



A Woman's Work is Never Done: Exhaustion and Alienation A Concluding Coda to the Special Issue

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Abstract

*This concluding coda to the “A Woman’s Work is Never Done” Special Issue focuses on themes of exhaustion and alienation in women’s work. This coda builds on the Introduction and papers in the issue to examine how women’s labor often negotiates between and beyond the world-systemic wage relation, yet, women of course still operate within the capitalist world-system. Here I bring together the papers in this Special Issue to consider how, if “a woman’s work is never done” at the same time as there being “no such thing as an easy job” in our current world-system, this system of exhaustion and alienation can be mapped onto the gendered enmeshment of work with non-work, especially around care, pleasure, and emotional investment, which alienates us from those very same things in our current capitalist formations. I demonstrate how this enmeshment is thought through in literature by comparing the lyrics from c. 1629’s “A Woman’s Work Is Never Done” with Kikuko Tsumura’s recent bestseller, *There’s No Such Thing as an Easy Job* (2021), to frame the key themes that have emerged in this Special Issue, using Audre Lorde’s theorization of the erotic as a form of unalienating activity and energy.*

Keywords: Alienation, Exhaustion, Women’s Work, Domestic Work, Capitalist World-System, Modern World-System, Gender, Gender Inequity, Pleasure



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In the Introduction to this Special Issue I argued that women, Black people, Indigenous people, and queer people have historically “made something out of nothing” between and beyond the patriarchal wage relation and value-exchanges of the world-system, using strategies of work and care that cannot (and in many cases should not) be assigned a wage or exchange-value. I also argued that literature and art represents a mode of feminist strategizing for denying the world-system its power by offering a space for “mine and thine” to become enmeshed (Federici 2004: 194), and to thus perform world-making. In other words, art is work that goes some way to unalienating us as we navigate the capitalist world-system, given that wage-value is not always applicable to such alternative world-making. In this concluding coda, I will bring together the papers in this Special Issue to consider how, if “a woman’s work is never done” at the same time as there being “no such thing as an easy job” in our current world-system, this system of exhaustion and alienation can be mapped onto the gendered enmeshment of work with non-work, especially around care, pleasure, and emotional investment, which alienates us from those very same things in our current capitalist formations. I demonstrate how this enmeshment is thought through in literature by comparing the lyrics from c. 1629’s “A Woman’s Work Is Never Done” with Kikuko Tsumura’s recent bestseller, *There’s No Such Thing as an Easy Job* (2021), to frame the key themes that have emerged in this Special Issue. I deliberately draw upon two very distinct texts—one, an anonymous oral cultural object from modernity’s early stages, the other a prize-winning translated text that was published very recently—to examine the surprising contours of familiarity between them which accentuate the arguments evoked in the papers in this Special Issue.

This issue’s themes chiefly emerge from the contention that for women navigating the world-system work and non-work are porous activities, which thus requires an alienating form of emotional investment. This is the key concern of this coda conclusion. In “A Woman’s Work Is Never Done” and *There’s No Such Thing as an Easy Job*, the female-identified narrators convey that the emotional investment that is required of them, often given involuntarily, manifests as physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion. This theme has been especially picked up in Hannah Gillman’s (2024) paper in this issue where she considers the connections between metabolic rift (or, soil exhaustion), and the exhaustion of Macabéa’s body as an urban worker in Clarice Lispector’s *Hour of the Star* (1977); likewise Hendrikje Kaube’s (2024) paper discusses what she calls “odd women” who are neither domestic workers nor strictly a free friend to their companion-employer. They represent, like the witch in my Introduction, a way of negotiating between the exchange values of capitalism through “dialogues, gestures, thoughts, and feelings...[where] a variety of affective claims and investments [are] met and made” (Kaube 2024)¹. The question of investing in oneself, and as such outsourcing certain kinds of less “desirable” work onto racialized or migrant workers is investigated in Bushra Mahzabeen’s (2024) paper on mothering and waged care work, which shares with Gillman’s (2024) paper a critique of how far the promise of the self-styled neoliberal subject can be successfully applied to women’s negotiation of the world-system.

¹ From an unpublished draft of “Compassion as Commodity: Middle-Class Women and Care Work in the Long Nineteenth Century.”

The body itself is thus also examined as a site of gendered and racialized resource extraction and exploitation in the world-system across papers in this Special Issue, especially in Charlotte Spear's (2024) paper on debt, agency and sex work in the Caribbean, Mahzabeen's (2024) paper on waged and unwaged childcare, and Madeline Sinclair's (2024) paper on reworkings of folklore in Caribbean women's writings. The question of orality, first person narration, and testimony also emerge between "A Woman's Work" and *Easy Job*, which is reflected in Federica Lupati's paper (2024) on Brazilian Indigenous women writers, whose literary work is an extension of their oral traditions. From the question of creativity between these papers comes the question of sexuality and the erotic, which I frame here through reapproaching "A Woman's Work," and more broadly women's energies and subsequent exhaustion.

All the essays contained in this Special Issue demonstrate that the way we imagine women's material conditions is often lacking, and, especially in the case of Kaube's and Spear's essays, not necessarily represented by data or dichotomous categories. Thus, art becomes a tool to think through how the world-system is negotiated in a variety of strategies for gendered subjects. All the papers in this issue are, in one way or another, interested in ambiguity, whether the ambiguous status of workers (Kaube 2024; Mahzabeen 2024; Spear 2024), the use of the colonizer's language and literary forms to convey postcolonial subjectivities (Lupati 2024; Sinclair 2024), or the failures of neo-liberalism to liberate women from exhaustion and claim themselves to be subjects of modernity (Mahzabeen 2024; Spear 2024) despite the fact that "modernity relies upon [invizibilized feminized] labor, and this *is* the condition of modernity writ large for women in the world-system." (Mahzabeen 2024: 32, italics in original). The texts selected by scholars in this issue, while spanning a variety of geographic and historical periods, all articulate a series of materially gendered tensions between the wage relation, alienation, and modernity in women's world-literature. This tension animates the literature of the world-system as it pertains to the boundaries between formal and informal labor, as well as personal, emotional investment, becoming porous for women's work. For instance, Kaube (2024: 88) identifies how, for nineteenth century domestic workers, "employment duration allowed for the development of a thorough reciprocal understanding, even if the relationship retained its formal characteristic on the outside." I would argue that this gives women's writing of the world-system an often surreal or unreal quality in order to theorize and articulate the disruption of borders between "mine and thine" that they may experience.

