

Wilfrid Laurier University

Scholars Commons @ Laurier

Journalism

Laurier Brantford

2008

Canadian Contributions to Social Reproduction Feminism, Race and Embodied Labor

Sue Ferguson

Wilfrid Laurier University, sferguson@wlu.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.wlu.ca/brantford_jn

Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Sue, "Canadian Contributions to Social Reproduction Feminism, Race and Embodied Labor" (2008). *Journalism*. 4.

https://scholars.wlu.ca/brantford_jn/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Laurier Brantford at Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journalism by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Race, Gender & Class: Volume 15, Number 1-2, 2008 (42-57)

Race, Gender & Class Website: www.suno.edu/sunorgc/

CANADIAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIAL REPRODUCTION FEMINISM, RACE AND EMBODIED LABOR¹

Susan Ferguson

Journalism

Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford Campus

Abstract: Recent methodological advances in Canadian Social Reproduction Feminism foreground labor as a foundational concept of social theory and, as a result, address the structuralist bias critics of the paradigm have identified, while still grounding theory in a comprehensive analysis that accounts for specifically capitalist relations. Yet, to fully address issues of racialization, this broad and dynamic concept of labor needs to be extended and complexified. Along with accounting for the sex-gender dimensions of labor, we need also to attend to its socio-spatial aspects. In other words, it's not just what we do to reproduce society, but where we do it that counts in an imperial capitalist world. And Social Reproduction Feminism, with its expansive definition of labor and its comprehensive focus on the full spectrum of practical activity, is uniquely positioned to accommodate such complexity without forfeiting attentiveness to social relations of class and/or capitalism. It has the potential, therefore, to provide intersectional analyses with a methodology that brings "both capitalism and class back into the discussion."

Keywords: social reproduction theory; feminist methodology; intersectionality; labor; race; gender

Susan Ferguson is Assistant Professor in the Journalism Program at the Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford Campus. Her previous work on feminist theory and politics explores the development of the social reproduction framework in the Canadian context. Current research interests include applying that framework to media and children's culture.

Address: Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford Campus, 73 George St., Brantford, ON Canada N3T 2Y3. Ph.: (519) 756-8228, Fax: (519) 759-2127, Email: sferguson@wlu.ca

Early attempts to develop a materialist, anti-racist feminism from a Marxian perspective foundered on the rocky shores of structuralism and economic reductionism—their end signaled in Heidi Hartmann’s 1979 critique, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism.” Many years later, and only after a detour through a postmodern, Foucauldian landscape, progressive feminists have embraced a new comprehensive materialist approach, intersectionality. Insisting that any given social moment embodies a historically specific nexus of institutionalized relations of class, race, gender, etc., intersectionality overcomes many of the weaknesses associated with early Marxist feminism.² Most importantly, it shifts the goal of analysis away from isolating and ranking particular forms of oppression, and toward interrogating the manner in which they reinforce and/or contradict one another in and through people’s lived experiences. This has the decided merit of exploring subjectivities, of focusing analysis on people’s lives, not just abstract categories of race, gender and class. Yet, as Johanna Brenner argues, scholars who have adopted an intersectional perspective tend to limit their field of inquiry. They usually set out to describe and explain how specified social *locations* shape experience and identity, rather than to understand how such locations interact as part of a dynamic set of social *relations*. Such a snapshot approach doesn’t adequately probe the question of capitalism as a social power—the question, that is, of how processes, ideas and institutions associated with race, gender and class act upon each other to both reproduce and challenge the exclusions, inequality and exploitation characteristic of capitalist class societies. As a result, they often leave capitalist relations of social power, and resistance to that power under-theorized (Brenner, 2000:293).

So how are we to understand those dynamics? How do we develop a conceptually integrative way of thinking and talking about class, gender and race that can adequately account for experience without losing sight of the broader context of specifically capitalist power relations—relations that, it’s important to stress, change over time? Here, I want to suggest the wisdom of revisiting, extending and developing a minor current within feminist thought: Social Reproduction Feminism. While the strain of SRF I take up in this paper is rooted in the work of a group of Canadian socialist feminist political economists, the direction in which I argue to extend their work resonates with certain currents in American social reproduction theory (eg., Brenner, 2000 and Katz, 2001).

