

Guy Mannes-Abbott
**Laboring One to
Seven (Island of
Terror)**

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e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 Guy Mannes-Abbott
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One

I'm laboring for words of concrete precision. Words for forms of labor that are both textbook early nineteenth century and specific to the early twenty-first century. Ones to honor the bodies and minds generating this "labor power," and that will also reach my intended targets.¹ Words to break down an individual's sleep-deprived, debt-formed despair, and so break with a system of exchange driving us to extinction. I'm striving to touch you through screens and borders, to conjure alternatives from the same-old and new, only-ever shared, world.

In my labor I seek words for the long working day and night of hundreds of thousands of migrant South Asian men living amongst concrete and sand, in squalid or prison-like camps on and around Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island project. Conditions of forced labor generating significant capital for North Atlantic world institutions seeking consolidation through expansion as global brands. Cultural institutions like the Louvre and the Guggenheim take in hundreds of millions of dollars for their brand alone, while exploiting recruitment debts that keep ill-paid construction workers imprisoned for an average of two years.

In laboring to see, ask, and listen to the details of men engaged directly and indirectly in producing the spectacle of Saadiyat Island over four or five years, it surprises me to find what I'm looking for in the words and conjurings of Karl Marx.

Two

My elementary Arabic struggles in response to bullet-point questions at al-Jalazone, the "green" camp north of Ramallah in the Palestinian hills. My new friend has introduced me to his old friend, the butcher. I am being introduced to – or initiated into? – the heart of the camp, beneath banners of Abu Ammar and Abu Jihad. Am I an atheist? Easy answer. Am I an imperialist? More or less easy answer. Am I a Marxist? This too should be an easy answer, but I labor under a yoke of ethical precision: if there were an occasion for truth this would be it.

I can't answer yes to the "Marxist" question without resorting to a deceptive distancing. Rather than trade in Marxian sophistry, I speak the truth: I don't trust the intellect or maturity of anyone who has never engaged Marx substantially, nor been able to answer the question in the affirmative. How fragile such a mind would be, and how helpless in this world of rapidly totalizing economic globalization. I listen closely to the patient Arabic translation and circling revisions until laughter embraces my little dig at a Marx-free lightness of being.

Something about the precision of this and

other responses satisfied my uncompromising comrades from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – that and my long familiarity with Abu Jihad, whose memorial service I attended in London after the state of Israel assassinated him in Tunis. I'd just returned from a revolutionary Nicaragua under murderous North American siege, slipping back and forth across the border in between Contra raids. A signal year, 1989.

Three

I'm listening as Imran from Peshawar, Pakistan details the hours and pay levels of men he works alongside as a foreman at construction sites on Saadiyat, in and around Abu Dhabi. He has worked longer than many of the other migrant laborers, and his account matches the accounts of men in labor camp after labor camp – in Mussafah, in Abu Dhabi, in Mafraq, on Saadiyat with its obscenely sanitized camp, and in industrial estates full of labor camps in Al Quoz and Jebel Ali in Dubai. Wages, on projects that include the Rafael Vinoly-designed New York University campus on Saadiyat, begin at 572 Dhs (\$150) a month for six ten-to-twelve-hour days a week. These are minimums, in each respect.

I hear Alok from Nepal describe a relative

success story turned cruelly sour. It took five years for the contractual conditions that drew him to Dubai, and then Saadiyat, to be met – a practice the UN describes as human trafficking. However, this clinical external measure underplays the violence involved: individual human costs borne in body and mind. Although he finally received his contracted wages, he was forced to travel five hours to and from the NYU site for a year. Returning at 9 or 10 p.m., he prepared next day's lunch and slept briefly before departing at 4 a.m. – every day but Friday.