As such, the Warwick Research Collective identify "critical irrealism" as one mode of the literature on the (semi-)periphery of the world-system as being "formally distinctive" in that it is likely to be "sensitive to absurdity and contradiction, disturbance and disruption, conflict and resistance" (WReC 2015: 82). When we take the papers in this Special Issue together, we might suggest that, for women writers, absurdity is a vehicle to expound the ambiguity between working within, and beyond, distinctive work/non-work positions and the wage-relation. For instance, Spear's (2024: 58) essay complicates the victim-agent dichotomy which the sex worker is imagined through, instead draws upon "the unwieldy nature of sex work to dignify the complexity of the human at the heart of these debates." Such "unwieldiness" opens up how literature and art,

and—as Sinclair engages with this ambiguity through absurdist folkloric retellings—are tools that help us unalienate ourselves. By demonstrating the absurdity of the contradictions that the capitalist world system lays at the feet of women—women are overly emotional, but they must emotionally manage others; women’s work is “naturally” to work in the home and to care for others for free, but if she doesn’t want to do this she can pay someone else to do it; she is a “victim” of the sex work, but at the same time is not afforded dignity and support; *ad nauseam*—literature offers a way of thinking through these emotionally and physically costly conditions, to fashion a community of empathy. Here I will briefly refer to Laura Salisbury’s (2023) conjecture on “doomscrolling” during the pandemic as:

this specifically textual practice might be an attempt at a more “social cure”, which uses the animating force within reading as a “reparative” orientation towards the renewal and rebuilding of connections between people and things in the world that feel increasingly frayed, even ruptured or broken. (P. 888)

Modernity’s first steps were about enclosure and the fraying of our social fabric—perhaps, then, writing and reading, if we consider the problems brought about by the world-system for women as a slower crisis than the pandemic, are essaying also for “the renewal and rebuilding of connections between people and things in the world” (Salisbury 2023: 888) on a globalized scale. Beyond the textual practice of reading and writing, I posit that for women in the world-system articulating exhaustion and alienation aligns with Audre Lorde’s (1984) theorization of the erotic—a not-necessarily sexual, but nevertheless energetic and emotional state—and how if we

refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd. (P. 43)

Absurdity, then, emerges from alienation and exhaustion in women’s world-literature.

This Special Issue has bought together disparate geographic and temporal contexts, from nineteenth century England in Kaube’s paper, to the metabolic rift between the urban and rural environments of Brazil of the 1970s in Gillman’s paper, to Caribbean literature in Spear’s and Sinclair’s papers. While one cannot overstate the material differences between these contexts, their complementary appearance here is “premised on the assumption that the ‘world’ is one, integrated if not of course united” (WReC 2015: 5). There is a danger here of reading these distinct contexts as analogous, which although well-meaning would not be useful. The variety in the collection of papers here is an attempt at bringing to the field of literary studies Carolyn Pedwell’s project in her work which troubled both the distinctions and analogies that can be made between Western female genital body modifications and instances of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Pedwell (2007: 48) instructively points out that while well-meaning, “the desire on the part of theorists working in the West to establish cross-cultural ‘empathy’ through models that stress similarity and solidarity conceals the continuing operation of geo-political relations of power and privilege.” These relations are rendered more visible if we read these instances through the world-literary or world-systemic approaches. Pedwell (2007) indeed concludes that:

feminists situated in divergent social and geo-political locations might more successfully seek to develop understanding, awareness and compassion across cultural and national boundaries through revealing, and mutually engaging with, the processes through which embodied cultural differences are relationally and hierarchically constructed...these imagined figures are, in part, constructed and defined *in and through one* another, via the complex historical articulations of race, gender, sexuality, nation and culture. (P. 64–65)

Pedwell's definition gestures to the combined and unevenness of the world-literary system that the WReC articulate, and what the conference from which this Special Issue emerged was concerned with. Indeed, Spear (2023) points out that:

it becomes impossible to understand the neoliberal debt economies of the Caribbean without examining the reliance of these economies on the unwaged labor of the reproduction of the notion of the Caribbean itself. Or, in other words, we must come to terms with the unwaged reproduction of the cultural imaginary of the Caribbean, which enables its ongoing inferiorization and exploitation by the world-system. (P. 60)

In the Introduction to this Special Issue I argued that women's work itself sometimes works outside of wage-value systems, and in other, more radical ways, can actually avoid reifying dominant social reproduction in favor of alternative or radical world-making (see Luker and Warner [2019: 53]). What the world-system cannot account for, then, is the feminist work which upsets and usurps such hierarchies of difference through solidarity work and empathy that do not emerge from, or rely upon, sameness or belonging. Joan Scott (1988: 282) argued that "we need theory that will let us think in terms of pluralities and diversities rather than of unities and universals." While the world-system itself is singular, its profound unevenness allows us to think through and with pluralities and difference in our analysis. She concludes that we should

question the validity of normative constructions of gender in the light of the existence of behaviours and qualities that contradict the rules, to point up rather than resolve conditions of contradiction, to articulate a political identity for women without conforming to existing stereotypes about them. (Scott 1988: 287)

Thus, "the political argument that sameness is a requirement for equality, an untenable position for feminists (and historians) who know that power is constructed on and so must be challenged from the ground of difference" (Scott 1988: 288). Scott makes the case that poststructuralist thinking is the best way of theorizing this, and I am inclined to agree—for all the WReC's work and world-systemic theorizing is arguably structuralist (and certainly materialist)—the cases made in the papers of this Special Issue combine the material conditions of women's lives with the way that we make knowledge, art, and culture, that register those conditions. As such, this feminist work will likely be never "done," as it is inevitable that we will produce more art and knowledge, especially as material conditions inevitably change, and thus will require constant, and attentive, re-examination, which I invite all our readers to participate in. It may not be an "easy job," but it is a worthwhile one.

“A Woman’s Work is Never Done”

The Warwick Research Collective (WReC 2015) argue that:

the theory of combined and uneven development...has a long pedigree in Marxist sociology and political economy and continues to stimulate debate across the social sciences. But the cultural aspects of Trotsky’s initiating formulation...has received less attention, even as what it highlights draws attention to a central—perhaps the central—arc or trajectory of modern(ist) production in literature and the other arts worldwide; and this aesthetic dynamic is, in turn, complexly related to histories and conceptions of social and political practice. (P. 6)

Modernity regularly leaves women behind, or rather the material conditions of women’s lives, and the activities that they may undertake are not seen as “modern” (Mahzabeen 2024). The WReC (2015: 13) point out that modernity seems to “happen” to men sooner than it does to women, yet, if the modern world-system is “combined and uneven” then we must attend to the unevenness across the lines of gender (WReC 2015: 9). Counter to the progress signaled by modern aesthetics, women are more likely to find themselves in the Sisyphean task of social reproduction.

For bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Saidiya Hartman, and other Black feminist writers, the call to “get outside the home and work—to cease being ‘just’ housewives” (hooks 2000: 96) left Black American women alienated from the Second Wave feminist movement. The questions of women’s work, too, are “combined and uneven” in the sense that where one woman absorbs the profit of going to formally waged work, understanding herself as a neo-liberal individual, another is pushed to lower paid tasks which prop up the former’s success in one way or another (Scharff 2016; Olufemi 2020). hooks argues that “poor and working-class women knew from their experiences that work was neither fulfilling nor liberatory—that it was for the most part exploitative and dehumanizing. They were suspicious of bourgeois women’s assertion that women would be liberated via work” (hooks 2000: 98). hooks’ argument rests on a racialized and classed experience of so-called “unskilled,” poorly paid labor which is “unhealthy, unnecessarily dehumanizing, stressful, and depressing” (hooks 2000: 103). hooks (2000:103) acknowledges that “women are exploited economically in jobs, but they are exploited psychologically.” More recent thought in the Anglophone feminist movement speaks of the “mental load,” which is essentially the project management aspect of domestic tasks and the intellectual labor involved in managing those tasks. As such, modernity requires women’s work to be invizibilized when it is formally waged or domestic, but the emotional and intellectual management of our communities (work, home, friendship groups, extended families) is also a gendered energetic resource upon which the world-system of modernity relies.

To pause on an oral example of a cultural object that registers such a system, the c. 1629 ditty, “A Woman’s Work is Never Done” makes the claim that it is in becoming a “wife,” and thus a domestic worker, that one moves from maidenhood to become the eponymous “woman” for whom

work is never complete. With an oral tradition it is impossible to tell the gender of who may or may not have sung it, let alone composed and re-composed it, yet this corroborates and historically situates some of Silvia Federici's (1975) arguments that I discussed in the Introduction. Namely that domestic labor is a way of performing one's "real" womanhood according to patriarchal norms. The end of the poem asks maids from both the core and the periphery, "both in the country and the city," to 'Take good notice of my lines I pray.... You see that maids live more merrier lives/ Then do the best of married wives" (Anonymous 1629). The singer here is performing a kind of social reproduction by preparing unmarried women for what married life will hold through the medium of culture and entertainment. While the song is comedic in tone, it is nevertheless a cultural object which reifies and parodies certain social norms. Indeed, the stanzas relate a lack of free time, a degree of overwork and frenetic task management that many homemakers today might recognize. Angela Y. Davis (1983: 222) argued that housework is "invisible, repetitive, exhausting, unproductive, [and] uncreative," quite the opposite to the "a well of replenishing and provocative force" (Lorde 1984: 41), especially for creativity, that Lorde surmises in *Uses of the Erotic*.

Yet, what is striking in the song is its musings on pleasure, or rather the lack of it in the married teller's life. While the cause of the teller's "pains" is seemingly being married, and the husband and children that come with the role, there is a comically antagonistic relationship between the teller and her husband. On the one hand she notices that he "seldom comes to comfort me" and demands his supper "when the clock strike nine," yet, later when the children have been put to bed and she has finished breastfeeding the youngest children "Perchance my husband wakes, and then wakes me;/ Then he does that to me which cannot shun,/ Yet I could wish that work were oftener done" (Anonymous 1629). Naturally, to a contemporary audience the implied lack of consent here is cause for concern, nevertheless, the speaker wishes "that work were oftener done" (Anonymous 1629). Given that this text is about physical pain, tiredness, and crucially a lack of time for pleasure, sex with her husband occupies a fascinating nexus between being "work" and pleasure, the bawdy joke being that she wishes for this "work" more often. Is it "work" for her, though? Or, is it the case that it is "work" that her husband performs? Is the implication, and final joke since this line comes in the penultimate stanza, that all the wife's harried domestic labors are worth the occasional "work" that her husband performs in bed? Alternatively, if we see the sexual encounter as work that the wife performs, it demonstrates a possibility of pleasure and work coexisting, which is not possible at any other moment of the day within her domestic duties. If we ignore the obvious problems of consent in the song, the meeting of pleasure and work in the wife's sexual encounter with her husband evokes Audre Lorde's (1984) work on the erotic as an animating energy, which is to say that these moments of erotic connection throw into relief the alienation that the speaker feels in her daily work.

Given also that this is a cultural text which emerges in the early-modern era, perhaps this text therefore shows us how modernity required a sense of alienation from pleasure, especially for women. Indeed, Davis (1983: 223) argues that "the desexualization of domestic labor would not really alter the oppressive nature of the work itself...neither women nor men should waste precious

hours of their lives on work that is neither stimulating, creative nor productive.” I slightly disagree with Davis here, however. For one thing, the gendering of this kind of work is still feminized, even if it is not only done by women, so it behooves us to interrogate this material and cultural condition of real people’s lives. What’s more, however, is that I am not convinced that care and domestic work is by its own nature unproductive and uncreative. There is, I think, the potential for the erotic power within it on the condition that it be not alienated work. Take for example the anecdotes from lockdown that bread-making become so popular that “flour and yeast,” due to a rise in interest in baking, “became very scarce in grocery stores across the US” (Wilkinson 2022: 45). Lockdown also gave rise to internet aesthetics of “cottagecore” and craft (especially repair and sustainable craft), where pastoral activities (even if they were unrealistic in terms of how labor intensive running a homestead or farm actually is, as we can see from “A Woman’s Work”) and “slow living” captured a cultural moment where domestic activities and creativity offered an antidote to feelings of overwhelm and isolation. Davis’ own chapter on housework contradicts her claim that housework is unproductive, she notes how Masai women are responsible for housebuilding alongside domestic duties, thus “the women’s ‘housework’ is no less productive and no less essential than the economic contributions of the Masai men” (Davis 1983: 225). Thus, it is not solely the repetitiveness of the tasks of housework which render it physically and emotionally exhausting, but it is also the alienation from creativity and community that such repetitiveness can engender—or in other words the isolation from the erotic (Lorde 1984). Indeed, Davis (1983: 225) points out that Masai women are “producers,” and that “as producers, they enjoy a correspondingly important social status.” To be social, to have our work reflect or at least allow for community connection, it seems to me, is vital to “the renewal and rebuilding of connections between people and things in the world” (Salisbury 2023: 888). Women’s writing and art offer a way of producing such connections.

