



## **The Wages of Non-Blackness: Contemporary Immigrant Rights and Discourses of Character, Productivity, and Value**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing from W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of the psychological wage of whiteness, this article explores how contemporary rhetoric promoted by immigrant rights advocates in the United States valorizes non-white immigrant workers in relationship to African Americans. Specifically, I examine moralized claims regarding immigrants' character, productivity, and value as well as their contributions to the U.S. and global economy. I emphasize how this discourse echoes and draws upon managerial and capitalist perspectives of labor as well as anti-Black rhetoric regarding African Americans as lacking a work ethic, militant, xenophobic, and costly to society. Finally, I briefly consider whether the wage of non-Blackness differs from the wage of whiteness as well as the possibility of an ethical immigrant rights discourse.

[1] In his 1935 book *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*, W.E.B. Du Bois reflected on the "political success of the doctrine of racial separation, which overthrew Reconstruction by uniting the planter and the poor white" (700). In doing so, Du Bois conceptualized a psychological wage of whiteness: "It must be remembered," he remarked, "that the white group

of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage” (700). This article examines how this psychological wage, which unites the laborer with elite and capitalist Whites, is invoked in discourse regarding the labor of non-Black people of color (hereafter referred to as NBPOC) and immigrants living and working in the United States in the wake of what Manning Marable and Leith Mullings have described as the “second Reconstruction” (341-52). Specifically, I analyze how African Americans are explicitly and implicitly referenced in the moralizing claims asserted by low-wage earning immigrants and their supporters regarding immigrants’ character, productivity, and value. Paying particular attention to commentaries of immigrants as contributors to the U.S. and global economy, I discuss how this discourse echoes and draws upon managerial and capitalist perspectives of labor as well as anti-Black rhetoric regarding African Americans as lacking a work ethic, militant, xenophobic, and costly to society.

### **Immigrant labor: character, productivity, and value**

[2] In October of 2005, nationally syndicated columnist Ruben Navarrette’s commentary about then New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin being “up in arms because what has historically been a mostly black city may be on its way to becoming a largely brown city” caused a firestorm (1).

Provocatively titled “The wrong color in New Orleans?” Navarrette’s column was filled with equally provocative observations such as:

Before Katrina, New Orleans was only about 3 percent Latino. Now, demographers say the city’s Latino population could swell to four or five times that amount. That comes as a bolt of bad news for black leaders nostalgic for a city and a culture that for all practical purposes no longer exists...With the loss of an estimated 50,000 households, Nagin has complained that New Orleans might never regain its former size. And he’s probably right. So why is he looking a gift horse in the mouth? Here Nagin is having trouble getting people to move to New Orleans, and there’s one group that’s already doing it. They’re ready to work hard, pay taxes and build a new New Orleans—or, if you prefer, a Nuevo Orleans. (1)

[3] In Navarrette’s account, immigrants being “ready to work hard, pay taxes and build a new New Orleans” is indicative of Latino immigrants’ “character.” As the writer puts it, African Americans lacked the same willingness to come (or return) to the city post-Katrina:

The thing is, many of the city’s former residents (especially many of its black residents) say that they have no desire to go back. That’s because living conditions in New Orleans are still far

from ideal...In a new USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll of evacuees contacted with the help of the Red Cross, half said they haven't returned home and 39 percent said they had no plans to do so. According to the poll, blacks are twice as likely as whites to feel that way. Among the least likely to return—young people under 30, the very group that might normally do a lot of the physical-labor jobs now being done by immigrants. (1)

[4] Rather than engage in an empirical debate regarding whether Navarrette's claims about African Americans' interest in returning to New Orleans is accurate, I want to consider how Navarrette valorizes immigrants for being willing to move to a city where, as he describes, "22 million tons of garbage are littering the streets, including rotten food." An obvious issue, of course, is the castigation of African Americans for not wanting to live in unsanitary and hazardous conditions. Another is how Navarrette poses the purported willingness of Latino immigrants to reside and work in such conditions as indicative of their character. As the columnist suggests, African Americans, by purportedly refusing to endure more suffering beyond that which they experienced before and during the actual Hurricane and rescue efforts (Sexton), are too accustomed to leisure, whereas Latinos are accustomed to hard work. As *non-immigrants*, African Americans, according to Navarrette, have become too dependent on welfare:

