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Britain's 'Dark Factories': Specters of Racial Capitalism Today

Anthony Sullivan

Dr Anthony Sullivan is Senior Lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies at the London College of Fashion, UAL. His recent publications include 'Dressing the Opposition: Sartorial Resistance on Europe's Political Left' in Bartlett, D. ed. *Fashion and Politics*. London: Yale University Press and 'Karl Marx: Fashion and Capitalism,' in Rocamora, A. and Smelik, A. *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*. London: IB Tauris.
t.sullivan@fashion.arts.ac.uk

Abstract

Recent revelations about illegally low wages and abject working conditions in Leicester's "dark" garment factories—endured by its vulnerable mainly global majority and migrant workforce—have once again highlighted British fashion's benighted "other" and its reliance on cheapened and "expendable" "racialized" sweated labor. Forced to work on through the Covid pandemic to produce fast fashion for e-commerce brands, "British" fashion manufacture now reflects the wider plight of the global CMT (Cut, Make and Trim) army, who at considerable personal risk and cost, manufacture most of our fashion. Drawing on a set of theoretical innovations in Marxist and post-Marxist theory, notably

Smith and Suwandi theory of labor “super-exploitation,” De Genova’s work on the disciplining of migrants through “border regimes and spectacles” and Gargi Bhattacharyya’s critical reading of Cedric Robinson’s thesis of “Racial Capitalism” (1983), this article explains how and why its specter still casts such a deep and troubling shadow over the production of fashion.

KEYWORDS: sweating, super-exploitation, racial capitalism, reserve armies, border regimes

1. Introduction: polycrisis and fashion

The fabric of fashion remains central to the narratives of “disaster capitalism” in our chaos wrought times. Britain’s “dark factories” (O’Connor 2018) exemplify how the manufacture of fashion and flows of migrant labor are deeply intertwined since it is these “edge populations,” as Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018) conceives them, who produce much of our fashion today, at the greatest of personal peril.

In this febrile era of “polycrisis” (Tooze 2021) this article explores three important innovations in Marxist/post-Marxist thought that can widen our understanding of the continuing paradoxes and contradictions of contemporary global fashion production and its relationship to transnational flows of people, labor and value. First, Gargi Bhattacharyya’s (2018) critical revisiting of Cedric Robinson’s (2020 [1983]) seminal conceptualization of the interlinkages between “race”, history and economy as “racial capitalism.” Second, the groundbreaking work on “global labor arbitrage” as the core of a new theory of Imperialism centered on the “capture” and “super-exploitation” of Southern “labor value” as advanced by John Smith (2018) and Intan Suwandi (2019). Third, and finally, Nicholas De Genova’s (2016) compelling work theorizing what he acutely terms the disciplinary “border spectacle.” This, he argues, works to reactively regulate “the prior human fact” of migration through contemporary governmental “tactics of bordering” as a part of a deeply racializing performative politics of immigration “control”. When brought together this theoretical work throws significant new light on the deeply embedded injustices of transnational labor exploitation in our fashion worlds. Underpinned by what Sandra Niessen graphically terms their “sacrifice zones” (2020), the co-existence of the abuse of vulnerable migrant workers in the Northern hemisphere alongside that of workers in the global “South” is symptomatic of a deeper existential crisis of capitalist “social reproduction” to use Lise Vogel’s incisive formulation (2013 [1983]).

2. From “clothing the world” to “dark factories”: Leicester fashion manufacturing in the Covid-19 pandemic

It was at the height of the Covid-19 Pandemic that the phenomena of Leicester's “dark factories” first came to widespread public attention in Britain. Those factories that arose in the gutted shells of former industrial giants, such as Imperial Typewriters, to produce fast fashion for mainly on-line retailers/lead firms or brands. Although it had been previously flagged by investigative journalists (O'Connor 2018; Sanders 2017), it was Labour Behind The Label's [LBTL] (2020) report “Boohoo and Covid-19: the People behind the Profit” that vividly exposed Leicester as the epicenter of a twenty-first century “sweating” scandal in the mainstream media; a city whose pride in garment factories, such as the knitwear manufacturer Corah and Sons, once lead it to claim “Leicester clothes the world”¹. According to LBTL, Boohoo's sales rose 45% in the first quarter of 2020 driving profits up as its “market value boomed to £5.3bn” (Sweney 2020). Meanwhile, its global workforce was offered only scant protection from Covid.