To return to “A Woman’s Work”: the speaker establishes her gendered position as “work,” the married woman in the song then asks the listener “to give ear,” warning that such a “woeful fate” is invisibilized, but nevertheless communicating this woe to a listener is going some way to build a community of knowledge and care (Anonymous 1629). Davis (1983: 242) points out that “the acute disillusionment” of housewives in the 1980s was partially cured by being able to get out of the home and build a community: that even if women “did not have inherently fulfilling jobs...their ability to leave the isolation of their homes, ‘getting out and seeing other people,’ was as important to them as their earnings” (Davis 1983: 242). All this is to say that the fact that “A Woman’s Work” exists as a cultural object bespeaks a desire for creativity among invisibilized labor, but the fact that it is a song that requires a social moment of listening in its lyrics suggest that women’s world-literature is historically animated by world-making and care work that unalienates us. For Sinclair (2024: 107), the return to and reworking of folklore in contemporary Caribbean women’s writing offers “critique the historical transformation of the female body into a site of contestation, while resisting the new processes of enclosure engendered by neoliberal capitalism.” The style of “A Woman’s Work” also shares some sensibilities of self-referentiality, parody, an awareness of the differences between urban and rural life, and stream of consciousness

with modernist texts—while no one would claim that it is actually a modernist text, it seems sufficient to say that cultural objects like this that women may have written and performed at the earliest moments of modernity already were registering the capitalist system in which the speaker is doomed to face the demands of being productive. There are resonances between this text and Sinclair’s analysis of “The Madwoman of Papine” (1986) by Slade Hopkinson in this issue, which describes “an ‘invisible old woman’ who occupies a ‘triangle of grass’ (S. Hopkinson 1986: 268) at a crossroads, the madwoman emerges as an interstitial figure condemned to the peripheries of an unevenly developed modern world-system” (Sinclair 2024: 110). Sinclair (2024: 110) argues that “the body becomes a material locus for social processes, the poetic emphasis on estranged embodiment communicating a broader systemic crisis of uneven development and socio-economic division;” likewise Federica Lupati’s (2024) paper in this issue highlights the importance of the oral form to Indigenous writing in Brazil, which is nevertheless under pressure to be heard or read by more Lusophone readers to ensure its survival. These two very different contexts show how oral forms, and questions of productivity and continuity of culture are concerns of women’s creative forms in the contemporary uneven world-system.

In this Special Issue we have aimed to reframe how women’s work is imagined in the world-system, primarily through world-literary objects. Selma James (2012: 69) invites us to rethink how domestic labor might also be reconsidered on the scale of the world-system, arguing that “while housework everywhere is consuming and endless, in the Third World it is generally accomplished without running water, State health care, education, or welfare. Immigrant women came to metropolitan countries precisely to refuse this housework.” James (2012:66) suggests that immigrant workers to the west, often perceived as “stealing” jobs from “the native working class” are exercising a “method...[to] reappropriate the wealth stolen from their home country and accumulated in the industrial metropolis.” James (2012) goes on to note that:

the work of women is basic to organizing for themselves and others to become immigrants, and also to transforming their communities from victims of State to a network of reappropriators. But like most unwaged women’s work, that work is hidden. (P. 66)

Insodoing, she argues, they are “refusing” to be houseworkers in their home nation: on the one hand, I would suggest that this represents a world-system that does not have a mechanism for such a woman to fully eschew this kind of work because modernity requires domestic tasks to be invisibly performed, we might think back to Virginia Woolf’s spontaneously accumulating wage and how it buys her someone else to cook and clean. James (2012) indeed notes on being the “invisible someone else”:

there is a material basis for our common struggle as women and workers internationally. In particular, the day-to-day struggle of Black women to cut down on this work and where unavoidable, to get it done and still survive remains largely invisible and unrecognized. (P. 69)

Mahzabeen's (2024: 48) paper in this issue investigates how "the mother/employer and nanny/employee relationship pattern are played out in the structure of exploitation imposed by the rich nations on the poorer ones, where the latter is always substitutable and even disposable," thus reifying the unequal world system on the basis of a wage-relation that relies upon outsourcing emotional labor.

On the other hand, James' assertions are useful to think through the ways in which a subjugated population, here immigrant workers, nevertheless navigate and invent informal modes of working around the world-system, whilst surviving within it. Mahzabeen (2024) points out that her texts show that migrant nannies are:

[c]onscious of their marginalized and subservient positions in society, the migrant workers are perhaps aware that they are disposable to the families they work for or to the country that they work in. The lack of meaningful communication and exploitative working conditions then often impose a heavy burden on the mental state of these women working in the care sector; (P. 49)

thus demonstrating again that it is not only the exploitative conditions of care labor that negatively impact women, but their sense of alienation and emotional exhaustion. This alienation might be undercut in some ways by James's notion of reappropriation, for instance Lupati's (2024) work on Indigenous Brazilian authors' alerts us to their—

choice to write both in their native language and in a non-native one, or more precisely, in the oppressor's language (Portuguese), can be seen as ambiguous; yet, it is to be intended as an act of reaffirmation... To Indigenous people, writing (in Portuguese) can become a form of liberation, a necessary step in order to survive and to preserve their ancestral memory. (P. 132–133)

In other words, they are (re)appropriating Lusophone culture to attain wider distribution of and engagement with Indigenous cultural objects. Likewise, Spear's paper engages with the tensions between being exploited and being a "reappropriator," arguing that "if we are to consider the informal economies to which sex work might belong, debt takes on a different shade: debt is a mechanism to obtain what you need without immediately engaging with its exchange value." (Spear 2024: 61). In other words, "reappropriators" are sometimes able to leverage the world-system to "make something out of nothing."

As I argued in the Introduction to this Special Issue, literature is a way of "making something out of nothing," of combining "mine and thine" (Federici 2004: 194). We might also see "reading as a 'reparative' orientation towards the renewal and rebuilding of connections between people and things in the world that feel increasingly frayed, even ruptured or broken" (Salisbury 2023: 888), and as such a form of "reappropriation" not necessarily of capital and wage value as James argues, but of social connection to undercut capitalist alienation from each other and from creativity. As Lorde (1984: 43) puts it 'self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling.' Literature and stories are of course commodities, but, especially in Kaube's paper in this issue, it acts as a means to fill in what raw data cannot, especially around the emotional landscapes of women in work. Spear (2024)

writes on a lack of connection in the sex-work of *Here Comes the Sun* and *The Immortals* results in “the ambivalence of the relationship between client and worker” is registered by:

the continual insertion of the space for female narration and the female voice in producing the narrative and subjectivity of the Haitian woman. In proposing the exchange of “writing for sex” (Orcel 2020: 2), the sex worker sells her bodily and sexual autonomy in exchange for the sharing of her story. Her body, and the bodies of those whose stories she tells, then become vital in the negotiation of narrative autonomy in the face of a history of racialized and gendered bodily violence. (P. 72).

For Spear, the literary objects demonstrate how creativity, narrative, and writing forge a form of self-actualization and a claim to subjectivity, even if it is within an otherwise violent and uneven system. After all,

to share the power of each other’s feelings is different from using another’s feelings as we would use a kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse (Lorde 1984: 44).

Boundaries Between Work and Non-Work

Beyond what we typically think as “women’s work” in domestic tasks, we can also see interesting amounts of labor disparity and alienation in the gendering of certain types of intellectual work. The WReC’s *Combined and Uneven* development opens with a discussion of the “crisis” in comparative literary studies, it behooves us to briefly pause on the fact that “‘soft’ disciplines like English, languages, comparative literature, cultural studies, and history—the preponderance of majors and graduate students is female...while the preponderance of senior professors is men” (Schechner 2003: 5). Richard Schechner, a Performance and Law professor, thus asks “is performance studies intellectual domestic labor?... [thus] Is performance studies an example of ‘women’s work’ in the pejorative sense” (Schechner 2003: 6). His question leads me to ask if the kind of examination of the world-system, social reproduction, and literary production also pejoratively “women’s work”?

