



## Refugees and racial capitalism: Meatpacking and the primitive accumulation of labor



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### ABSTRACT

When meatpacking plants in the United States lost a third of their undocumented Latinx workers to Federal immigration raids in the late 2000s, the industry began recruiting vulnerable, but “legal,” refugee workers to replace them. In the spring of 2020, as COVID-19 threatened to halt meatpacking, two separate executive orders designated meatpacking production as essential to the United States food system and introduced new restrictions on refugee resettlement in the United States. Bridging Marxian literature on race, labor, and capitalism and critical refugee studies, this paper examines the paradox of refugees’ positioning as both “essential” sources of vulnerable labor and “prohibited” threats to the American nation-state. We argue that the placement of refugees in meatpacking jobs is actually the primitive accumulation of unfree labor. In the case of “essential” meatpacking work in the United States, racial capitalism articulates with conditions of statelessness and unequal citizenship rights to anchor “prohibited” refugees to meatpacking work.

### 1. Introduction

In the spring of 2020, meatpacking plants all over the world became hotspots for COVID-19 outbreaks (Molteni 2020). By April 27, more than 5000 meatpacking workers in 19 US states had tested positive for coronavirus. Fearful of spreading the disease and killing the workforce, twenty-two meatpacking plants across the country shut down. Given how highly consolidated the industry is and the enormous volume of meat that comes out of each plant, a high number of plant closures threatened global meat supply chains, and shelves began running bare. But President Donald Trump, citing section 101(b) of the Defense Production Act, a 1950’s era law dating from the Korean War, issued an executive order effectively claiming authority over the meat production system in the United States and ordering Food and Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue to “ensure America’s meat and poultry processors continue operations” (Trump, 2020a). Trump stated, “[Meatpacking plant closures] threaten the continued functioning of the national meat and poultry supply chain, undermining critical infrastructure during the national emergency” (ibid). John Tyson, the chairman of Tyson Foods, one of the four largest meatpackers in the US, took out full page ads in the country’s largest newspapers to warn that “the nation’s food supply

is breaking.” He wrote, “As pork, beef and chicken plants are being forced to close, even for short periods of time, millions of pounds of meat will disappear from the supply chain” (Mansoor 2020). Meatpacking was quickly designated “critical infrastructure,” and meatpacking workers were designated as “essential workers,” ordered to stay on the job even though they risked their lives in the plants.

On March 19, 2020, the Trump administration “paused” refugee admissions entirely due to the coronavirus pandemic. In the same week, Trump issued an executive order entitled “Enhancing State and Local Involvement in Refugee Resettlement,” mandating written permission from local and state officials in any jurisdiction where refugees – or displaced people whose claims to asylum based on a “well-founded fear” of persecution according to race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, or political orientation have been recognized by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) – will be resettled. The two orders sowed chaos among refugee resettlement agencies and effectively halted resettlement for tens of thousands of refugees between March and June on the grounds that they posed a threat to native-born workers in contracting labor markets (Trump, 2020b). Even after the “pause” was lifted, refugee admissions remained close to zero. Refugee admissions in the US had already been plummeting – from a planned 115,000 in the

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last year of the Obama Administration, the Trump Administration had already reduced admissions to 11,814 for fiscal year 2020. But with the new executive order, the Trump Administration *de facto* limited refugee admissions to 4149 between June and the end of the fiscal year in September – a near complete ban<sup>1</sup> on refugee workers aimed at preventing refugees from pushing low-wage American workers out of a labor market where unemployment was rising rapidly.

The irony here is that very often, meatpacking workers are refugees. While the greatest proportion of immigrants in US meatpacking are still from Mexico, over the last ten years the industry has increasingly relied on refugees who are placed in the plants by the agencies who resettle them on behalf of the US government. People displaced by civil war and conflict in Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Ethiopia and other locations are now a vital source of workers for the meatpacking industry, and without an ongoing flow of refugee labor, the meatpacking industry can no longer function. This puts refugees in a curious position: they are both *essential* and *prohibited*, valorized as low-wage workers and stigmatized as potential sources of infection and labor market disruption.

In this paper, we seek to understand the paradoxical status of being both essential and prohibited by rethinking the ways refugees are supposedly integrated into labor markets. Refugee integration in labor markets is often thought of as a form of humanitarianism – particularly in the US, where resettlement work is most often carried out by groups affiliated with churches and other religious organizations. Despite the fact that the majority of the world's refugees live in cities, refugees are often thought of as “surplus” populations, people contained in camps and excised from the workings of capitalism (c.f. Rajaram, 2018). The problem of refugees’ disconnection from capital presupposes the solution of *reconnecting* them with capital through their integration in labor markets. This reconnection is then framed as benevolence, a generous gift given by governments and NGOs meant to restore dignity to people through work.

But what happens when we think of policies that insert refugees into the labor market not as humanitarian action, but as a form of expropriation essential to the workings of capitalism itself? In what ways does the drive to quarantine refugees in low-wage, racialized jobs where English language skills are not required a means of creating the conditions necessary for capitalism rather than serving refugees themselves? To ask a larger question, what does the shift from undocumented labor to documented, “legal” refugee labor in the United States meatpacking industry tell us about how states, labor, and capital function in the 21st century?