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there's a struggle of competing values. City officials say that one thing that keeps former residents from wanting to give New Orleans another chance is the lack of subsidized housing. Guess what? Latino immigrants have to contend with the same shortage. The difference is that the immigrants are not sitting around and waiting for government to come to the rescue. They're probably living two or three families to a house, and saving money to buy a home of their own. That's how it used to be in this country before the advent of the welfare state. And, if immigrants win this tug of war, that's the way it'll be again. Let's understand the stakes. This is a struggle between those who want to be seen as delivering salvation and those who believe that everyone is responsible for saving themselves. (2)

[5] Navarrette's claim that African Americans lack character due to environmental factors, in his case, "the advent of the welfare state" (2), echoes similar environmental arguments made by white imperialists towards non-Whites. For example, consider how a white U.S. official involved in the colonization of Samoa in the early 20th century equated enduring hardship with character; in the following remark, Samoans are depicted as too accustomed to leisure—in this case because of the beautiful natural environment—or at least a lack of deprivation, and thus void of character:

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Taken as a whole the people lack character. It is doubtless a natural law that there can be no development without hardship, and nature here is so kind that the natives practically never have to face hardships. They move along through life, as did many generations of their forefathers, without the necessity of any great amount of work or of privation. The result is that they are amiable, but lack seriousness. (quoted in Go 41)

[6] Navarrette's commentary, then, relies on tropes popular among white colonizers of the 20th century which posited that those who have endured hardships are more evolved and thus prepared to develop nations, or in the case of New Orleans, rebuild cities. Competition over jobs and space between African Americans and other groups, then, comes down to a "tug of war" between groups with "competing values" (Navarrette 2) engendered by environmental factors. Unfortunately, Navarrette is not alone in believing that who gets jobs is just a matter of cultural values or that African Americans lack the necessary character to endure harsh conditions, work, or keep a job. Indeed, a host of sociological studies indicate that such perspectives are common among employers (Moss and Tilly, Neckerman and Kirschenman, Park, and Thomas). This research has found that they perceive African Americans as lazy, criminal, undisciplined, and lacking what

William Julius Wilson labels “soft skills,” or “personalities suitable to the work environment, good grooming, group-oriented work behaviors, etc.” (136).

[7] In many cases, employers of different racial backgrounds valorize NBPOC *in relation* to African Americans. For instance, Edward Park, studying race and hiring in Silicon Valley, reports that one white personnel manager commented: “Asians work hard due to their Confucian culture. They have loyalty to the company and view the company like a family. Latinos in America also work hard because they had to. Working as migrant farmers for all these years has instilled a hard work ethic in them” (quoted in Park 230). The same manager made an environmental argument about African Americans that echoed Navarrette’s claim: “And blacks. I think they have lost much of their work ethic, and it’s really the fault of the welfare system. Why work when you can have the same income and maybe even better benefits from the welfare office?” (quoted in Park 230).

[8] Along with celebrating the pliancy of NBPOC, cast by this manager as “loyalty” and a work ethic derived from a history of migrant labor—a point hearkening back to the aforementioned colonizing discourses of hard labor as a source of character building—African Americans are depicted by employers as lazy. They are also perceived as too militant and demanding of rights, presumably a subterfuge meant to conceal a lack of work ethic. One of Park’s respondents, a white business owner, for example, argued that

environmental changes ushered in by the Civil Rights Movement have made African Americans too vigilant and therefore less manageable than NBPOC:

As a small businessman, my main fear is having a worker who is bent on filing formal complaints or lawsuits. It would surely drive me out of business. As I see it, Asians and Mexicans are generally not like that. If they have a problem, they try and solve it personally, or they just go to another company. But whites and blacks, they like to stand up for their rights, even if it means they can drive me out of business and all of the other workers lose their jobs. For blacks, I'm afraid that they will not just involve lawyers but bring outsiders, like the NAACP or the Black Panther's Party or whatever they have now. Then I'm really dead. (quoted in Park 230)

