensions or over- time pay.”<sup>37</sup> RTV has “product[ed] a whole new bottom tier of industry worker who is willing to suffer under precarious and exploitative conditions in order to get their foot in the door.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the material products that make up RTV stars’ brand extensions (clothing lines etc.) that are a big source of revenue for the networks, are also typically made by invisibilized and underpaid labor that has been externalized to the Global South.

By invisibilizing the labor of the entire system of production, the industry is able to maintain the narrative that only the relational-cognitive brand building labor of the RTV star creates any value, yet this too has already been redefined as non-labor. Through the creation of narratives of non-work, and categorizing some types of work as more or less valuable than others, networks are able to justify their own high profits, and perpetuate the myth that low wages are simply the fault of individuals not working, or performing the wrong type of work. The interconnectivity of this labor system illustrates how narratives of non-work, immaterial work, or production free ‘products’ are always linked back to very real systems of production and that the repercussions of invisibilizing work at one point down the line, ripple out across the entirety of the labor network.

## **6. Visibilizing Work and Identity to Re-Claim Narratives**

Though the current state of labor paints a bleak picture, to end on a more positive note, it is important to remember that narratives do not belong exclusively in the hands of power. Struggles over reclaiming and redefining narratives of identity, work, social value, and structures have been ongoing as long as these structures have existed and continue to grow. Resistance mobilizations such as the feminist strike, part of the fourth wave feminist movement rooted in Latin America, are fighting to visibilize the many forms of work and being that have been violently erased and undervalued by capitalist structures, and redefine work’s connection to identity.



Veronica Gago defines feminist strike as revolving around the widespread acknowledgment that all labor is interdependent, important, and valuable, whether it is even considered to be work by the market, let alone valuable work. The fundamental tenet of the feminist strike is that it “maps new forms of the exploitation of bodies and territories from a perspective that is simultaneously that of visibilization and insubordination.”<sup>39</sup> The strike exists “in a state of applied investigation,” continuously naming and making visible work and workers that have before been invisibilized, naturalized, or externalized.<sup>40</sup>

This interconnectivity and recognition of labor in all its forms means that there can be no exteritorialization, no capitalist weaponization of the center against the margins and vice versa. By visibilizing and doing away with hierarchies of work and identities behind work, there is no opportunity to appease one group at the expense of another, further entrenching capitalism in more hidden corners. While the feminist strike recognizes the significance of each individual’s struggles, it also recognizes that they aren’t the same. There is significantly and crucially no attempt to flatten the plane of resistance and experience, to cut out identity and individual experiences and struggles for the sake of a unified whole. Differing from previous more mainstream and academic feminist movements that silenced differing experiences of race, class, sexuality, for the sake of unity.

The power of narrative is undeniable when it comes to shaping and maintaining the structures that control the conditions of everyday lives. But the thing about narratives, is that people can pick which ones to believe in, and even the most powerful ones are subject to change.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bill McKibben, “When ‘Creatives’ Turn Destructive: Image-Makers and The Climate Crisis,” *New Yorker*, November 21, 2020.  
<sup>2</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and The Witch: Women, The Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 71.  
<sup>3</sup> Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 90.  
<sup>4</sup> Federici, *Caliban and The Witch*, 221.  
<sup>5</sup> Federici, *Caliban and The Witch*, 226.  
<sup>6</sup> Federici, *Caliban and The Witch*, 229.  
<sup>7</sup> Federici, *Caliban and The Witch*, 88.  
<sup>8</sup> Federici, *Caliban and The Witch*, 91, 89.  
<sup>9</sup> Federici, *Caliban and The Witch*, 101.  
<sup>10</sup> Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, 95.  
<sup>11</sup> Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, 103.  
<sup>12</sup> Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, 75.  
<sup>13</sup> Change The Museum (@changethemuseum), bioline.  
<sup>14</sup> For the Culture (@\_fortheculture2020), bioline.  
<sup>15</sup> Noy Thrupkaew, “The God of Big Trends,” *Bitchfest*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2006), 299 - 300.  
<sup>16</sup> Thrupkaew, “Big Trends,” 302.  
<sup>17</sup> Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 262.  
<sup>18</sup> Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, 263.  
<sup>19</sup> Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, 273.  
<sup>20</sup> Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, 268.  
<sup>21</sup> Cristina Morini & Andrea Fumagalli, “Life Put To Work: Towards a Life Theory of Value,” *Ephemera*, vol. 10 (2010): 236.  
<sup>22</sup> Morini & Fumagalli, “Life Theory,” 235.  
<sup>23</sup> Morini & Fumagalli, “Life Theory,” 236.