The state of intellectual work, to take academia as an example, seems to be that domestic and emotional tasks—that is, social reproduction—are inescapable despite women’s worker status in these industries, thus constituting a material part of day-to-day life that impedes women’s professional progress while upholding broader systems. According to a survey that spanned Norway, Sweden, Italy, France, Germany, the United States, and the UK during COVID-19 lockdowns, academics who were “that working mothers combined childcare and homeschooling with their paid work during this period by working long hours in the evening” revealing “the pandemic had a differential impact on the research productivity of women and men” who have children (Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2021: 244). Academia, like many white-collar industries,

expounds the values of “excellence” in its outputs and working cultures. According to Lorde (1984), work which gives us a sense “of satisfaction” engenders,

having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. It is never easy to demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work. To encourage excellence is to go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of our society is to encourage excellence. (P. 41)

In some respects, intellectual work can more easily be mapped onto creativity and accessing the erotic than, say, laundry, nevertheless Lorde (1984) cautions that internalizing excellence, and perhaps productivity, as a measure of worth,

must not be misconstrued as demanding the impossible from ourselves nor from others. Such a demand incapacitates everyone in the process... Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavours bring us closest to that fullness. (P. 41)

In other words, while lockdowns were an unusual state of affairs, it exasperated existing inequalities in households with academic parents; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2021) reflect how

academic work—in which career advancement is based on the number and quality of a person’s scientific publications, and their ability to obtain funding for research projects—is basically incompatible with tending to children... having children leads to reductions in the academic productivity of women, but not men. (P. 247)

The reasons for this may not just be practical, but “the lockdown may have forced women working in academia to prioritize care-taking responsibilities in line with ‘cultural ideals of the good mother’” (Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2021: 247). Power (2020: 71) argues that this time added “a ‘fourth shift’ (homeschooling while working) to our burden of unpaid care work.” Homeschooling in this emergency situation, to my mind, sits at the nexus between domestic and intellectual work, yet is regarded as neither. While in practical terms this fourth shift may have been “demanding the impossible” (Lorde 1984: 41) from working mothers, it nevertheless also may, in some cases created a “sense of satisfaction and completion” (Lorde 1984: 41) when supporting their children. The question then becomes about what work is alienating and unsatisfying, and what work isn’t, on an individual basis while acknowledging collective struggle.

While the ditty after which this Special Issue is named reflects that “a woman’s work is never done,” it is worth remembering that sometimes women’s work is done without being seen as work at all. Silvia Federici (2004) reminds us that during and after enclosure in Europe, women were reimagined to be non-workers, “that any work that women did at home was ‘non-work’ and was worthless even when done for the market.... Thus, if a woman sewed some clothes it was ‘domestic work’ or ‘housekeeping,’ even if the clothes were not for the family... city governments told the guilds to overlook the production that women (especially widows) did in their homes, because it was not real work” (Federici 2004: 103). Their work, much like that of the academic mother

providing homeschooling, is de-professionalized in how it is imagined because it becomes an act of love and care. We even see this de-professionalization in policy around gender equality in the workplace: Power (2020) points out that

when promoting policies to facilitate the participation of women in the paid economy, flexible working is often promoted as a solution. However, studies in several countries show that more adaptable working arrangements further cement traditional gender roles. For example, while it enables mothers to combine paid work with additional hours of unpaid care work, flexible working allows fathers to work additional (often unpaid) hours in their jobs. (P. 68)

All this is to say that women's efforts are invisibilized and devalued across work, the home, and culture, yet Power's point alerts us to how current efforts to stabilize women's participation in GDP relies on acknowledging that in order to work women need time to do the not-work, in turn exasperating this inequality. As Gillman (2024) writes "to be metabolized in the service of capital, therefore, is what ultimately defines womanhood in Lispector's narrative."² In so doing, I argue that there is an acute blurring of boundaries between the wage-relation and not-work that women experience and register in literary production.

Working from home during lockdown, and perhaps after, meant that "work and family boundaries became indistinct, and the gendered distribution of responsibilities within the household became more apparent" (Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2021: 244). So, does this mean that women, or anyone, was doing more gratifying "non-work"? Well, the answer to this is unclear. While "working from home has become engraved in modern working life. Although advocated as a solution to combine work with family life, surprisingly little empirical evidence supports that it decreases work-family conflict" (Van Der Lippe and Lippényi 2020: 383). This might lead us to believe the blurring of the boundaries between work and non-work do not help us within our communities, including the small community unit of the family, yet other research found that the proximity enforced by lockdowns had some surprising positive emotional effects:

the suicide rate in Japan was 20% lower in April 2020 than April 2019. This is thought to be due to people spending more time at home with their families, less commuting to work, and the delayed start to the school year – a time which is usually associated with increased stress for children in the country.... In the UK, a survey of parents found that 80% feel they have formed stronger bonds with their families as a result of the increased time together during the lockdown, despite the challenges of juggling working from home and homeschooling... Similar stories are reported from other countries including Turkey where parents report that the lockdown gives them an opportunity to improve their marriages and family life. (Power 2020: 68)

Power's summary doesn't mention whether women specifically felt these positive changes, but rather that, across cultures and locations, having time to spend with one another, time not spent

² From an unpublished draft of "Reading Hunger and Exhaustion in Clarice Lispector's *A Hora de Estrela*: Exploring the Ecology of Women's Work and Literary Production."

commuting and preparing for work perhaps, seemed to unalienate some in the world-system. Walton and Luker (2019: 2) define alienation as “the way capital disintegrates the worker into the components that create value and the components that don’t matter.” In a way, then, did a global lockdown generate a model where we were forced to reintegrate the components of our lives that are for work and the ones that do not generate value (arguably that which “really matters”)? Yet, if we take the patterns from “A Woman’s Work is Never Done” and Federici’s assertions that women’s domestic labors have historically been seen as non-work because they do not directly generate value, hasn’t it always been this way for women?