We argue that “essential” meatpacking work in the United States is based on a conjuncture where racism meets conditions of statelessness and unequal citizenship rights. This anchors “prohibited” refugees to meatpacking work. We begin by showing that when states and state-sponsored refugee resettlement organizations slot recently resettled refugees into meatpacking jobs, they are enabling the primitive accumulation of labor. We define primitive accumulation as the ongoing process of seizing human and non-human natures, including racialized, gendered, and colonized labor (Moore, 2015, p. 55, Federici, 2010; Harvey, 2004; Issar, 2021; Nichols, 2021). Here, the political production of refugee crises allows resettlement agencies and meatpacking firms work together to engage in accumulation by dispossession, a process in which elements of value such as labor are taken away from the poor and allocated to the rich (Harvey, 2004).

Second, we center Black Radical approaches to unfree labor to

extend Nancy Fraser’s (2018) claim that primitive accumulation is made possible by racial oppression. We show that the primitive accumulation of refugee labor is facilitated by both ideas of race and citizenship, which confine refugees to a bounded, racialized niche in the labor market. Finally, we assert that refugee capitalism, as a historically specific expression of wider structures of racial capitalism, produces capitalist labor frontiers that are essential to the capitalist economy as a whole.

### 1.1. Methods

This research is informed by 20 years of combined mixed-methods experience working with meatpacking workers (Dunn, 2003, 2007; Frydenlund 2020). It is also informed by one of the authors’ experience as an executive board member of a federally-sponsored refugee resettlement agency, and both authors’ experience volunteering at refugee-serving organizations since 2015. For this article, we began by forming a macro-scale understanding of the link between COVID-19 and changes in the US resettlement process by analyzing news media articles and Executive Orders from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as an analysis of quantitative refugee resettlement data from the US Department of State. We paired this analysis of secondary sources and resettlement data with qualitative data from over 100 interviews with refugee workers, labor activists, municipal officials, refugee resettlement employees, and community members in Indiana and Colorado conducted between 2015 and 2021.

### 1.2. Meatpacking as a niche in the labor market

Meatpacking is what economists call a “labor market niche,” that is, a specific line of work or segment of an occupation that is dominated by a defined social group (Eckstein and Peri, 2018). The industry has long depended on racialized and immigrant labor. In the late 19th and early 20th century, workers from Eastern Europe - then highly ethnicized and racialized as non-whites (Roediger & Esch, 2012) did the dirty, bloody work on the kill floors (Sinclair, 1906). As the meatpacking plants were moved out of urban areas and into small rural towns, the industry sought new sources of labor. In poultry production, most of the workers in the mid-twentieth century were African American. But as African American workers began to unionize, the meatpacking industry sought laborers who were more vulnerable, and hence less able to organize, in order to create competition for African Americans’ jobs in the industry (Freshour 2018).

Mexican and Guatemalan workers became a high-volume source of labor to replace unionized workers and fill jobs that American citizens refused to do without high wages and social protections. In some cases, these workers were recruited in Mexico and brought to the United States on H2B visas, which are for temporary, non-resident non-agricultural workers. Municipalities often supported this introduction of immigrant labor as a strategy of urban redevelopment, using both immigrants’ wage labor and their families’ unpaid reproductive labor to revitalize local economies (Miraftab, 2016, p. 141).

Indeed, in a small town north of Denver where one of the authors once lived, there was a bus that ran directly from Durango, Mexico, to a bus stop in front of the Longmont, Colorado turkey processing plant. Plant officials recruited workers from Durango and put them directly on the bus to Longmont to begin work. Although some meatpacking workers had H-2B visas, which are for temporary non-agricultural workers, many others were undocumented because they either never possessed visas or had overstayed them.

The strategy of hiring undocumented labor soon became highly problematic for meatpacking firms. On December 12, 2006, over 1000 agents from US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raided six plants owned by Swift and Company in the largest immigration raid in US history (Boyle, 2006). More than 12,000 workers were detained in the plants, and nearly 1300 were eventually arrested and sent to federal detention centers. The plants had to shut down for days, and eventually

<sup>1</sup> Of the 4149 refugees admitted between the end of the “pause” in June 2020 and the end of FY2020 on September 30, the Trump Administration reserved 903 slots for Special Immigrant Visas, or admissions for people who helped the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan (US Department of State, 2021). This reduced the *de facto* admission rate for other refugees to a mere 3,246 - a number that is, in comparison to pre-Trump admission numbers, very nearly a complete exclusion of refugees.

lost nearly 10% of the plants' staff as workers were arrested and then deported. This was not the full extent of the issue: given that the raids only detained workers on first shift, the proportion of undocumented workers in the plant was likely closer to 30%. The cost to the firm from these raids was in the millions of dollars, and it highlighted how financially vulnerable a dependence on undocumented labor made the industry.

