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The H-1B Visa and Coolie Form

By

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Introduction: Form and Figure

[T]he capitalist project today is not merely a response to the workers' impact on the structure of the Planner-State. *It also seeks to interpret the form or figure in which this impact develops*, which is the mass worker. It seeks to interpret the mass-worker phenomenon in order both to recuperate it and to reshape it.

— Antonio Negri, “Crisis of the Planner State”¹

“One hypothesis,” testified Alan Greenspan, in a 1999 appearance before the Congressional Joint Economic Committee while Chairman of the Federal Reserve, for why American productivity had outpaced the rest of the world in the foregoing decade, “is that a necessary condition for information technology to increase output per hour is a willingness to discharge or retrain workers that the newer technologies have rendered redundant. Countries with less flexible labor markets than the United States enjoys may have been inhibited in this regard.”² This postulation of Greenspan’s followed an account of how the rebound of the U.S. economy through the increasing synchronization of production and consumption, and innovations in production technologies, were both an effect of the growth of the information technology sector. “As this century comes to an end, the defining characteristic of the current wave of technology is the role of information.”³ What Greenspan’s comments suggest is the relation between comprehensive national economic growth, the rise of the U.S. information technology industry, and the form of labor it employs—and discards. What this paper, in turn, suggests is that the H-1B visa is the legal and economic instrument which sutures these developments and features. By making cheap foreign labor readily available and eminently contingent, the H-1B visa regime underwrites the U.S. information technology sector’s “flexible

labor market,” at the economic site where innovations in productivity are being generated and recursively incorporated.

Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission* (2004) is a novel about this historical configuration of capital, the H-1B, and the subjects produced by both.⁴ Shortly after migrating to the United States with fantasies of prosperity informed by the “double-boom” (40) of the U.S. Internet economy, the novel’s protagonist Arjun finds himself desperately searching for work, conducting endless phone interviews for scarce I.T. jobs. Along with several other Indian H-1B visa beneficiaries of Databodies, Arjun otherwise passes his days on the ‘bench’ watching television, punctuated by visits from Sherry, the “Databodies Personnel Liaison Manager” (38) who sees them as “a bunch of starving coolies” (42). After a brief stint in Maine, employed by a fish processor where he “came cheap” (44) and two “sets of middlemen would be taking a percentage” of his earnings (43), Arjun lands a job at Virugenix in Redmond, Washington. At his new job Arjun “follow[s] the workaholic Virugenix ethos (unofficial company motto: ‘*Sometimes it is noble to sleep in the crawl space of your desk*’)” (54). There, he meets a coworker, Chris, who quickly realizes Arjun is “on one of those slave visas” (62). This fact subtends Arjun’s pleas when he is originally given his two weeks: “‘Please if I lose this job I’ll have to go back’” and “‘I’ll work for less money. I’ll do longer hours’” (91). It is telling that the narrative arc of Arjun’s employment traffics heavily in the language of indenture and coolie labor, calling forth a long history of British imperial labor practices which similarly trafficked in Indian bodies. As this paper will argue, it is precisely the activation of formal resonances with—the pastiche of—coolie labor by the H-1B visa regime which undergirds registrations of the program as one of indentured labor.

Indeed, by marking the H-1B as a “slave visa,” Chris indexes the exploitative form of labor capture and devaluation facilitated by the H-1B visa regime, if grossly overstating the similarities between such a program and chattel slavery. These realities have led many scholars, including Sharmila Rudrappa, to label the H-1B “slave visa” (62) program as one of “indentured servitude” where Indians are reinscribed as “cyber-coolies” and “probationary Americans,” indexing a long history of Indian indentured labor in the Americas and beyond.⁵ Just as the British empire once coercively exported Indian and Chinese coolie labor to “plantation colonies in the Caribbean, South Africa, and the Indian and Pacific oceans,”⁶ the U.S. iteratively mobilizes the nexus between brownness and indenture to exploit unassimilable Indian laborers under the H-1B visa regime. In the racialization and labor devaluation which is coextensive with the H-1B visa, Indian immigrants are ‘coolie’ laborers first and Americans never. Separated in their inceptions by over a century, the geographic epicenters of their organization, and the forms of labor typically demanded by each, considerable commonalities between the systems and across their differences appear tenuous and unlikely. Yet, *Transmission* demonstrates how the H-1B visa program racializes its Indian workers through a pastiche of the history of (Indian) coolie labor, and the production of a coolie form.

While the *category* coolie has no essential inside, coolie *form* indexes both the historically-specific configurations of labor exploitation which racialize the productive subjects they interpellate and the historical cathexis of Indian migrants to this formal (legal, economic, political, and social) structure. By noting this nexus of form and subject, this paper registers how the Indian migrant laborer becomes discursively and culturally articulated in relation to the industrial-state which facilitates their migration, exploitation, contingency, and precarity, and that state’s political-economic imperatives. This paper, then, critically considers how colonial

configurations of labor exploitation historically racialized the Indian (migrant) worker as coolie, and how this marking is productively and tenuously reappropriated by the U.S. state into the present. On the one hand, Indian migrant laborers were, in fact, historically racialized as coolies; on the other hand, the historical specificity of coolie labor makes for the spuriousness of its descriptive claim on contemporary Indian H-1B workers. This ambivalence with respect to history is what we refer to as coolie form.

The term coolie itself comes from the Tamil word “*kuli*,” which means wages, daily labor, or hire. Popularized by Portuguese traders in the sixteenth century, as they traded in and out of Asian port cities, the designation of coolie simultaneously referred to the racial and class character of the unskilled Asian labor exported and imported under that appellation. However, the cultural and critical use of the term has been the subject of much debate due to its historically pejorative and epithetic usage. According to Gaiutra Bahadur, “most indentured laborers would not have used the word to describe themselves... Coming from the lips of plantation managers and overseers, the c-word stung, a reminder of lowliness in the hierarchy of a sugar estate, a hierarchy based on race.”⁷ In spite of this, movements to reclaim the term are long-standing, including most prominently, Guianese poet Rajkumari Singh’s call to “proclaim the word! Identify with the word!”⁸ We use the term coolie in this paper with these various angles on its historical and contemporaneous use(s) in mind. In line with Moon-Ho Jung, however, we do not place coolie within quotes so as to not paradoxically effect the reification of other non-punctuated racial designations, such as black and white, also taken up by this paper.⁹ Indeed, the theory of coolie form we advance is premised on the historical specificity of the labor configurations in which coolie-ness was, in the first instance, produced in the service of. Our emphasis on form, then, does the necessary work of denaturalizing the racial category of coolie,

and resituating its force as both productive and produced, while remaining attuned to its historically racial coordinates.

Set around the collapse of the dot-com bubble, *Transmission* explicitly problematizes the globalized information economy of the early aughts, its uneven accumulative flows, and the racialized labor which undergirds this world-system. Although the demand for “good, properly qualified *desi* butts” (9) is not as consistently high as he previously believed, Arjun eventually finds employment at cybersecurity company Virguenix. However, when the industry faces a downturn with the collapse of the Internet bubble, Arjun is among the first to be let go leading him to hatch a plan to prove his worth to his avoidant bosses (56). A skilled virus (Vx) programmer, Arjun unleashes the highly-sophisticated Leela01 virus, figuring a looped five-second clip of rising Bollywood star Leela Zahir, with plans to ultimately save the day (and his job) with an “elegant solution” (139), halting Leela’s spread. Instead, Arjun’s boss takes credit for his fix, his two-week notice slowly elapses, and Leela unexpectedly mutates into Leela02 and Leela03 and so on (up to at least Leela09). Careening out of his or anyone else’s control, the virus decimates water treatment plants, electrical grids, public safety computer systems, financial institutions, and more. When media outlets and law enforcement agencies begin speculating about a potential terror attack and a “technological fifth column” (145), Arjun goes on the lam. The remainder of the novel follows his ultimate escape over the southern border, Leela Zahir’s strangely undesired rise to global stardom (and eventual disappearance, seemingly as a result of the eponymous viruses’ destruction), and the viruses’ deleterious effects on British businessman Guy Swift’s attempts to save his floundering company.

The material mechanism behind these threads in the novel’s plot, which *The New York Times* referred to as “a Chuck Palahniuk paranoid daydream,”¹⁰ is a sobering legal reality for

hundreds of thousands of Indian immigrants to the U.S. The H-1B visa regime is both the facilitative grounds for Arjun's immigration to the U.S. and structural reason behind the deep economic and legal insecurity which drives him to create the Leela virus, thereby functioning as the sign under which all of *Transmission's* events transpire. If Arjun's status as an American—however contingent—is based on the economic vicissitudes and logics of the U.S. technology industry, then those instruments which facilitate the sector's accumulative tendencies beg closer scrutiny. Namely, the H-1B visa. To this end, this paper argues that what the H-1B visa regime produces is not coolies as such, but rather a coolie form under which the racialization and devaluation of Indian migrant labor is not only possible but historically commonsense.¹¹

If pastiche, for Fredric Jameson, is the paradigmatic representational mode of a postmodernity effected by a loss of historicity, then the H-1B visa program generates coolie form in that very breach. Put differently, the historical disjunctures between coolie labor and H-1B labor, in the technology industry or otherwise, are precisely what enable a coolie form to be activated and made to work. In postmodernity, “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts.”¹² The reduction of radical historicity to text in postmodernity makes radically accessible a ‘history’ of coolie labor for the actuation of a coolie form and implies the formal-textual process by which this occurs: pastiche. Colleen Lye's theory of racial form explicates the changing coordinates between which race is historically articulated: “race construed as form rather than as formation may help us keep in focus how race is an active social relation rather than a transhistorical abstraction.”¹³ That coolie form is activated by way of such abstractions (and their persistence) does not cancel the fact that the H-1B must do the work of reproducing and reinscribing such abstractions. Understanding the history of the Indian coolie as textualized in the postmodern conjuncture

illuminates how the H-1B racializes its Indian subjects within a pre-constituted, if superficially flattened, discursive field, and how capital accumulates by alternately activating and dispensing with historicity.

Lye, again: “the problem of race might instead be reformulated as a question of the relationship between language...and other material processes—between race understood as representation and race as an agency of literary and other social formations.”¹⁴ By mimicking the postmodern tendency of pastiche, *Transmission* makes explicit how the racial form of Indian labor is continually reshaped by contemporary state technologies of political-economic control i.e., the H-1B visa regime, and the reinscription of historical forms i.e. structures of coolie labor. It is as dehistoricized “cyber-coolies” that Indian H-1B workers in the U.S. tech industry can be efficiently racialized and their labor power devalued. As Jasper Bernes reminds us, art is not merely reflective of labor’s configurations but selectively takes up various features of “the world of work” to lay bare their immanent contradictions.¹⁵ Indeed, if the novel outlines the mobilization of coolie form, it also highlights its immanent, propulsive disjunctures. Precisely through the formal play of the novel, the H-1B visa program’s necessary toggling between modes of historicity and anti-historicity with regard to the Indian subject is elucidated as a kind of postmodern pastiche itself. What the mode of pastiche offers us, analytically, is a formal and textual link between the movement of capital in the late twentieth century, its cultural content, and the consequent regimes of (anti-)historicity which are mobilized by the H-1B visa program in service of that capital.

The Immigration Act of 1990 informs our focus on this postmodern conjuncture in its historical importance for mapping out chronologies of Indian immigration to the U.S. and its legal-economic effects in shaping Indian American labor, racialization, and subjectivity. The

1990s marked a clear demographic shift in the various national origins of those subjects constituting ‘Asian America’, especially Indians, because of the specific legal instruments i.e., the H-1B visa, created and formalized by the Immigration Act. According to Pallavi Banerjee, “the Immigration Act of 1990...can be considered to have launched a fourth phase in the migration history of Indians.”¹⁶ The previous three ‘phases’ are distinct from the post-1990 immigration landscape in several key ways including, importantly, in the rate (far lower) of and legal pathways (sans H-1B) for migration. Indeed, “according to the US Department of Homeland Security, more than a third of all foreign-born Indians in the United States came here in 2000 or later.”¹⁷

While East Asian—especially Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Filipino—immigration boomed after the 1965 Hart-Celler Act lifted quotas on Asian immigrants, transits from the Indian subcontinent remained low by comparison: by 1990 around 1,650,000 Chinese immigrants were settled in the U.S. in contrast to only approximately 815,000 Indian Asians.¹⁸ More generally, South Asian immigrants as a whole only comprised approximately 13.4% of Asian Americans while East Asians made up around 47.7%.¹⁹ As of 2025, however, Indian Asian Americans alone number around 5.2 million, making up 21% of the Asian American population—second to only Chinese Americans who account for 22%. What accounts for the numerically significant and temporally compressed immigration of Indians to the United States? How can this influx over the last 35 years be theorized in relation to economic regimes?

Under the United States immigration regime, the H-1B visa is a class of temporary visas, valid for three years and issued to “non-immigrants” in distinction to permanent visas i.e., green cards, granted to immigrants or Long-Term Permanent Residents (LPRs).²⁰ The program empowers U.S. employers to “hire skilled foreign workers for specialty occupations on a

temporary basis” and was originally capped at 65,000 visas annually.²¹ Specialty occupations were defined as those “requir[ing] ‘theoretical and practical application of a body of highly specialized knowledge’ and a bachelor’s degree or its equivalent.”²² The specificity of knowledge privileged by the H-1B immigration regime is deeply connected to the U.S. (information) technology industry’s rapid growth with the invention of the World Wide Web and Internet in the late 1980s and 1990s. The H-1B visa program, then, marks another shift in the historical turn of, as Christopher Fan notes, “U.S. immigration policy away from principles of exclusion to principles of economic selection.”²³ Indeed, the demand for foreign IT workers in the U.S. helps explain how by 2000 nearly 58% of all H-1B visa holders were working in computer-related occupations, a number which has continued to grow to as high as 66% in 2022.