These working days are either the same or comparable to those detailed in Marx's *Capital*, which examines eighteenth- and nineteenth-century workhouses and factories in London. Marx refers to these, with their twelve-hour shifts, as the "House of Terror 1770!"² Is there a better term for a dystopian system in the year 2015 in which men work similar hours, are trapped by recruitment debts, and have to spend unpaid hours traveling to and from work sites, significantly extending the working day?

Four

"Very recently, I reread *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. I confess it to my shame: I had not done so for decades," wrote Jacques Derrida

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A worker rests in front of a promotional banner on Saadiyat Island. Photo: Human Rights Watch

in 1992.³ I admit to something similar, and to not having read Derrida's *Specters of Marx* for a couple of decades either. Derrida was amused back then by discovering that the first noun in the *Manifesto* is "specter," the one "haunting Europe – the specter of communism."⁴ It's a noun that repays the kind of attention Derrida gives it, principally for conjuring the future tense and a coming community.

Beyond that, Derrida's specter "sees us not see it even when it is there. A spectral asymmetry interrupts here all specularity. It de-synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony."⁵ Later, he deploys Marx's construction of the commodity as "strange ... [and] ... grotesque"⁶ to conclude that "the commodity is a 'thing' without phenomenon."⁷ Atyaaf, the Arabic equivalent of these conjuring specters, returns us to Saadiyat and its parade of spectacularity along a waterfront separating island from city center: Zaha Hadid's threatened performing arts complex; Jean Nouvel's memorial to forced labor, the Louvre Abu Dhabi; and the ultimate in grotesque frippery, Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

When Latour writes that "like God, capitalism does not exist," he is stating the obvious, without diminishing the concrete

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effects of either.⁸ It is not only that the modern – periodized to 1989 – had no substance, but that time has never possessed a synchronized "jointedness." Saadiyat crystallizes what this means. What is arguably new is the form – the cultural gloss and vulgar knowingness – in which the Guggenheim in New York feeds so mercilessly off desperate Nepali villagers, even while ghosting historical slave trade triangles.

Five

Jebel Ali Industrial Area is almost an hour's drive from downtown Dubai, and more than an hour from Abu Dhabi. It's home to tens running into hundreds of thousands of migrant workers housed in shabby, high-walled labor camps. Casually tight security is evident everywhere. Lifeless men negotiate largely unpaved tracks carrying goods from the Labour Power or Al Madina Supermarkets, the prices of which overlap with ones uptown.

These labor camps bear the signatures of well-known companies like Arabtec, Al Habtoor, and Kele. Bleak warehouses map conglomerates and families in the region, brands with big claims to longevity, innovation, high standards, and pivotal roles in the UAE's success. The Habtoor-Leighton Group, for example, boasts that it



"To widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the laborer." Labor Camp, Mussafah, Abu Dhabi from *Companions*.

“takes a zero-tolerance approach to unethical behavior, incl. conflicts of interest, bribery and corruption.”⁹

Aminul from Dhaka has been trapped here for five years on a construction contract that was passed on to him by his brothers. He is paid 750 Dhs a month. He is not happy about this, and he has three years to go. Amitava from Bihar, India, looks raggedly defeated in middle-age, halfway through a four-year contract with Al Basti & Muktha. Embarrassed but reckless, he reaffirms in Hindi that he earns 600 Dhs a month. Muhammad from Multan, Pakistan, paid the usual \$2500 to acquire his former job of preparing US military supplies for shipping to Afghanistan. He now works building a downtown Hilton and receives 1200 Dhs a month, minus 300 Dhs for food. He is young, smart, and desperate.

I ask Farukh from Waziristan, Pakistan what he thinks of his labor camp: “You can see it – be practical!” A dreadful, infectious laughter ricochets around the tight space we are in. Leaving, I pass gleaming Arabtec busses, all of them bearing Abu Dhabi job sheets in their cabs.

