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MLC 2015 Keynote: What's at stake in the Mobility of Labour? Borders, Migration, Contemporary Capitalism

Sandro Mezzadra¹

Abstract. *The talk starts with a short discussion of some influential works on the mobility of labour in historical and contemporary capitalism. Drawing upon a book I recently published with Brett Neilson, Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labour, I then discuss the significance of the proliferation of borders in the global age from the point of view of “late” capitalism. In the last part of the talk I focus on the subjective stakes of the politics of migration, providing instances from many parts of the world (including the Asia-Pacific region).*

I would like to start my talk by warmly thanking the organizers of this conference for inviting me as a keynote speaker in such a stimulating and challenging framework. The relations between migration and capitalism have indeed been at the center of my scholarly work for several years now. They particularly play a prominent role in the book I recently published with Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labour* (2013), where we propose to take the border not merely as a research object but also as an epistemic viewpoint on the tensions and struggles that characterize contemporary capitalist transitions at the global level. And let me add that my engagement in migration and border studies has never been simply a scholarly engagement. Since the early 1990s I have been rather involved in experiences of migrants' struggles and organizing, and the question regarding the connection between research and activism – the question some times discussed in terms of “militant investigation” (Grappi 2013; De Genova, Pickles and Mezzadra 2015, 63-64) – has always been at stake both in my individual work and in the many collaborative projects in which I have been participating over the last few years. Allow me to mention just one of these projects, the coordination, with Nicholas De Genova and John Pickles, of the collaborative writing of 17 activist scholars which led to the recent publication in the journal *Cultural Studies* of a text entitled “New Keywords: Migration and Borders” (2015).

I came to Victoria from Italy, with images of shipwrecks and an ongoing mass murder of migrants in the Mediterranean in my mind. These images resonate with others, coming from diverse borderscapes around the world, for

¹ Dr. Mezzadra is a foremost researcher on Late Capitalism in relation to Western Europe. Dr. Mezzadra's experience with migratory labour and how it relates to borders will provide insight into deep seeded issues surrounding the mobility of migrating populations.

instance with the images of Muslim and Rohingya migrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar stranded at sea between Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia in May this year. Reading the amazing book written by the Salvadorian journalist Óscar Martínez, *La bestia* (2014), I recently had once again the chance to get a scaring idea of the ‘structural violence’ which shapes the trail of migrants from central America across what critical migration and border scholars in Mexico call the ‘vertical border’ (Aquino, Varela, and Decosse 2013), which means the routes connecting the Southern and Northern border of the country. Murders and kidnappings, exploitation, rape, and enslavement are daily expressions of this structural violence. Speaking of ‘late capitalism and migration’ I do not pretend to ‘explain’ this structural violence by offering to you some new ‘grand theory.’ Nevertheless I will try to keep these images in mind during my talk, not simply the intolerable excesses of violence, but also the powerful impression of the stubbornness and ‘incurability’ (De Genova) of people on the move that they convey. And it is with particular emphasis on this second aspect that I resist taking such phrases as ‘humanity in excess’ or ‘human waste’ as iconic definitions of the predicament of global migration.

Needless to say, violence, coercion, and death are not something new in the history of the relations between modern capitalism and migration. ‘Many middle passages’ made the modern world (Christopher, Pybus, and Rediker 2007), ranging from the Atlantic slave trade to the global geographies of indentured labour, from the transport of convicts to ‘blackbirding’ in the Pacific. From recent historical investigations of these multifarious histories and geographies of abjection we have learned that these bodies in motion were never ‘docile.’ Practices of rebellion and resistance crisscross the history of even the most brutal forms of ‘forced’ migration, while they were and continue to be part and parcel of the experiences of dislocation, expulsion, and dispossession of the rural poor in many parts of the world. Multifarious forms of ‘coercion,’ including racism and special legal arrangements also characterize the histories of ‘free’ migration that played a crucial role in the age of mass industrialization, from the transatlantic migration between the 19th and 20th centuries to the ‘guestworkers’ and postcolonial migratory regimes in Western Europe after the Second World War. And nevertheless these migrants prompted the development of radical labour struggles, often challenging the very established structures of the labour movement.