EARLY CANADIAN SOCIAL REPRODUCTION FEMINISM AND THE CENTRALITY OF LABOR

Canadian socialist feminism developed largely by engaging with Marxist political economy. In a 1969 *Monthly Review* article, Margaret Benston drew the connection between household labor, women's status as a "reserve army of labor," and the value producing logic of the capitalist system. Those ideas percolated among Benston and other Canadian socialist feminists for a decade and, by the early 1980s a series of articles emerged arguing for the reworking of the categories and theory of critical political economy to accommodate the *totality* of capitalist reproduction (and not just the reproduction of capital in the formal economy). The contributions of Pat and Hugh Armstrong, Martha MacDonald, Patricia Connelly, Meg Luxton, Bonnie Fox, Wally Seccombe and Angela Miles can be found in the journal *Studies in Political Economy* (issues 10, 11, 12, 15, 17, 30), as well as in the edited collections *Hidden in the Household* (1980), *Feminism in Canada* (1982) and *The Politics of Diversity* (1986). Less prolific now, a small current of social reproduction feminists nonetheless continues to produce important work, such as *Power, Production and Social Reproduction* (2003) and *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neoliberalism* (2006). While the postmodern turn and cultural feminism pushed SRF to the margins of Canadian feminist discourse, its most serious theoretical challenge came not from a Foucauldian, but from an anti-racist socialist feminist, Himani Bannerji (whose critique I take up below). Whatever its weaknesses, however, SRF is a rare example of a feminism that consistently engages with issues of class and capitalism.

Critically, early SRF rejects the Marxist feminist portrayal of social reproduction as situated within two distinct spheres of activity, each adhering to its own reproductive logic: the capitalist economy on the one hand, and the patriarchal household on the other. Instead, SRF advances the concept of an expanded mode of production, whose essential unity lies in a broad definition of labor. That definition—the foundational concept of SRF—incorporates both the value-producing labor associated with the waged economy, and the domestic labor (typically performed by women) required to give birth to, feed and raise the current generation of workers, and the children who will comprise the future workforce. These innovations prompted at least two significant theoretical explorations. The first concerned SRF's emphasis on the embodied (and hence, sex-gendered) dimensions of labor, an insight that generated a vibrant and important debate about biological determinism. The second stemmed from the insistence that the various processes comprising social reproduction are integrally related. In explicating the manner in which domestic, economic and political institutions and practices interpenetrate, scholars strived to evade the theoretical and strategic pitfall associated with earlier Marxist feminism: granting one form of labor greater political or economic significance to the project of social renewal than another.

Ultimately, however, that goal proved elusive as SRF accounts revised, but failed to eliminate, the problems associated with a structuralist analysis.³ Just as Hartmann sounded the death knell for reductionist strains of Marxist feminism, Bannerji delivered a fatal blow to this Canadian strain of SRF. In a 1991 article, she highlights the Althusserian influences in socialist feminist political economy, forcefully arguing that they are responsible for the traditions' systematic blindness to the experiential—and to experiences of race and racism in particular.

While concurring with much of Bannerji's critique, I argue in the first half of this article that it is possible to overcome the tendencies toward structuralism and reductionism without abandoning the SRF paradigm as a whole. Rather, at its core – in its foundational concept—SRF is uniquely equipped to conceive of the social as a comprehensive set of contradictory and ever-changing social relations, and of capturing the interplay of subjective and objective processes that this implies. This goes a long way toward addressing Brenner's critique of intersectionality. As well as examining the socio-cultural and economic interplay of various oppressions that scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks have so compellingly drawn to our attention, such a theory encourages us to understand those layered and contradictory experiences as part of a much broader, dynamic and materialist set of social relations—relations created, contested and reproduced by our labor inside and outside the household. The remaining theoretical challenge, however, is to develop an account of how the laboring body at the core of the SRF framework is not only gendered, but also racialized. To that end, I suggest, it's helpful to draw upon David Harvey's notion of socio-geographic spatialization (2001), and recast the SRF foundational concept of labor to incorporate an understanding of its socio-spatial as well as its sex-gender dimensions. In what follows I show why I think this is feasible, and how such a project can, in the words of this journal's editors, "bring both capitalism and class back into the discussion."

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION FEMINISM AND AGENCY

SRF's early proponents introduced the concept of "the expanded mode of production" as a way of capturing the fact that the provision of society's daily and generational needs exceeds the purview of the sphere of formal, paid labor, and depends upon a considerable amount of informal, unpaid labor (predominantly housework, child-bearing and child-rearing). The concept also emphasizes the essential unity of the dynamics in play—the fact that the "logics" governing these two arenas of productive activity, as well as political and cultural formations are integrally related (see, for example, Seccombe, 1987).