I am not convinced that the above statistics will reflect how women felt on the whole; for example, to take the UK statistic suggested that parents felt stronger bond with their families due to increased time and proximity, Del Boca and her colleagues (2020) found that for Italian families during lockdown:

further increased the workload of women, resulting from both their occupation and the housework. In contrast with men, there is no difference in the increase of housework between women who telecommute and those who do not work because of the emergency... Men are more likely to be spending more time with the children, hence in more gratifying family work rather than chores. (P. 1013)

All that to say, perhaps it was the case that men, who are alienated from the family unit, or as Dalla Costa (1972: 27) puts it “excluded from the home” and “detached...from the family and turned him into a wage labourer” began spending more time with his community, which in turn, by eschewing repetitive chores in favor of childcare, was not only “gratifying” (Del Boca et al. 2020: 1013) but presents a balm to alienation under capitalism; Lorde (1984: 43) might argue that these men experienced “that self-connection... a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling,” a capacity for feeling that Del Boca and her colleagues (2020:1013) call “gratifying.” To take another example, the reduction in rates of suicide could be accounted for by those at risk having more access to support networks, but at home that network is likely to begin with matriarchs. Power (2020) herself quotes:

Sociologist Heejung Chung (2020) [who] describes the situation as “ensuring the emotional wellbeing of not only...children but also parents and other family members. In other words, they are in charge of the mental load of worrying about the family.” (P. 67)

In other words, one has to wonder who was doing the worrying enough, and then following that up with care labor, to see the positive outcomes listed above.

There’s No Such Thing as an Easy Job

It is not surprising to see how:

structural inequality gets even more enhanced once women have children and caring responsibilities at home. This double burden constitutes one of the obstacles

towards the work–life balance where the negative spillover between paid work and domestic duties influences women enormously. (Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2021: 244)

This “spillover” or boundary-crossing between emotional labor (often valueless in the wage relation) and work (paid labor) and the places and feelings that this is enmeshed in is ripe for discussion and theorization in art. Following about a year of lockdowns worldwide, *There’s No Such Thing as an Easy Job* by Kikuko Tsumura (2021), translated from Japanese into English by Polly Barton, won the English PEN Award in 2021 and was published with Bloomsbury to much critical acclaim. The novel follows a woman who is never named who, due to burnout from her career tells her temp-agency manager: “I’d like an easy job” (Tsumura 2021: 224). The novel follows her through four episodic work placements, one where she performs surveillance on a writer, another where she writes copy for audio bus adverts, another where she puts up posters and surveys responses to them, and one where she sits in a hut in a public forest perforating tickets and filling in the visitors’ map. In every episode, curious and surreal circumstances take hold, and the protagonist becomes more and more emotionally involved in her work.

The protagonist oscillates between uncomfortable inactivity, where “even while working, I was basically doing nothing” (Tsumura 2021: 5–6), to feeling like “I was a total and utter idiot and descended into bouts of self-loathing, cursing myself for stealing the company’s money in the guise of undeserved wages” (Tsumura 2021:180). Tsumura’s novel asks us to consider what a job actually is, where the protagonist engages with intellectual and embodied inactivity that are nevertheless constituted through the wage-relation. Yet, there are instances where the protagonist seems to understand that it is only a certain kind of inactivity—that which she has been employed to “do”—is “deserving” of wages. This question of what actually counts when it comes to work, and how this is gendered, is bought into a sharper relief when we consider the context in which the book was written. According to a review by Thúy Đính (2021) for *NPR*:

in real life, Tsumura experienced workplace harassment so severe in her first job out of college that she had to leave her position, but in the novel her protagonist’s career burnout is defined as a vague, gender-neutral condition caused by an excessive engagement with her work—a tendency that also afflicts another male character. It’s not apparent that their respective breakdown is tied to any incident of workplace discrimination.

Đính is correct in that this vague sense of exhaustion does affect one other character, Mr. Sugai, but Đính does not point out that the narrator reveals what she has in common with him in the final thirty or so pages of the text: that they were both social workers. This kind of care work often falls between the boundaries between work activities and emotional investment, something that the main character regularly struggles with; at one point she narrates how “I didn’t want to have any more feelings about my work than were strictly necessary. I was done with all that” (Tsumura 2021: 85).

The novel’s success in the UK market perhaps bespoke the sense of burnout and foreboding that lockdowns and COVID-19 had engendered in many people (Geall 2020). *Stylist*, a lifestyle

magazine aimed at women, published an article in 2021 which described “The Great Exhaustion” (Porter 2021). Anna Porter reports for *Stylist* that

The Great Exhaustion is defined by large numbers of the workforce experiencing an absolute, overwhelming feeling of emotional exhaustion, and it’s something that’s disproportionately affecting women. Coined by researchers at the University of New South Wales, The Great Exhaustion was a phenomenon that was first noticed in Australia, where 77.9% of healthcare and social assistance workers combined are female, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

She goes on to note that “The Great Exhaustion is a much bigger issue for women” (Porter 2021). Taken alongside the statistics that lockdown improved family life (Power 2020), this paints a concerning picture that for those who do care work, the boundaries between work and non-work, whether formal or informal affective labor, come at a huge personal cost. We might return to Lorde (1984: 42), who theorizes that “the lack of concern for the erotic root and satisfactions of our work is felt in our disaffection from so much of what we do,” perhaps the emergency of lockdown and the move to isolating online working engendered such disaffection, emerging as physical and psychic exhaustion such as we see in Tsumura’s protagonist? Nevertheless, Lorde (1984) goes on to point out that:

the principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need... Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities. (P. 42)

The necessity of “the fourth shift” for many white-collar working women, or the additional pressure on welfare and care services from 2020 onward results, inevitably, in disempowerment. To put it another way: “her book may as well be called *There's No Such Thing as An Easy Job for a Woman*” (Đinh 2021, emphasis in original).

In the novel, Mr. Sugai is a social worker who, upon experiencing burnout from his social work job, takes to the woods and removes himself from society, thus not having “to think about anything other than making it through the day” (Tsumura 2021: 380). Acting as a foil to the narrator, he relays how:

I’d get so much joy from it [social work], the sense of powerlessness really tortured me, you know?... I started to feel so incredibly exhausted I didn’t know what to do with myself... the more feeling you put into your work or whatever it is you’re devoting yourself to, the more of them [pitfalls] there are. (Tsumura 2021: 397)

The idea of devotion and emotion correlates with “A Woman’s Work is Never Done,” where the singer relays her hurt that “My husband he runs out o’ th’ doors in haste/ He scarce gives me a kiss for all that I/ Have dealt and done to him so lovingly;/ Which sometimes grieves me to the heart” (Anonymous 1629). In lyrics that, according to the title is about work and mostly lists endless tasks, here the singer pauses to convey their feelings about how that work impacts their emotional and interpersonal life. Indeed, she relays her devotion, that all was “done... so lovingly”

(Anonymous 1629): a counter to Tsumura's (2021: 180) protagonist who sometimes feels "undeserving" of her wages, the woman whose work is never done feels deserving of emotional recognition. The very next stanza conveys how "There's never a day, from morn to night/ But I with work am tired quite/ I hardly in a day take one hour's rest" (Anonymous 1629), echoing what we might now call burnout, especially alongside Tsumura's narrator who is also so "tired quite" that upon being released from her job early one day finds that "the only thing I could think to do was sleep, which I guessed was a sign that I was thoroughly accustomed to a lifestyle of overwork" (Tsumura 2021: 62). In this Special Issue, Gillman (2024) points out that in the contemporary world-system "a crisis of social reproduction is created as the rift grows between the worker's labor-power and the pressures placed on the exhausted female body (considered essential to the reproduction of that labor-power)."³