There are of course several angles from which the relations between capitalism and migration can be investigated both in history and in the present. The shifting geographies of center and periphery characterizing the transformations of capitalism as a ‘world system,’ as well as the links between the mobility of capital and the mobility of labour come to mind here. And there is no need to mention the well-known names of scholars who have developed these perspectives. I do not want to deny their importance and productivity, particularly in a moment in which the stretching of commodity and supply chains through new logistical arrangements is dramatically transforming the geographies of the capitalist mode of production. The scattered historical ref-

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erences to the multifarious tensions between coercion and resistance that I just provided point however to a different analytical and theoretical angle. I am convinced that the study of migration, both historically and in the present, is a strategic field in which to understand the wide variety of devices, experiences, and conflicts that make possible the 'encounter' between capital and labour. As you may know, for instance from the work of the late Louis Althusser, 'encounter' is a word used by Marx in *Capital* in his analysis of the relation between capital and labour. I would like to stress the relevance of this word even though I share the criticism of Marx particularly developed over the last two decades by 'global labour historians,' who have contested the very possibility of using 'free' wage labour, instituted through a contract, as a standard characteristic of employment relations in the capitalist mode of production.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere the very constitution of 'free' wage labour, which definitely characterizes specific histories of capitalism, is to be understood as the result of a struggle where mobility and its control are always at stake (see for instance Mezzadra 2011; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a). Nicholas De Genova (2010, 40) has recently emphasized that the use by Marx of such terms as 'energy,' 'unrest,' 'motion' in his definition of the concept of labour power points to the relevance of mobility in 'the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being' that he terms labour power (Marx 1977: 270). The commoditization of these 'mental and physical capabilities,' which means the production of labour power as a commodity, is the result of a wide array of processes, struggles and conflicts. Far from being reducible to the presumed 'norm' of a contractual exchange giving way to 'free' wage labour the commoditization of labour power can take multiple shapes. Practices, controls, limitations, and the regulation of mobility form a strategic field for the development of these processes, struggles and conflicts. And there is a need to emphasize that they are not limited to geographical mobility but also involve the very possibility to quit a specific job, whose relevance for labour law and contracts has been often emphasized by historians and legal scholars (e.g. Steinfield 1991 and Moulner 1998).

There is a subjective and even autonomous dimension of mobility that we always have to keep in mind in our analysis of the relations between migration and capitalism, while it is also necessary to be aware of the relevance of the regulation of migration, often posited as a 'supplement' to the autochthonous labour force, to be filtered according to specific criteria and hierarchies, for the legal and political constitution of 'labour markets' (see for instance Bauder 2006). Once it is framed in this way, which I believe is consistent with Marx's definition, the concept of labour power provides a theoretical and analytical angle on the relations between migration and capitalism that is irreducible to the icon of the homo oeconomicus, whose criticism has become a kind of common sense point of entry for contemporary critical migration studies. The production of subjectivity associated to the notion of labour power rather points to a kind of zone of indistinction, where the very boundaries between

economy, politics, and culture are continuously worked and reworked. In different historical ages of capitalism, and within specific capitalist transitions this zone of indistinction takes on distinct characters, which deserve critical investigation.

It may be useful from this point of view to spend a couple of words on the concept of 'late capitalism,' which figures in the title of our conference. I think it is important to be aware that this concept, as every concept, has a history. It presumably emerged from the discussions of the early 20th century regarding the dramatic transformations of capitalism since the deep crisis that started in the 1870s, discussions which involved both Marxist theorists like Hilferding and Lenin and bourgeois social scientists like Weber and Sombart. The latter is usually credited for the introduction of the concept of 'late capitalism' (in the third volume of his work *Der moderne Kapitalismus*, 1927), which was later picked up and reframed by Ernst Mandel as well as by the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School and their epigones in the 1970s, most notably by Jürgen Habermas and Claus Offe.