The Swift raids opened a new, much more aggressive era in immigration policy in the US. The government's goal was to force the meatpacking industry to hire US citizens. But as a meatpacking industry lobbyist told one of us (Dunn, 2004), there were two problems with this strategy: first, meatpacking was the most dangerous job in America, according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Schlosser, 2000), and most white Americans refused to do it. Second, the growing opioid crisis in rural America made native-born white workers in rural towns a risk to the company. As the lobbyist said, "heroin and meat saws are a bad mix."

Refugees' importance to meatpacking capital became apparent when companies like Swift and like JBS, the Brazilian meatpacker that bought Swift in 2005, abandoned undocumented workers and sought to inject ailing plants workers that were equally vulnerable and exploitable, but that also had legal permission to work. While searching for documented workers from immigrant Latinx communities in Denver, JBS head of human resources Christopher Gaddis "discovered" Somali, Eritrean, and Congolese refugees instead (Murray, 2013). He quickly forged direct connections with refugee resettlement agencies and service organizations to ensure a steady supply of legal refugee workers. Refugee resettlement agencies, struggling to place newly arriving refugees in jobs that did not require English language skills at the height of the 2008 financial crisis, were eager to send refugees to JBS and Cargill. The companies quickly found that offering signing bonuses in lieu of wages higher than \$15 per hour was a strategy that not only attracted refugees desperate for cash to start new lives in state with high costs of living, but that also suppressed wages in the long term.

At first, undocumented Mexican workers at the Greeley JBS plant were replaced with a mostly Somali refugee workforce, who were placed there by the African Community Center and Lutheran Family Services, two resettlement agencies in Denver who were contracted by the US federal government to find housing and jobs for newly arriving refugees. The Somalis were more tractable than most US citizens, who demanded higher wages and better benefits. But they posed another problem: as observant Muslims with a well-organized presence in the plant, a group of Somali Muslim representatives requested breaks five times a day for Muslim workers so they could pray for Ramadan in 2008. Citing safety and productivity concerns over so many people leaving the line at once – line slowdowns cost hundreds of thousands of dollars per minute – JBS was unwilling to accommodate them and demanded that Muslim employees continue working without modified breaks. Dissatisfied with the negotiations, a group of Somali Muslim workers then walked off the job and refused to report to work the next day. Management then agreed to allow the B shift to break 15 min later to accommodate Ramadan fasting, but on the second day after negotiations, a large group of mostly Hispanic workers protested the accommodations. JBS then reneged on the agreement with the Somali workers, citing grounds that the agreement violated the union agreement. When 80 Somali workers took their break to pray, they were fired (Verlee 2008). As one worker told a journalist, "When they see Somalian women, or Somalian men leaving the line, they would prevent them from doing so, and say that the work is going on and you have to keep on working. We don't pay you to pray, we pay you to work" (VOA, 2009). The Greeley workers then joined workers from a plant in Grand Island, Nebraska who had a nearly identical experience to file a lawsuit with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in the spring of 2008. A federal panel ruled in September 2009 that the meatpacker had in fact violated workers' civil rights, but the ruling was overturned in the federal court of appeals in 2016.

JBS executives were soon keen to acquire another source of

documented, but less organized, set of workers. Other plants had been hiring refugee workers from Southeast Asia for decades. In Garden City, Kansas, for example, Vietnamese and Lao refugees had staffed the plant since the mid-1960s (Benson, 1996). So, in Greeley, the JBS beefpacking plant began hiring newly arriving Burmese, Chin, Karen, Karenni, and Rohingya workers from Burma, again mostly placed there by refugee resettlement agencies. Most refugees from Burma were Christian, and while the Rohingyas were Muslim, they did not demand line shutdowns. This was in part because Burmese and Rohingya refugees' specific experiences with the Burmese military and junta government often sowed profound distrust of authority and the state (see also Ong, 2003). In particular, refugees from Myanmar often believed that "causing trouble" at work or speaking out against discrimination would result in the loss of their green cards, TANF benefits, and section 8 housing vouchers. In Logansport, Indiana, Exodus Refugee Immigration placed Karen and Karenni workers in a pork processing plant owned by Tyson Foods.<sup>2</sup> Other Burmese workers who had originally been resettled in Fort Wayne, Indiana, joined them, making a commute of more than 2 h each way. Increasingly, the cheap meat that made up such a high proportion of the all-American diet was produced by refugee workers brought from far away.

### 1.3. Refugees and racial capitalism

Given that meatpacking jobs are dangerous, painful, and increasingly deadly in the wake of the pandemic, why do refugees do them? If refugees are "free" labor in a capitalist economy, why do they sell their labor to meatpackers? We argue that in fact, refugee labor is not free labor, and that refugees' labor unfreedom is characterized by a state-sanctioned system of coercion that funnels them into a labor market niche marked by ideologies of both race and statelessness. While in some cases, migrant "illegality" is a critical condition of labor subordination in racial capitalist systems (De Genova, 2019:5), in the case of refugees admitted by the US Department of State, it is their particular form of *contingent legality* that joins with racial oppression to render refugees into easily expropriated unfree labor. As we explain below, we use the term "unfree labor" quite consciously to refer not to a dichotomy between completely free and completely unfree labor, but rather to draw attention to a spectrum of unfreedom or coercion and to emphasize the effects of state coercion (Chartrand & Vosko, 2021: 5, Fraser, 2018:12, De Genova, 2019).