[9] Part of the problem, according to this employer, is not so much that Blacks and Whites purportedly act similarly. Rather, as suggested by the references to the NAACP and the Black Panther Party, Blacks *bully* or physically threaten employers to see them as equal to Whites and thus don't "know their place" in the American racial hierarchy. Efforts by African Americans to secure or keep their jobs through political activism and intra-racial solidarity are thus devious and violent acts. Blacks are also considered delusional as indicated by their purported misidentification with Whites as

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fellow Americans or equals. While such remarks come from people whose job is to manage others in the name of making profits, far too many others echo this sentiment. Navarrette, in his column, states, “Ironically, a lot of what’s being said by these folks resembles what white nativists say in the immigration debate” (1).

[10] Given Navarrette’s racist commentary about African Americans and welfare use, it is perhaps easy for some to dismiss his discussion of Black nativism. Yet even among progressives concerned with interracial solidarity and social justice, “Black citizenship” is treated as a form of privilege that African Americans exert *over* immigrants. Thus, immigrant status, and the very real vulnerability and structural exploitation of poor and working-class immigrants serve as a moral claim deployed against African Americans when the latter have difficulty getting jobs that purportedly “only immigrants will work.” For example, in an article published on the website of the North American Congress on Latin America, Claudia Sandoval, exploring Black-Latino conflict in Chicago, writes:

the nationwide anti-immigrant discourse in the mainstream media and in politics has posed a powerful challenge to black-Latino coalition politics, since it groups Chicago’s Whites together with African Americans within the category of lawful, hard-

working citizens—as defined against a criminal, alien Latino Other. (36)

[11] One example Sandoval gives of African Americans being “grouped” with Whites as “lawful, hard-working citizens” is that of “a group of about 10 to 15 African American men” who “held a demonstration outside a meat-processing plant, shouting ‘Illegal!’ at Latino workers” (37). “Through this frame,” Sandoval argues:

African Americans have the advantage of symbolically belonging to (white) U.S. society—‘symbolically’ because any actions that African Americans take on the immigration debate does not change the existing racial structure of white dominance, dominance, much less translate into substantive change for their own life chances (39).

[12] While I agree with Sandoval that African Americans are not imagined or treated as real U.S. citizens despite their legal citizenship status, I want to consider how Sandoval’s discussion of African Americans’ “symbolic” citizenship, as opposed to legitimate citizenship, serves to negate an adequate discussion of Black structural vulnerability in the economy as well as in debates regarding work and productivity. Despite pointing out the high unemployment rate of African Americans, Sandoval does so to suggest that

Black Chicagoans may be easily seduced by rhetoric that “aims to drive a

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wedge between ‘illegal aliens’ and ‘working families’ of whatever race” (37). Some African Americans may be anti-immigrant as well as concerned with non-citizens being offered jobs that Black people often *can’t get*—as opposed to unwilling to work. Yet given the wealth of evidence documenting the negative perception of African Americans as lazy, undisciplined, and dependent as a belief common among more than just employers or writers such as Navarrette (Ransby), it is highly unlikely that, to non-Blacks, African Americans are the face of “working families.” Sandoval’s discussion also ironically echoes some of the frustration expressed by *employers* that Blacks have a false sense of equality with Whites. Because African Americans in Sandoval’s account are suffering from “false consciousness” of their citizenship status (my words, not hers), their demands for work and claims to productivity are de-legitimized. Sandoval’s depiction implies that African Americans do not have a legitimate claim to jobs or productivity *when immigrants are involved*, because to assert as much is xenophobic.