Typifying media coverage in British tabloid newspapers, The Daily Mail announced, “Illegal work in Leicester “sweatshops...” flourished “due to fear of racism claims” (Marsden 2020), thereby underscoring the potential of the term “sweating” to conflate cause and effect. Quoting Andrew Bridgen, the Conservative MP for North West Leicestershire, “there has been a total systemic failure by the organizations supposed to protect the public and those who work at these factories. Some of it is down to racial sensitivities,” (Marsden 2020) The Mail pursued a racist variant of populist victim blaming.² By attributing the proliferation of sweating to those forced to negotiate the harshest effects of racism rather than unpicking the racialized system of “racial capitalism” and the “super-exploitation” of labor which underpins it—this article—and many like it obscured the “truth” about “sweated labor” they claimed to reveal.

In “New Industry on a Skewed Playing Field: Supply Chain Relations and Working Conditions in UK Garment Manufacturing” (Hammer et al. 2014) University of Leicester (UOL) researchers led by Nikolaus Hammer document how “widespread under-or nonpayment of wages at the National Minimum Wage (NMW), the absence of employment contracts, late payment of wages, and the official declaration of a portion of wages only,” had become the norm. Detailing degrading working conditions “that exploit the various vulnerabilities of different groups of workers”—those drawn mainly from ranks of successive waves of migration, they conclude, “these problems are endemic.” Noting reports that “consistently put the average wage at £3 per hour” applying to “75-90% of jobs in the sector,” they estimate the value of “underpaid wages in apparel manufacturing in the East Midlands at £1 million per

week”—a figure which feeds into Leicester’s 37% child poverty rate (Hammer et al. 2014, 10).

Beyond this the UOL report explains how “violations regarding employment contracts are compounded by work practices that exploit the vulnerabilities of different groups of workers” with “inadequate health and safety, verbal abuse, bullying, threats and humiliation, and a lack of toilet breaks”. “Shop floor management” they continue, “often arbitrarily abuse and humiliate workers in front of coworkers for mistakes or missed performance targets ... (with wage deductions reported in some of these cases)” (Hammer et al. 2014).

Current management practices in the Leicester CMT sector (Sullivan 2016) have, they argue, “created a segmented workforce that works under different price/quality/social compliance parameters” (Hammer et al. 2014, 8). The report outlines how this benefits brands and intermediary agents and suppliers primarily—the latter allocate work based on the competitiveness of the bids made by clothing contractors. They explain how an estimated 1000 small firms “employing” some 10,000 workers make-up the ultra-flexible arm of fashion manufacture in the city. “Producing 30-40% of the fast fashion items for lead firms such as Boohoo, Pretty Little Thing and ASOS”—this new generation of on-line fashion brands have no production capacity. Competing for garment making contracts at ever more marginal and lower unit costs, these CMT subcontractors form the outsourced arms of a wider UK ready-to-wear industry which has undergone “a fundamental transformation since the 1970s when lead firms began sourcing from abroad especially the Far East” (Hammer et al. 2014, 9).