But spelling out the nature of that integration was clearly a challenge. Bannerji takes SRF to task for failing to adequately account for the mediation of

social relations. In adapting a positivist reading of *Capital*, she argues, this approach treats the economy as a thing or a structure, and not as a historically changeable set of social relations, the product of people's conscious practical activity. Under the influence of Louis Althusser, she contends, SRF conceived "the social space . . . as a chain of linked 'structures' which somehow 'reproduced' themselves and spun off into others by using human agents to fulfill their will and purpose" (1995:78). And like Althusser, this perspective ultimately reduces the social to the narrowly conceived economy. This analysis, she charges, makes no room for subjectivity, the experiential, for the "active, conscious and creative . . . ground for direct political agency" (1995:78).⁴ Instead, subjects are analytically present only as unconscious bearers of roles determined by the systemic needs of the realms in which they operate. And if people's experiences are rendered irrelevant, the analysis as a whole is "delinked" from history. Indeed, she continues, SRF cannot provide a truly integrative account of the power structures on which it focuses. Even sexism is conceived of as an afterthought, understood as a functional requirement of the economy or, at best, as a cultural/personal attribute of the mode of production. As for *racism*, it rarely receives even that degree of consideration. Women of color, (im)migrant experience and labor are, for the most part, simply absent. "Marxist feminists," she concludes, "create an unbridgeable gap between self, culture and experience, and the world in which they arise and have little to say about political subjectivity" (1995:80).

One need only scratch the surface of the early SRF canon to discover that Bannerji's concerns are well placed. Race and racism are absent from the earliest contributions and remain on the sidelines into the 1990s, despite an effort to widen the SRF lens. For example, the authors of *Recast Dreams*, an otherwise excellent study of gender and class consciousness in Hamilton, Ontario, seek "to break with a 'class first' framework that treats gender, generational and race relations as subsidiary to, or somehow derived from, class relations," by locating the material basis of race and ethnicity in the process of proletarian integration and marginalization (1996:131). They try to show that racist attitudes of white steelworkers can be attributed to the erosion of job security in a recessionary climate, coupled with the yawning social distance between members of "the old white working class" and visible minorities. "In the current context of diminishing material prospects, particularly for their children," write Seccombe and Livingstone, white families "are inclined to blame those beneath them in the class structure or governments that seem to be bending over backwards to assist those others, for the increased vulnerabilities of their own, caught-in-the-middle class" (1996:167).

Accurate or not, such an explanation is highly circumstantial—and slips a class-first analysis in through the backdoor. It also associates race with dark skinned people ("visible minorities"), without inquiring into the manner in which

the “old white working class” is itself implicated in the process of (white) racialization. But most significantly for the purposes of this paper, Bannerji’s criticism still holds: in this account, subjects are overdetermined by a force exterior to themselves (the recessionary climate that increases job insecurity and decreases workers’ expectation of wealth). And subjectivity (here discussed in terms of race consciousness) is explained as a function of—and thus ultimately reducible to—the (economic) realm in which subjects participate.

SITUATING EXPERIENCE

It’s helpful at this point to reflect upon why any account that fails to address experience or social subjectivity is limited. For Bannerji, experience is important not because it is a repository of truth, a claim usually associated with standpoint theory. Rather, experience is the key to constructing—and understanding—consciousness, since it is through experience that individuals interpret or make sense of, the world. Drawing upon Marx and Gramsci, Bannerji argues the need for a “theory of a *conscious* and transformative relation between labor, self and society” (1995:80)—something that can only be achieved by bringing to light, in non-polarized terms, the ways in which specific social moments are mediated. This involves, in the first instance, authenticating personal experience (social subjectivity), naming it, and showing how it is constituted through broader social forces. In so doing, we can draw out the link between the self and capitalist social relations of power. Social theory that begins with the experiential, she suggests, is the only way to guard against false universalizations—against assuming the category “woman” (feminist code word for white, middle class and straight) represents all women. It is also, she notes, the only way to give due consideration to history, to the notion that people create the world in which they live.

As with standpoint theory, Bannerji’s transformative political theory starts from the personal, the subjective. But Bannerji pushes inquiry beyond merely reflecting the immediate fabric of everyday life and feelings that comprise our subjectivities. In so doing, she shifts the analytic lens from a narrow focus on social location to a more comprehensive focus on social *relations*. Theory, she argues, must show how everyday life and subjectivity are socially mediated—show, that is, how the immediate and experiential are moments in a dynamic, historically changing, set of capitalist social relations. Cindi Katz makes a similar point by foregrounding the spatiality of the subjective when she critiques standpoint theory as “a space of zero dimension” (2001:723), and argues for “a politics that simultaneously retains the distinctness of the characteristics of a particular place and builds on its analytic connections to other places along ‘contour lines’ marking, not elevation, but rather a particular relation to a process,”—all part of what she

calls “countertopographies” (2001:721).