[13] By emphasizing Black xenophobia in relationship to the status of undocumented immigrants, some of whose stories of deportation she details, Sandoval also casts the undocumented immigrant as a much more sympathetic figure than the Black Chicagoans who, she reports, suffer from an unemployment rate twice that of the national rate (37). Indeed, it is precisely by emphasizing the *illegal* status of some immigrants as well as

suggesting that Latinos face nativist opposition from *both* Blacks and Whites that Latino/immigrant productivity is amplified. Only the Latino or immigrant, particularly those who are undocumented, cares about work or *needs* work whereas African Americans, by presumably casting their lot with Whites as “Americans,” are simply engaging in nativism and capitalist exploitation by attempting to control who works and who does not. Sandoval also suggests that Blacks are the driving force behind “Black-Latino conflict.” Although contradicting her claim that “any actions that African Americans take on the immigration debate does not change the existing racial structure of white dominance,” Sandoval’s positing of African Americans as politically selfish, i.e., possessing an “unwillingness to understand the struggle of other U.S. minority groups” (39), reinforces the image of the immigrant worker, particularly those who are undocumented, as *overly* productive compared to Blacks. The denial of immigrants’ political and social rights, due to xenophobia and anti-Latino racism perpetrated by both Whites *and* Blacks underscores the *economic productivity* of the immigrant. That is, we are to assume that the (illegal) immigrant is permitted to do nothing *but* labor and to do so in dire conditions and under the vigilant eye of xenophobic African Americans colluding with Whites.

[14] Amplifying the denial of immigrants’ social and political, as well as

economic, rights is a general strategy of liberal and progressive defenses of

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immigration, which generally assert the economic *contributions* of immigrants, particularly those who are undocumented, to the United States. In this discourse, immigrants are inadvertently praised for being deprived, a gesture that, while meant to emphasize their vulnerable racial status, ironically casts them as akin to (imagined) whiteness as self-reliant and of possessing character developed through hardship. Consider, for example, how the taxing of immigrants, legal and undocumented, is discussed. A 2008 Associated Press article titled “At tax time, illegal immigrants are paying too” reports, “The tax system collects its due, even from a class of workers with little likelihood of claiming a refund and no hope of drawing a Social Security check.” And in a sociological article, Nadia Kim remarks:

In sharp contrast to lawmakers’ depictions of immigrants from south of the border as economic burdens, scholarly evidence overwhelmingly points to the equal or greater tax contributions of immigrants. Evidence also reveals the fiscal windfall that the federal government enjoys from taxing *undocumented* immigrants without accountability. The continued exclusion and derision of Mexican and Central American immigrants as economic burdens, when in fact they pay billions in taxes, cast into sharp relief the return to more pernicious racialized class discrimination in U.S. immigration law. No matter what immigrants do, no matter how indispensable they are to the U.S.

economy, they are racialized as economic burdens and society's parasites. (473)

[15] Seeking to refute the myth that immigrants are what Kim critically labels "society's parasites" (473), Grace Chang, in *Disposable Domestics: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*, comments:

The notion that immigrants pose a burden on 'native' citizens has held fast in public perceptions, despite study after study's consistent finding that immigrants contribute a great deal more than they 'cost' this country. In particular, the perception that immigrants drain the public coffers by heavy dependence on public assistance and social services persist. (28)

Chang cites the work of Julian Simon, a professor of business, who found, as she describes, "that 'illegal' immigrants provide the greatest economic bonus because they use practically no welfare services, while about three quarters pay Social Security and income taxes" (29). Reporting another finding of Simon's, Chang states, "His analysis of 1976 Census Bureau data on welfare use and taxes shows that legal immigrants actually use less than their share of medical care, unemployment insurance, food programs, AFDC, retirement programs, and educational programs" (29).

[16] Again, these defenses of immigrant workers against the charge that they burden U.S. citizens ironically celebrate immigrants for being deprived

and exploited. Immigrants' contribution, then, to the U.S. economy, lies in the willingness to give more than they get, a valorization that informs the aforementioned belief that immigrants have more character than African Americans who are associated with an unwillingness to suffer as much as they purportedly should, and who are associated more generally with waste, excess, and instant gratification (Ransby). Additionally, the specter of Blackness, and specifically the racist and sexist image of Black women as "lazy, promiscuous, and irresponsible" (Ransby 218) also accentuates the immigrant, and particularly immigrant women, as *economically productive* and contributing to the U.S. economy due to their reported under-utilization of social welfare services.