Over and above facilitating what Fan describes as “STEM occupational concentration,”²⁴ the labor authorized by the H-1B visa is also deeply racialized as over 48% of beneficiaries in 2000 were Indian (72.6% in 2022), with Indians composing the largest beneficiary class by country every year since the visa’s inception.²⁵ Indeed, Biao Xiang writes that the H-1B is colloquially known as the “Indian visa.”²⁶ Moreover, the specialization of labor in computer-related occupations among Indian petitioners was higher than on average: 84% of Indian H-1B visa holders in 2000 worked in IT. The historically dominant presence of Indian H-1B beneficiaries working in IT is so great that in the 2000 Yearbook, the Immigration and Naturalization Service’s description of the average beneficiary for the H-1B program in general was one “born in India; 29 years old; holding a bachelor’s degree; working in a computer-related occupation.”²⁷ To this end, 37% of all H-1B beneficiaries in 2000 were Indian, held a bachelor’s or master’s degree, *and* worked in a computer-related occupation. That post-1990 Indian migration to the U.S. is tied to the H-1B visa regime and the IT industry’s demand for foreign

workers also requires contending with these specific labor relations produced under the H-1B program.

A number of defining features of (Indian) labor under the H-1B visa regime are especially important to any such discussion. Firstly, the H-1B is a temporary visa which is “employer-specific and employment-based,” meaning that visa holders’ immigration status is tied to a specific employer and their employment status.²⁸ This temporariness is inscribed explicitly in the legal language of the H-1B program and undergirds the contingency experienced in Indian laborers’ relationship to their immigration status. Further, because the H-1B petition for a foreign worker is filed by the employer themselves, the individual migrant has no stable status outside of that specific labor relation, explaining Arjun’s increasingly desperate attempts to win back his job in *Transmission*. This is dynamic is especially heightened given that, although the H-1B provides pathways to citizenship through obtaining a sponsored Green Card, annual national quotas mean this process can take “upwards of six to twenty years” for Indians in particular.²⁹

Secondly, Banerjee’s work on H-1B laborers found that employers “routinely” reduce wages, withhold benefits, decline promotions, and threaten dismissal.³⁰ According to the Economic Policy Institute, employers intentionally use the H-1B program to “legally underpay” workers over and above any wage mediation which may already exist.³¹ Despite this, the dependence produced by the H-1B visa makes it such that Indian migrants are equally unable and unwilling to agitate for better working conditions or quit their jobs; indeed, *Transmission* engages this dynamic in Chris’s appraisal that Arjun “didn’t want to say bad things about his boss” (62). Lastly, the IT industry’s particularities also play a part in this labor differentiation and racial marginalization. The “job churning...because of short product life cycles” which is

“endemic to the IT industry,” that Julie Watts notes, creates a particularly high demand for labor flexibility, and thus job insecurity within the sector.³² Especially in the 1990s and 2000s when the landscape of the burgeoning information economy was rapidly changing with the latest technologies (Java, object-oriented programming, Oracle, etc.), the H-1B proved a useful instrument for an industry in which employers “prefer to hire new workers skilled in the latest technologies rather than retrain current workers.”³³ Greenspan’s turn of the century assessment of the U.S. technology sector’s dominance implicitly registers the importance of the H-1B visa regime for facilitating such devaluation and flexibility.

A “willingness to discharge” workers evinced by the H-1B visa regime’s structural features underwrites both this flexibility at the level of labor organization, and manifests what Antonio Negri refers to as the post-Fordist “fluidification of work throughout the entire productive cycle.”³⁴ This character of capital, combined with “selectivity in the functions of rule within that same cycle—and hence the significance of automation—has now won a role in the history of capitalist development comparable to that of Taylorism and Fordism during the twenties.”³⁵ Central to Negri’s project is the theorization of capitalism’s dialectical development as driven by proletarian class-struggle, or more accurately in the post-Keynesianism conjuncture being described, the mass worker’s. Reorganized capital, however, “seeks to interpret the form or figure in which this impact [the mass worker] develops” through “selective participation in command.” Put simply, as a means of fracturing the class solidarities of the mass worker, capital intensifies the (global) division of labor through the fluidity and flexibility which come to characterize the post-Fordist regimes of accumulation. This paper, then, engages Negri’s formulation by parsing how, in one instance, the H-1B visa regime interprets both the form and

the figure of the worker to accomplish the necessarily variegated goals of capital. The product: the Indian American “cyber-coolie.”

This paper, finally, situates the H-1B visa regime in the long history of Asian American legal and political exclusion in the U.S. which, according to Lisa Lowe, has produced such subjects as “‘foreign’ to the national cultural terrain.”³⁶ We acknowledge, however, that Asian (American) exclusion is always conditioned by its partial, provisional, promised, and/or possible inclusion. David Palumbo-Liu encodes this indeterminacy in his theorization of the “Asian/American,” “where the solidus at once instantiates a choice between two terms, their simultaneous and equal status, and an element of indecidability, that is, as it at once implies both exclusion and inclusion.”³⁷ Recalling Michelle Huang’s claim that “plastic is an Asian American ‘racial form,’” the temporariness encoded in the H-1B ensures that Indian laborers in the U.S. encounter an “endless process of deferral” in any attempt to accede to what Lowe terms the terrain of national culture.³⁸ To this end, the protractedness of the solidus’s “dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement” also informs the racializing conditions produced when, for Indian H-1B immigrants, even the potential of acceding to citizenship, where “the nation proposes immigrant ‘naturalization’ as a narrative of ‘political emancipation,’” is fraught and ultimately foreclosed in most cases.³⁹ This racializing effect registers the fact that, as Fan puts it, “heroic training in STEM professions doesn’t come close to translating to heroic status in the United States.”⁴⁰ In fact, for Indian H-1B workers, it doesn’t even translate into a stable status as American, despite the national tech industry’s critical reliance on such labor, a contradiction this paper probes and looks to explain. Fan’s larger project notes how U.S.-Asia economic relations have constituted the “STEM occupational concentration” of Asian Americans as a material and formal conceit of Asian American literature in the post-1965 era. This paper, in turn, takes up

Fan's intervention to investigate exactly how the H-1B visa regime, in particular, is part and parcel of this larger material history and is ultimately inflected in and by "racial and literary forms."⁴¹

In considering the H-1B visa regime's production of coolie form as a method of labor disciplining and the formal relationship of this dynamic to a racial history, this paper proceeds in three parts. The first will sketch out the 'referent' for coolie form: the history of Indian coolie labor, in the nineteenth to twentieth century Caribbean case. The second will demonstrate how the H-1B visa serves to meet later twentieth century capital's needs for flexibility and devaluation by racializing its labor under the production of coolie form. It will also show how the specific dependence of U.S. capital in this conjuncture on the technology sector informs the H-1B's cathexis to the industry. Finally, the last section turns to Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* and the novel's mimicry of pastiche in order to argue that this formal conceit elucidates the regimes of historicity and anti-historicity upon which the H-1B visa's animation of coolie form relies.

The Coolie ‘Referent’

It was during the 1850s and 1860s that the Indian character of the sugar plantation became more and more pronounced, until by the mid-1870s *the terms ‘sugar worker’ and ‘Indian worker’ became virtually synonymous* in Trinidad and British Guiana.

— Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*⁴²

Created in 1834 under the auspices of the British Empire in India, the indenture system was a vast legal, economic, and political regime which facilitated the migration of Indian laborers overseas to British colonies on temporary work contracts. From the genesis of the system until its end in 1920, over “half a million Indians worked as coolie laborers in the Caribbean,” where the system was largely concentrated, although much work has also been written about the histories of *girmityas* elsewhere, such as in Mauritius and Fiji.⁴³ While the experiences of indenture varied over time, and from colony to colony, there were a number of largely standard practices and structures which characterized life and work as a coolie. This paper uses the term coolie to denote the racialized subject formations produced under the British system of indentured labor; it also acknowledges that this category is an empty one which has been historically cathected to Indian and Chinese laborers but lacks immanent substance, as do all racial categories.⁴⁴ Indeed, as Moon-Ho Jung recognizes, “no one, in the United States or the Caribbean, was really a coolie, but Asian workers were surely racialized as coolies across the world, including in the United States.”⁴⁵ In investigating how the *form* of the coolie is understood to repeat, with difference, across time and space this paper works to denaturalize the link between racialized subjects and labor regimes by registering how this repetition (with difference) is *produced* as means of disciplining racialized labor under the H-1B visa regime.

The emergence of the system of indentured labor which trafficked in Indian and Chinese coolies, and the products of their exploited labor, was at least partially motivated by the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 which formally outlawed slavery and the slave trade across the British Empire. Glossing the findings of the 1842 Stanley Committee, Walton Look Lai, notes that the British explicitly used the indenture system as a competitive wedge against newly freed Black labor to distort the labor market and depress wages to the levels the plantocracy had come to rely upon under slavery.⁴⁶ Lai's seminal work on indentured labor focuses primarily on the cases of the sugar industries in Trinidad and British Guiana where the mass of Indian indentured labor was concentrated. Despite this specificity, because "the Indian indenture system had largely the same general terms and conditions, with only minor variations between the different colonies," Lai's study is a rigorous description of indenture as a total structure.⁴⁷ Several standard practices characterized the form of racialized labor control and disciplining instantiated by and as indenture. Under the system, immigrants signed five-year labor contracts in return for a fixed wage for mainly agricultural labor, predominantly in Caribbean cash crop industries. During this time, employers were nominally required to provide medical services and other care to their indentured workers, although these responsibilities were often ignored.⁴⁸

The form of the labor contract (known as the *girmit*) which tied coolies to the land of their employer for a set period of time, the systemic abuse and conditions of extreme exploitation to which coolies were subject, and the system's contiguity with slavery led many British officials at the time to worry that indenture was, as Hugh Tinker has separately argued, "a new system of slavery."⁴⁹ While this paper does not take up this argument since it necessarily misunderstands the historical and ontological conditions of slavery to draw its systemic comparison, the anxieties of colonial administrators key us into the deeply exploitative conditions under which Indian

coolies labored in the indenture system.⁵⁰ As opposed to slavery, the *girmit* was a contract which both the Indian migrant and their employer signed, ensuring that the labor performed was putatively consensual, and therefore formally free.⁵¹ After five years, laborers could choose to extend their contract for another five years or return home—many stayed.

While this temporary labor contract seems to privilege the transience of the labor imported, in the last phase of indenture from 1870 onwards, as identified by Lai, “Indians were being seen...*not only* as abstract units of temporary plantation labor, but also as potential settlers and citizens of the new societies into which they were being imported.”⁵² In an 1871 account of the indenture system, Edward Jenkins notes the colonial policy under which “the Agent-General is enjoined to take care that children under the age of fifteen years are not separated from their parents, natural guardians, or protectors, and that relatives are so allotted as to accompany each other, and that even friends are not separated unless unavoidable.”⁵³ Thus, the form of coolie labor was twofold in its relationship to time and history: at various conjunctures—and often in the same—in the evolution of the system, the coolie was an eminently disposable and temporary, abstract unit of labor, and at others coolie family units were the all-too human basis for long-term colonial development and reproduction of colonial society. Indeed, “immigration [of indentured labor] was seen...as a way of expanding a sparse population in an underdeveloped frontier environment.”⁵⁴ Of course, this oppositional dyad is more accurately described as recto and verso of the same racial form, where legal and social transience coexisted alongside an imperative toward the permanent socioeconomic reproduction of colonial society, the simultaneity of which conditioned the ability of the colonial state to more effectively discipline coolie labor. Moreover, while the former dimension of coolie form imagines a labor without history, literally as “abstract units,” the latter cannot insofar as the importation of entire kinship

networks undercuts a complete effacement of the Indian coolie's historicity. Tinker notes this very contradiction: "It was India's role, within the British Empire, to furnish a supply of cheap and disposable labour. Units of production, not people, were exported across the seas to supply the demand: but somehow they remained people all the same."⁵⁵

Once in the destination colonies to which they migrated, on often dangerous and lethal journeys "across the seas," Indian coolies were generally subject to brutal working conditions for little pay. Worked as much as twenty-two hours a day with no breaks and no extra pay, in some cases, coolies often found the pre-established terms of the *girmit* were routinely violated by employers to ensure profit in the sugar industry. Given the lower prices of sugar—an economic cornerstone of the British Empire—and abolition of slavery in the later nineteenth century, the "need for immigration, and for some form of control over the immigrant labor force, as an indispensable condition for the healthy recovery of the West Indian sugar industry had become integral to official reasoning."⁵⁶ The hyper-exploitation of Indian coolies in the Caribbean, then, was intimately associated with both the contiguity of indenture with slavery and the dependence of colonial cash crop—especially sugar—economies on cheap labor. Favorably for the British, Indian coolie labor fulfilled colonial objectives by both lowering costs and increasing production in these sectors. The Dickens Committee Report of 1840, commissioned to investigate the "situation of Indian indentured labor," noted this intentional devaluing (effect) of coolie labor over and against 'free' labor and its further clarification by the brutal quantity and quality of the work which indentured Indians were made to perform.⁵⁷ The Committee concluded, "the harsh treatment which has been adopted [toward Indian coolies]...cannot in any shape be justified."⁵⁸

Indian coolies were also disallowed from physically traveling outside their plantations without passes, which were often refused; their wages were systematically withheld and

unevenly distributed; the recourse to legal remediation promised to Indian coolies operated, in practice, to disproportionately favor the planter class and pass down rulings which further disciplined indentured labor; and, relatedly, the punishments for any (perceived) abrogation of the terms of their *girmit* were often harsh and incommensurate with the alleged offense.