There is no need here to go into the details of this conceptual history, within which the notion of 'late capitalism' was developed in tandem with or as a criticism of other notions, like for instance 'high,' 'monopoly,' or 'organized capitalism,' as well as 'industrial' or 'administered society.' Suffice it to say that on the one hand the emergence of the notion of 'late capitalism' in the early 20th century was part and parcel of extraordinary efforts to grasp the radical novelty of a historically specific capitalist formation and that on the other hand the notion was meant to identify the defining features of capitalism at the heyday of its industrial and national moment. Shortly put, this is not anymore the capitalism we are confronted with in our global present. Fredric Jameson, who may be well considered the main reference for contemporary uses of the concept, is definitely aware of this. In the introduction to his book on postmodernism he notices that late capitalism "is not my favorite slogan, and I try to vary it with the appropriate synonyms ('multinational capitalism,' 'spectacle or image society,' 'media capitalism,' 'the world system,' even 'Postmodernism' itself)" (Jameson 1991, xviii). I think it is worth emphasizing this moment of conceptual confusion and proliferation, since it points to the need to further investigate the breaks, ruptures, and mutations that make up the novelty and distinctiveness of contemporary capitalism.

Summing up in a necessarily rough and schematic way the collaborative work I have been developing over the past years in particular with Brett Neilson (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013b and 2015) and with Verónica Gago (Gago and Mezzadra 2015), I would say that capitalism has moved beyond its industrial moment and is currently characterized by the prevalence of what we call extractive operations. Needless to say, we do not deny the persistent relevance and even expansion of industrial activities at the global level. What we contend is that particularly due to the new scale of processes of financialization the moment of 'command' in the very constitution of what Marx used to call 'total capital' has shifted towards new criteria and logics both in the

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direct exploitation of social cooperation and in the production of space.

A crucial aspect of this capitalist transition is a tendency towards varying degrees of decoupling of capital and labour, meaning that the relation between specific labouring subjects and the capitalist actors that exploit them is increasingly mediated and takes forms that are more and more difficult to reconstruct, both analytically and politically. This is particularly true in the case of the accumulation and valorization of financial capital (of what is often discussed as the problem of the 'sources' of financial value). I am convinced that one of the most important tasks for the critique of contemporary capitalism lies precisely in understanding the multiple, differential, and hierarchical ways in which financial capital penetrates social cooperation, disseminating within it its own 'rationality' (primarily through the logics of debt) while at the same time intertwining with and synchronizing other forms of capitalist exploitation. The radical heterogeneity of labour (both from the point of view of its subjective constitution and from the point of view of its regulation, control, and exploitation) that Brett Neilson and I have tried to grasp with the notion of a 'multiplication of labour' acquires its full meaning within this framework.

Migration plays again crucial roles in many parts of the world within these processes of multiplication, which are characterized by a displacement of the centrality of 'free' wage labour in the organization of labour markets, going beyond the notion of a 'dual' or 'segmented' labour market, by a mobilization of 'human capital' that blurs the boundary between 'labour' and 'activity,' and by a capitalist valorization and exploitation of what Verónica Gago, in her investigation of migrant economies in Latin America, calls popular 'vitalism' and 'pragmatism' (Gago 2015). What Gago has in mind is a wide and heterogeneous array of informal and often community-based economic activities, which support the material reproduction of migrant networks and transnational spaces and are increasingly becoming integrated in the circuits of capitalist valorization in Latin America and elsewhere. The financialization of these migrant and popular economies is particularly relevant in this regard.

I know, what I have just said may sound abstract and even a bit obscure. For want of time I have summed up a set of research hypothesis, which deserve further theoretical and analytical development. But it was important to me at least to point to the more general framework within which I try to make sense of the contemporary reorganization of the relations between capitalism and migration. Needless to say, this reorganization is far from being homogeneous and smooth at the global level. Nevertheless I believe that we can identify a set of trends that are 'translated' in radically heterogeneous ways in different contexts while being at the same time consistent with the general framework I just presented. Contemporary capitalism, precisely due to the hegemony of finance and to the prevalence of what I call 'extractive operations,' is predicated upon a total mobilization of subjective capabilities, attitudes – of "all those physical and psychological factors which make someone able to earn this or that wage," to quote from Michel Foucault's discussion of the neo-liberal notion of 'human capital' (Foucault 2008, 224).