[17] Whereas poor Black women, many of whom also work (and for low wages), are depicted as draining the resources of the middle class and wealthy, immigrant women are often celebrated for contributing to these classes' livelihoods and careers. Such sentiment is expressed by those working as domestic workers or advocating on their behalf. For example, at a talk sponsored by the Labor Research Association, Ai-Jen Poo, an organizer with Domestic Workers United (DWU), which represents "Caribbean, Latina and African nannies, housekeepers, and elderly caregivers in New York," remarks:

The role that this great city plays in the global economy is increasingly important in the wake of neoliberal globalization. For the shift in production to countries scattered all over the world demands centralized command posts to coordinate the process of production. New York City is a key city where financial services, corporate law firms, media, and other high-level services are centralized to help coordinate the global economy. There is an increasing demand for professionals who will work in these professional sectors. And there is also an increasing demand for low-wage service workers who will support this work force...New York *needs* domestic workers, nannies, housekeepers, elder care givers, who do the work in the home that makes it possible for the professional sectors to go to work. New York in fact *survives* and *thrives* off of the labor of workers in unregulated sectors. (Web)

[18] In Poo's assessment, the value of immigrant labor is that it buttresses the productivity of those working in corporate professions or who serve as the architects of capital and cultural hegemony in both the United States and the global economy. To be fair, DWU's goal of organizing "for power, respect, fair labor standards and to help build a movement to end exploitation and oppression for all" *does* challenge many employers'

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dehumanizing and violent practices as well as the opportunistic brokering of “migration intermediaries” who market and financially benefit from a pliant workforce (Chang, DWU). Yet such analysis, while situating immigrant labor within a discussion of neoliberal globalization, is not antagonistic to capital or the rise of global cities and their role as “centralized command posts” in the world economy (Poo). Without discounting the organizing work of DWU and their affiliates, or the risk it takes for the women to demand their rights, we can consider how this representation of immigrant labor as of value to the productivity of global cities and to their middle and wealthy classes may have helped the organization succeed in having the landmark Domestic Workers Bill of Rights recently passed in New York state (DWU).

[19] In the case of immigrant domestic workers, they are not only celebrated for contributing to the (global) cities in which many of them work, but also for contributing to the development of their home countries through remittances. While a 2011 story in the *New York Times* (NYT) lauded the stories of such women as “a tale of emotional hardship, but also of female empowerment,” others, such as Chang, situate the reliance on women as transnational breadwinners against the backdrop of structural adjustment programs (SAP) in the third world: “Their role as commodities (or, at best, mercenaries) in this global exchange is explicit, as they are both prodded to migrate and lauded for doing so by statesmen calling them the new ‘heroes’

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of their countries" (16). Chang's work rightfully challenges the dubious and short-sighted celebration of "female empowerment" expressed in the *NYT* article, which conspicuously does not address SAPs. However, Chang's argument fails to address a specific issue as it relates to African Americans. While Chang, in *Disposable Domestic*s, does discuss the negative impact of SAPs on African Americans in the United States, such as vicious attacks on social welfare, she nevertheless fails to consider that the subject of Black labor cannot be adequately explored through a framework of globalization that prioritizes or valorizes the post-WWII immigrant experience. This is not because African Americans are not economically exploited or lack character or are incapable of possessing valued characteristics commonly associated with immigrants. Rather, it is because the value of labor among non-Black people, including NBPOC, is calculated in relationship to that of African Americans according to a "racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" in which "black lives are still imperiled and devalued" (Hartman 6). Despite working and often doing so in dangerous and hazardous conditions, including prisons, African Americans, unlike vulnerable immigrant workers, are not celebrated as important contributors to the world economy or as assisting in the development and progress of two nations. Indeed, they are not even viewed as (economic) contributors to the country in which they live and at least on paper, have citizenship. As the descendants of slaves, African Americans are what Hartman describes as

“strangers” (5), in this case, to the (neoliberal) world order; thus, as workers, African Americans are treated as possessing no productive value and contributing to no economy or nation.