This approach doesn’t conceptualize capitalism in abstract, objective terms—as a set of *structures* within which people act in functionally prescribed ways. Rather, the economy, households and state are treated primarily as social relations, a set of past and present *practices* which individuals and groups act out and upon, reproducing and changing them over time. “The social and the historical,” writes Bannerji, “always exist as and in concrete forms of social being and knowing. Our selves and worlds express, embody, encompass and yet extend beyond individual experience, intention and location . . . [revealing both their] uniqueness and . . . species nature” (1995:83). *Experience*, then, is the crucible, linking the (conscious) self and society. Transformative political theory needs to capture the dialectical interplay between the subjective and the social and thereby make clear the ways in which distinct experiences or subjectivities are part of the same, over-arching set of social relations. Capitalism is thus reintroduced into social theory not as an abstract category connoting a narrowly conceived economic system, but as a living, changing set of power relations and social processes.

BEYOND STRUCTURES: LABOR AS EXPERIENCE

Bannerji holds little hope for redeeming SRF from the stranglehold of structuralism and reductionism. But her pessimism may be unwarranted as it overlooks the potential explanatory power of SRF’s foundational concepts—something more recent work in the paradigm is beginning to explore.

Bakker and Gill’s *Power, Production and Social Reproduction*, an international political economy account of globalization published in 2003, makes important advances in this area. Throughout the book, contributors analyze the impact global capital and neo-liberal structures of governance have on racial hierarchies in various times and places—an impact they assess mainly by examining notions of citizenship and capital’s increasing reliance on exploitative regimes of migrant and marginalized labor. But much more critical with respect to overcoming the SRF structuralist, reductionist legacy is the theoretical groundwork Bakker and Gill forge. Social reproduction, they write, is best conceived not so much as a set of intersecting structures, but as “a transformative *process* that not only entails the constitution and reconstitution of gender, race and class and ideas about gender, race and class . . . but also how a sense of identity and resistance can be actualized in this new context of intensified globalization” (2003:18). Such a conception is rooted within a *historical* materialist approach to understanding social relations. Rather than structures in which subjects who bear the weight of some over-arching systemic logic act in ways that are functionally prescribed by that logic, households, culture and the economy are presented as a set of past and

present practices (or experiences) that individuals and groups act out and upon, reproducing *and changing* over time.

The activating force of this transformative process is labor, broadly defined. In resurrecting the foundational concept of SRF, Bakker and Gill draw upon Gramsci to introduce an important distinction between work and labor: work is the broader category here, defined as that process which “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, on the other hand, is more narrowly construed as “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” (2003:19). Gramsci conferred on work, Bakker and Gill point out, ontological status. That is, work is the “creative process” by means of which individuals and groups “forged society, culture and history” (2003:22). This places subjective experience at the center of analysis. Work, writes Gramsci, “is a specific mode by which *man actively participates in natural life in order to transform and socialize it* more and more deeply and extensively” (2003:20, emphasis added). (That much of that work is *alienated*—a distinction Gramsci captures with the term *labor*—explains the very real limits on people’s capacities to fully control that transformation and socialization of natural life.) In drawing attention to Gramsci’s notion of work, Bakker and Gill revive the broad conception of labor at the heart of SRF. Rather than situate work/labor in pre-ordained, abstract entities called “households” or “economies,” they ask us to start with the concept labor as a lived, creative experience, and train our analytic lenses on the “survival strategies” (and not just the formal paid labor) of those whose lives are the grist for the globalization mill.

David Camfield develops a similar position. Drawing on John Holloway’s distillation of Marx, he argues that, insofar as people work to fulfill their needs, they are consciously and actively creating households, the economy—in short, the social world. That world, therefore, is nothing less than a product of their labor (work or creative process). There is nothing, insists Holloway, external to labor: “Work is all-constitutive” (2001:42).⁵ In defining labor broadly to include domestic labor performed to ensure the biological and physical reproduction of the species, suggests Camfield, SRF opens the door to developing a truly integrative social theory. And “because work is recognized as constitutive of society,” the feminist focus on social reproductive labor generally (and not just value-producing labor) makes it possible for all who labor to be “present from the beginning (2001:44). *All* is the key term. “Work,” Camfield writes, “is performed by human beings who, from the moment of their birth, acquire gender identities as social constructions in specific cultural contexts” (2001:45).