Echoing existing historical accounts of fashion ready-to-wear (see Phizacklea 1990; Green 1997; Lemire 1997), the UOL researchers highlight how within a spatially dispersed web of production segmentation, flexibility and vulnerability are interlinked. A core garment making workforce is supplemented by peripheral and precarious workers—that which Marx first termed a “reserve army of labor” (1990 [1867])—who are casually engaged when consumer demand spikes. Tellingly, Hammer et al. argue “the smallest segment, consists of workers who do not have an employment contract but, overall, are paid at National Minimum Wage (NMW) rates. This is followed by a much larger segment of mostly female workers whose language and socio-cultural capabilities are too limited to work in other industries. Earning around £3/hour, they are forced to complement their wages with welfare benefits. Finally, migrants on student or visitor visas, as well as undocumented migrants who no longer have the legal right to work and remain in the UK, constitute the most vulnerable groups. Often working for even lower or no wages these workers are dismissed at will.” Significantly the researchers conclude, “evidence suggests that low points in order fluctuations (or the pretext of such) are used to substitute less vulnerable

workers with more vulnerable ones working at different wage rates and conditions” (Hammer et al. 2014, 10–11).

3. Migrant and global majority workers North and South: labor and fashion

Understanding this abuse and the reasons for the abject position of precarious migrant and global majority workers within sweated labor regimes in fashion is the focus of the remainder of this article. As Green stresses “blaming immigrants for the very form of the [fashion] industry” is as common as it is mistaken’ in its “racialist” assumptions of “imported group characteristics” which imply “immigrants drive down wages by their low standard of living and by accepting low prices for their work.” (1997, 171) Phizacklea (1990) also argues that successive waves of immigration to Britain did not establish fashion’s oppressive labor dynamics. Rather, they contributed to embedding a ready-to-wear clothing industry characterized since its inception as a “cottage industry” in the eighteenth century by a pattern of exploitative work subsequently referred to as “sweating.” Although Phizacklea refers mainly to Jewish and Asian immigrants, we could now add Eastern European migrants and those fleeing war, persecution and climate induced crises, African and Middle Eastern refugees, and asylum seekers to this list.

Crucially, sweating involved merchant clothiers “putting out” (Hobsbawm in Lemire 1997, 55) fabric to be worked up into garments by isolated individuals and small groups of garment workers in dispersed webs of production (Green 1997). In a pattern similar to today’s ultra-competitive “cattle market” auctions, interactions between Leicester brands, intermediary suppliers and small-scale garment contractors (O’Connor 2018) merchant clothiers reduced the payment for each piece, driving-up productivity “sweating” and cheapening the value of the garment makers labor-power by forcing a reduction in the time taken to meet each piece (Sullivan 2016). Given fashion’s notoriously elastic and unpredictable demand, driven in Marx’s words by its “murderous caprices” (1990 [1867], 365), this sweated subcontracting arm evolved to form part of a “dual system” of small and larger factory scale ready-to wear production (Phizacklea 1990). With the former pushed to work ever harder and faster to supplement the latter when demand peaked, the profits obtained by sweating down the value of each garment piece ensured an on-going dynamic of labor intensity in fashion supply which was sufficient to dis-incentivise investment in fixed capital (beyond the sewing machine) in the garment assembly process (Sullivan 2016).

David Harvey (2004) theorizes neo-liberal globalization as an attempt at a “spatial fix” to a systemic crisis of capitalist profitability centered on regimes of “free trade”; the end of protectionism, tariffs

and quotas on most commodities including garments in the older industrial economies of the North. With its ascendancy at the turn of the new century, this historic form of garment subcontracting was transformed into a globally organized system of outsourced “sweated” manufacture. As Jackson and Shaw (2006) explain, by the early 2000s key retailers such as M&S switched from 90% British made garments to ten percent or less as fashion manufacturing relocated overseas, shifting overwhelmingly Southwards, “chasing the cheapest needle on planet” (HOCEAC 2019, 12). In this context 1990s Britain saw the closure of large-scale garment manufacturers such as Corah and Sons in Leicester, leaving, as Phizacklea explains “a dog eat dog, subcontracting chain with 200 per cent markups for retailers and paltry sums paid [for garment orders] to clothing subcontractors” (1990, 93) and even less to the workforce that remained.