This notion continues to shape social and economic policies across diverse geographical scales, disrupting established forms of regulation of labour and prompting conditions of uncertainty and precarity as well as a further diversification within the field of human activity posited and exploited by capital as ‘source of value.’ Foucault himself emphasized the relevance of mobility and migration for theories of ‘human capital,’ which aim at coding the ‘material’ and even ‘psychological costs’ of migration as an investment. The resulting image of the migrant as ‘an investor’ (230) figures prominently in contemporary theories and practices of ‘migration management,’ particularly forged and promoted by global actors like the International Organization for Migration that play increasingly relevant roles in the design and implementation of migration policies (Geiger and Pécoud 2014). I propose to read this ‘translation’ of the neo-liberal notion of ‘human capital’ onto the field of ‘migration management’ as an attempt to read from the angle of the valorization of capital the persistent turbulence, autonomy, stubbornness of migration, its ungovernable moments of freedom and excess.

The diversification of migratory patterns and experiences, the stretching of migratory networks, the multiplication of what is known in migration studies as ‘new immigrant destinations’ (Winders 2014), the spatial and temporal turmoil that characterize contemporary migration at the global level correspond indeed to a permanent mobilization of subjective energies and potentialities. This process radically transforms and challenges established forms of life, under the pressure of material conditions of deprivation and dispossession but at the same time of a subjective push towards the opening up of new spaces of freedom and equality. We probably owe feminist scholars the most compelling descriptions of these tensions and conflicts, which take on a particularly sharp aspect in contemporary processes of the ‘feminization of migration.’ To mention just one recent example, in her work on migrant domestic and care work in Turkey, Ayse Akalin has recently argued that the stretching of ‘global care chains’ and the increase in women migrants who move for the purposes of domestic work “should be read as concerning a ubiquitous demand to extract from them a potential for a specific set of creative capacities that are consequent upon their emergence as mobile actors” (Akalin 2015, 67). Women’s mobility is thus translated through the action of multiple borders and control devices onto a generalized ‘availability’ of their labour power, which in many cases coincides with carceral modes of ‘live in’ facilitated by their ‘irregular’ status.

A dramatic tension between mobility and its containment emerges here at the very heart of what several scholars investigate in terms of the governmentality of migration (see for instance Tazzioli 2015, 47-49; Walters 2015). And I think that this tension provides us with a conceptual and analytic thread we have to follow in our investigation of the relations between migration and contemporary capitalism. At stake is the attempt to make mobility productive, a problem that has characterized the whole history of capitalism. But we also have to emphasize that nowadays the manifestations of the tension between

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mobility and containment are radically diverse and heterogeneous, and are far from converging towards a standard form of regulation and employment.

If there is a common trend in migratory policies today in many parts of the world it lies precisely in the multiplication and diversification of recruitment schemes and types of visa, which aim at encoding the position of individual migrants according to their presumed 'skills' as well as to nationality, language, cultural and religious criteria. This trend has become even more rooted and entrenched in the wake of the global economic crisis of 2007-2008.

Gone are the days in which migratory policies revolved around the centrality of a single figure, as it was for instance the case with the industrial 'guestworker' in Western Germany after the Second World War but also (to mention just one more example) with large-scale programs of labour transplantation connected to processes of mass industrialization in modern East Asia. In his research on the 'transplant' of Chinese migrant labour to Singapore, South Korea, and Japan, Xiang Biao (2012) highlights a trend toward the emergence of 'sector specific migration policies' that pretend to identify 'without ambiguity' when and where migrants are going to work. As Brett Neilson and I show in *Border as Method*, this corresponds to the fantasy of a 'just-in time' and 'to-the-point' migration, which nurtures the evolution of migration policies in many parts of the world according to an ideal that can be eventually described in terms of an individualization of migration control.