Breaking with the earlier SRF tendency to focus on the ways in which

specific social structures interact or intersect, Camfield, Bakker and Gill foreground, develop and enrich the foundational premise of SRF—that we labor (broadly defined, recalling Gramsci’s “work”) to reproduce and change our social relations.⁶ And situating labor—sensuous, practical activity in both its alienated and nonalienated forms – as the starting point of social theory (instead of structures and functions), foregrounds the experiential *and* human agency. This move advances SRF a long way from the structuralism and reductionism Bannerji identifies.

Yet what of the racial dimensions of its foundational concept? In referring to the “specific cultural contexts” into which people are born Camfield creates an opening for understanding ethno-racial identities as acquired at birth—a position that essentially attaches gender and racialization to the very concept of human subjectivity. For Bakker and Gill, that move is more explicit: they posit human subjectivity as “constituted and constrained by different moments of class formation, racialization, sexuality and gender” (2003:21). But in both cases, the notion of racialization is merely linked to subjectivity. The challenge now is to probe the potential of the SRF methodology to explain *how* and *why* subjectivity becomes racialized.

How and why *gender* inhabits the concept of labor was the subject of extended debate and discussion within the SRF tradition, the gist of which can be summed up in the question, “what does biology have to do with the social (or capitalism in particular)?” Although that question may still lack a definitive answer, the dominant working assumption within the SRF tradition goes something like this: an elementary biophysical distinction determines sex-specific tasks around a key aspect of social reproduction, childbirth. True, those consequences vary depending upon the specific socio-historical conditions under which women give birth, but in insisting biology matters, proponents of the SRF perspective effectively suggest that the *type* of laboring body (eg., the concrete particularity of bodies) is critically significant to underwriting the experience of gender in a capitalist world.⁷ (The same biophysical traits may not hold the same—or any—significance for those laboring on and within different social relations.)

SRF scholars, however, have not subjected the laboring body to the same rigorous theoretical examination to explain its racialization. The question that goes begging is: what is it about our laboring bodies that opens up the possibility—and in capitalism, the certainty—that they will be racialized? In order for SRF to lay the basis for an integrated perspective, it is not enough to assume that race and racism attend subjectivity: they, like gender, must be present—and accounted for—from the beginning. The challenge, in other words, is to move from what is descriptively true of laboring human beings—that, as Camfield, Bakker and Gill note, race is “acquired” or “constituted,” and the process of racialization is one of

the various “moments” mediating experience and identities—to an understanding of how and why race comes to inhabit the concept of the laboring subject.

SPATIALIZING THE LABORING BODY

Moving this discussion forward requires elaborating and complexifying the concept of labor that is at the heart of the SRF perspective. It’s helpful to start with the insistence by SRF scholars that social reproduction is not just economic and biophysical. Because we live and reproduce ourselves within communities, it is also deeply cultural. As a result, education, health care, leisure and art, among other things, are invariably implicated in the process of social reproduction. Of course, cultural life is increasingly commodified. But under capitalist social relations—which have developed in and through a history of military and economic imperialism—the state remains a paramount shaper of those aspects that fall outside the market which, despite the drive to privatize, are still considerable.⁸ This geo-political ordering of society overlaps and intersects with a class, gender and racial order in ways that, for the most part, sustain and reproduce the exploitative and oppressive social relations. Yet while the state is a crucial determinant of domestic culture, it is also part of a broader, historically changing network of geo-political blocs that broadly influences cultural (as well as other forms of) reproduction, both internally and externally, through such means as trade and military alliances.

As such, it becomes clear that, as David Harvey argues, it’s not just *what* we do to reproduce society, but *where* we do it that matters in an imperial capitalist world. Harvey laments social theory’s neglect of space and geography, and calls for a “historical-geographical materialism” (2001:17) in which considerations of space and place are “thoroughly integrated into [its] theoretical formulations” (2001:119). While he is primarily concerned with theorizing the spatial organization of capital (including value producing labor), the idea that the full spectrum of people’s reproductive activities are also organized in and through space merits consideration—especially in light of Harvey’s observation that “geographical space is always the realm of the concrete and the particular” (2001:327). That is, 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. That location is always socially determined. It can be teased apart analytically into two basic types of spaces: the territorially based geo-political (defined, for example, by state and regional boundaries, military liaisons, multinational capital investment patterns and trade agreements); and the systemic social relations between people (defined by class, gender and racial divisions). While analytically distinct, these two aspects of space are never experienced in isolation from each other. The geo-political is always lived in and through relations of class, gender and race in a complex unity.