Although the stated language of the *girmit* worked in many cases to protect Indian coolies from the worst of these offenses, “the practices of the planters tended to violate the spirit of the law,” even in less severe instances.⁵⁹ Functioning to underwrite the perpetuation of these conditions, as the Dickens Committee Report and the complex legal apparatus which emerged to regulate indenture evince, “the state, in various ways, supported employers in their efforts to extract labour at a lowest price and provided no opportunity for worker[s] to bargain.”⁶⁰ Precisely because Indian coolie labor was the basis for the continued profitability of the British Empire’s Caribbean cash crop economy, the state was intimately involved in the organization of the system in favor of the planter class. Indeed, Radhika Mongia goes as far as to argue that “state control of migration and attendant definitions of state sovereignty [themselves] have a crucial colonial genealogy”—one rooted in the regulation of Indian coolie labor.⁶¹

Although this picture of Indian coolie labor is necessarily incomplete, the contours of what this paper considers the coolie form—activated and reinscribed in the subject of the Indian H-1B immigrant by the visa regime’s pastiche of this history—are articulated by this truncated outline. In fact, because the relationship of the H-1B visa regime to this history is one of pastiche, the attendant coolie form is a postmodern textualization of the above history. In other words, while this brief history constitutes merely the lineaments of colonial coolie labor, such is the narrow historical concept coolie form is invested in. Coolie form’s necessarily attenuated grasp on deep historicity, then, is a result of the H-1B visa program’s toggling between racial

regimes of historicity and anti-historicity—where the latter predominates. This is not a flaw of coolie form, but its constitutive condition of possibility for the work it performs in racializing and devaluing contemporary Indian labor. That, today, the Indian H-1B worker is practically synonymous with ‘tech worker,’ demonstrates how contemporary, state-based, political-economic regimes of capital accumulation inscribe a coolie form that indexes a history where the “Indian worker” was “virtually synonymous” with the “sugar worker.”

The H-1B Visa: Pastiche in the Long Downturn

“These [H-1B] workers...do not have access to basic benefits, such as health care or social security; they earn very modest weekly pocket money, room and board, and a monthly salary of around \$250, which is remitted directly to their home countries. For this HP [Hewlett Packard] has been accused of ‘high-tech indentured servitude.’”

— Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*⁶²

If the H-1B visa’s regime of labor is understood, within and outside the world of *Transmission*, as rhyming in some way with a previous coolie labor of the colonial era, on what level this historical continuity is registered is of particular interest. Perhaps the resonance can be simply understood as the recurrence of the generally racialized subject position of the Indian migrant laborer, exploited by and precarious under the imperatives of foreign capital. Indeed, this is a likely explanation as the figure cut by the always contingent (H-1B) Indian laborer calls forth associational (colonial) histories in which the Indian subject is already inscribed as such. However, this inscription cannot be taken *prima facie* as a transhistorical fact; instead, it must be understood as an economically mediated and socially produced reality. Thus, the primacy of a racial subject position in suturing a cultural consciousness of contemporary coolie labor is only half the story, and the latter half at that (and at best) since that subject remains an effect of the very racial regimes of capital which it might otherwise be made to explain. The theoretical force of coolie form, however, is what makes legible the H-1B as both cause and effect of the Indian (American) subject.

It is how capital produces the racial subject of the Indian H-1B laborer under the specter of coolie form, then, which must be elaborated by way of situating the form of the H-1B visa regime as marked by and eminently responsive to the needs of (American) capital. Moreover,

because the H-1B has been variously described as a “slave visa” and “indentured servitude,” the “Indian visa” and as cathected to the U.S. software industry, according to Vijay Prashad, how the visa articulates, and is articulated between, these subject positions, labor configurations, and histories requires close attention.⁶³ The connective tissue between these disjunct conceptual, historical, and subjective appellations under which the H-1B is legible is the racialization and devaluation of labor which the visa’s actuation of coolie form facilitates. Our particular tracing of the history of later twentieth century capital is an account of both why and how the H-1B visa regime emerges and operates as the switch by which the twin engines of labor’s racialization and devaluation fire.

If the H-1 visa, created by the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, is the predecessor that must be split by amendment in 1990 to establish the H-1B, the same initial moment of postwar economic growth is also a critical inflection point around which to periodize a distinct phase of global capital determinative of the H-1B visa’s eventual inception. Indeed, it is possible to at least partially understand major U.S. immigration policies such as those of 1952, 1965, and 1990 as related to the onset and intensification of what Robert Brenner has termed the “long downturn,”⁶⁴ and a subsequent need to devalue labor in the face of capital overaccumulation.

Following the aftermath of the Second World War, the 1950s and 60s saw both the massive economic growth of recovering Japanese and European economies under the auspices of organized capitalism alongside the continued economic hegemony of the U.S. as a result of its wartime technological innovation. Conversely, although the U.S. had been experiencing massive growth for over a decade by the early 1950s, the high development of fixed capital and strength of labor spelled the ultimate slowdown of the American economy by the early 1970s. In fact, the exclusionary valences of the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act which set stringently low quotas on

immigration from Asian countries only served to strengthen the position of American labor vis-à-vis capital during the interceding decades by barring the influx of devalued Asian labor.

Though the H-1B's predecessor visa, the H-1, was created by the same promulgation, it was "not until the 1970s that H-1 visas were used widely to bring foreign workers to the [U.S.]" when pathways to permanent status were opened.⁶⁵

The countervailing global forces of capital's uneven development came to a head in 1965 when the U.S., unable to compete with cheap Japanese and European goods, found itself incapable of realizing its investments in capital and labor without losing even more of its global market share. The resulting falling rates of profitability ultimately redounded on the rest of the world's industrialized economies, spreading the crisis and plunging the U.S. headfirst into the long downturn. Yet, by, and immediately after 1965, this eventual turn was not a foregone conclusion and the U.S. needed to address an emergent downward trend in profitability by either redirecting capital investment, devaluing labor, or shouldering profit losses. While the former would have functioned as a more durable solution to the nascent downturn, the U.S. opted for the latter, unwilling to unsubscribe from its overinvested supply lines.⁶⁶ It is difficult to see the 1965 Hart-Celler Act as unconnected from this need for American capital to further stem the profitability crisis through the devaluation of labor. Indeed, Brenner notes as much: "by the mid 1960s, [U.S. manufacturers] were...seeking to reduce wage growth."⁶⁷ The lifting of the national quotas established by the McCarran-Walter Act and consequent mass immigration of Asians into the U.S. accomplished this goal by supplying a much-needed cheap labor force, not organized within the extant U.S. labor movement. By 1973, the crisis of realization which spurred the initial reduction in profitability had morphed into a full-fledged crisis of accumulation.

Homologous with the function of Asian labor in the U.S. during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Indian coolie labor's historical usage, in the Caribbean especially, was to furnish putatively free, but practically dependent labor which would "act as a competitive element against the [newly freed] Black labor force."⁶⁸ The function of the Indian coolie, then, was also doubled in its relation to devaluation insofar as the devaluation of racially segmented labor in itself has, in general, the effect of depressing overall wage levels to serve the profitability of capital. Indeed, this was the effect of the introduction of Indian coolie labor in the British colonies: even subsequent to the recovery of the previously flagging Caribbean sugar industry, "planters continued to import large numbers of Indians into the society, as a means of further depressing wage levels in the industry generally."⁶⁹ Considering the McCarran-Walter Act's opening of the U.S. to a global market of cheap labor alongside the H-1 visa's subsequent reorientation toward the importation of foreign workers elucidates how the history of Asian, especially Indian, immigration to the U.S. is similarly cathected to a need for devalued labor. Indeed, "what vitality the [U.S.] economy still maintained [during the downturn] derived from—had been conditioned upon—depriving production and non-supervisory workers of any real wage increase for a quarter of a century."⁷⁰ Thus, in the period of the early 1970s to the early 90s the devaluation of labor was consolidated as a stopgap strategy of the corporate state to shore up profitability just as it was by the British during the late nineteenth century. And, of course, the inability of this devaluation to truly stem the continuing crisis underwrites repeated and expanded attempts to devalue labor through national immigration policy, of which the H-1B is a prime manifestation.⁷¹

The coextensive shift from a Fordist organization of production and consumption to what David Harvey terms "flexible regimes of accumulation" and Toyotism was a parallel strategy of

capital to address the “rigidity” of fixed capital and the labor configurations which had been sedimented in the forties and fifties. Addressing these issues in the 1970s and 80s, then, required “rationalization, restructuring, and [the] intensification of labor control” as firms raced to increase the turnover time of capital amidst the downward trend of the national economy. The sum of these responses were realized in the unprecedented flexibility of a capital built on overcoming Fordism by seizing on the unevenness of global development to rapidly shift between various labor markets around the world as well as displace certain jobs into the low-wage service sector. This flexibility and mobility—which were the idioms of this new regime of accumulation—of capital further facilitated unprecedented pressure to be placed on labor, instantiating both its rigorous devaluation and a “reliance upon part-time, temporary, or sub-contracted work arrangements” and outsourcing.⁷²

The H-1B visa—over and above other U.S. migrant work visas such as the H-2A and H-2B—is precisely structured by such temporariness: H-1B labor works under the doubled specter of disposability or lapse *and* the possibility of their deferral by renewal. By formalizing and institutionalizing the temporary work demanded by flexible regimes of accumulation, the H-1B articulates the nexus formed by the convergent needs of the state and capital. The H-1B visa, moreover, coordinates the contingent and periodically shifting needs of U.S. capital, the need to devalue labor in the protracted long downturn, and state strategies of national exclusion. If indentured labor systems in the Caribbean figured the Indian coolie as an “abstract units of temporary plantation labor” and “potential settlers and citizens of...new societies,” in turns (and at moments, simultaneously), the H-1B visa regime explicitly favors an updated version of the former.⁷³ Although the H-1B visa program holds out the possibility of citizenship, the suture of

settler and citizen in the colonial case ineluctably modifies the calculus of the immigration regimes which subtend their labor configurations.

Whereas the Indian H-1B worker labors under the tenuous prospect of inclusion (where such permanent inclusion for the contemporary U.S. state is unnecessary and gratuitous when disaggregated from an obsolete need for territorial settlement), the coolie laborer is, in many cases, already figured as part—if only formally—the colonial state. In fact, the explicit understanding of Indian coolies in the Caribbean as both constituting the economic and social bases of the colonial state characterized the majority of the formal indenture system; this was a system steeped and invested in rigidity. The intensified temporariness encoded at the level of national contingency by the H-1B visa, then, is a product of the historically shifting needs of different nation-states and the regimes of labor necessitated by capital. The eminent flexibility demanded by later twentieth century capital, signals a shift away from the already vastly different, if still far more rigid configurations of migrant labor, that existed under Fordism. These, in turn, are a world away from those deliberate rigidities which defined Caribbean coolie labor.

As Fordism is yoked to Taylorism, the Toyotism of post-Fordist flexible regimes of accumulation similarly occasioned new organizations of production and work. What Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri refer to as the postmodernization of production begets this restructuring of labor as increasingly immaterial.⁷⁴ Indeed, the rise of the (information) technology sector in the 1980s indexes the concomitant “passage to the informational economy” whereby the assembly line gives way to a deterritorialized network of production that destabilizes the sites in which labor meets itself *in concreto*.⁷⁵ Coextensive with the narrowing of space for labor organizing, the immaterialization of labor also constitutes a condition of possibility for the

flexible regimes of accumulation by which the position of labor is eminently weakened and available for devaluation. The reorganization of labor along the lines of immateriality that emerges in the crisis of the long downturn characterizes what Negri marks as early as 1971 as “the fluidification of all moments of the productive cycle,”⁷⁶ intensifying already trending devaluation. The H-1B visa, then, is a privileged technology by which the formal relation between immaterialization, devaluation, flexibility, and the informational economy becomes articulated: the labor instantiated by the H-1B, predominantly composed of Indian tech workers, constitutes the subjectivity par excellence of devalued immaterial labor.

This new structuration of the global economy convincingly explains in part why “the U.S. government poses the establishment and regulation of a global information infrastructure as one of its highest priorities.”⁷⁷ Alan Greenspan’s 1999 testimony that “an economy that twenty years ago seemed to have seen its better days, is displaying a remarkable run of economic growth that appears to have its roots in ongoing advances in technology,” evinces this.⁷⁸ Coextensive with the evolution in global circuits of value production as linked to (information) technology is the need for high-skilled labor to underwrite (the code for) that technology’s production and management. As a program specifically designed to “hire skilled foreign workers for specialty occupations” and, from its inception, seized upon by the business sector, the H-1B visa program has always been one of ‘high-skilled’ labor. This is true even before “the software firms who continue to reap the benefits of the H-1B program” come to disproportionately dominate the program around the turn of the century.⁷⁹

Conversely, the indenture system was one based on agricultural labor in the cash crop industries of the British Caribbean. Aside from the parochial view of agricultural work as ‘low-skilled’, the level of formalized education and training required of these two immigration

regimes distinguishes them from each other in distinct ways. Under the H-1B visa program, ‘skilled’ work is that which “requires ‘theoretical and practical application of a body of highly specialized knowledge’ and a bachelor’s degree or its equivalent.”⁸⁰ On the other hand, many Indian coolies, upon arriving in the colonies, had little to no experience performing agricultural or other types of domestic labor, and were wholly unprepared for the kinds of labor expected of them under the terms of the *girmit*. These differences in requisite experience and training across the two systems underscores the prevailing characteristic of contemporary immigration regimes as one of reverse economic selection and subtends a disparate willingness of the industrial state to invest capital in the temporary laborer versus laboring citizen-settler. The radically distinct conjunctures of industrial development which inform these dissimilarities surely cannot be ignored in this accounting but also highlight just how necessary coolie form is to bridge these gaps and produce a legible racialized subject. Coolie form, thus, works to reconcile the agricultural, sugar plantation coolie of the colonial period with the H-1B tech worker of the post-Fordist one.