Needless to say, a fantasy is a fantasy, and an ideal is an ideal. Nevertheless, this fantasy and ideal allow us to grasp tendencies and processes, which further qualify the multifarious contemporary manifestations of the tension between mobility and containment that I have emphasized above. Synchronizing the movement of migration, even of individual migrants, with the flexible spatiality and temporality of contemporary capitalist production requires a dissemination of control and a multiplication of recruitment schemes which often aim at institutionalizing temporariness as a widespread feature of migration, resonating with generalized conditions of uncertainty and precarity of employment. *Liberating Temporariness?*, an important collective book published in 2014 in Canada, discusses the implications for migration studies and policies of the ensuing displacement of the standard of 'permanence,' which as Parvati Raghuram contends in her contribution to the volume has long been "the Holy Grail for migration theorists of all political persuasions" (Raghuram 2014, 178). Such a concept as 'integration,' which often shapes also its flipside, which means the concept of 'exclusion,' should give way to a detailed analysis of the multifarious forms, of the spatial arrangements and temporal nuances of what Brett Neilson and I call 'differential inclusion' as well as of the conflicts and tensions that play themselves out even on the field of the experiences and practices of temporariness. The multiplication of borders that we map in *Border as Method* must be understood also from this angle, and there is a need to stress that they often take the shape of processes of segregation of migrants whose condition is constructed as temporary. There is an architecture of segregation, which is articulated in many ways with the

architecture of detention so vividly described and critised by Tings Chak in her keynote yesterday. Just think of gated camps for migrant workers under the *kafala* system in the Gulf, of the dormitory labour regime for Chinese internal migrants under the *hukou* system, of the slums and textile sweatshops in which Bolivian migrants live and work in Buenos Aires, or of the camps for agricultural migrant workers in Italy often living in conditions of ‘irregularity.’ The tension between mobility and containment takes here particularly harsh shapes.

The scattered temporality of migration is part and parcel of a new spatialization of class formation, which these instances reflect in heterogeneous but vivid ways. Writing for instance on the condition of migrant workers in the Gulf, Adam Hanieh has underscored the need to overcome any ‘methodological nationalism’ in the analysis of class formation and composition. He very effectively shows how the regional dynamics, including of course South Asia into the ‘region,’ have become an internal element of the composition of the working class in the Gulf, not simply considering ‘those who happen to be inside its borders’ but also ‘the enormous number of potential workers who constitute a labour pool for the Gulf’ (Hanieh 2015, 67). Beyond the peculiarity of the situation in the Gulf, I am convinced that contemporary migration, once we analyze the constitutive tension between mobility and containment from the angle of its spatial and temporal coordinates, allows us to grasp class formation as an open process. And it opens up the space within which the conflicts and struggles connected to the formation of class (and not merely to the movements and condition of an already constituted class) can be productively analyzed.

Myriad actors enter into play in this process of class formation, facilitating as well as obstructing the movement of migrants, extracting value from this movement well before migrants enter a specific employment relation. The ‘Rent-seeking practices’ of citizens of the Gulf States, who take the *kafala* system (and the privilege of citizenship) as a basis for profit through a further stretching of the employment relation (AlShebabi 2015, 35), can be considered as an extreme example of the proliferation of the logics of rent within and across the whole migratory process. In his lecture, ‘Where are the Missing Vehicles’ William Walters has expressed his concern “to give vehicles and their routeways, the materials of the journey, a more central place in critical studies of migration” (Walters 2012, 9). Expanding on Walters’ point (see also Walters 2014) I think that there is a need to investigate the relations between migration and contemporary capitalism also from the point of view of what we can call the logistics and infrastructures of migration. These are notions that recently entered the vocabulary of critical studies of capitalism and globalization. According to geographer Deborah Cowen (2014, 10) “logistics is a driving force in the transformations in time, space, and territory that make globalization and recast jurisdiction.”

Without going into the details of Cowen’s discussion we can argue that the mediation of mobility, the channeling and distribution of migrants through the intervention of both human actors and logistical infrastructures are crucial

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aspects of the process and dynamics of contemporary migration. Needless to say, I am not contending that these are completely new aspects. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) point for instance to the 'middle passage' as a key site for the emergence of modern logistics. But the scale, the temporality, the techniques, the technological as well as the economic 'rationality' of this mediation seem to me to be indeed unprecedented. Far from seaming together actors and networks within smooth processes of mobility, these new forms, procedures, and technologies of mediation of the social relation of capital multiply and disseminate through the whole process of migration moments of clash and antagonism. A 'logistical gaze' on migration would help in shedding light on the multiple dimensions, scales, and temporalities of these moments of clash and antagonism.