Unlike most European countries, the US resettlement system provides remarkably little help to newly arriving refugees. In Germany, for example, refugees are given state-subsidized housing for months or years, along with mandatory language and civics courses. The German government provides this extensive training in hopes of incorporating refugees from middle-income countries, particularly Syria, into its economy as highly skilled laborers in high-tech factories to replace its aging workforce (Momin, 2017). In the US, by contrast, help is scant. Refugees arrive in debt: the US Department of State loans them the money for plane tickets to the US, but demands repayment in the first year, which means that refugees arrive already thousands of dollars in debt. Resettlement agencies rent apartments for them and furnish them with second-hand furniture, kitchen equipment, bedding, and so on. Refugees get 90 days of rent and up to 180 days of paid utilities, along with \$425 per person in cash assistance for clothing and other needs. Most are eligible for Medicaid, which is state-funded healthcare, and other state-sponsored social benefits, but these are not enough to lift refugees out of poverty. The goal outlined by the US Department of State is for refugees to be economically self-sufficient within three months of

<sup>2</sup> This information comes from Cole Varga, the executive director of Exodus Refugee Immigration.

their arrival.<sup>3</sup>

For resettlement agencies and the refugees they serve, this enormous financial pressure creates a strong incentive for refugees to be placed in jobs as quickly as possible. Those jobs are at the bottom of the economic pecking order: in addition to food processing, refugees often work in fulfillment warehouses (like Amazon's), clean hotel rooms, or do assembly line work. Although meatpacking pays more than many entry-level jobs in the retail sector—an average of \$14.75 an hour, as opposed to minimum wages ranging from \$7.25 an hour in Indiana or \$12.00 an hour in Colorado—the annual wage that most workers is far enough above the poverty line to disqualify them from most federal aid programs while being not enough to actually make ends meet. While the federal poverty line for a family of three is \$21,720 for a family of three, the actual cost of living for that family on Colorado's Front Range, where skyrocketing property values have driven up rents, is about \$59,564 (McCoy, 2020). A full-time entry level employee in JBS's Greeley plant makes \$29,500 before taxes. This clearly creates enormous pressure on refugee families, who must also pay for childcare or have a non-working adult at home. Working in jobs American citizens will not do quickly becomes necessary for survival. Once refugees have entered low-skill, low-English jobs, they are often stuck. Shift work and a lack of transportation often precludes attending English classes at resettlement agencies, and because they work with co-ethnics, many do not learn English on the job. Exiting these labor market niches then becomes very difficult.

Labor market niches are often defined by skill sets: a particular group has a lock on the skills necessary to do the job, for example, as among artisanal furniture makers or rug weavers who pass the skill down from generation to generation. But labor market niches are also defined in terms of ethnicity, as when Vietnamese nail salons recruit new workers among their own ethnically defined social networks. The development of immigrant niches in labor markets is not new: it is a well-documented feature of developed economies in both Europe and North America (Friberg and Mitboen 2018). But this has mostly been explained as something that immigrants do preferentially, for themselves, by hiring co-ethnics in businesses they own or referring co-ethnics to their employers to build so-called immigrant enclave economies (Portes and Jensen, 1989). That is to say, immigrant niches are generally seen as the product of free labor, of working people who can choose whether and where to sell their own labor. As Eckstein and Peri [2018:2] say, optimistically,

"We explain the dependence of niching on demand for their skills, their abilities, and, more generally, their individual characteristics. Once an immigrant group gets a footing in a particular line of economic activity, in-group social networks and informal dynamics contribute to that group's continued association with the niche .... These forces impede unfettered market forces from determining who does what work, but in ways that may enhance economic production and productivity by inducing worker loyalty, commitments, and investments."

Often, these kinds of labor market niches are described in positive terms, as "enclaves" that help immigrant groups sponsor and resettle new members (e.g., Edin et al., 2003). "Immigrant enclaves" are seen as a pathway to social integration and upwards economic mobility, a pathway to the American dream in which the arriving generation works in ethnically defined labor market sectors to facilitate the education and social integration of their children into a wider, and whiter, generalized labor market.

Meatpacking, however, is not a labor market niche defined by skill. As the switch from Mexican to Somali to Rohingya workers in Greeley

over a decade shows, it is also not defined by ethnic networks. Rather, the niche is defined both by racialization – by the categorization of a wide array of workers as un-white, albeit in different ways – and by a network of government-sanctioned nonprofits that constitutes specific relations of coercion and unfreedom. Workers being hired are being placed there by resettlement agencies, who create pipelines into a racialized labor market niche by economically pressuring indebted refugees to take low-wage dangerous jobs. Refugees are pushed toward economic self-sufficiency both because the agencies themselves are being coerced by the Department of State to place refugees as quickly as possible and because they must fill gaps in federal funding with money from donors. This funding is tied to the agency's "success," which is measured by refugee rates of employment within a 90-day period. This hurried integration of refugees into a racially-defined labor market reflects both liberal ideologies of self-reliance and settler colonial imaginaries, making racialization an integral part of refugees' access to prosperity and liberal freedoms from the very beginning (Lowe, 2015: 5).