While the immateriality thesis would claim for this post-Fordist (re)organization of work a radically rhizomatic and global quality, the persistent uneven development of capitalism confounds this theorization of labor’s total flexibility. What Harvey refers to under the moniker of flexibility and its attendant “peripheral Fordism[s],” instead appreciates the shifting of manufacturing processes to the Global South precisely because the (low-wage) service economies of immaterial labor have become concentrated in the global capitalist cores. However, the global division of labor upon which flexible regimes of accumulation produce value means that immaterial labor becomes geographically concentrated, requiring the spatial reorganization of its productive subjects. Resolving this contradiction, the H-1B visa regime can be understood

to coordinate the asynchronies of capitalist development across the globe by mobilizing and connecting cheap labor in the Global South to industrial infrastructure in the U.S. while still maintaining the flexibility characteristic of labor in the post-Fordist era.⁸¹ That the immaterialization of labor is so intimately connected with a new flexible regime of accumulation and the rise and growth of the predominantly U.S.-centered, but global, information technology industry highlights how the H-1B visa both harmonizes the global unevenness of capitalist development and negotiates the demands of specifically American capital.

The management of the unevenness of capitalist development and attendant global division of labor by the H-1B, finally, is accomplished through an actuated coolie form which reaches across time and space to yoke the high-skilled Indian tech worker to a colonial regime of labor devaluation. This strategy of racialization works hand in hand with the flexible mode of production demanded by post-Fordist capital insofar as the inscription of coolie form facilitates the construction of a highly mobile, eminently temporary Indian worker-subject. Although one might be tempted to argue that coolie form as a mechanism of racialization is superfluous for the devaluation of a labor already devalued by its position in the underdeveloped Global South, the historical basis of capitalist value production, as Cedric Robinson reminds us, is “not to homogenize but to differentiate.”⁸² And that this differentiation must be iteratively effected. In this inheres the contradictory movement of a capital which would differentiate labor but also abstract it through the elision of historicity. However, this is a contradiction only on its face insofar as the deletion of the Indian H-1B worker’s history is the move by which they are racialized and their absolute flexibility realized. This racialization, in turn, authorizes the contingency of the Indian H-1B worker, thereby shoring up the necessary flexibility the immigration regime serves.

In considering the complexities of gender overlaid on these problems of differentiation, the H-4 dependent visa, formulated under the larger H-1B visa regime, which allows for the migration of spouses and children of the H-1B visa holder is designed in a specific way which limits its practical use. Namely, spouses on the H-4 visa—which is highly feminized, in the case of this paper’s focus, as the work in the technology industry is greatly masculinized—are disallowed from working for pay.⁸³ Given the pitiful wages already paid to many Indian H-1B tech workers, the presence of additional dependents produces an untenable economic situation where social reproduction becomes materially impossible. This structural feature of the H-1B visa regime subtends Vijay Prashad’s argument that “the anti-immigrant sentiment at the end of the 1990s came at a time when the increase in family preference migration reminded South Asian Americans that we are only wanted here for our labor and not to create lives.”⁸⁴ This situation is markedly different from that of the Caribbean indenture system where the migrations of coolie women was encouraged by the British for the performance sexual, reproductive, and directly productive labor.⁸⁵ The social reproductive capacities of the latter case are exactly what must be cancelled in the former since the rending of Indian H-1B workers from such networks evinces capital’s fantasy of a non-historicity that produces the maximum flexibility of labor. The rift in the implicit theories of social reproduction and history encoded in the two regimes is what coolie form covers over as a mode of anti-historicity in order to inscribe the non-historicity of its subjects. If coolie form is what is produced in the H-1B visa regime’s relationship to the history of coolie labor, then the anti-historicity of coolie form is conditioned by the anti-historicity of pastiche as the definitive idiom of that relationship. The post-Keynesian imperative of flexible capital to interpret the form and figure of the mass worker implies those legal, economic, and discursive technologies by which this is accomplished. Thus, it becomes clear how pastiche as a

textual relationship to history, in the first instance, becomes productive for capital through the work of racialization—under the auspices of the H-1B visa and the banner of coolie form.

By the 1990s, when the H-1B visa program was formalized, the U.S. had “for almost two decades, made the reduction of price, and *especially wage*, increases the *supreme goal of policy*.”⁸⁶ The ‘New Economy’ of the 1990s, then, was new neither because it represented a break with the necessity to devalue labor to maintain profitability nor because the long downturn had turned down in a meaningful way. Perhaps the only truly new thing about the ‘New Economy’ was that growth increasingly became based on computer-technology-driven investment, famously culminating in the dot-com bubble of the late 90s and early aughts. The “double boom” (40) of the early 1990s U.S. internet economy and dot-com bubble of the late 1990s, then, is the context in which the H-1B is iteratively expanded and also cathected to the U.S. technology sector. While the speculative bubble—which ultimately bursts, shaping Arjun’s harried and wearying search for work—is just that, an unreal vitality, it nevertheless informs the activation of global labor circuits, managed by the H-1B in one instance, to underwrite its continued expansion.

The boom in private equity investment in particular as outstripping the profitability of technology companies was rationalized by Alan Greenspan, “in terms of the infinite promise of the New Economy,” its potential for radical future growth.⁸⁷ Indeed, in 1999, Greenspan explicitly connected the New Economy to the information technology industry, and understandably so as information technology accounted for 33% of U.S. economic growth between 1995 and 2000.⁸⁸ With the rapidity and magnitude of investment in information technology, the drought in wage growth finally broke in the non-manufacturing sector between 1997 and 2000 while the profit rate fell as a result of the “structural limitations of the low-wage

economy.”⁸⁹ Within this period, then, it is no coincidence that both the American Competitiveness and Workforce Improvement Act of 1998 (ACWIA) and the American Competitiveness in the Twenty-First Century Act of 2000 (AC21) were passed—both of which expanded the H-1B visa program. Responding to the dual need to underwrite the investment-driven pseudo-recovery of the U.S. economy as yoked to the burgeoning information technology industry and simultaneously devalue labor in an attempt to maintain profitability in the sector, the ACWIA and AC21 both, crucially, turned to the H-1B.

The importance of H-1B labor to the IT industry, as yoked to national economic health in the 1990s, cannot be overstated and is demonstrable in that leaders of the sector have repeatedly agitated for the raising of the 65,000 annual visa cap. In debate over the passage of the AC21 Act, fourteen IT CEOs, including Bill Gates, argued that “failure to increase the H-1B cap...could mean a loss of America’s high technology leadership in the world.”⁹⁰ Similarly, in a 1999 hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Immigration, the president and CEO of software company Olympus Group, testified that “our [American] economic and technological future [would be] at risk” if the H-1B visa program was not expanded.⁹¹ Such claims stand in stark contrast to industry research which demonstrated there was no shortage of domestic IT workers with many employee associations and labor unions stating that, in reality, corporations simply “see the H-1B visa as a cheap, flexible labor resource...that can be used to threaten or replace higher paid American IT workers,” according to Watts.⁹² Nevertheless, such industry lobbying ultimately led to the raising of the cap on H-1B visas to 115,000 in 1999 and 2000 and to 195,000 for 2000 to 2003, having the effect of making the H-1B “synonymous with the IT sector.”⁹³ This obvious factual contradiction is easily explain by considering the eminent need of

the state and capital to devalue labor throughout the long downturn, and especially to propagate the “double boom” partially necessary to attract the labor represented by subjects such as Arjun.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the flagging British-Caribbean sugar industry was similarly rescued by Indian labor, and the centrality of sugar to the Caribbean economy meant that the Indian coolie saved a cornerstone of the British colonial system. The yoking of sector-specific economic health to the futurity of the state and its interests both prefigures the centrality of Indian migrant labor to the U.S.’s economic rebound in the late twentieth century and the explicit investment of the state in facilitating the continued migration of such labor. Indeed, such investiture “bec[a]me integral to official reasoning” in this colonial moment. Outlining how categories such as the nation and free labor come to be sedimented, Mongia writes of the Caribbean coolie case: “In its bare outlines, the migration of Indian indentured labor simply constituted a source of labor necessary for the continued and expanded cultivation of sugarcane in the ex-slave plantation economies. This economic imperative, however, had effects and repercussions that were infinitely more complex. Indeed, the *form* of the migration and the debates it provoked raise important questions in multiple domains.”⁹⁴

In the entanglement of the state and industry, the demand for cheap labor in the latter conditions the technologies by which the former meets that need. If the form of temporary Indian migrant labor can be understood to recur from the colonial moment into the present, it remains precisely that: a form. The activation of this form—coolie form—is produced by the state regime of the H-1B visa, in the service of capital, and it becomes clear how the state and its technologies are articulated in and through the economic imperatives of industry. However, this form is not incidental to the devaluation of the labor imported; rather, it performs the racializing functions which subtend that necessary devaluation. The radical differences between a cash-crop plantation

economy and one based on high-technology production persist but this should not efface that the latter necessarily relies on the history of the former in the case of the H-1B. By demonstrating how the state is historically involved in the regulation of racial subject formation and naming the particular collusion of the H-1B visa regime as pastiche, ‘then’ and ‘now’ can be appreciated as historically disjunct and, *therefore*, productive for the variegated needs of the industrial-state.

The substantial historical disjunctures with respect to the racial subject positions, the labor regimes in which they are embedded, capital’s global circuits and uneven developments, the legal and economic logics which rule the itineraries of migrant labor, and many more wrinkles, clearly disqualify a simplistic reading of continuity across time and space with respect to the Indian migrant laborer. Ultimately, the conjuncture of capital which determines the structure of coolie and indentured labor in the colonial period of the nineteenth century is distinct from that which produces the necessity of the H-1B and its formal qualities, even if both labor regimes are broadly invested in the racialization of their subjects and devaluation of their labor. However, the H-1B as a technology of racialization does not merely rhyme in a coincidental fashion with an antecedent regime of coolie labor but rather pastiches that historical configuration to perform its racial work vis-à-vis its Indian subjects. The uptake of pastiche as the relational mode by which the H-1B visa regime engages the history of coolie labor is marked by the postmodern textualization of the past, pastiche’s necessarily vitiated claim on historicity, and the homologous (but not identical) imperatives of capital, especially since the latter moment of capital is what effects pastiche’s dominance. Therefore, working backward from the latter expression in this hypotaxis, the H-1B’s embeddedness within and responsiveness to the needs of (American) capital is precisely what conditions the deployment of pastiche in the production of coolie form. It is not coolie form’s anti-historicity which necessitates the pastiche mode but the

reverse. And that coolie form is an anti-historicist regime of subject formation and labor disciplining caught within the same conjuncture of flexible capital that imagines its subjects as eminently mobile, disposable, and replaceable—in other words, without history. This formal mode inhabited by the H-1B is made explicit as such in *Transmission*'s mimicry of it, which operates to expose the historical disjunctures that must be elided by coolie form to be productive of value.

Unwriting the “Cyber-Coolie”

If pastiche frequently operates by way of a latent intertextuality, then *Transmission*'s many explicitly embedded texts—films, songs, clips—are the sites around which the H-1B's activation of coolie form becomes particularly salient and articulate. In the novel, Arjun's "filmi" obsession with Bollywood and its products greatly informs his desire to immigrate to the U.S., the largely singular impetus being "*Naughty Naughty, Lovely Lovely*" or "*N2L2*," a fictional movie which traverses itineraries between India and Britain (33). After being hired by Databodies (which he later discovers is a bodyshop),⁹⁵ enduring the arduous H-1B visa application process, along with many others in whose eyes "there was the same determined blankness, a thousand-yard stare directed at H-1B migrant status, at a dollar-denominated future," Arjun quits his part-time job. His boss, Mr. Khan, aggressively chastises him: "Who has trained you to do this work? India. Who has provided the schools? What do you think it means for you to take yourself abroad, instead of using your talents for the good of the nation? Arjun replied (silently) that if India had wanted him for something it probably would have asked" (22-3). Lured by the U.S. IT-driven economic boom, Arjun's fantasies of success abroad are doubly structured by the prosperity proffered in the demand for his skillset abroad and the putative lack thereof in India. After being granted an H-1B visa and wishing his family farewell, Arjun flies to the U.S., ensconced by a "uniquely aerospatial charm" in which he admits "*N2L2*, winner of eight Filmfare Awards and the first Rocky Prasad picture to star newcomer Leela Zahir, was the reason he came to be on the plane in the first place" (33). "Commun[ing] with his innermost hopes and dreams," Arjun watches and summarizes the film:

N2L2 is a love story... Despite Dilip's attempts to impress Aparna...she remains unmoved, singing to him that the man who wins her heart...should command the respect

of his fellow citizens and hold down a high-paying job in commerce or industry... That evening Dilip...realizes that the key to his beloved's heart lies in acquiring NRI [Non-Resident Indian] status...he sings that he...will go forth to seek his destiny in the international capital markets [in London]... [After doing so,] in a fantasy sequence, the action switches to the Punjab, and Aparna...sings that Dilip has won her heart through his bravery, decisiveness, and diversified investment portfolio... (33-5)

Although Arjun's reasons for immigrating to the U.S. are not necessarily for love, it is possible to read much of *Transmission* as a pastiche of *N2L2*; Arjun himself claims "Dilip was him" (36). *N2L2*'s entanglement of fantasies of (sexual) citizenship and economic security also find realization in Arjun's self-narrated uptake of the film as his own story. By "command[ing] the respect of his fellow citizens and holding down a high-paying job," Dilip both secures his economic standing in the U.K. and Aparna's hand in marriage. In fact, they are inextricable since "Dilip has won her heart through his...diversified investment portfolio." Talking to his friend Aamir before leaving India, Arjun tells him "they have real girls" in America, after Aamir worries Arjun's job in Silicon Valley will isolate him from the "action" in Hollywood and the promise of American femininity embodied by stars like Cameron Diaz (28). After finishing *N2L2* on the flight (his eighth time viewing the film), Arjun asks, "how could he not see this movie as a parable" (28)? For Arjun, then, the U.S. is the site of his economic empowerment and interfacing with a more "real" femininity than Aamir's pornographic magazines offer. All he has to do is win the esteem of his "fellow citizens and hold down a high-paying job."