Surveillance and security studies have often emphasized the emergence of a migration 'business' and 'industry,' in which legal as well as illegal actors participate and share the profits ensuing from restrictive regulations of migration (see for instance Rodier 2012). Widening the scope of these studies, Johan Lindquist and Xiang Biao propose the concept of 'migration infrastructure' to come to grips with the results of their ethnographic investigation of 'low skilled labour migration' from Indonesia and China. 'More than ever before,' Lindquist and Xiang (2014, 124) write, 'labour migration is intensively mediated.' Distinguishing five dimensions of the 'migration infrastructure', the commercial, the regulatory, the technological, the humanitarian, and the social, Lindquist and Xiang pay particular attention to the role played by a wide array of recruitment intermediaries in the process of migration. While they take into account the persisting relevance of national borders for the regulation of migration, they stress the role of 'more expansive forms of mediation and infrastructure' in shaping channels and corridors of mobility within which migrants are often 'moved by others' (131).

The resulting logistical spaces of migration are crucial to the organization of the 'encounter' between capital and labour in a situation characterized by the stretching, flexibilization, and outsourcing of production, by what I have evoked before when speaking of various degrees of 'decoupling' of capital and labour. At stake here is once again the tension between mobility and its containment. As plenty of interviews demonstrate, recruitment agencies and other intermediaries play key roles in binding migrants to specific, usually temporary, jobs, radically limiting (for instance through the confiscation of passports) their spatial as well as labour market related mobility (e.g. Rota 2015). The concept of 'indentured time' used in the paper presented today by Shanti Robertson is particularly relevant here. Moreover these logistical spaces are also spaces of value extraction and valorization of capital for multiple actors, once again both legal and illegal, including smugglers and traffickers, who as recent studies emphasize are often connected in myriad ways to 'professionals who offer travel, immigration, or employment services' (Townsend and Oomen 2015, 9). These logistical spaces are shaped by the logics of rent, loan and debt, which in many parts of the world reproduce the specters of in-

denture and peonage. And they intertwine with the highly financialized as well as with the informal networks within which migrants' remittances circulate. At the same time they are spaces of struggle, where the fifth and last dimension of the migration infrastructure distinguished by Lindquist and Xiang (the social, identified with 'migrant networks') can crystallize in a set of resources for resistance and negotiation, giving way to those 'mobile commons' that Parsanoglou, Trimikliniotis, and Tsianos (2015, 9) read as "an essential acquisition resulting from the collective power to reshape the world of people on the move."

Summing up my argument today, I am convinced that the tension between mobility and containment characteristic of the global history of capitalism takes on today peculiar shapes, which are becoming even more apparent in the wake of the global economic crisis of 2007-2008. Attempts to tame, channel, and valorize the tumultuous and autonomous migration, to detect in its ungovernable body vital skills, capacities, and potentialities for the valorization of capital go hand in hand with more general processes of flexibilization of production, shattering of established formations of labour, citizenship, and rights, and the multiplication of labour. The resulting fracturing of the temporal and spatial coordinates of migration, the diversification of migratory schemes, the proliferation of borders, the increasingly intensive mediation performed within the logistical circuits of the 'migration infrastructure' must be understood as crucial aspects of the production of labour power in a global conjuncture in which capitalism has reorganized itself beyond the logics and 'rationality' of its industrial and national moment. Transnational and transcontinental scales of class formation are particularly relevant here. Reading the concept of labour power from the point of view of the production of subjectivity, I tried to propose an analysis of the relations between migration and contemporary capitalism that escapes the shortcuts and pitfalls of traditional liberal and Marxist theories centered upon the homo oeconomicus while emphasizing the centrality of labour.

Migration continues to be nowadays a strategic field of investigation for any attempt to understand, in localized and grounded ways, the composition of what we can call with another Marxian concept living labour. This notion appears particularly challenging once we stress that we are confronted nowadays with powerful processes that increasingly place the very distinction between 'life' and 'labour' under duress. While migration, both in its subjective dynamics and in the ways it is 'managed,' is a powerful force of heterogenization of the composition of living labour, the experiences, movements, and struggles of migrants resonate with those of other labouring subjects, who have exploded the very theoretical and political possibility of conceiving a homogeneous working class. At the same time, these experiences, movements, and struggles make even more urgent the task of working towards the invention of new forms of commonality, solidarity, and organization of struggles in an age of financialized capitalism and multiplication of labour.

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