Crucially Phizacklea’s (1990) analysis remains apt in the problematically “revived” (O’Connor 2018) and re-shored “British” fashion manufacturing sector today where the existence of “dark factories” demonstrates “sweating” and what I argue—following the work of Smith and Suwandi—is the “super-exploitation” of vulnerable migrant and global workers treated as a twenty-first century racialized “reserve army of labor.” Explaining why “first world” conditions mirrored “third” (SIC), Phizacklea argues that a sector still technically reliant on the sewing machine as a form of low-entry cost capital based on technology unchanged in substantial part from its invention in the mid-nineteenth century (see also Sullivan 2016)—proved “attractive” to migrants. Drawing on Bhattacharyya’s “edge populations” (2018), this can be understood on the basis of its accessibility in the face of racist hostility. As Phizacklea writes, “historically [garment making] provided self-employment and work for immigrants and this pattern shows no signs of decline” (1990, 75). Understanding then (and now) the high levels of involvement by “ethnic minority” and migrant workers in Britain’s ultra-low paid CMT fashion sector, she continues, “it is imperative to recognize that it is racism and racial discrimination that constrain choice and force many minority men into the entrepreneurial option and minority women to work for them” (Phizacklea 1990). For Phizacklea “ethnic minority” garment workers “onshore” or “off”—abused as a “reserve army”—became the manufacturing cornerstone upon which ultra-profitable mass fashion rested.

4. Primitive accumulation and racial capitalism in the garment “trade”

Phizacklea’s work, as well as others (see Green 1997; Ross 1997; Lemire 1997), points to the links between intersecting racial and gender oppressions and class exploitation in garment manufacture. But moving beyond this Bhattacharyya’s reassessment of Cedric Robinson’s seminal

work "Black Marxism: The Making of The Black Radical Tradition" (2020 [1983]) offers the first part of a conceptual triangulation which enables a deeper understanding of its on-going and intensifying racialized dynamics. It helps explain why the grand modernizing impulse of the "empire of fashion" (Lipovetsky 1994) is still haunted by the specter of racial capitalism, racism and contemporary forms of colonialism/coloniality (Jansen 2020) as the case of Leicester's Dark factories shows.

Bhattacharyya's reading of Robinson foregrounds the extent to which capitalism has not left behind "the racial concepts which grew up with it" (Olende 2021, 153). What she terms "the machinery of neocolonialism in our time" (2018, 31), due to its founding legacy in slavery, theft and coercion, Marx previously understood as "primitive accumulation". "Capital" Marx writes, "comes [into the world] dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (1990 [1867], 926). No more so than in the case of the clothes and textiles industries where primitive accumulation was pivotal to the triangular Atlantic Trade. Andrew Brooks offers this incisive summary: "the inhuman slave plantations of the West Indies first provided the bulk of raw cotton for industries in Manchester, Liverpool and other cities; thereafter English cotton cloth exports went to West Africa and the North American Colonies" (2015, 59). The horrifying trade in "black skins" (1990 [1867]) as Marx put it, produced the twin catastrophes of slavery—the terror of capture, chaining and torture synonymous with "the middle passage" and forced plantation labor—alongside the destruction of the "large scale [indigenous] artisanal clothes making [industries] that existed prior to the arrival of Europeans," (Brooks 2015, 101).

For the merchant and colonizer by contrast, a dual system of rapacious exploitation ensued, accumulating capital from slave labor itself and the exchange and later sale of cloth and clothing. Regarding the latter, "the colonial trade in cloth as well as garments proved to be highly lucrative and overseas markets [expanded]." Brooks continues, "whilst individually the colonized areas of Africa, Asia and South America provided small markets for textiles and other British goods, collectively a huge customer base was held in near monopoly by the early nineteenth century" (Brooks 2015). Eric Williams (1997 [1964]) recounts the history of the London Quaker family who founded Barclays Bank with monies from each stage or passage: buying selling, "working" and shipping slaves and that derived from the sale of their produce. Mercantile capital then underpinned not only further trade, but the finance and development of large-scale machinery and production techniques associated with the Industrial Revolution—and the full subsumption of work in the circuit of industrial capital signaled by the ascendance of wage labor as the source of "surplus value" as Marx theorized it (1990 [1867]). In the 1860s, the Deep South [of America] "The Cotton Kingdom," as David Olusoga explains, became the economic twin of Manchester or "Cottonopolis ... the shock city of the Industrial