The meatpacking labor market niche is also defined by the unique combination of racialized identity and citizenship status. Refugee workers are hired preferentially in meatpacking, expressly because they do not have the capacity for easy exit and are believed to be well-suited to demanding and dirty labor on the basis of biological constitution and previous work in agriculture or animal husbandry. Like undocumented workers in other parts of agriculture – for example, farmworkers from Mexico (Holmes, 2016) – their legal status, past traumas as victims of genocide and military violence, socially disdained ethnic identities and religious affiliations (e.g., Islam), and lack of English skills make it difficult for them to organize, bargain collectively, strike, or use any of the other tools of labor activism developed in the nineteenth and twentieth century labor movements. In fact, Somali workers' attempts at bargaining failed in part because of backlash from mostly Catholic Mexican coworkers, who were positioned as competitors in the labor market. It has also proven to be nearly impossible for refugees to simply quit their jobs, even when their very lives are at stake: refugee meatpackers largely kept working during the COVID pandemic, even though by September 2020, more than 42,534 workers had tested positive in 494 packing plants, and over 203 meatpacking workers had died (Kindy, 2020).

#### 1.4. Unfree labor

Among employees at the Colorado Office of Refugee Resettlement, it is widely understood that refugees choose to work in meatpacking plants because the signing bonuses and \$18 an hour wages are more than they could get elsewhere. But this is not true. First of all, when commuting and other costs are taken into account, \$18 is not a particularly high wage for the region. Most refugees take meatpacking jobs because they see meatpacking as their only choice. This is a vital distinction that invites a rereading of debates over the meaning of free and unfree labor.

In his analysis of capitalism, Karl Marx (1990 [1867]) argued that the use of unfree labor is foundational to capitalism. Slave labor was part of what Marx called "primitive accumulation," or a moment in which initial capital is accrued through the violent seizure of labor, land, or other resources (Melamed 2015: 76). In Marx's rendering, primitive accumulation for the beginning of capitalism is the equivalent of the Big Bang for the beginning of the universe: a violent process that nonetheless is a one-off moment, since it begins a cycle that afterwards is self-sustaining. Violent coercion is necessary for capitalism only once, says Marx, because afterwards the structure of economic relations themselves compel workers to sell their labor. Slavery thus appears to become quickly unnecessary and outdated, because the wage relation itself does the work of enslavement while maintaining the facade of free choice (Graeber 2006).

Cedric Robinson, in his foundational work [Robinson \(2020\)](#), disputes Marx's view of primitive accumulation as a singular moment. Instead, he

<sup>3</sup> This information comes from the authors' involvement with refugee resettlement agencies in Colorado and Indiana.

argues, the constant production and introduction of unfree labor into the capitalist system is essential to its functioning. Although we often associate the relationship of enslaved labor to capitalism with colonialism, Robinson argues that the category of the slave and the use of enslaved labor pre-dated Europe's relation with Africa and was a precondition for capitalism itself (Robinson, 2020). Among the traders of the Mediterranean in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, enslaved Tatars, Circassians, Slavs, and others became essential to the workings of merchant capitalism. Medieval intra-European slavery then became the model for African slavery.

Robinson's point is twofold. First, he argues that the introduction of unfree labor into the capitalist system is *not* the result of essential racial differences between Europeans and their colonial others. Indeed, as McKittrick (2011) argues, the meaning of blackness (and whiteness) varies across time and space. Rather, he argues, capitalism itself is dependent for its functioning on the production of human difference and relations of inequality, and it produces those relations through ideologies of race and racism. It is only by ideologically producing a marked group as racially inferior that their labor can be seized from outside the capitalist system, violently expropriated, and appropriated into capitalist production and circulation. Jodi Melamed rephrases the point:

Capitalism is racial capitalism. Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups ... These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires (Melamed 2016: 77).

Second, Robinson argues that although primitive accumulation through the violent appropriation of enslaved labor is essential for capitalism, it did not and does not happen in an originary "big bang" moment. Rather, capitalism requires the continuous appropriation of unfree labor. As scholars including Robinson (1983), Mintz (1981), and Trouillot (1982) have argued, slave labor was not just necessary for the initial production of capitalism writ large, but for the ongoing reproduction of wage labor and the circulation of capital. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the seizure and enslavement of African people was essential to the production of sugar in the Caribbean. That sugar, along with other slave-produced crops including cocoa, coffee and tea, was what made it possible to feed urban workers in England, people who had been violently separated from their lands by the Enclosure Acts and forced to move into the cities to work in the newly emerging factories. The industrial revolution, and the development of industrial capital, thus depended on the constant application of unfree labor. Wage labor, which was indirectly coercive, depended for its very existence on the direct coercion and unfreedom of the slave system.