### **Conclusion**

[20] When articulating the psychological wage of whiteness, Du Bois provided a lengthier description than that given at the beginning of this article. Speaking of the white laborer, he posited:

They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them...The newspapers specialized on news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule. (700-1)

[21] Du Bois’ characterization of a “public and psychological wage” (700) may read as incompatible with the lived experiences of most NBPOC immigrants living and working in the United States, and understandably so

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given the virulent racism, white supremacy, structural and interpersonal violence, and surveillance that immigrants of color experience (Brotherton and Kretsedemas). Thus, the wage that white laborers accrued in Du Bois's account may not be easily recognizable for measuring the public and psychological compensation of post-WWII immigrants of color, particularly those working as low-wage earners. But one does not have to experience the *exact same treatment* as Whites to have access to the psychological wage of whiteness. One needs simply to have access to the subject category of worker, access to which requires a particular racial status. As Frank Wilderson reminds us, "work is a white category" (238). The worker, while exploited and demeaned, categorically exists within the logic of civil society. The *slave*, embodied in the Black, however, cannot be incorporated into the logic of civil society but rather exists as an antagonism and therefore "cannot be satisfied through a transfer of ownership/organisation of existing rubrics" (231). Whereas the "worker calls into question the legitimacy of productive practices, the slave calls into question the legitimacy of productivity itself" (231). Additionally, the grievance of the worker, i.e., exploitation, may be addressed through the mechanisms of civil society but the slave experiences a suffering, involving accumulation and death, which cannot be relieved through the same means as the worker (234).

[22] Of course, Wilderson notes, this does not mean that Black people don't work:

The fact that millions upon millions of black people work misses the point. The point is we were never meant to be workers; in other words, capital/white supremacy's dream did not envision us as being incorporated or incorporative. From the very beginning, we were meant to be accumulated and die. Work (i.e. the French shipbuilding industry and bourgeois civil society which finally extended its progressive hegemony to workers and peasants to topple the aristocracy) was what grew up all around us—20 to 60 million seeds planted at the bottom of the Atlantic, 5 million seeds planted in Dixie...Today, at the end of the twentieth century, we are still not meant to be workers. We are meant to be warehoused and die. (238)

[23] The difference between the worker and the slave or whiteness/non-Blackness and Blackness is not simply a matter of distinctive formations. Rather, it is an issue of interrelation; it is the civil death of Blacks that girds notions of work—as well as character, productivity, and value. Or as Wilderson puts it, “where whiteness is concerned, work registers as a constituent element. And the black body must be processed through a kind

of civil death for this constituent element of whiteness to gain coherence” (238).

[24] Whereas poorly paid immigrant workers of color experience a greater degree of vulnerability, exploitation, surveillance, and nativism than that of the white worker, the former’s presumed character, productivity, and value is amplified when their “work” or “willingness to work” is compared to African Americans. In other words, the recognition of immigrant labor as productive is articulated through anti-Black rhetoric and practice. As I have shown, such positive albeit at times condescending and disingenuous characterization of immigrants unites capitalists, managers, and immigrant rights’ advocates in a shared discourse that explicitly or implicitly casts immigrants as more akin to Whites and in turn, “not (like) Black(s).” With the addition of liberal and progressive people of color, such an alliance is reminiscent of what Du Bois posited as an ideology “uniting the planter and the poor white” (700). This is precisely why I consider the moral claims regarding character, value, and productivity that are invoked about—as well as by—NBPOC and immigrants as a wage of non-Blackness. If Asian and Latino immigrants, particularly those without documentation, have not yet achieved whiteness, or at least do not have the *exact same* material, political, and social experiences as that of the white laborer Du Bois described, they nevertheless are associated with character, productivity, and

value that becomes amplified in relationship to the non-Black world's perceptions and actual treatment of African Americans.

[25] Overall, those committed to social justice have a formidable task: articulating the value and rights of the immigrant without relying on pro-white, anti-Black, and pro-capitalist tropes. Such a demand for an ethical discourse of immigrant rights is most likely impossible within popular frameworks of work, productivity, and value as detailed here. Indeed, such discourses perhaps need to be totally taken off of the table as they can, to quote Hartman again, only become legible to the world through the expression of a "racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (Hartman 6).

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