The protagonist's desire for an "easy" job is eventually described a little more specifically that she "wanted a job that was practically without substance, a job that sat on the borderline between being a job and not" (Tsumura 2021: 226). As we can see from above, however, her previous job in social work, where the boundaries between performing formal tasks and emotional investment, or as Mr. Sugai put it, "devotion," was where her problems with exhaustion began. Nevertheless, she clarifies that "above anything else, I wanted a job I could do alone" (Tsumura 2021: 226). All this is to say that we can read the narrator's burnout as symptomatic of her sense of alienation from her work, ironically through emotional overinvestment. Tsumura's protagonist attempts, then, to become the ideal capitalist subject, whose work and labor power are distinct from her interior life: Walton and Luker (2019) describe how:

within capitalist society, the means of production are controlled by a few people, and everybody else is forced to commodify their labour-power. This is the basic principle of social alienation produced by capitalism... whatever you get paid to do will be primarily organised around creating exchange value—providing goods and services to sell—and not around knowledge of what would actually be useful or harmful for you to do. (P. 14)

Yet, as Lorde (1984) points out, our energies, sense of community, and ultimately our claims to our own subjectivity require us to activate what she calls the erotic, arguing:

we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. For the ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is one not of self-discipline but of self-abnegation. (P.42)

Mr. Sugai's testimony about why he took to the woods shows that the burnout, and subsequent self-isolation from society, was about his sense of powerlessness in the social worker role, which

³ From an unpublished draft of "Reading Hunger and Exhaustion in Clarice Lispector's *A Hora de Estrela*: Exploring the Ecology of Women's Work and Literary Production."

is replaced by the “useful” aspects of getting through each day living in the woods undetected. Yet, the narrator relates to him, conveying her understanding to us: his state of alienation is not alien to her. For her and her desire to never emotionally invest in her work through finding an “easy job,” she exhibits “the highest fear, the gravest immobility” (Lorde 1984: 42).

The novel’s first-person form, alongside Mr. Sugai’s story, suggests that *No Such Thing as an Easy Job* is not about alienation as Lorde might understand it. Once the protagonist begins to build workplace friendships her sense of exhaustion lifts, and on a metatextual level we as readers come to learn more about her, allowing us greater and greater understanding based on what is shared in the narration. The protagonist begins by praising how one of the “perks” of her first job as “the amount of time I had to spend talking to my colleagues was extremely minimal” (Tsumura 2021:21), evoking a strategy of survival that is the opposite to the singer of “A Woman’s Work” whose project relies on the listener “to give ear” (Anonymous 1629). Eventually, the narrator’s strategy changes. In her trivia-writing job for a cracker company, she opens a series on name meanings with one about one her lunchmates’ names because “she said that her parents had died relatively young and she’d never had the chance to ask them properly about why they’d chosen the name for her” (Tsumura 2021: 181). When the packet is printed, the workmate relays how “she’d presented a sample packet as an offering at her home altar,” and the narrator reflects how “that was really nice for me to hear” (Tsumura 2021: 182). For Lorde (1984), the erotic can be:

providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. (P.42)

Her interpersonal relationships begin to inform her work, where the advice series is inspired by her workmates problems (Tsumura 2021: 198–199), which becomes a very popular series, much to the protagonist’s confusion, yet the success of her writing is arguably because of “bridge” between writer and reader that she creates through her creative investment in her job.

Yet, Tsumura troubles how far we can adapt and negotiate capitalist alienation solely through interpersonal relationships by evoking the surreal. The WReC (2015) argue that “critically unreal” texts, usually from the periphery or semi-periphery of the world-system—

dramatize the trauma of modernity: for here the precipitate and selective introduction of capitalist productive and social modes into a non-capitalist environment produced incompatible material and existential situations, generating aesthetic forms encoding these disjunctions and constituting their stylistic peculiarities. (P.81)

In one of the protagonist’s jobs, one of her colleagues seems to have the ability to manifest businesses in and out of existence by writing or deleting adverts for them. One such company is the “Far East Flamenco Centre,” a large building which seemingly springs up out of nowhere, and “dramatizes” the encroachment of globalization and the world system into her neighborhood by rendering it unfamiliar and uncanny. Tsumura identifies the effects of globalization on the design

of the center, noting how “all of the windows in the building had yellow curtains. It was Spain after all, I reasoned with myself. But the ‘Far East’? Who had been responsible for such a grandiose naming choice?” (Tsumura 2021: 88). The self-consciousness around bringing together Spain and Japan, and arguably their “incompatibility” in that this becomes an uncanny site, renders the building part of the “aesthetic forms encoding these disjunctions and constituting their stylistic peculiarities” (WReC 2015: 81). This incongruity is further elucidated when the protagonist

passed the Far East Flamenco Centre again... Looking up at the windows framed in their yellow curtains of an almost eerie radiance, it occurred to me that maybe the problem wasn't how little I knew my neighbourhood. Maybe it was that my neighbourhood was morphing into a place I didn't know. (Tsumura 2021: 99)

The uncanny unfamiliarity that the protagonist experiences is mediated through the bus company “subjecting passengers to a non-stop commercial barrage” (Tsumura 2021: 78), wherein new adverts become the commercial ventures that “morph” the local space.

This uncanniness carries over to some references to the supernatural in *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job*. While the singer of “A Woman's Work” rails against escaping the notice of her husband, Tsumura's main character's first job requires her invisibility as she monitors an author, Yamae Yamamoto, who is unwittingly holding stolen diamonds. In the Introduction to this Special Issue I argued that we might instrumentalize Wilma A. Dunaway's (2001: 2) claim that that “women are only a faint ghost in the world-system perspective” to become “ghosts in the machine” who operate beyond the wage-relation. This becomes literalized in this job, where the protagonist narrates how she “started to feel a bit concerned for him” (Tsumura 2021: 21) regarding his own isolation and inability to write. The protagonist, mediated by the surveillance screen and the wage relation, experiences a kind of emotional investment where her sense of self begins to blur with that of Yamamoto's, where “my cravings for things became more and more synced up with Yamae Yamamoto's habits, until I ceased looking for things of my own accord” (Tsumura 2021: 42). This may at first glance might seem to align with unalienating connection with another, as Lorde might theorize, especially as the protagonist narrates “little by little, I was coming to feel like I was living alongside Yamae Yamamoto, sharing in his joy and his sadness, his pleasure and his pain” (Tsumura 2021: 43), which echoes some of Lorde's (1984:42) work about the “sharing of joy.” Yet, the protagonist immediately checks herself and narrates: “No, that's probably going too far...if not his sadness, then certainly his boredom” (Tsumura 2021: 42). In this instance, then, the unnamed protagonist's identification with, and doubling of, the subject of her surveillance actually entrenches further alienation.