Revolution at the center of a vast constellation of around two and a half thousand cotton mills and factories in Lancashire alone” (2016, 344).

Confirming ‘the essential role played by imperialism and slavery in financing European “development”, Bhattacharyya argues that “it is accepted that racialized violence has formed the backdrop to capitalist expansion and this violence has been a source of value” (2018, 43). However, she continues, “one experience of the edge populations of more recent racial capitalism consists of the extent to which their own social reproduction”—the provisioning of their means of existence/subsistence—” is relegated to a space beyond or alongside the wage economy” (Bhattacharyya 2018). This observation is critical in relation to understanding how and why both “on-shore” “vulnerable” fashion labor in metropolitan hubs like Leicester as well as that which has been “off-shored” to countries such as India, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Vietnam, continues to be so “sweated” and cheapened that it falls far below even the value of “labor power” as a commodity. In today’s terms the concept of the “minimum or living wage” serves as a rough proxy for the amount of value necessary for social reproduction to happen i.e. to meet a workers’ subsistence—returning them to work sufficiently fed and provisioned. As I have explained elsewhere (Sullivan 2016), for Marx, wages reflect the “socially necessary labor time” (SNLT) of a worker’s labor—the portion of value returned to them to provide their means of subsistence—whilst the “surplus value”—all the value produced by the worker above and beyond the value of this portion of laboring time was retained by the capitalist as profit.

Drawing on Vogel (2013 [1983]), Bhattacharyya notes that the depletion of wages paid to “edge populations”—such as those who work at garment making in Britain’s dark factories—renders them at best on the margins of “wage labor.” “Cast out or pushed to the edge” by what De Genova theorizes as state “bordering practices and spectacles” (2016) which serve to create “the other and limit of working-class populations” (Bhattacharyya 2018, 5), the cheapening of their work drops below the level of the “SNLT” needed to subsist and reproduce themselves. It becomes more a matter of “primitive accumulation” or the theft of labor or “accumulation by dispossession” in Harvey’s terms – “value extraction” or “super-exploitation” (Smith 2018; Suwandi 2019) rather than the “exploitative norm” of wage labor as conceived by Marx.

So, while Marx’s concept of “Primitive Accumulation” suggested mistakenly for some (see Pradella 2021), that the era of colonial conquest, slavery and bondage would be left behind when fully blown industrial capitalism based on formal wage-labor developed, the thesis of “racial capitalism” advanced in Robinson’s work, and its reading by Bhattacharyya, challenges linear chronologies of development in overly determinist Marxist accounts. She stresses instead that the primitive mode of accumulation remains racially embedded in capitalism’s

changing forms. Thus, capitalism continually creates and recreates divisions and through “differentiating processes” (Bhattacharyya 2018) enacts a contemporary form of primitive accumulation in subordinated “edge populations”. This includes those who reside in its most developed metropolitan spaces—the cities of the “developed” world such as Manchester, London and the focus of my essay, Leicester. For migrants in particular, she argues, “racialized bodies signal [their] vulnerability to exceptional violence and exclusions” (Bhattacharyya 2018) and an existence that lies outside or on the edges of the more familiar legal “bio-political” order which prevails. “In the metropolis”, Bhattacharyya concludes, “the spectre of necro (death) politics serves as disciplining reminder and trace” (Bhattacharyya 2018). More specifically then for those who work in the “informal” sector—in the liminal spaces occupied by the contemporary labor “reserve”—the “dark factories” which are so central to Leicester’s garment industry—the unequal terms of their existence within “racial capitalism” are manifest in their relationship to the “border and border spectacle” (De Genova 2016). They continually circumscribe and condition the limits to their working lives.