Marxian theorists have shown how capitalism is likewise dependent on the violent production of frontiers. For Lenin (1999 [1916]) and Rosa Luxemburg (2015 [1913]), imperialism, war, and the colonization of "natural economies" outside capitalism supplied capital with new sites for the primitive accumulation of raw materials and creation of new consumer markets. Grappling with capitalism's dynamism and resilience in the era of finance capital and globalization, David Harvey argued that primitive accumulation was an ongoing process of accumulation by dispossession, a process in which elites manipulated geopolitics and macro-level economic factors to reallocate goods from the public domain, where poor people could access them, to the private domain, where the wealthy could profit from them. Marxist Feminists linked global capitalism with the scale of the body, theorizing the theft of women's labor and reproductive capacities as foundational processes of primitive accumulation that led to the rise of capitalism (Caffentzis, 1999; Federici, 2004, 2010). The continuous, dialectical process of appropriating unfree and unpaid labor - or the production of labor frontiers - is yet another facet of global capitalist development (Frydenlund, 2020; Dunn, 2004, see also Miraftab, 2016 and Moore, 2015).

Broadly speaking, a capitalist frontier is the boundary between capitalist and non-capitalist worlds (Ballvé, 2013; Li, 2005, 2014; Moore, 2015; Smith, 2013). As world systems theorists argued in the 1980s and 1990s, capitalism's restless expansion depends for its very existence on these frontiers, on the ability to draw what is outside it into itself, relentlessly commodifying and appropriating whatever it encounters, transforming it into capital and launching it into circuits of transformation into goods and money (Moore, 2015; Hopkins et al., 1987; Wallerstein, 1989: Chapter 3). These processes of "incorporation," as the World System theorists called it, are mostly thought of geographically, as a problem of how capitalism incorporates far-flung regions into increasingly distant circuits of capital circulation. But rather than thinking of the problem in terms of geographically fixed locations and frontiers that move across space, we can think of the frontier as being embodied in persons - people who are mobile, people who bring the frontier of primitive accumulation with them as they move into the heartland of capitalist production.<sup>4</sup> Seen from the standpoint of accumulation by dispossession, the compulsion to move from one place to another occurs simultaneously and continuously alongside the accumulation of mobile peoples' labor to reproduce capitalism writ large.

Like other migrant workers, refugees embody capitalism's mobile frontier. Unlike many other kinds of labor migrants, however, refugees mark a special kind of frontier: one in which unfree labor is brought into the ambit of capitalist circulation for the continual reproduction of primitive accumulation and racial capitalism itself.

The question of whether the primitive accumulation of labor only existed as a historical precondition of capital or whether unfree labor persists in capitalism has been fiercely contested by Marxian labor scholars. Brass (2003, 2015), for example, argues that only stark forms such as chattel slavery or serfdom constitute unfree labor, and that while these forms persist in capitalism, they have largely been superseded (see, for example, Brass, 2003, 2015). Other scholars have argued that capitalism's forces of economic compulsion make all forms of labor "unfree" and suggest that all labor, even market-based wage labor, is always being pushed toward this endpoint of racialized enslavement (Banaji 2003, De Genova, 2019: 3). We think this debate is framed incorrectly. Rather than debating whether enslavement persists in contemporary capitalism (of course it does) or whether wage labor has ever been free in relation to individual choice (of course wage labor is never a completely free choice), it is more useful to consider *why* and *how* people in wage labor markets are coerced into specific jobs where they are unable to leave if they want to. We argue that refugee workers experience labor unfreedom as the condition of being coerced by the state to sell their labor in a *specific sector* and to specific capitalists – what we rethink here as a "labor niche."

Labor market niches are based on a continuum of unfreedom. Obviously, refugees in the United States are not enslaved as chattel or as indentured servants. Yet, they are not as "free" as more privileged workers who can find work in multiple sectors and sell their labor to a diverse array of capitalists. Their placement in the meatpacking industry is not the product of voluntary self-placement in an ethnicized industry where individualized workers can "work their way up" in the American economic hierarchy if they work hard enough. Rather, refugees hover

<sup>4</sup> For example, Chinese workers' subjectivization as distinctly "mobile" workers who were neither "free" nor chattel slaves amid the 19th century race to build the transcontinental railroad reflected the role of capitalism's "racial calculus," which enabled the expropriation of both wage labor and unpaid social reproduction labor (Karuka 2019: 93). As Chartrand and Vosko (2021) demonstrate in their analysis of Canadian immigrant worker programs, Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) and International Mobility Program (IMP) institutions are bound up with racial and colonial relations that identify new sources of labor to expropriate and reproduce precarious labor relations across multiple scales (Chartrand and Vosko, 2021: 14).

uncomfortably on the far end of the gradient of labor's so-called freedom.<sup>5</sup>

As the COVID-19 pandemic revealed in uncomfortable ways, the American labor market is based on a spectrum where, on one end, employment is characterized by *privileged* forms of mobility (including the capacity for remote work) and on the other end, precarious and highly constrained in ways that require workers' presence in particular locations (Ong, 2003; Hewison & Kalleberg, 2013; Katz, Marston, & Mitchell, 2015; Meehan & Kendra Stauss, 2018; Vosko, 2000, 2006, 2010). This precarious employment can be experienced as both hypermobility in the case of migrant farm workers or as chronic immobility in the case of people tied to one occupation or location.