Once the surveillance operation recovers the stolen diamonds, Yamamoto conveys how “I became fixated by a ghost story I heard about on TV. For days on end, I kept having the feeling that something was standing behind me” (Tsumura 2021: 63). He goes on to say that “if there was a jibakurei [stationary ghost] in my room, for example, I'm fairly sure he or she would be incredibly bored” (Tsumura 2021: 64). In this job, the protagonist quite literally in a ghost in the machine, both in being a presence in the machinery of the camera, but in a less literal sense that her labor is invizibilized in the state's carceral machinery. The recovery of high value diamonds

resulted in hours and hours of wages for (boring) surveillance. Her overidentification with Yamamoto's boredom is an uncanny reflection of her own, which, through the prism of the wage relation for the recovery of diamonds evokes "the principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need... Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities" (Lorde 1984:42). We revisit the travesty of necessities and the question of ghosts in her final job, where she begins to notice items are moved or missing from her station in the woods, especially food, which the previous employee in the hut in the forest thinks "might be a ghost" (Tsumura 2021: 338), but turns out to be Mr. Sugai. In this sense, ghostliness in *No Such Thing* comes full circle where,

the proximity of discordant discourses and unrelated narrative registers moving between the mundane and the fantastic, the recognisable and the improbable, the legible and the oneiric, the worldly and the mystical, can perhaps be understood as stylistic forms stemming from and transcending the novel's social ground, and thus as abstracts of incommensurabilities attendant on combined and uneven development. (WReC 2015: 95)

In other words, in a modern world-system where alienation renders us removed from our environment and communities, ghostliness allowed the protagonist to emotionally invest and evoke a kind of, albeit stilted, communication with Yamamoto and Mr Sugai. *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job* seemingly narrates the nauseous negotiation of when the market rubs up against our most essential need to connect with others.

Conclusion

The papers in this Special Issue are unified by questions brought about by dependency; that is to say, when the wage-relation in the world-system is upset by a cross-class, cross-status, or cross-wage way of relating to the humanity of the other. An obvious example of this is Kaube's (2024) paper on:

the malleability, the unknowability of her place between employee and friend could be strategically adopted in pursuit of individual ends. The companion, then, was a site of affective agency, a focal point for the needs and desires of her employer. (P. 99)

In other words, this Special Issue brings out how women and other minoritized groups have historically and continue to work in "the gaps in such systems that allows for survival within and beyond visible structures" (Spear 2024: 59). The world-system relies on unwaged reproductive labor, but in this coda I have made the case that it also relies on the blurring of the boundaries between work and non-work, the waged and the emotive, which, as demonstrated in the case studies of "A Woman's Work Is Never Done" and Tsumura's *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job* are unified over centuries and continents by alienation and exhaustion, or rather how modernity relies on suppression of women's erotic power. Lorde (1984) expounds how:

when we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. (P. 42)

In this coda I have argued that art and literature offer a bridge to combining 'mine and thine', not in the combined and uneven world-system of dependency and exploitation, but upon a common ground of humanity, what Lorde calls a "capacity for joy."

Lola Olufemi (2020: 65) makes the case that "the need to work, the expectation of manual and emotional labour, mean that there is rarely time or space for artistic reflection. But ... Creativity is at the heart of any new world we seek to build." This is not to say that all forms of non-artistic labor or domestic tasks are thus not creative, for instance Alissa Wilkinson (2022:42) describes "the happiest days" of her early marriage as making "a big pot of soup and a loaf of bread" for friends. Kathi Weeks (2011: 12) is clear that to call the work ethic into question "is not to deny the necessity of productive activity" but rather "to insist that there are other ways to organize and distribute that activity and to remind us that it is also possible to be creative outside the boundaries of work" and that "there might be a variety of ways to experience the pleasure that we may now find in work, as well as other pleasures that we may wish to discover, cultivate, and enjoy" (Weeks 2011: 12). Throughout this coda I have used Lorde's theorization of the erotic as a means to access this pleasure and satisfaction in work. I would also underline, however, that truly unalienated labor is animated by our "knowledge of what would actually be useful or harmful for you to do" (Walton and Luker 2019: 14). In Wilkinson's case, her domestic labor, feeding "twenty-five people" lentil soup once per month, emerged from the fact that "many of our artist friends were struggling, and in an effort to do *something*, I hit upon the idea of hosting" this monthly meal (Wilkinson 2022: 42 emphasis in original). Her emphasis on "something" alerts us to the animating force of the erotic to world-build, to create cultural bridges through a variety of cultural forms, and to avoid the scarcity mindsets that global capitalism relies upon.

In a neoliberal world-system I would posit that "a woman's work is never done" because it is no longer clear where the boundaries between work and non-work actually lie. The task as I see it, however, isn't necessarily to delineate these boundaries, but to:

question the validity of normative constructions of gender in the light of the existence of behaviours and qualities that contradict the rules, to point up rather than resolve conditions of contradiction, to articulate a political identity for women without conforming to existing stereotypes about them. (Scott 1988: 287)

The world-system presupposes a way of relating to each other which is based on a wage relation. Yet, the papers in this Special Issue have shown that women's negotiations of the world-system are more complex, sometimes emotively, physically, through violence, than bald data can account for. As such, we turn to art and literature to convey how there is "no such thing as an easy job" because we have become alienated from our creative and productive energies which has thus "reduce[d] work to a travesty of necessities" (Lorde 1984: 42). This "horror" (Lorde 1984: 42) is

registered in surreal, folkloric, or critically unreal texts which “dramatise the trauma of modernity” (WReC 2015: 81). Spear (2024: 59) articulates such trauma as “the very fashioning of globalized modernity as we understand it today created not only the inequalities upon which the sex trade relies, but the gaps in such systems that allows for survival within and beyond visible structures.” To work around such a system, within the gaps, is to be “peripheral... the writing produced in such locations is likely to be sensitive to absurdity and contradiction, disturbance and disruption, conflict and resistance” (WReC 2015: 82). We have seen such absurdity and surrealism in various guises across papers in this Special Issue, and in “A Woman’s Work Is Never Done” and *No Such Thing as an Easy Job*.

The intellectual exercises in this Special Issue do not represent the last word on the question of women in world-literature, or the world-system. To paraphrase Sheila Rowbotham (2016) as I quoted her in the introduction to this issue: “much luck to our elbows.” The end of capitalism, or the devolution of the world-system, would not signal the end of work. Olufemi’s (2020: 1) understanding that feminism is “justice work” in its own right suggests that this is the sort of work which, joyously, will never be done: there will, to my mind, always be better and more to achieve and consider.

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