In the global South the benighted shadow of this racial capitalist specter “the form of living death” endured by garment workers was revealed most horrifically by the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Dhaka Bangladesh on the April 24, 2013. A tragedy that killed over 1100 garment workers (Sullivan 2016). But it stalks migrants, under- and undocumented garment workers the world over on-shore or off; core or periphery; North and South; Newly Industrialized and Industrialized Countries alike. Despite the protestations of shock and horror from “mainstream” media and politicians, the revelations about Leicester’s “slave labor” and “sweating” scandal, this is not a coincidence. Super-exploitative “sweating” is instead the product of a conjuncture between the “practices of differentiation for exploitation” [or “super-exploitation” in Smith and Suwandi’s terms] and the expropriation that makes-up “racial capitalism” and “the unfortunate machinery of border control which serves to create a pool of precarious workers who occupy a particular [subordinate] role in the semi-formal and informal economies.” For this “racially subordinated” (Bhattacharyya 2018, 19) labor “reserve” “the taint of death circumscribes their lives,” (Bhattacharyya 2018) feeding into the global crises of social reproduction so brutally exposed by the pandemic.

5. Sweating as super-exploitation and/or expropriation

To understand why super-exploitative sweating has become the rule, and not the exception in fashion manufacturing requires a further excursion into Marx’s “hidden abode of production,” (1990 [1867]) and the deeper political economy of contemporary global capitalism and fashion’s place within this. John Smith (2018) and Intan Suwandi (2019)

build their critique of global “North” “South” exchange relations as “the new imperialism” based on the systemic diminished value of labor-power as a commodity in the countries of the latter. This arises because of a combination of the historical legacy of “racial capitalism” (Robinson 2020 [1983]) and the structural inequalities in socio-economic and industrial development—wrought by the catastrophe of colonial conquest outlined above—and its on-going neo-colonial effects today. Smith and Suwandi’s work vindicates at least in part dependency theorists such as Andre Gunder-Frank (1978) and Samir Amin (2006). Against liberal models of “Development” they argue that systemic “Underdevelopment” is perpetuated by the unequal exchange of commodities between South and North creating a “vast drain of value from the poor to capital based in the rich countries” (Bellamy Foster and Suwandi 2021, 31).

Specifically, Smith critiques the eurocentrism and ahistoricity of value chain analysis (VCA) (Gereffi 2019) which analyses the differential value of labor across global supply or commodity chains—using the key concept of “value added”—by arguing value created in the South is more properly conceived as “captured” rather than “added” in the North. Thus, as they explain, “capture” occurs via the realization of profits from the sale of manufactured goods in the North at prices well above the value, cost and purchase price of their manufacture, and purchase by lead firms. At the heart of this circuit of capital the same competitive drive to “sweat” or reduce unit labor costs to a minimum—noted above as historically embedded in fashion production—now drives a process of “global labor arbitrage, “the “substitution of “high wage workers here with like quality low wage workers there/abroad” (Roach 2004 in Smith 2018, 189). It is this competitive “arbitrage” or labor substitution, which Smith and Suwandi contend, facilitates enhanced profitability as the lower the unit labor costs the greater the proportion of value grabbed by capital and thus “captured” by outsourcing lead firms whether “offshore” as in the case of H&M and Primark sourcing from Bangladesh (Sullivan 2016), or “on-shore” as in the case of Boohoo and Pretty Little Thing as previously explained.