Yet, after the exposition of *N2L2*, the book immediately cuts to Arjun as "a figure, a walking man, trudging along the margin of a wide California highway" (39). If "anyone on foot in suburban California is one of four things: poor, foreign, mentally ill, or jogging" (39), then the

ambulatory narrative keys the reader into Arjun's obvious immigrant status but also readies them for his realization that "he was living in a 'low-income area'" (41). In this revealing, one confronts the incommensurability between Dilip's success in the U.K. and Arjun's debased position as an H-1B immigrant in the U.S. This disjuncture between the novel and its fictional intertext, clarified by pastiche, is structured by the H-1B insofar as the visa regime represents the conditions under which the postcolonial Indian subject of *N2L2* is reinscribed as David Palumbo-Liu's "Asian/American" one.⁹⁶ Arjun describes his first weeks in the U.S., along lines which evince the double-sidedness of the inclusion and exclusion constitutive of Asian American racialization. By turns Arjun realizes that "the job Databodies had guaranteed him was not in fact guaranteed at all," "he would have to interview by phone with potential clients," "that until he successfully secured a post Databodies would pay him a grand total of five hundred dollars a month, half of which would be taken back as rent for the house-share" (39), and that Sherry sees him and those on the bench as "a bunch of starving coolies" (42). Arjun eventually lands a contract with a fish processor in Maine where he "came cheap" (44) and two "sets of middlemen would be taking a percentage" (43). Yet, within four weeks "he was back on the West Coast, on the bench" (44) and "he had made no money, gained nothing at all since coming to America" (45).

The internalization of such a fictional intertext as *N2L2* for the sole purpose, it seems, of pastiche complexifies the novel's relation to the formal technique. Jameson's claim that pastiche is the dominant representational mode of postmodernity, then, is not uncritically reproduced by the novel, but rather is taken *prima facie* to excavate how such textual regimes are productive of subjects and value. *Transmission* parodies this mode in highlighting the anti-historicity evinced by postmodern pastiche through the production of disjunctures between "imagination" and

“reality” (28). On the one hand, Arjun’s fantasies of prosperity are informed by postcolonial transits figured in Bollywood media where the site of cosmopolitan capital accumulation and sexual citizenship is temporally and geographically displaced from the U.S. of the early aughts. On the other hand, it is exactly these circuits which are the residue of a colonial regime that both proffers the Indian H-1B worker up for reinscription under a coolie form and conditions the historical availability of that very form. Ultimately, it is the “dollar-denominated future” which Arjun pursues—and which is so markedly different from the “international capital markets” of London—that legibly produces him as a “starving coolie.”

Thus, it does not suffice to read the fracture of Arjun’s *N2L2* fantasy as simply being the result of a difference in destination. Instead, this difference between the U.K. and U.S. is also attended by a concomitant one in racial regimes of capital accumulation. While Dilip can feasibly, and does, realize economic and social success in London, the H-1B visa ensures that is a structural impossibility for Arjun since “he has worked for only three and a half months out of twelve. He has been given credit, and had it withdrawn” (45).⁹⁷ The novel’s provisional pastiche, and its rapid rupture, keys the reader into the historicity of the Indian migrant laborer only to immediately withdraw from this realization by registering the H-1B visa’s mobilization of a racializing coolie form that is fundamentally anti-historicist.

In other words, the H-1B visa conditions the failure of the novel’s pastiche. In turn, the novel’s mimicry or ‘parody’ of pastiche—that is, its necessary failure—encodes the logic of the H-1B’s activation of a coolie form which short-circuits the historicity of the Indian migrant laborer. This formal conceit of the novel, figured as a provisional attempt to unwrite the Indian H-1B tech worker as a “cyber-coolie,” which self-consciously turns back in on itself in the face of coolie form’s actuation works to demonstrate the structuring anti-historicity of the H-1B, its

pastiche of the history of coolie labor, and the resultant coolie form. The novel itself obliquely registers this movement in its opening pages: “A chain of cause and effect? Nothing so simple in Leela’s summer. It was a time of topological curiosities, loops and knots, never-ending strips of action and inside-out bottles of reaction so thoroughly confused that identifying a point of origin became almost impossible” (4). If these dynamics seem circular it is precisely because the intervention of a postcolonial narrative of history (*N2L2*) that toggles between the Punjab and London cannot be tolerated by the H-1B’s closed-circuit regime of anti-historicity. Moreover, if the H-1B must imagine its Indian subjects as without history, outside those faint contours useful to capital’s accumulation, then a narrative or representational mode invested, however tenuously, in historicity comes up against the limits which inhere in the H-1B’s regime of racial subject formation.

Thus, it is not that the novel’s pastiche unwittingly fails in the face of the H-1B, but rather that it metabolizes and reveals the anti-historicity of the H-1B in the failure of historicity to obtain with respect to the Indian migrant laborer racialized under coolie form. This is the disintegrative power of coolie form with respect to history and the accumulative power of capital it enables—indeed, it is the formal logic of the novel. Arjun notes this incongruity in his getting paid \$250 a month by Databodies while “as if their old economy wasn’t booming enough for them, [the U.S.] had declared a new one. Double-boom” (40). Indeed, Sherry sees Arjun as a “starving coolie” and he finds himself living “with a pair of indistinguishable Tamil Java programmers he privately nicknamed Ram and Shyam” (44). The impotence of the imaginative work Arjun does of restoring a nominal, but ultimately superficial, history to these fellow “starving coolies” is apparent when he gladly leaves them behind, narratively and in parataxis,

for a job at Virugenix: “he had said good-bye to Ram, Shyam, the Samoans, dogshit, California, and daytime TV” (51).

The original scenes of Arjun’s dispossessed state on the bench, on the shoulder of a Californian highway, articulate the formal logics of the novel with respect to the H-1B and coolie form. However, the disjunctures between *N2L2* and what follows do not end there; in fact, there is partial and potential recuperation offered in Arjun’s proverbial eleventh-hour hiring at Virugenix, “a new-economy success story” (53). Once hired, he happily immerses himself in the quirky office culture of the antivirus team, self-fashioned “ghostbusters” (53) obsessed with email chains and questionnaires: “formatted quizzes were sent around at the rate of several a day, asking the respondents to assess their knowledge of *Angel*, their ‘nerditude quotient,’ their sexual performance” (55). It is through one such mass-email (“How Aspergers Are You?”) that Arjun meets its sender, Chris, after spiraling over his positive self-diagnosis (55). When the two end up meeting to discuss Arjun’s worries, Chris questions the category of normal and asks if Arjun is happy which he confirms and, in turn, she says, “with an air of finality. ‘Then shut the fuck up,’” to which they both laugh (60).

Chris’s status as a white, American woman in the novel’s narrative is one that is particularly fraught in the context of Arjun’s immigration status. Marriage to one of the U.S.’s “real girls” is a ticket out of the H-1B’s exploitative labor regime. But not just that. If the H-1B operates by way of a coolie form that denudes its Indian laborers of purchasing power i.e., economic citizenship, then the promise of sexual citizenship—not just formally, but that proffered by proximity to white femininity in general—often functions as an alternative site of cathexis to realize national belonging for these racialized subjects. Chris’s position of authority manifests even in her and Arjun’s initial interaction, as she assuages his concerns “with an air of

finality” and inducts him into normalcy, or at least the constitutive weirdness of Virugenix.

Ultimately, Chris’s role is not cemented by what she says, but rather that she specifically is the one to say it. By installing the white feminine as arbiter and authority of Arjun’s inclusion, even if she jocularly evades the responsibility, Arjun’s inscription under a coolie form is resurfaced.

If it appears Dilip is finally winning Aparna, the novel, by turns, disabuses the reader of any such notion. After Chris realizes Arjun is “on one of those slave visas” (62), she offers to teach him how to drive, and they begin to forge a connection. She recommends he shave his mustache, and he does; he spends a drunken night at her house and realizes she is in a relationship; she reveals her bisexuality and is offended by Arjun’s incomprehension for which he apologizes, “I know this is the land of the free and you have full citizenship rights to do whatever you want at any time: (78); and she ultimately takes his virginity while on MDMA before growing distant, a reaction undoubtedly of a piece with her assessment upon waking the morning after that “this [Arjun’s apartment] was a bad place with sharp things in it. This was a chicken-smelling place of horror” (84). Clearly, this is no Dilip-Aparna love story. Telling her friends about Arjun’s virginity, before they eventually have sex later that night, prompts a flurry of sexually-coded descriptors that precedes her plan to “fuck him” including “deflower,” “initiated,” and “fresh,” the latter of which cannot help but call forth the appellation of ‘fresh off the boat’, and its abbreviation, ‘FOB’, all too often applied to Indian immigrants (80-1). (Arjun’s descriptive infantilization, however, is antecedent to this moment in the novel.)

The intersection of Arjun’s racialization under the H-1B visa regime, Chris’s valorized racial and social positionality, and the former’s sexual inexperience produce a complex nexus where the potency of coolie form is patent. Arjun’s virginity (and his sexual “initiation”) becomes explicitly tied, both narratively and logically, to his racialized immigration status. His

and Chris's relationship intensifies in the first place after her realization that he was "being paid a fraction of what it would cost Darryl to hire an American engineer" (62) and that Arjun doesn't know how to drive, and levels up once again in her drug-induced imagining of him as "less sallow than *mahogany-skinned*" (81). The yoking of Arjun's sexual naiveté to his exploited position as an H-1B tech worker to his racialized provincialism (and the parallel imaginaries which attend it) demonstrates how Chris's position as a figure proffering sexual—and, perhaps, at first, the potential of actual—citizenship is one caught up in the coolie form under which these traits are interarticulated.

The conspicuous break between the romantic arc of *N2L2*, and Chris admission that "she had been avoiding him all week and had intended to go on doing so for as long as possible" (95) and her disbelief when Arjun claims "you're supposed to love me" (97) once again exposes the logics of anti-historicity which inhere in the H-1B visa regime. The coolie form activated by the H-1B disallows the simple pastiche of *N2L2* when it comes to Chris and Arjun's nebulous relationship. After all, Arjun is not Dilip and Chris is not Aparna. The U.S. is not the U.K. These facts, secured by the H-1B, subtend another one—that the anti-historicity of Arjun's racialization as "cyber-coolie" is surfaced in the racial imaginings which attend the revelation of his virginity. Given the H-1B visa regime formalizes the temporariness and flexibility—simultaneously evacuating possibilities for the social (and familial) reproduction—of its subjects over and above antecedent coolie labor configurations under the indenture system, the Indian migrant laborer without family or sexual history is the subject without history-in-general par excellence. It is obvious that the H-1B does not retroactively produce Arjun's lack of sexual history; however, that the imaginative embroidering and racialization of this inexperience occurs via Chris, and is

closely tied to her pity for his being “on one of those slave visas,” demonstrates how coolie form reifies its own regime of anti-historicity.

Despite Chris’s avoidance, they briefly reconcile since “guilt told her she ought to check on him” (95) after Arjun is fired as a result of a “sectorwide [downward] trend” (92). In his termination meeting the “deputy director of personnel...at Virugenix” tells him, ““In your time here...you have added quality and value” (90). Arjun experiences immediate denial of this reality: “it struck him. This was not his story. This was not his story because this was not how his story went. There had been a mistake” (90). Then he pleads. “Please don’t do this to me... Please... I’m begging you... I need this job. This job is all I have... Please, if I lose this job I’ll have to go back. And I can’t go back... I’ll do anything. I’ll work for less money. I’ll work longer hours... What if things change? What if they get better? You’ll need me then” (91). The coolie form under which Arjun has been racialized, however, means “last in, first out,” in fact, signifies coolie in, cyber-coolie out since the very contingency of his employment status is part and parcel of Virugenix’s business plan for “minimizing negative outcomes” and “demonstrating fiscal responsibility” (90). Arjun’s insisting that “this was not his story” is because “Dilip was him,” and so *N2L2* is “his story,” not one in which he is unemployed and abandoned by Chris—forced to return home, therefore, with no capital or nuptials.

And yet *Transmission* is Arjun’s story. The extended pastiche of *N2L2* and explicit call back to its promise for Arjun’s own narrative realization is shattered in this moment of the novel. The “job churning...because of short product life cycles” which is “endemic to the IT industry,” structures the H-1B visa regime’s formal encoding of temporariness and its modes of racialization vis-à-vis the coolie form. The collapse of the fantasy and pastiche of *N2L2*, then, are coextensive with each other and demonstrate how the H-1B’s activation and realization of coolie

form conditions the possibility for Arjun's dismissal. Indeed, because "technically employed by Databodies," "Virugenix has no obligation" to Arjun (91). Arjun's sundered fantasy is the necessary collateral damage of capital's own fantasy of eminently flexible labor without social needs—a labor of coolie form, one without the extra baggage of history at all. Were that the reality, Arjun's trip home, no bags to check, would be far simpler than it is.

After being handed his two weeks, Arjun, instead, unleashes a computer virus (Leela) for which he has a pre-engineered solution, hoping to prove his value to his boss, Darryl, by defeating the sophisticated malware. Introjected between Arjun's inchoate epiphany that births this plan and the narration of Leela01's global spread is an analeptic digression explaining Arjun's discovery of computers, coding, viruses, and "*pyaar*" (103). Meaning love in Hindi and Punjabi, "*pyaar*" for Arjun is something that "throughout South Asia you can't get away from" (103). This excursus would appear aleatory were it not for Arjun's conjecture that, "perhaps the rise of Love has something to do with cinema, or independence from the British or globalization..." (103). For Arjun, "Love," "*pyaar*," certainly does have "something to do with cinema" as *N2L2*'s love plot is the *ür*-text for his own migratory romantic fantasy, and from where he derives the name and 'malicious animation' of his Leela virus. But then, it also has something to do with information, and the U.S.'s supplantation of the British as global economic hegemon in the conjuncture of decolonization and globalization. If "in India (the most disco nation on earth) Love is a glittery madness, an obsession, broadcast like the words of a dictator from every *paan* stall and rickshaw stand, every transistor radio and billboard and TV tower" (103), then the global information economy commanded by the U.S. coordinates the transmission of love as an object of libidinal investment inextricable from the capital networks which make its "broadcast" possible—recursively installing U.S. hegemony. Indeed, "Arjun first

saw a computer when he was ten years old. It was a 286 PC and it belonged to cousin Hitesh, whose father, concerned for his son's education, had brought it back from a business trip to America" (100).