Refugees become a stream of highly coerced or constrained workers brought in across a capitalist frontier because exploiting their labor is necessary to the continuation of a capitalist industrial sector. Like the enslaved labor that produced the food that fueled the industrial revolution (see Mintz, 1981), refugee labor is literally essential to the reproduction of other forms of wage labor. Without the cheap pork and beef and chicken that refugee workers produce, other wage workers in the US and abroad will be literally unable to feed themselves and reproduce their labor. So, President Trump was not wrong when he proclaimed meatpacking to be "critical infrastructure" and meatpacking workers to be essential workers. Their in-person work, which put them at high risk of exposure to COVID, was necessary so that other workers could work remotely, thus reducing their risk of exposure and keeping the nation's infrastructure operating (Lakoff 2020). Andrew Lakoff writes,

"At the heart of the essential worker policy was an assumption that the well-being of the collective depended on securing the continuous flow of resources through a set of vital, vulnerable systems."

As Gavin Newsom, the governor of California wrote in his executive order permitting essential workers to break the stay-at-home order, "the supply chain must continue" in food processing if other forms of capitalist production were to also continue (cited in Lakoff, 2020). The continuity of the essential supply chain and the vital infrastructures it supported therefore depended on an ideology of race that stigmatized refugee workers and compelled them to work in the sector, and on the production of relations of severe inequality that comprised not only different wage rates, but violence in the form of different exposures to risk and disease.

### 1.5. Statelessness as capitalist frontier

For refugee workers, ideologies of race are not the only ideological formations that confine them to low paid, dangerous labor niches. Statelessness, too, is an ideological construct that works with capitalist economies to create labor streams. Although refugees are defined exclusively in terms of politics – indeed, this is the feature that separates them from labor migrants – politics and economics should not be analytically separable. Here, we argue that statelessness is what constitutes refugees as a capitalist frontier, as a site where what is outside capitalism can be brought into it as a form of ongoing primitive accumulation of unfree labor.

Refugees have often been defined as people outside the nation-state system—that is, as people whose sole defining characteristic was the

political condition of statelessness. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt argued that in a world where both civic and human rights were upheld solely by nation-states, refugees were *de facto* rightless precisely because they had been thrown out of the nation-state system altogether (Arendt, 2007: Chapter 9). But refugees were not just thrown out of political community, but often economic community: host states have often held refugees in closed camps not just because camps made delivering aid easier, but because the closed camp prevents refugees from joining local labor markets. Barred from legal wage labor, dependent on aid given to them outside the market, often even prevented from acting as consumers of locally produced goods, the ideal-typical refugee in the closed camp is as excluded from capitalism as from citizenship. It is this ideal-typical view of refugees that led Bauman (2013) to characterize them as "superfluous populations" who could not even make their own living, people who had been tossed out of modernity itself and thrown into camps that functioned as garbage dumps for what Bauman referred to as "human waste."

As anyone who has worked with refugees knows, Bauman's formulation of refugees as people completely outside capitalism is wrong. In almost every camp in the world, refugees remain embedded in capitalism: they work, often as undocumented workers making significantly lower wages than the local population. They trade, sometimes openly and sometimes illicitly, often across borders with their country of origin. They buy consumer goods above and beyond what they receive in aid. Refugees who refuse to enter the camp system are even more embedded in capitalist markets, working licitly or illicitly, often in low-paid high-risk environments. In addition to working for wages in what is often, though problematically, termed "informal markets," refugees are also incorporated into capitalist markets through relations of debt and servitude that have the same effect in extracting labor power as capitalist exploitation, as Stephen Campbell and Elliott Prasse-Freeman write of slum dwellers' experiences in Yangon, Myanmar (Campbell, 2020). It is the rare refugee family who has no participation in capitalist markets at all. Yet, because refugees have been torn from their means of subsistence, subsequently locked "outside the gates" of capitalism (Sanyal 2014) and then tenuously reintegrated into it, refugees' participation in capitalism is markedly degraded, reflecting what labor scholars term "adverse incorporation" into labor markets (Phillips, 2013): they are driven into low-wage, low-status, and precarious employment relations, they trade in makeshift bazaars or out of their homes rather than opening storefronts, and they buy fewer and cheaper goods than they did before displacement.

Becoming stateless does not force refugees outside capitalism, but it places them on its margins, in precarious circumstances, suspended between hypermobility as precarious workers and immobility as unfree industrial workers. Refugees in the United States are simultaneously consumers with and without choices and always on the verge of falling out of the capitalist system again. If, as Jodi Melamed (2015) argues, capitalism depends for its existence on the production of human inequality, then statelessness is surely one way that this inequality is violently produced and reinforced in tandem with geographies of displacement and capitalist restructuring. Ideologies that stigmatize refugees pile on to the mere fact of statelessness: when refugees are seen as job-stealers, as terrorists, as potential biological contaminants or worse, violent inequality is legitimated and made to seem normal, or even natural. Anti-refugee sentiment thus has similar effects to structural racism in the United States: it creates conditions where the appropriation of unfree human labor enables continued accumulation and the reproduction of capitalism itself.