Taking into consideration the spatialization of labor prompts us to think about 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. That is, changing social, economic or political imperatives (shaped by, among other things, efforts of capitalists to maximize profits and actions of the oppressed to better their conditions) determine who gets defined as "other." So while people are necessarily "territorialized" by matter of their birth (we are all born and live *somewhere*), they are only *racialized* as a function of how their location figures in the broader socio-geo-political ordering of capitalism. This explains how, for example, Irish Americans could go from being "black" to "white" as Noel Ignatiev documents in *How the Irish Became White*. The oppressed did not change their place of origin; what changed was the socio-political meaning of coming from Ireland, partly because Irish Americans variously resisted and (insofar as they came to identify with and collaborate in regimes of whiteness) accommodated racism against themselves and others. And partly, the socio-political meaning of their origins changed because the ruling class shifted its methods and ideologies of domination. Place, in other words, has no abstract, a priori meaning; it is only meaningful in and through history.

Certainly, the social meaning of place tends to reflect and respond to the spatial imperatives of the capitalist process of accumulation.⁹ Harvey suggests (citing Marx) that the process of capitalist accumulation involves a contradictory spatial relation: the drive to overcome spatial barriers (to reduce the "turnover time" of capital in the production process) on the one hand, and an expansionary thrust (to develop new markets in which to realize profits) on the other (2001:246). While the manner in which these underlying, contradictory logics become manifest (or indeed *fail* to be realized) is a matter of the balance of competing class and national forces, the dominant historical pattern to date has been one in which the centers of capital accumulation have, through the exercise of military-colonial power and economic imperialism, dominated peripheral regions. (Because nation states are similarly divided internally, "peripheral" countries of the Global South can also be centers of accumulation in their own right.)

The globalization of production does not disrupt this basic pattern, but reinforces it, albeit by incorporating new areas, including global cities and export processing zones. It has also spurred significant processes of displacement and migration (documented, undocumented and coerced). And nation states in the so-called First World (which benefit from such migration) have responded with a range of new, and largely repressive, immigration policies intended to control this

increased flow between borders—or as David McNally suggests, to ensure migrants from the global South enter countries like Canada “frightened, oppressed, vulnerable,” ready to accept low-wage, insecure jobs (2006:190). The neo-liberal governance regime crucial to consolidating the current era of globalization has, in fact, reinforced capitalist spatial relations on the level of both the geo-political and domestic social relations of class, gender and race. The majority of the world’s population experiences this as an encounter with stepped-up border security and toughened immigration laws on the one hand, and with the poverty, sexism and racism that accompany a widening income gap and retrenched state services on the other. The world’s elite and ruling class experience this as increased trade and investment opportunities, along with greater “protection” from the rabble through more policing on city streets, gated communities, and increased investment in security systems.

Before continuing, it’s worth pausing to note that socio-geographic location is largely an accident of birth. Although neither state nor class membership is immutable or uncontested, it is never easy for those in the lower rungs of society to willfully and freely change them. And in the case of state membership, even when people do emigrate, they don’t often escape the implications of the spatial order of global capitalism (even generations later) for reasons I discuss below. However, as with sex differences, the spatial differentiation of laboring bodies wouldn’t necessarily lead to oppression under different (non-capitalist) social relations.

Awareness of labor’s socio-spatial aspects then bids us to take account of the way in which the history of capitalism is shot through with colonial impulses and resistance to them. This becomes all the more pressing in an era of globalized capitalism when issues of citizenship have become front and centre of the political agenda. As the essays in Bakker’s and Gill’s collection compellingly argue, inclusion, exclusion or partial exclusion (as in the case of First Nations) in citizenship increasingly shape a person’s social possibilities and opportunities. Migrant laborers from the global South, people of—or whom are presumed to be of—Arabic background, recent immigrants and First Nations peoples are all among the most targeted racial minorities in North America. They also come from, or share an association with, *other*—read foreign or appropriated—states and lands. That is, in crossing the border and taking up residence or even citizenship in another country, a person doesn’t necessarily escape the implications of the spatial order. Rather, the spatial organization of global capitalism is reproduced inside countries of the North through racial codes that identify immigrants, refugees and people of color as “others,” and physically and socially, through the ghettoization of specific communities and groups of workers—a fact that no doubt contributes to the on-going racism experienced by second- and third-generation immigrants.