Explaining why unit labor costs are lower, Smith tellingly reveals that VCA ignores “asymmetry in labor market structures”, especially “the vast reserve army of unemployed workers” and the “repressive regimes” which in the global South condition and shape “the distribution of value added” (2018, 92). “The suppression of labor mobility” in particular, he argues, is the key to the ultra-low value of labor in countries designated as “third,” “developing” or the “least developed”. This in turn explains why they became the focus of the outsourcing of production from North to South in the recent wave of globalization/Northern de-industrialisation. Unlike the period of mass and mostly unregulated, “economic” migration from Colonial and Imperial centers to the colonies from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries,

today's "border regimes" (De Genova 2016) aim to prevent the kind of mass migration/labor mobility Northwards which would undermine and break the disciplining effects of "reserve armies" and "surplus populations" on the economies of the South. This block on the free movement of peoples which most specifically depresses the value of Southern wages below the minimum level of subsistence, to the point at which they cross into the realm of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2004) or "super-exploitation" (Smith 2018) i.e. "wages" below the portion of value Marx termed "SNLT"—the socially necessary labor time needed to produce the value of goods workers' required to sustain themselves (1990 [1867]). Most significantly, then, Smith argues in relation to the capitalists' *raison d'être* "accumulate, accumulate, accumulate" (Marx 1990 [1867], 743), "global labor arbitrage" provides the mechanism for "super-exploitation" becoming the "third way"³ to increase the rate of exploitation upon which the accumulation of "surplus value" depends (Smith 2018, 236).

6. Reserve armies and border spectacles: disciplining migrant workers as vulnerable labor

De Genova's work (2016) on "border technologies" and "spectacles" as key facets of the enduring architecture of "racial capitalism", when linked to Marx's analysis of "reserve armies" or "surplus populations", provides the final part of the explanation as to why "super-exploitative" "sweating" of "global majority" and migrant workers in fashion prevails. This is not only in the global South but amongst migrant and racialized workers in the North too.

For Marx, "reserve armies" resulted from capitalism's deep contradictions. What he theorized as the "organic composition of capital"—the ratio of dead labor (machines) to living labor or "fixed" to "variable capital"—increased as the scale of production expanded, and fewer workers were needed to produce the same number of commodities, given the development of new labor processes, techniques, and technologies. Thus, he argued, capitalism's inability to absorb labor profitably meant, "the working population produces both the accumulation of capital and the means by which it is itself made relatively superfluous" (Marx 1990 [1867], 783). But this surplus (unemployed/underemployed) population also performed the vital task of disciplining those who remained in work. He continues: "this surplus population becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalist accumulation ... a disposable industrial reserve arm that belongs to capital," (Marx 1990 [1867], 784) because "the greater pressure that the reserve by its competition exerts on the employed workers" the more this "forces them to submit to overwork." (Marx 1990 [1867] p.789)

Together, Marx's analysis of "reserve armies" and De Genova's analysis of "border regimes" explains how the segmentation of labor in

Leicester garment subcontracting works to engender abject working conditions and “super-exploitation.” Centrally, it is the threat of substitution because of “illegality” which underpins the precarity of “un” and under-documented migrants—a reserve group who may be dismissed at will” (Hammer et al. 2014, 10). Regarding this, Dominique Muller of LBTL argues, “allegations of abuse at many Leicester companies have been reported for years now,” but “local and central government have failed to take any meaningful action ... focusing instead on immigration raids, which have made vulnerable workers more fearful of speaking out” (Bland and Campbell 2020). Similarly, Emily Kenway of “Focus on Labor Exploitation” argues “exploitative bosses use migrant workers’ fear to force them to accept abusive conditions” and wages far below the NMW (Kenway 2020).