The seemingly disjointed narration of Arjun becoming "the hero of Vx boards" in India and his obsession with "*Pyaar. Pyaar. Pyaar*" (103) are apposite precisely because they cannot be separated: the U.S. is the site from which Arjun's love of information and understanding of love-as-information are both transmitted. Thus, while *N2L2* is apparently a postcolonial Bollywood romance, the availability of its amorous conceit is part and parcel of the promise of the New Economy underwritten by the U.S.'s technological and financial sectors. In fact, "over the years Arjun had given a lot of thought to Silicon Valley. As a prime daydream-location, it had gradually been elaborated into a lost world, a hidden ravine lined with fibre optics and RadioShacks, where surfer girls accompanied you to films viewable on day of international release and the number of available flavours N was always $n+1$, where n was the total when you last looked at the menu" (22). It is no coincidence, then, that the U.S. replaces the U.K. as Arjun's fantasmatic site of attachment. Tracking the "rise of Love" as an effect of "independence from the British," concomitant with the Empire's economic decline, "or globalization," overseen by an ascendant U.S., the latter becomes the locus of both romantic and economic potentials. Considering that *N2L2* is a story of the realization of capital and love, the failure of either to materialize for Arjun in the U.S. as a recently-fired H-1B tech worker spells the ultimate foreclosure of their possibility. How legal and economic citizenship are tied up with their sexual counterpart also inflects Arjun's consequent engineering of the Leela virus.

As the virus infects its hosts, *N2L2*'s Aparna, played by eponymous Bollywood star Leela Zahir, is figured in a "jerky five-second loop from the *holi* dance in [*N2L2*]" (120). This

looped clip is from the *N2L2* montage which toggles between London and the Punjab after Dilip has finally won Aparna's heart, once again reinscribing the novel's problematization of pastiche as an anti-historicist mode of racial subject formation. Since Leela's release is a reaction to the failure of the novel's pastiche of *N2L2* to obtain in the face of the H-1B's pastiche-inflected coolie form, Arjun's attempt to regain employment is a simultaneous attempt to rehabilitate the former pastiche—to rejoin his narrative (*Transmission*) to its source text (*N2L2*). Undoubtedly, this desire is manifest in the figuration of *N2L2*'s romantic dénouement as the virus's animation after Chris “had been avoiding him all week and had intended to go on doing so for as long as possible” (95). Yet, the resolution of the disjunctures between the two texts is necessarily impossible since the coolie form which effects, and is predicated on, the rupture in the first place cannot accommodate Arjun's notion of love-as-information, only his love of information. That is, Arjun's misunderstands that *N2L2* is, however clichéd, a history which must be effaced, not continually resurfaced, for his labor as an H-1B tech worker to effectively produce value under its given form.

Arjun's value, then, is not in his ability to defeat the Leela virus per se, but rather that he does so after already being fired, operating as “a blood-splattered fist squashing an Indian dancing girl” (141). The H-1B is the facilitative mechanism which sutures immigration to employment status and produces coolie form through pastiche's anti-historicity. Thus, the continual return of the novelistic pastiche's source text as that which must be defeated—indeed, at first by Arjun himself—for the world's circuits of transmission to produce value, and for Arjun to prove his own value, indexes how the H-1B is fundamentally contingent on the evacuation of its subjects' historicity. Once again, the structure of the H-1B, which ensures the failure of Arjun's plan, also secures the failure of *N2L2* to be anything other than a problem for

the text to self-reflexively resolve. Even though *N2L2* returns in only one of the fragments into which it burst upon Arjun's firing, it must be dispensed with entirely at the moment Arjun's maximum flexibility for disposal is similarly required. Moreover, since the novel's formal logics work to elucidate the necessary failure of restoring historicity i.e., that of a representational counter-pastiche, to Indian tech workers under the H-1B visa regime, coolie form is unable to tolerate the sexual and familial resonances called up by even the dehistoricized abstractness of "an Indian dancing girl." The repetitive reinscription of a decontextualized shard of *N2L2*, transmitted as the afterlife of the novel's metabolization of the H-1B's regime of anti-historicity, works to continually register coolie form's (non-)relation to history. In the end, coolie form outmaneuvers Arjun. In fact, it must as Arjun's position in the U.S. is circumscribed by it.

This tense relationship to history is further expressed by Leela's description as "a swarm, a horde" (106), as well as the semantic slipperiness between the Leela, the virus, and Leela, the Bollywood star. Although this paper is focused on the Indian subject, it worth noting that in the Americas both Chinese and Indian laborers were racialized as coolies and that "vision[s] of California as a post-frontier about to be engulfed by coolie hordes and Oriental despotism" remain central to cross-racial imaginaries of the coolie.⁹⁸ Indeed, the temporariness of the H-1B visa might well be seen as a way to manage such racial anxieties. Given that Indian women historically racialized as coolie were doubly deployed by colonial authorities as the socially reproductive basis for coolie labor and a buffer against racial contamination of white colonial society by that same laboring population, Leela's self-multiplication evinces exactly those fears against which 'she' is meant to guard. For these reasons, the installment of Leela as the name of the virus and the image of its spread, further deflates the ability of the virus to undercut the

coolie form which is already the subterranean text underwriting Arjun's racialization, devaluation, and dismissal.

Playing with this slide between viral and racial subject, the opening pages of the novel prefigure the destruction wrought by Leela even if, “despite what [Leela Zahir's] mother may have thought, she [the *N2L2* clip of Leela] was a surface effect” (4). Simultaneously, while Leela dances on screen, as Aparna in the moment of *N2L2*'s narrative fulfillment, she was “stealing resources from other programs, taking up disk space, making herself at home...perhaps she was also doing other things—malicious, corrupting things” (120). The split between various Leelas and representations of surface versus depth, finally, demonstrates how coolie form accumulates productive power through the visibility of racializing “surface effect[s]” and the removal of inconvenient bugs—such as history—from capital's codes of racial subject-formation. The Leela virus is centrally a problem because she/it annexes the circuits of transmission along which capital accumulates, disrupting the flows facilitated by coolie form; because Arjun, in attempting to prove his value, agitates against the very logics which authorize his value, Leela constitutes a break in coolie form which must be quarantined for capital to resume its normative routes. Apposite to the accounting of “a series of high-profile security breaches” caused by Leela02, a U.S. government spokesman responds to a question about “whether the country was under attack,” “any attempt to compromise or mitigate our ability to function effectively in terms of our critical infrastructure, whether that be in the realm of telecommunications, energy, banking and finance, water facilitation, government operational activity thresholds or the smooth and unhampered running of our essential emergency services, must be viewed as taking place within a framework strongly suggestive of deliberate negativization, threat or hostile intent” (144-5). That Leela figures a (vitiating and fantasmatic) historicity of the Indian tech worker while

deranging capital's reproduction is ostensive of the connection between the racial surface-effect of coolie form and the effacement of history. Coolie form is the racializing technology by which capital smooths out history as a kink in the smooth functioning of capital's (state) institutions.

The need to defeat the Leela virus, then, functions doubly to reinscribe the anti-historicity of coolie form (as produced) and reactivate the racial fears which justify the marginalization and exploitation of "cyber-coolies." The danger of those "malicious, corrupting things," which, in fact, is Indian tech workers' "stealing resources," "taking up...space," and "making [themselves] at home," are exactly what is managed by the H-1B visa's regime of anti-historicity. If defeating Leela symbolically secures the evacuation of these workers' historicity, then this defeat is also the pre-emptive, exclusionary logic of the H-1B visa that guarantees "cyber-coolies" will make extremely limited demands on the state because of the precarity and contingency conditioned by the flexibility of a labor without history.⁹⁹ The ongoing and accelerated attenuation of the (possibility of the) novel's self-reflexive pastiche metabolizes these anti-historicist logics of the H-1B visa regime to demonstrate the monstrous power of coolie form to racialize its subjects in the service of capital.

Despite Arjun's "elegant solution" (137) to the first generation Leela virus, Darryl takes credit for the fix and remains deaf to Arjun's entreaties: following Arjun's pleas to be rehired, "even for a trial period" (142), Darryl emails him ("Subject: Boundaries"), "You are clinically ill. You can not do this to people. There is a LAW. Also re: your request/THREAT there can be no change. What did you think? This is policy please do not discuss it further with me. THERE IS NO USE IN CRYING OVER SPILT MILK" (143). Arjun's desperation to reverse his termination is underwritten by the H-1B visa, thus, what might be understood as a singular ending is double in this case: being fired from Virugenix equals being fired from America.

In the confrontation which prefigures the email, there is a noticeable linguistic echo in Darryl's policing of "Boundaries." Despite Arjun's non-combativeness, and making no narrated movement within Darryl's office, Darryl variously addresses him, "This is my space, Mehta. My space," "This is compulsion, right? Compulsive boundary transgression," "Just back up...Just stay back, Mehta...Stay on the other side of the desk," "I can break bones...crumble bones," "I'll think about it, right? I'll think about it...I'll think about it" (142). These repetitive insistences stabilize Darryl's claim that "there can be no change," by introducing a recursive dialogic stasis which reiteratively constitutes multiple distances between him and Arjun. That "there can be no change" with respect to either Arjun's physical position vis-à-vis Darryl or his employment status sutures the two foreclosures and constructs Arjun's "boundary transgression" as a "THREAT" to those "Boundaries" of both the workplace and the nation.

Thus, Darryl's recourse to "a LAW" doubly indexes the legal regimes pertaining to (perceived) harassment and the H-1B visa. The singularness of "a LAW," however, grates against the syntactic multiplications and semantic doublings which permeate the scene, elucidating asymmetries in different subjects' vulnerability to legal consequence, or "SPILT MILK," in general. On the one hand, for an American citizen like Darryl, recourse to "a LAW" resolves, at the level of the text, the anxious recitations that "there can be no change" through the implication of the H-1B visa regime in such "a LAW." On the other hand, for Arjun, the same visa regime solders the legal implications of any putative transgression (within the workplace) together with his immigration status into "a LAW" singularly directing his conduct while doubling the implications of any perception of misconduct. That this differential relationship to the national legal apparatus as a whole pivots on each character's immigration status illuminates

how the H-1B visa regime produces its own jurisdictional subjects as doubled: valuable and disposable, valuable because disposable, “cyber-coolies.” What did Arjun think? He knows this.

Indeed, the “THREAT” Arjun poses is suggestively grafted onto the figuration of Leela as doing “malicious, corrupting things” when let loose into the circuits of (capital, information) transmission centered in the U.S. On the one hand, the danger posed by Leela to capital’s reproduction is as a break in coolie form’s overcoding whereas Arjun’s release from employment is not one from the coolie form which authorizes it. On the other hand, the residue of *N2L2* imaged by the Leela virus and its variants reproduces the fears of an Indian laborer who has not been rent from history, by pastiche or otherwise, at the same moment Arjun makes emotional entreaties against his flexible disposal. Although Arjun’s firing does not necessitate his emigration since Databodies holds his H-1B, not Virugenix, during his termination meeting he is nevertheless distressed because “even after months of working he had no savings. He wouldn’t be able to last more than a few weeks on the bench. After that he would have to go back to India” (92). Thus, the structural realities produced under the H-1B visa regime make it such that Arjun’s “THREAT” is his unwillingness to leave Darryl’s office, Virugenix, the U.S. (as the former implies the latter)—a refusal of the flexibility coolie form ought to reinforce. The proliferation of Leela variants which endanger capital are of a piece with the prospect of Arjun’s transgression of his provisional status necessitated by capital. The threats of Leela and Arjun, respectively, are staged from either side of coolie form, threatening to surface a history which must be effaced in the former case and threatening to reject the fungibility this historical elision is meant to effect in the latter. The “THREAT” indexed by Darryl, then, is not a physical one posed by Arjun, but rather that of the Indian subject of and with history: between the Leelas and Arjun, the threats are multiple, but the “THREAT” is one.

After failing to recoup his job, and Leela variants have begun to multiply (-03, -04, -05, -06, and on), causing “market movements, jitters and shakes, reconfigurations of money and confidence and power” (147), Arjun realizes “they were calling him a terrorist” on television (148). Although yet to be properly identified, “at that moment he understood. Sooner or later they would find him and then life as he knew it would be over. *All I wanted was my job back. All I wanted was to work and be happy and live a life of magic in America*” (148). The registration of the H-1B visa regime’s simultaneous interarticulation of these desires and predication on the temporariness of H-1B labor’s inclusion at the site of their possible realization is a poignant return of the all-too-human Indian migrants that are capital and coolie form’s collateral damage. The next time we encounter Arjun, proverbial pink-slip in hand, he is reeling from a car crash after stealing Chris’s Honda Civic in an attempt to abscond over the northern border “before they found out” (181). Arjun’s narrative slowly descends into a surreal haze as, after his discovery, he evades the law on buses, in motel rooms, with phony disguises, and ultimately “step[s] into legend” (249) over the southern border. Instead, prior to this final decampment, “for days the border had acted as the outer limit of [Arjun’s] imagination. Beyond it were abstractions: *Escape, Freedom, The Future*” (248). It is demonstrative of the H-1B’s power that the hypostatization of these promises when cathected to the U.S. become ironically dematerialized “now [that] the future had a landscape, a mess of flat roofs strung with telephone and electrical wires” (248). Arjun wonders “what kind of a life could he have over there? The place on the other side of the river had a hopeless quality” (248). “*Escape, Freedom, The Future*” are both reified and singularly cathected to the U.S. under the political economy of the H-1B and its transnational circuits.