There has been a great deal of discussion lately on the idea of a "mobile border." Arguing that the state's regulation of migrants inside its own geographical frontiers effectively makes borders elastic and bordering into a highly mobile practice, anthropologists and geographers have come to see the borders between nation-states as often embodied in border-crossers themselves, who become not only the targets of state regulation but the very site at which statehood is enacted

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas De Genova (2019) has argued that the enslavement of Africans in the United States marks the limit case of unfree labor. Katherine McKittrick's work (2011) challenges this idea, arguing that this is a mode of knowledge production that centers Black suffering and continues the ongoing dehumanization of Black people. While resolving this debate is beyond the scope of this article, we signal the fact that an uncritical reproduction of chattel slavery as an institution based on essential racial differences has worrying effects for contemporary racial politics. See also Gilmore 2006.

(Jones, 2016; Mountz, 2010). Likewise, we can see refugees as embodying the mobile border between capitalism and everything outside it. The refugees themselves come to mark the capitalist frontier, the boundary between industrial capitalism and its other, and the site where capitalism can engage in primitive accumulation to seize resources from outside itself in order to sustain itself.

What we see among refugee meatpackers and their host cities is what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2010) calls *antirelationality*. She argues that in the service of capitalism, states and other actors use race to produce “group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies.” That is, Gilmore argues that states and capital, working together, separate groups of people spatially and socially and assign them different values only so that they can be reconnected in ways that serve the economic system. For Gilmore, ideologies of race are the tool that allows this process of separation, distinction, devaluation and reconnection to occur. But ideologies that render people stateless and then stigmatize them for their statelessness work in much the same way – dividing people into groups of citizens and non-citizens, assigning nefarious characteristics to non-citizens, relegating them to ethnic enclaves or ghettos, and driving them into labor market niches of low-wage, dangerous jobs. The stigmatization of refugees isn’t an add-on to capitalism that can be removed while still integrating refugees into labor market niches. That stigmatization is the very condition of possibility for those niches – without it, refugees or undocumented people couldn’t be made to take jobs that others will not. This is the heart of refugee capitalism, a historically specific expression of wider structures of racial capitalism and immigration regimes. At the conjuncture where structural racism and statelessness articulate, refugee capitalism produces labor frontiers that are essential to the capitalist economy as a whole.

## 2. Conclusion

We very often think of the need to integrate refugees into the labor market as a humanitarian imperative, granting them dignity, self-sufficiency, choice, and other neoliberal virtues. Among scholars, refugee resettlement agencies and host governments, integrating resettled refugees in host labor markets is often also seen as crucial to successfully integrating them politically and socially. Placing refugees in jobs is assumed to reduce their reliance on local welfare systems (which, in neoliberal ideologies is seen as an ultimate good) and to reduce local prejudice against them by proving their self-sufficiency and contributions to the local economy. Paired with refugee resettlement advocates’ eagerness to change public opinion about refugees and encourage increases in state quotas for refugee resettlement, the argument that refugees quickly become self-sufficient is perceived as not only the best, but the *only* political argument available to them. Pro-resettlement activists thus increasingly define refugees not by their economic need or their political and social vulnerability, but by their value to capitalist economies as workers and consumers, touting refugees’ value in the towns and cities where they are resettled. They aim to show that cost of resettling them is overcome by the economic value that they produce, and argue that the economic value they produce is the key in overcoming discrimination against them (Hooper et al., 2017).

A sarcastic meme circulated on social media a few years ago about “Schroedinger’s Refugee: somebody too lazy to work but still stealing your job.” The meme was meant to point out the fundamental illogic of ideologies that argue that refugees are both illegitimate recipients of state benefits because they will not work, and people willing to work so hard in such horrible conditions and for such low wages that they steal jobs from white American citizens. In this paper, however, we show that these two arguments are not, in fact, illogical or irrational when held simultaneously. Instead, we have argued that being essential to the functioning of the entire capitalist system and being stigmatized and prohibited by it are not antithetical. Refugees can be both prohibited and essential at the same time because being both essential and

prohibited are components of the ways that a labor market niche for unpleasant, brutal, and dangerous work is built, and the ways that people are rendered vulnerable enough to be coerced into doing it. The ideologies that stigmatize refugees, the political status of statelessness which disempowers them, and their economic segregation into low wage high risk work are therefore foundational elements of their integration into market capitalism: integral elements of the capitalist system, not unfortunate anomalies.

This means that just as we cannot think about capitalism and racism simply as separate but unfortunately linked phenomena (McKittrick 2011, Davis, 1981; Gilmore, 2006), we also can’t think about capitalism and forced migration separately. Capitalism is a system that essentially depends on the social division of the population into citizens and non-citizens, the production of vulnerability and economic desperation among non-citizens, the stereotyping and vilification of forced migrants, their exposure to life-threatening risks and the appropriation of their labor in difficult, dirty, dangerous, underpaid jobs. If capitalism is racial capitalism, it is also refugee capitalism. As we think about labor market integration for refugees, it is high time to reconsider not only the designation of “essential” industries and workers in relation to the embodied inequalities and risks that these workers face, but also in relation to a more robust approach to integration itself. Refugee integration must position refugees not as the beneficiaries of our largesse but as equally positioned vis-à-vis rights of citizenship, which are inextricably bound to labor market mobility and worker protections.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

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