For De Genova, only in the context of the division of the world into nation states, despite the “global configuration of the capitalist world economy,” can a migrant “crisis” or “illegality” exist (2016, 34). Defined by border regimes and defended by the application of state “bio” judicial and physical power—a panoply of punitive nationality and immigration laws policed by para-military border forces ensure that the free flow of capital, value, and surplus value—the cornerstones of the neo-liberal “spatial-fix” (Harvey 2004)—is never mirrored by flows of people and labor. Migration and “border regimes which create and channel ‘illegalised’ human mobility” (De Genova 2016, 33) have, he argues, “turned the maritime borders of Europe into a macabre deathscapes.” Meanwhile as a cover for state authored practices of “race craft”—to use Bhattacharyya’s incisive term—the specter of “modern slavery” via “human trafficking” is “cynically conscripted” and hypocritically invoked⁴ (De Genova 2016, 35). This is despite the fact that “border-making” as a constitutive “socio-political activity ... constructs and naturalizes borders” (De Genova 2016, 47), creating the very possibility of human “illegality” upon which not only trafficking but, the “super-exploitation” of migrant labor is premised. De Genova concludes even for those who succeed in gaining entry, “the vicious severities of extensive and expansive border zones” are but “a preliminary apprenticeship in ... a protracted career of migrant ‘illegality’, precarious labor and deportability” (De Genova 2016, 47).

In Spring 2020, as the mainstream media lens zoomed in on the scandal of Leicester’s “Dark Factories”, in a letter to Boohoo’s chief executive John Lyttle, Conservative Home Secretary Priti Patel reflected the studied ambiguity of current under resourced, over-bureaucratized and draconian UK workplace inspection and Health and Safety regulation. In response to Patel’s letter and its widely reported expression of “deep concern” about “any potential role the fast fashion industry may be playing in fueling alleged criminal, inhumane and abusive practices in Leicester’s garment sector” (Patel in Stevens 2020), Kenway commented, “the hostile environment—and specifically, the illegal working offense

... make it impossible for migrant workers with irregular status to feel safe and to report abuse forcing them to choose between staying in exploitative situations or risking detention and deportation if they do report harm" (2020).

Significantly, a year later, demonstrating how much is now invested politically and ideologically in the state "race- craft" (Bhattacharyya 2018) of Britain's bordering regimes, Patel appeared at the center of a "border spectacle": a high-profile border force raid on suspected "people traffickers". This performative reaction to what she has helped to define as the "channel migrant crisis" enabled her to personify the "crack down" on "illegal immigration" contained in the government's "Nationality and Borders Bill." Dubbed the "anti-refugee bill" by critics—this enactment of migration regimes through such a spectacle signaled the unrelenting reinforcement of the "hostile environment" policy (putatively for "illegal" migrants), so controversially initiated under the Premiership of Theresa May (Grierson 2018).

Conclusion—fashion and the border spectacle

To conclude, it is hostile "border regimes" as analyzed by De Genova which by restricting the mobility (free movement) of what Marx would term capitalism's "surplus populations" as "reserve armies" that creates the basis for what Smith and Suwandi theorize as the "super-exploitation" of both Southern Labor and migrants who with courage and ingenuity move North. In this respect then it is not immigration per-se and so called "cheap foreign labor" that lowers wage levels locally and globally but immigration laws, border regimes and spectacles—the existence of which explains why the specter of "racial capitalism" still casts such a deep shadow over the production of fashion.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. Corah and Sons' St Margaret's Works employed around 7000 workers in the late 1960s, with much of its output destined for Britain's flagship retailer Marks and Spencer (M&S). For the history of Corah's see <https://www.knittingtogether.org.uk/behind-the-scenes/the-companies/corah-plc/> accessed on 17 January 2022 at 00.29.
2. Such reporting ostensibly ignored the fact that many of the managers and owners of Leicester's small garment making

- contractors—labelled “sweatshops” in the media—who are themselves of migrant/global majority origin have gone on record to explain how the system of ultra-competitive subcontracting itself is the source of “sweating”—for such accounts see O’Connor (2018).
3. In addition to the methods most familiar from Marx: increasing the length of the working day or absolute surplus value’ and/or the intensity of work “relative surplus value.”
 4. Thus the barbarism of trafficking only arises when punitive border regimes circumscribe legal freedom of movement denying precarious migrant workers citizenship and employment rights.

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