Six

In 1980, the UAE outlawed recruitment fees. The law applied to any “employment agent or labor supplier,” and included “any commission or material reward in return for employment, or ... expenses thereby incurred.”¹⁰ In 2010, new policies enabled the Ministry of Labor to force companies and individuals to reimburse such fees, whether paid inside or outside the UAE. Saadiyat has its own body of regulations, the Employment Practice Policy, which further prohibits loading migrant workers with recruitment debt. In 2011, the Tourism Development and Investment Company of Saadiyat appointed monitors to report back on implementation at their projects on the island.

In 2014, PricewaterhouseCoopers’s third annual report stated that 88 percent of employees currently working on Saadiyat paid recruitment costs and were not reimbursed for them.¹¹ I was present in March 2014 when a “TDIC official who did not wish to be named, observed: ‘If there is a worker who said they have not paid a recruitment fee, I would not believe him.’”¹² Meanwhile, Nouvel’s Louvre is completing construction with thousands of men entrapped this way by Arabtec, a private company in which the government has a controlling stake.

Marx noted that, as industrialization developed in England, the legal working day lengthened and conditions worsened. In response, “Parliament passed five Labour Laws between 1802 and 1833, but was shrewd enough not to vote a penny for their compulsory

implementation, for the necessary official personnel, etc.”¹³ It took the 1847 Factory Act to establish a ten-hour working day. The UAE has recently increased the number of labor inspectors, with markedly little effect. The UAE has also beaten and deported workers at the NYU site that complained, and expelled or banned humanitarian and academic labor specialists from the campus and the country.

Marx added an apposite footnote to the remark above: “It is very characteristic of the regime of Louis Philippe ... that the one Factory Act passed during his reign ... was never put in force.” Actions to enforce “this law are, in a country where every mouse is under police administration, left to the good-will of the *amis du commerce*.”¹⁴

Seven

The first verb in the *Communist Manifesto* is “haunting.”¹⁵ Other promising verbs caught my attention recently: “labor is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the laborer.”¹⁶ The aspiration is for a free play of bodily and mental activity in a society in which the present overrides the past, rather than the reverse. It’s a specter of astonishing modesty and common sense.

Contrast this with the spectacle of Gehry’s Guggenheim, which so effectively represents the insubstantiality of Abu Dhabi’s Island of Terror. Contrast the Guggenheim’s claim to civilizing values that will transform the region and the world with the real effects of its commodifying loop, which erases the Guggenheim museum’s origin in human labor: those exploited, imprisoned, deported, and replaceable South Asian migrants.

“Marx remains an immigrant *chez nous*, a glorious, sacred, accursed but still ... clandestine immigrant,” wrote Derrida, a figure “we” should neither neuter nor “send back to the border.”¹⁷ I disagree. It matters what measures we use in conjuring the present and future of migrant labor, lest we detract from “their” violent fate and misread “our” own becoming-migrant too. These are measures, perspectives, and precisely aimed words which can only be formed at the borders where we are thrown. Here we must gather to widen, deepen, and “enrich” modes and zones of commonality – if we are to continue to exist.

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1
Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. I* (London: Penguin, 1990), 128.

2
Ibid., 388.

3
Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.

4
Ibid.

5
Ibid., 6–7.

6
Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 163.

7
Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 150.

8
Bruno Latour, quoted in Graham Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political* (London: Pluto, 2014), 111.

9
See <http://www.hlgroupp.com/en/article/company-overview/ethics.html>

10
Federal Law No. 8 for 1980, quoted in “Migrant Workers’ Rights on Saadiyat Island in the UAE, Progress Report,” Human Rights Watch, 2015, 25.

11
PwC November 2014 report <http://www.tdic.ae/TDIC/ourapproach/pages/worker.aspx>

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“Gulf Labor’s Observations and Recommendations after Visiting Saadiyat Island and Related Sites (March 14–21, 2014),” 9. See http://gulflabor.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/GL_Report_Apr30.pdf

13
Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 390.

14
Ibid.

15
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 1979), 78.

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Ibid., 97.

17
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