Racialization, it must be stressed, doesn't arise automatically from the given geo-political and economic configurations; it is constructed—and resisted—in and through specific socio-historic processes. And it doesn't always involve spatial relations. Racism that arises within a defined geo-political border among citizens with full and equal rights may encompass some spatial element (such as discrimination against southern Italians or the French Basque or Québécois by their compatriots), but it can't be fully understood without considering other socio-historical dynamics. Moreover, white people are racialized too as part of that same process. And while the global spatial order no doubt helps to sustain the subjective dimension of whiteness—through the desire for access to certain neighborhoods and other cultural-institutional spaces, for example—it doesn't fully explain it. Rather, suggests McNally, picking up on ground forged by W.E.B. Dubois, Frantz Fanon and David Roediger, powerful psychological impulses concerning respectability and the repression of desire come into play (2006:168-173).¹⁰ Thus it isn't sufficient to explain racism as merely a function of a person's identification with a certain socio-geographic location. Accounting for the various manifestations of race and racism clearly requires socio-specific historical analyses as well.

CONCLUSION

Injecting a discussion of socio-geographic location into the SRF framework with its broad conception of labor allows us to build an understanding of racialization into the ground floor of social theory, to establish a method by which race and racism, like gender, can be present and accounted for in the beginning. In conceiving labor not as a narrow economic category, but as practical human activity, SRF has long drawn attention to the way in which the laboring body is sexed and gendered. In turning to the *location* of the body, the global nexus of practical human activity comes into focus—specifically the unequal power relations and the attendant processes of racialization that result from the imperialist expansion of capital and the neo-liberal governance regime, both of which are responsible for “placing” certain populations into certain socio-cultural spaces.

The goal of this paper has been to illustrate the potential of the SRF methodology in this regard. I've tried to show that, with its focus on labor broadly defined, SRF is uniquely positioned to answer Bannerji's call for a socially transformative political theory that, in and through its incorporation of experience, conceptually integrates an understanding of race and gender oppressions. Insofar as SRF foregrounds human agency *and* keeps its focus securely on the social whole (which incorporates the economic, cultural, political and household practices and institutions associated with national and global capitalist relations), it provides a framework in which individual experiences are portrayed as discrete moments

within a capitalist totality—that is, a totality comprising, “a certain contradictory unity, albeit a unity in diversity” (Bakker & Gill, 2003:17).

When Brenner critiques intersectionality for its focus on social location as opposed to social relations, she is pointing out that many intersectional analyses fail to connect their descriptively rich accounts to that broader “unity.” Identifying nexuses of oppression and probing their inner workings has the advantage of “starting from experience,” and thus is a clear advance on structuralist political economy. But the most such analyses can do is highlight similarities and differences amongst discrete instances of oppression, and explain those oppressions in terms of contingent economic and cultural forces (state policies, policing practices, or the culture of whiteness, for example). To move beyond this, as Bannerji suggests, involves investigating how these experiences are socially mediated—that is, the way in which various social locations arise in a *shared* social space, a space shaped by certain colonial capitalist exigencies. A revised and expanded SRF framework conceptualizes those intersectional nexuses as products of labor—of creative activity undertaken to reproduce ourselves within this shared space. This, in turn, highlights not only the ways in which we partake in a broader set of social relations—relations that, because of the alienated form of much of our labor, often end up dominating us—but also the *embodied* nature of that activity, the biophysical differentiation and spatial location of the laboring body that, under conditions of capitalist reproduction, inscribe that body with both gender *and* race. As a result, real and systemic connections between the endlessly varied struggles of the oppressed become apparent, between, for instance, a childcare worker strike in Vancouver, the struggle to protect schooling for girls in Kabul and the environmental movement against mega-dams along India’s River Narmada.

The way in which this Canadian strain of SRF attempts to draw such connections dovetails with recent projects within American social reproduction literature. Emphasizing the capacity of social reproduction theory to analyze “*how* rule is accomplished,” Katz stresses that “we need to examine the multiple interlinked forces within which the body of the laborer is constituted and hegemonic norms develop” (Mitchell et al., 2004:18, 14). And this, she insists, means being attentive to the sort of complex unities to which Bakker and Gill refer. For Katz, this involves developing a *spatial* politics, a politics of “countertopographies” that “asks what connections there might be among sweatshop Bangladesh, *maquiladora* Mexico, and the prison work camps of the US, or among structurally adjusted Sudan, welfare-reformed Britain, and neoliberal Brazil” (2001:724).