As he prepares to cross over into a Mexico disarticulated from his postcolonial and New Economy fantasies, Arjun “conjured up a soothing image of a darkened room and a TV set. A TV not tuned to a news channel. A TV showing an easy-to-follow narrative fiction in which he was not the central character. Preferably with romance and songs. And a happy ending” (248-9). The self-awareness of *Transmission*’s protagonist of his own protagonicity in a “narrative fiction,” in the last instance pulls us back into the world of pastiche, of the *N2L2* intertext, one such “narrative fiction...with romance and songs. And a happy ending.” Despite the wholesale loss of *N2L2*’s promise, the pull of its fantasy persists, ostensive of the imaginative power that drives visa regimes such as the H-1B and which capital simultaneously depends on and, in this case, must evacuate under coolie form. Where originally “Dilip was him,” now Arjun imagines “he was not the central character,” perhaps a belated acknowledgement of that impossibility in a global epoch of capital where racialized migrant labor is never the central character of production precisely because it cannot be individuated for flexible accumulation to function.

That Arjun’s fabulated “narrative fiction” is “easy-to-follow” already keys us into the fact “he was not the central character” since “follow,” ambiguously signified, can be taken to mean either consumption or reproduction. *Transmission*’s play with the mode of pastiche activated by the H-1B’s (non-)relation to history disarticulates the ease of such consumption from reproduction (while activating both signficatory possibilities) and reminds us that coolie form operates by way of the partial completion of the latter in full service of the former. Put differently, under the H-1B’s anti-historicist regime of racial subject formation, the history of coolie labor is fractured for its productive reinscription and formalized for its productive consumption by capital. Coolie form, in turn, ensures its subjects cannot reproduce themselves outside its historical delimitations, only be eaten up within them. Indeed, in light of his

immiseration, Arjun cannot mimetically reproduce or consumptively identify with the protagonist of this imagined “narrative fiction” precisely because coolie form has done its work.

While Arjun’s racialization as “cyber-coolie” under the H-1B visa drives nearly all of the novel’s events, his counterpart, on the other side of this regime of capital as it were, is white British businessman Guy Swift—who consequently merits brief mention. Although Guy and Arjun’s narratives never overlap, the Leela virus radically disrupts Guy’s desperate attempts to rescue his business, “Tomorrow*” (19), which is hemorrhaging cash and whose services are deliberately unclear. “In a glittering career Guy had raised awareness, communicated vision, evoked tangible product experiences and taken managers on inspirational visual journeys. He had reinforced leading positions and project-managed the generation of innovative retail presences” (19).

At the risk of flattening the novel’s work, Guy not only occupies the verso of capitalism to Arjun’s recto, but personifies technologically-driven, New Economy capital itself: cocaine- and private equity-fueled, “when Guy slept, he dreamed of tall buildings... Sometimes at night his twitching took on a regular myoclonic rhythm, a constant cycle of fall and recovery. Boom and bust (21). The emplotment of Guy’s financial success “at the height of the late-nineties boom” (110) is evinced by his drive toward individuation and the new, “the latest, the next wave, the bleeding edge” (124) which he explains in relation to his expensive high-rise apartment, In Vitro, on London’s Thames: “all of it was personalized, individual, *signature*” (113). At the same time, Guy fetishizes his building’s creed as his own, “one of absolute calm, a heavenly sense of floating free of the care of the world” (110), demonstrative of the deterritorialized fantasy of free-floating capital in the globalized information technology age. When nothing happens as Guy clicks on an email containing the Leela virus, “his annoyance registered as a

little spike of distaste, a momentary disturbance in the smooth sine of his working day. Hotel shower, breakfast tray, lobby, limo, lunch meeting, shopping, hotel, limo again—the grid of Manhattan streets sliding by, the silent driver easing him out toward the airport—all noiseless, perfect” (109-10). When his financial sector funding threatens to dry up, and disrupt all this seamlessness, Guy complains, characteristically, “the whole situation was very Old Economy” (122).

Guy’s caricatural, but historicized, personification of global post-Fordist capital as smoothly accumulating across and within abstracted geographic financial centers suppresses the uneven development of capital amidst and between these sites. Despite this elision, the registration of the racialization of service labor upon which the accumulation of capital, Guy’s and in general, relies is manifest. “Like all the front desk staff at In Vitro,” Guy notes at one point, “this one had an unidentifiable Eastern European accent. Guy disliked it. Eastern European did not say customer service to him” (111). Given the cathexis of the South Asian subject to customer service labor in the information economy—as call center workers, namely—Guy’s complaint easily takes on a racial valence, although it need not necessarily. Nevertheless, these various articulations of New Economy value creation continue to circulate around In Vitro when Guy

looked for the hundredth time at the glass case set into the marble cladding of the wall, containing objects found during the building’s construction. There were old bottles, Roman coins, a shoe buckle, a human shinbone. Guy liked the presentation more than the things themselves. He accepted the principle that heritage added value; even the past had a future, and though in itself this display was more or less a collection of rubbish, here it

was at least contributing to the texture of a contemporary living space. Gaby [Guy's girlfriend] straightforwardly wished it would go away. It was an unwelcome reminder that beneath her feet was an earth full of household waste and human remains, disposables that even after hundreds of years had not been disposed of (125).

The dim theory of history and value creation that emerges in these lines through the vector of In Vitro, cannot be separated from that of the H-1B visa regime's production of coolie form—and not simply because of their sharing narrative space in *Transmission*. In the first place, the presence of “a human shinbone,” paratactically set next to “old bottles, Roman coins, a shoe buckle” as similarly “found during the building's construction” indexes the incidental role of precarious blue-collar labor in unearthing a potentially violent history, where human remains become mere ornamental accoutrements. The aleatory nature of the found-artifacts, however, sutures the intentionally devalued and often racialized labor of blue-collar work to the surfacing of a potentially destabilizing history which must be contained. That “Guy liked the presentation more than things themselves” is indicative of a capitalist sensibility, indeed that of the H-1B visa regime, which would take up history for its own formal use while disavowing the messiness that comes with it, “the things themselves.” Exactly whose shinbone is unearthed must be ignored for it to serve its decorative purpose. If “even the past ha[s] a future,” it is a partial past and one delimited by its operation as “contributing to the texture of a contemporary living space.”

The historical dynamics encoded by coolie form, which this paper has theorized, are palpable here: the attenuation of the historicity of objects and people is what underwrites, adorns the environs of contemporary capital. Moreover, the primacy of “presentation” over “things in themselves” registers this necessarily vitiated relation to history and its transcoding as form, the

evacuation of (historical) substance or subjectivity. Meanwhile, Gaby's discomfort at "disposables that even after hundreds of years had not been disposed of" articulates the racial fears which are yoked to the historicity of the Indian "cyber-coolie," here abstractly displaced onto that which should have, in the movement of history, been discarded and has not. But is this not just the logic of coolie form recoded? The disposability of temporary labor which is made to recur through the presentation of a racial form that (re)authorizes that disposability and quarantines the danger of "the things themselves," of "the mud sucking at [one's] heels" (125)? Of course, that this sense of fear is focalized through a figure of white femininity, coupled to Guy as the personification of contemporary financial capital, only further marks coolie form's salience to that racial regime of accumulation. The coolie recurs, if only formally, and, indeed, they must: "heritage add[s] value." However, "rising up the lift," away from the suck of history, "[Gaby and Guy] both felt a sense of relief" (125) that history's unruliness is, and can be, contained. Here, the logic of coolie form is not merely articulated by the H-1B's regime of anti-historicity, but spoken directly, from the mouth of capital itself.

The racial underclass of labor which undergirds Guy's various attempts to save his business reinforces the sense of this broader configuration of labor under capital. In Dubai, an infamously major site of blue-collar South Asian migrant labor, Guy is greeted by a "development agency billboard: *'Move your company to the gateway of the globe. 1.5 billion consumers await your arrival. A business base with a first-world infrastructure—at a third-world cost'*" (165). That "third-world cost" of labor quickly materializes as "the car door was opened by a Filipino...identified...as *Gary*," "by [Guy's] side was *Carolyn*, a Singaporean woman," "the lift took Guy and a pink South Asian bellhop (*Bruce*) to the twentieth floor," "*Doug*, a dark-skinned young man who was perhaps Indonesian arrived with a plate of fruit,"

“*Carey-Ann*, who was maybe Chinese...gave him a menu” (166-7). After failing to secure his Emirati client, however, Guy finally succeeds in wooing the higher-ups at “PEBA, Pan European Border Authority” (122), to whom he tells, during a coke-fueled presentation, “a common European border authority must have common information collection and retrieval. This much is obvious. Otherwise you find some terrorist or economic migrant in one country and lose him again when he crosses into another” (234). Signore Bocca of PEBA recognizes this necessity, saying, “The problem with these people is they lie... They say they’re from a war zone but all they want is to take a job from a citizen” before outlining PEBA’s plan “aimed at taking five thousand *sans papiers* off the streets by tomorrow morning” (235-7). Guy ultimately wins the PEBA contract with his plan to “promote Europe as somewhere you want to go, but somewhere that’s not for everyone. A continent that wants people, but only the best... And our big idea is to use the metaphors of leisure to underscore that message” (239).

These two scenes articulate the racial underclass of labor, especially within the service industry, that facilitates the “leisure” Guy experiences while in Dubai, the formal recoding of this racialized labor under Anglicized names at the economic “gateway to the globe,” and the fantasy of these laborers’ exclusion understood as immanent to a “metaphorics of leisure.” Indeed, this is the paradoxical fantasy of a capital which at once relies on differentiated, racialized labor to provide undergirding services of value production and imagines the total abstraction and invisibility of those racial differences itself constructs. The slide between “economic migrant” and “terrorist” both indexes the brown body and the “THREAT” of the former becoming the latter, in a post-9/11 conjuncture, when not properly circumscribed by a racial form that facilitates temporariness, flexibility, and disposability. Ostensive of the racial and economic fears which become sutured by the economic migrant who “take[s] a job from a citizen,” “Europe

as...somewhere that's not for everyone" becomes a site where a coolie form is not yet operative yet must be effected forcibly to the same effect. Indeed, these scenes lay bare the violence inherent in and elided by the often seamless functioning of coolie form's racializing logics. Without the H-1B's anti-historicist regime of racial subject formation, PEBA's "coordinated sweep" is necessary for the state to manage immigration and labor. What coolie form enables, finally, is the invisibilization of this process under the sign of historically commonsense racialization.

If coolie form operates by way of reinscribing a partial history in the present to produce valuable racial subjects under the aegis of the H-1B visa regime, then let us also follow a tenuous path backwards and end with a beginning. Pre-figuring the exegetical accounting in the final 'Noise' section of the novel, its beginning conducts a similar, if truncated and vague, precursory synopsis. In those first pages, Arjun is never referred to by name, merely implied in the description of "a young man standing outside a New Delhi office tower" (5). This is certainly not the case in *Transmission's* final pages which continually reference Arjun's infamy: "Despite being labelled a terrorist by governments and media agencies around the world, Arjun Mehta has admirers" (267). Indeed, not just mere admirers, as "the figures of the outlaw and the unrecognized genius are dear to many in the computer underground, and Mehta (combining both) has become a hero to a younger generation" while, "judging by the hagiographic tone of postings and zine articles, there is certainly no shortage of people who would be willing to assist the fugitive if he arrived on their doorstep" (267). I suggest that the novel's ultimate attempt at unwriting the Indian H-1B immigrant as "coolie" occurs in the use of pastiche between these two sections of the novel. After escaping over the southern border, and Leela Zahir's largely unexplained disappearance from her movie set, the novel ends with "one persistent report,

mostly from Pacific-rim countries, [that] has a young man fitting Mehta's description accompanied by a South Asian woman of a similar age, 'tomboyishly' or 'punkily' dressed. They are sometimes seen kissing or holding hands. According to conspiracy theorists, there is only one possible explanation, only one pattern that makes sense" (175-6).

The implication that Leela Zahir and Arjun find each other in the end is tenuously, if suggestively, held out as a possibility given the vague descriptions of a "young man" and "South Asian woman of a similar age." On the one hand, these generic accounts may very much be the point as Arjun's initial story is also one of a whole generation of Indian H-1B tech-workers. On the other hand, the intimation that it is Arjun and Leela who finally unite, that *N2L2* is realized, is the final reinscription of the novel's counter-pastiche. That it might ultimately succeed in unwriting the "cyber-coolie" only becomes possible outside of the U.S. and the H-1B's regime of racial subject formation. Of course, the novel holds this reading at a distance in the generic quality of the last theory, both problematizing the possibility of the unwriting of the "cyber-coolie" at all and registering the ubiquity of coolie form's subjects. Indeed, the novel registers in this indeterminacy that unwriting by clarifying the force of the H-1B visa regime's anti-historicist writing over of its racialized subjects remains questionable as a politically efficacious strategy, precisely because of the very power of coolie form to evade and triumph over such attempts. To this end, in the first section, an unnamed "young man," simply "he," and in the last so famous he spawns "Mehtologists" (265), Arjun's story represents the fantasies of generations of Indian immigrants to the U.S. who explicitly view(ed) the H-1B as the facilitative vehicle for rewriting themselves into hyper-successful American subjects.