- <sup>24</sup> Morini & Fumagalli, "Life Theory," 243.
- <sup>25</sup> Precarias a la Deriva, "A Very Careful Strike," *The Commoner*, no.11 (Spring 2006): 35.
- <sup>26</sup> Morini & Fumagalli, "Life Theory," 242.
- <sup>27</sup> Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *Women and The Subversion of The Community: A Dalla Costa Reader* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019), 169.
- <sup>28</sup> Dalla Costa, *Subversion*, 170.
- <sup>29</sup> Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 81.
- <sup>30</sup> Alison Hearn, "Reality Television, The Hills and the Limits of the Immaterial Labour Thesis," *TripleC*, vol. 8 (May 2010): 69.
- <sup>31</sup> Alison Hearn, "Witches and Bitches: Reality Television, Housewifization, and The New Hidden Abode of Production," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2016): 19.
- <sup>32</sup> Katherine G, "Real Housewives: Behind The Scenes Secrets," *Fame* 10, April 8, 2016.
- <sup>33</sup> Hearn, "Immaterial Labour," 66.
- <sup>34</sup> Hearn, "Immaterial Labour," 70.
- <sup>35</sup> Hearn, "Witches and Bitches," 14
- <sup>36</sup> Hearn, "Witches and Bitches," 14
- <sup>37</sup> Hearn, "Immaterial Labour," 71.
- <sup>38</sup> Hearn, "Immaterial Labour," 72.
- <sup>39</sup> Veronica Gago, "Eight Theses on the Feminist Revolution," *La Potencia Feminista* (Verso Books, 2020).
- <sup>40</sup> Veronica Gago, "Eight Theses on the Feminist Revolution," *La Potencia Feminista* (Verso Books, 2020).

### Bibliography

- Below Deck, "Season 7 Reunion Part 1 & 2," Bravo, 2019.
- Change The Museum, @changethemuseum, Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/changethemuseum>
- Dalla Costa, Mariarosa. *Women and The Subversion of The Community: A Mariarosa Dalla Costa Reader*, Edited by Camille Barbagallo. Oakland: PM Press, 2019.
- Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and The Witch: Women, The Body, and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia, 2004.
- For the Culture, @\_fortheculture2020, Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/fortheculture2020/?hl=en>
- G, Katherine. "Real Housewives: Behind-The-Scenes Secrets." *Fame* 10, April 8, 2016, fame10.com/entertainment/real-housewives-15-shocking-behind-the-scenes-secrets/.
- Gago, Verónica. "Eight Theses on the Feminist Revolution." *La Potencia Feminista*. Verso Books, 2020.
- Gay, Roxane author. *Bad Feminist : Essays*. New York, Harper Perennial, 2014.
- Hardt, Michael & Negri, Antonio. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Hearn, Alison. "Reality Television, The Hills and the Limits of the Immaterial Labour Thesis." *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, vol. 8 (May 2010): 60-76. doi: 10.31269/triplec.v8i1.206.
- Hearn, Alison. "Witches and Bitches: Reality Television, Housewifization, and The New Hidden Abode of Production." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2016): 1-15. doi: 10.1177/1367549416640553.
- McKibben, Bill. "When 'Creatives' Turn Destructive: Image-Makers and The Climate Crisis." *New Yorker*, November 21, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/when-creatives-turn-destructive-image-makers-and-the-climate-crisis>
- Mies, Maria. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. London: Zed Books, 1986.
- Morini, Cristina and Fumagalli, Andrea. "Life Put To Work: Towards a Life Theory of Value." *Ephemera Articles*, vol. 10 (2010): 234-252. [researchgate.net/profile/Andrea\\_Fumagalli2/publication](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Andrea_Fumagalli2/publication).
- Precarias a la Deriva. "A Very Careful Strike - Four Hypotheses." *The Commoner*, no. 11 (Spring 2006): 33-45. [thecommoner.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Precarias-a-la-Deriva-A-Very-Careful-Strike.pdf](https://thecommoner.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Precarias-a-la-Deriva-A-Very-Careful-Strike.pdf).
- Thrupkaew, Noy. "The God of Big Trends - Book Publishing's Ethnic Cool Quotient." *Bitchfest*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006.