In grounding SRF in a revolutionary conception of labor which embodies all the things that capital (and global capital ever more vigorously) both exploits and attempts to deny—location, biology and the social—the methodological basis

exists from which a conceptually integrative and transformative theory can arise. And because it is one that foregrounds the dialectical relationship of the subject to the totality of social relations, it can account for both capitalist power and the resistance that power breeds.

NOTES

¹ I want to thank David McNally for his helpful comments and support.

² My use of the term “race” requires some qualification. I agree with those who argue that race has no biological, or “natural” foundation but is, rather, a social and historical construct “invented” as part of the justification for oppression and exploitation (see McNally, 2006:156-68) but retain the term to reflect a lived reality in which people are *racialized* through political, ideological and economic processes.

³ For a discussion of the developing SRF framework and its limitations, see my article in *New Politics* (Ferguson, 1999).

⁴ I use these two terms interchangeably. While *experience*, it can be argued, refers to broader, more situated phenomena, *subjectivity* is never simply individual, but inherently social and, in that sense, experiential.

⁵ This comment needs some clarification: even if the world is *mediated* by labor, not everything is *produced* by labor (eg., oceans, forests, DNA).

⁶ Humans, that is, are social creators, albeit nobody starts from zero: we create within the conditions in which we’re born (which are themselves, the product of past labor or creative activity).

⁷ Male and female are not, of course, the only biological options, but they are the two sexes recognized by the dominant culture.

⁸ Of course, culture *does* exist outside and against the state, but the state is a dominant arbiter of a shrinking sphere of non-commodified cultural goods, opportunities and good taste. And through its regulatory regime, it even shapes culture that is fully marketized.

⁹ My terminology requires clarification here: “determines,” “reflect and respond to” are not intended to convey direct causality. Rather, I use them in the sense Raymond Williams outlines of setting limits and exerting pressures.

¹⁰ Only under capitalism does a doctrine of racial inferiorization develop. In all preceding class societies, oppression was naturalized, determined by birth. Such distinctions supposedly disappear under capitalism. But because the vast wealth of early capitalists was built upon one of the brutal mass enslavement of African and Indigenous peoples, a justification for inequality was sorely needed. This need was answered with the scientific doctrine of race, positing Blacks as genetically inferior (McNally, 2006:156-59).

REFERENCES

- Bakker, I. & Gill, S. Eds. (2003). *Power, production and social reproduction*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bannerji, H. (1991). But who speaks for us? Experience and agency in conventional feminist paradigms. In H. Bannerji, L. Carty & K. Delhi (Eds.), *Unsettling relations: The university as a site of feminist struggles*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
- _____. (1995). *Thinking through: Essays on feminism, Marxism and anti-racism*. Toronto, Women's Press.
- Brenner, J. (2000). Intersections, locations, and capitalist class relations: Intersectionality from a Marxist perspective. In J. Brenner (Ed.), *Women and the politics of class*, pp. 293-324. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Camfield, D. (2002). Beyond adding on gender and class: Revisiting Marxism and feminism. *Studies in Political Economy*, 68:37-54.
- Ferguson, S. (1999). Building on the strengths of the socialist feminist tradition. *New Politics*, 26:89-100.
- Hartmann, H. (1979). The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism. *Capital and Class*, 8:1-33.
- Harvey, D. (2001). *Spaces of capital: Towards a critical geography*. New York: Routledge.
- Katz, C. (2001). Vagabond capitalism and the necessity of social reproduction. *Antipode*, 33(4):709-728.
- Livingstone, D. & Mangan, J.M. Eds. (1996). *Recast dreams: Class and gender consciousness in steeltown*. Toronto: Garamond.
- Marx, K. (1973). *Grundrisse*. Middlesex: Harmondsworth.
- McNally, D. (2006). *Another world is possible*, 2nd ed. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring.
- Mitchell, K., Marston, S.A., & Katz, C. (2004). Life's work: An introduction, review and critique. Pp. 1-26 In K. Mitchell, S.A. Marston, & C. Katz. (Eds.), *Life's work: Geographies of social reproduction*, MA: Blackwell.
- Seccombe, W. (1987). Reflections on the domestic labor debate and prospects for Marxist-feminist synthesis. In R. Hamilton & M. Barrett (Eds.), *The politics of diversity: Feminism, Marxism and nationalism*, pp. 190-297. Montreal: Book Centre Inc.