Although Arjun becomes famous for an entirely separate set of reasons, the H-1B visa's inscription of an eminently exploitable coolie form remains the ground from which he finds

himself forced to annex the very circuits of transmission which facilitate his devaluation—in order to prove his value. In this movement, which pushes the H-1B regime’s racial logics to their limits, before finally transgressing both them and the borders of the H-1B’s jurisdiction, Arjun is unwritten and rewritten from an unnamed Indian “cyber-coolie” into a household name the world over. One need only look to such representative, famous Indian CEOs of U.S. technology companies—such as Shantanu Narayen (Adobe) and Arvind Krishna (IBM), both of whom immigrated to the U.S. on H-1B visas—to note the H-1B’s place in the Indian American cultural imaginary as a technology by which Indian immigrants can realize a historically enduring American Dream. If the Noise section of the novel deploys a faint pastiche to rewrite its opening pages, then the attendant disjuncture in Arjun’s representation cements the status of the H-1B visa as the technology by which Indian American immigrants can be written as “cyber-coolie” or CEO. Of course, as *Transmission* shows us, the latter requires the mastering of, or at least forceful infringement on, those same routes of capital along which coolie form accumulates its productive power. Tellingly, and demonstrative of this paper’s suggestion of an Indian American racial form, hundreds of thousands of Indians continue to immigrate annually to the U.S. on the H-1B visa in hopes of doing just that.

Notes

¹ Antonio Negri and Timothy S. Murphy, *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy* (London: Verso, 2005), 25, emphasis mine.

² *High-tech Industry in the U.S. Economy*: Hearing before the Joint Economic Committee, 106th Cong. (1999) (statement of Alan Greenspan, Chair of the Federal Reserve).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hari Kunzru, *Transmission* (Dutton: 2004). Hereafter, page citations for *Transmission* will be notated in parentheses.

⁵ Sharmila Rudrappa, “Cyber-Coolies and Techno-Bracers: Race and Commodification of Indian Information Technology Guest Workers in the United States,” *University of San Francisco Law Review* 44, no. 2 (2010): 353, 371.

⁶ Najnin Islam et al., “Indenture, Iteration: Race and the Aesthetics of Contract Labor,” *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 10, no. 1 (2024): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1353/vrg.2024.a922356>.

⁷ Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), xx.

⁸ Singh, Rajkumari, "I am a coolie," in *They Came in Ships: An Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry*, McDonald, Ian (ed.), Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1998, pp. 85-7. See also Marina Carter and Torabully, Khal, *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*, (Anthem Press, 2002).

⁹ In his seminal *Coolies and Cane*, Moon-Ho Jung writes, "Earlier drafts of [*Coolies and Cane*] always had quotes around coolies to convey the unstable and imagined character of that racial designation... As Matthew Frye Jacobson notes, the selective punctuation of some racial categories can have the ironic effect of reifying others, such as whites and blacks. With or without the quotation marks, this book aspires to reveal the historical formation of race, its social constructedness, and its very real, material consequences" (10). See Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation*, Johns Hopkins Paperback edition (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Janet Maslin, "BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Culture Clash on the Messy Trail of Computer Viruses," Books, The New York Times, May 17, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/17/books/books-of-the-times-culture-clash-on-the-messy-trail-of-computer-viruses.html>.

¹¹ Eileen Ying (2020) uses the term 'coolie form' but does not develop the concept. See, Eileen Ying, "Coolie Pathology," *Post45*, October 13, 2020, <https://post45.org/2020/10/coolie-pathology/>.

¹² Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 1, no. 146 (1984): 66, <https://doi.org/10.64590/s2p>.

¹³ Colleen Lye, "Racial Form," *Representations* 104, no. 1 (2008): 99, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2008.104.1.92>. For an extended discussion of how a dyadic Asiatic racial form is produced in relation to Californian naturalism, U.S. progressivism, and global political economy, see Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jasper Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, Post 45 (Stanford University Press, 2018), 33. While Bernes' argument for art's autonomy foregrounds the dialectical relationship between the "world of labor" and the aesthetic, this paper's claims are narrower as regards the relationship between *Transmission* and the H-1B visa regime. This paper is interested in how the "constitutive contradictions" of the H-1B visa regime's "technical processes," as related to its theorization of history, become apparent through *Transmission*'s "push[ing] some to the point of failure."

¹⁶ Pallavi Banerjee, *The Opportunity Trap: High-Skilled Workers, Indian Families, and the Failures of the Dependent Visa Program* (New York University Press, 2022), 36.

¹⁷ Banerjee, *The Opportunity Trap*, 32.

¹⁸ United States Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census, *We the Americans: Asians*, Edna L. Paisano, et al. WE-3, 1993. PDF, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1990/we-the-americans/we-03.pdf>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lindsay Lowell, "H-1B Temporary Workers: Estimating the Population," *The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies*, University of California, San Diego, Working Paper no. 12 (2000): 2.

²¹ Pallavi Banerjee, "Indian Information Technology Workers in the United States: The H-1B Visa, Flexible Production, and the Racialization of Labor," *Critical Sociology* 32, nos. 2-3 (2006): 430, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916306777835295>.

²² Kristen N. Ayers and Scott D. Syfert, "U.S. Visa Options and Strategies for the Information Technology Industry," *International Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (2002): 542.

²³ Fan, *Asian American Fiction*, 4.

²⁴ Ibid., 21.

²⁵ Pallavi Banerjee (*Opportunity Trap*, 2023) has also commented extensively on the H visa regime's gendered dimensions, highlighting how the dependent H-4 visa—which allows for the migration of spouses and children of H-1B visa workers—is deeply feminized while the H-1B masculinized. Ironically, the structure of the H-1B program which legally allows for the underpaying and hyper-exploitation of workers is a feminizing structure vis-à-vis the historical and imperial feminization of underpaid work. Thus, the H-1B is an immigration technology which both racializes and genders. For further discussions of the gendered productions coincidental with the exploitation of racialized Asian laborers, see Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 1996); David Eng and Alice Y. Hom, *Q&A: Queer and Asian in America, Asian American History and Culture Series* (Temple University Press, 2018); David Leiwei Li, *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent, Asian America* (Stanford University Press, 1998); David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford University Press, 1999); and David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*, Perverse Modernities (Duke University Press, 2007).

- ²⁶ Biao Xiang, *Global Body Shopping: An Indian Labor System in the Information Technology Industry*, In-Formation (Princeton University Press, 2007), 7.
- ²⁷ United States Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2000 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. M-367, U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 2002. PDF, https://ohss.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-12/Yearbook_Immigration_Statistics_2000.pdf.
- ²⁸ Banerjee, "Indian Information Technology Workers in the United States," 432.
- ²⁹ Pallavi Banerjee, *The Opportunity Trap*, 8.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 437.
- ³¹ Daniel Costa and Ron Hira, "H-1B Visas and Prevailing Wage Levels," *Economic Policy Institute*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.epi.org/publication/h-1b-visas-and-prevailing-wage-levels/>.
- ³² Julie R. Watts, "The H-1B Visa: Free Market Solutions for Business and Labor," *Population Research and Policy Review* 20, no. 1/2 (2001): 145. See also Biao Xiang, *Global Body Shopping: An Indian Labor System in the Information Technology Industry*, In-Formation (Princeton University Press, 2007): Accommodating the flexibility demanded by the IT industry required the coextensive emergence of "body shops" (Biao, *Global Body Shopping*). Body shopping is a "uniquely Indian practice whereby an Indian-run consultancy (body shop) anywhere in the world recruits IT workers, in most cases from India, to be placed out as project-based labor with different clients" (Biao, *Global Body Shopping*, 4). Often, there were additional levels of employment mediation in the form of consultancy companies which contracted specific projects for IT firms and hired from body shops. Thus, a typical employment relation for an Indian IT worker on an H-1B would operate through as many as three levels of mediation. To reduce friction between immigration regimes and the IT industry's labor demands, body shops engage in a practice of benching whereby Indian H-1B beneficiaries (sponsored by the body shop), would be preemptively imported and put "on the bench" until an IT company demonstrates demand for their labor or specific skillsets. The highly mediated labor relation between the subcontracted Indian H-1B worker and an IT company begets a chain of wage siphoning whereby the worker can legally receive lower than fifty percent of their original compensation.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Negri, *Books for Burning*, 25.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 1996), 30.
- ³⁷ David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 1.
- ³⁸ Michelle N. Huang, "Ecologies of Entanglement in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 1 (2017): 102, 105, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2017.0006>.
- ³⁹ Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 1; Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 30.
- ⁴⁰ Christopher T. Fan, *Asian American Fiction after 1965: Transnational Fantasies of Economic Mobility* (Columbia University Press, 2024), 35.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ⁴² Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838 - 1918*, Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 117, emphasis mine.
- ⁴³ Rudrappa, "Cyber-Coolies and Techno-Braceros," 356. For more on the experiences of *girmityas* outside of the Caribbean, see Brij V. Lal, *Girmityas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (The University of Michigan Press, 2004); Brij V. Lal, "Girmit," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2017): 313–15; Brij V. Lal and Shahid Amin, eds., *Girmityas: The Making of Their Memory-Keeper from the Indian Indentured Diaspora* (Primus Books, 2022); Ashuthosh Kumar, *Girmityas and the Global Indian Diaspora: Origins, Memories, and Identity*, Global South Asians (Cambridge University Press, 2024).
- ⁴⁴ See note 9.
- ⁴⁵ Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 4.
- ⁴⁶ Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 12.
- ⁴⁷ Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 2.
- ⁴⁸ Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 112.
- ⁴⁹ Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830 - 1920* (Hansib Publishers, 1993).
- ⁵⁰ For theorizations of these unique historical and ontological conditions of Blackness see Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64; Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183–201; Fred Moten, *In the*

Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2009): 177–218; Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*, American Philosophy (Fordham University Press, 2014); Frank B. Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, (W.W. Norton & Company, 2022).

⁵¹ Much has been written about the exploitative conditions under which such contracts were agreed to (or not), including asymmetries of information, language barriers to comprehension of their terms, intentional deception on the part of colonial officials, kidnapping, etc. For more on this, see Radhika Viyas Mongia, *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State* (Duke University Press, 2018), 43-55.

⁵² Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 107, emphasis mine. For more on the marked differences in familial and kinship configurations between Indian and Chinese coolies in the Caribbean see Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 50-86.

⁵³ Edward Jenkins, *The Coolie, His Rights and Wrongs* (George Routledge and Sons, 1871), 197.

⁵⁴ Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 12.

⁵⁵ Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, 38.

⁵⁶ Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 57.

⁵⁷ Mongia, *Indian Migration and Empire*, 33-8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁹ Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 131.

⁶⁰ Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire*, 56.

⁶¹ Mongia, *Indian Migration and Empire*, 32.

⁶² Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007), 81.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005* (Verso, 2006).

⁶⁵ Watts, “The H-1B Visa,” 144.

⁶⁶ Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, 99.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁸ Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 12.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 120-1.

⁷⁰ Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, xxviii.

⁷¹ While for the manufacturing sector, the fall in growth precipitated since 1965 was largely inevitable by 1973, non-manufacturing businesses were able to somewhat successfully respond throughout the subsequent crisis by devaluing labor.

⁷² David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Blackwell, 2011), 150.

⁷³ Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 107.

⁷⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2003). See also Maurizio Lazaratto, “Immaterial Labor” (1996) in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Theory out of Bounds 7 (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 142-157.

⁷⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 289.

⁷⁶ Negri, *Books for Burning*, 25.

⁷⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 298.

⁷⁸ *High-tech Industry in the U.S. Economy*: Hearing before the Joint Economic Committee, 106th Cong. (1999) (statement of Alan Greenspan, Chair of the Federal Reserve).

⁷⁹ Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 81.

⁸⁰ Ayers and Syfert, “U.S. Visa Options,” 542.

⁸¹ If one common gripe against Harvey’s theorization of the post-Fordist flexible regimes of accumulation is that it relies on the regulation school’s U.S.-centrism, embodied in thinkers such as Michel Aglietta, the H-1B is precisely that technology which inscribes (some of) the non-post-Fordist economies of the Global South within a single regulatory regime of capital. Moreover, Harvey’s concept of “peripheral Fordism,” the shifting of Fordism to the global periphery, implicitly registers the unevenness in the power of labor which enables the devaluation practiced by the H-1B visa regime. For an extended theorization of Regulation School Marxism see Michel Aglietta et al., *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience*, Verso Classics 28 (Verso, 2000).

⁸² Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, with Robin D. G. Kelley (The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 26.

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- ⁸³ Banerjee, *The Opportunity Trap*, 8.
- ⁸⁴ Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 80.
- ⁸⁵ For more on the experiences and understandings of Indian women within the coolie system, see, Rhoda Reddock, “Indian Women and Indentureship In Trinidad and Tobago 1845–1917: Freedom Denied” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 20 (1986), 79-87; Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).
- ⁸⁶ Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, 255, emphasis mine.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 308.
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 310.
- ⁹⁰ American Competitiveness in the Twenty-First Century Act of 2000, Pub. L. 106–313, 114 Stat. 1251 (2000).
- ⁹¹ America’s Workforce Needs in the 21st Century, United States Senate Subcommittee on Immigration, 106th Cong. (1999) (n.p.) (statement of Julie Holdren, president and chief executive officer, Olympus Group)
- ⁹² Watts, “The H-1B Visa,” 150.
- ⁹³ Banerjee, “Indian Information Technology Workers in the United States,” 430-1.
- ⁹⁴ Mongia *Indian Migration and Empire*, 49, emphasis mine.
- ⁹⁵ See note 28.
- ⁹⁶ David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 1. For Palumbo-Liu, the solidus in ‘Asian/American’ “at once implies both exclusion and inclusion” while “‘Asian/American’ marks both the distinction installed between ‘Asian’ and ‘American’ and a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement” (1). Exemplifying this dynamic, Arjun, included in the U.S. state on the basis of his ability to produce economic value, is simultaneously excluded, denuded of purchasing power, and reduced to an unnamed “figure” after migrating (Kunzru 2004, 29).
- ⁹⁷ For more on the role of credit (economies) in regimes of subject-formation, see Annie McClanahan, “Bad Credit,” *Representations* 126, no. 1 (2014): 31–57.
- ⁹⁸ Colleen Lye, *America’s Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 11. The epicenter of the U.S. technology sector, in service of which the H-1B visa regime produces “cyber-coolies,” is similarly located in California, at the frontier of the digital age, a historical resonance which should not be ignored.
- ⁹⁹ See Watts, “The H-1B Visa;” Banerjee, *Opportunity Trap*; Banerjee, “Indian Information Technology Workers.”

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