



## **(Global) Capitalism and Immigrant Workers in Gary Paulsen's *Lawn Boy*: Naturalization of Exploitation** —Lilijana Burcar

Under the current conditions of global capitalism, with the ongoing systemic exploitation and racially motivated persecution of immigrant workers that characterizes this system, it is important to investigate the kind of work literature performs as a social imaginary and, by extension, a tool of acculturation in Western societies. Because works of fiction arise from specific historical contexts, it is impossible for them to build their literary worlds and subject positions without also invoking, implicitly or explicitly, the socio-political setting in which they are embedded. As a form of social practice, works of fiction thus directly partake in the co-construction or the critical examination of social reality and, consequently, in the tacit validation or transformative redefinition of socio-economic systems and symbolic orders (Eagleton; McLaren; Wilkie-Stibbs). Like other discursive practices, then, literary texts can be understood as “compellingly metonymic” of their “contemporary political climate,”

where the socio-political context assumes the function of an umbilical cord between “narratives of fiction and narratives of the material world” (Wilkie-Stibbs 9). Given the current practices of exploitation targeted at immigrant workers and coupled with racially motivated stigmatization, it is of crucial importance to ask how children’s literature raises and addresses such issues. After all, the practices of children’s literature can result either in the implantation and further consolidation of racialized attitudes toward migrant workers and the concomitant justification of their economic exploitation, or in the evocation of the need for social justice and hence in the fostering of critical consciousness on the part of young readers.

My aim here is not to investigate the *alternative* literature for young readers, which is characterized by the way it challenges hegemonic power structures of neo-imperial Western states. This kind of literature engages in teasing apart the ideology and mechanisms

through which narrowly defined subjectivities are constructed, polarized, controlled, and managed within contemporary Western regimes of truth, which are linked to the maintenance of socio-economic relations of subjugation and inequity. Radical children's literature makes use of this kind of interrogation to offer a new vision of common reality and a means of self-actualization by recomposing and repositioning subjectivities that fit socially transformative and liberating alternative modes of being-in-the-world. This line of critical literary investigation has been covered by, among others, Kimberley Reynolds in *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* and Christine Wilkie-Stibbs in *The Outside Child In and Out of the Book*.

My line of inquiry instead concerns those modes of literary production for young readers that, in the current context of the global restructuring of processes of capital accumulation, "reproduce normative position[s]" (Wilkie-Stibbs 140). Specifically, this article addresses the ways that such mainstream literature for young people uses mechanisms of representation to conceal and mystify exploitative socio-economic relations, leading to the naturalization of structural inequalities and hierarchically organized constructs of identity, which in turn makes this kind of literature complicit with Western hegemonic discourses of power and domination. Within this literary

framework, as I demonstrate, the reinscription of inequitable social relations as a form of unproblematic status quo clearly rests upon the recoding and reproduction of Western relationships of difference and otherness. An "[immigrant] Other" whose presence in official discourses is reduced to, and acknowledged only in terms of, a mere economic asset is left again, in Homi Bhabha's words, without "its power to [speak] . . . , to initiate its 'desire,' to split its 'sign' of identity, [and] to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse" (31). The newly reconstituted Other—a term that in the restructured global world order in fact once again references "socially and economically disinherited underclasses" (Wilkie-Stibbs x)—is allowed to signify only as "the docile [working] body of [inscribed] difference" whose assigned but invisibilized task is to confirm, reflect, and "reproduce[] a relation of domination" (Bhabha 31).

Global capitalism has deepened and exacerbated structural inequalities, which can be witnessed in the increasing income disparities between the ever more differentially segmented workforce on local and global levels, and in the growing inequalities of the distribution of natural resources and social provisions. The global expansion and restructuring of capitalist production has affected people in both the South and the North, though not in the same way. Indeed, common to this agenda, which serves the interests of privately owned corporations and financial institutions

in the North, is the imposition of free-trade agreements and the drive toward the deregulation and dismantling of local economies in newly recolonized states in Central and South America, Africa, and some parts of Asia. All of these policies have resulted in the massive dispossession and displacement of local people across the world, constituting the driving force behind the migratory flows in the internationalized labour market. In the receiving countries of Europe, Canada, and the USA, it is a common practice on the part of employers and states alike to devalorize and invisibilize the work of migrants, whose underpaid work makes a significant contribution to the affluence of these societies. As a result, forced migration turns out to be a process that “transports most migrants from one situation of deprivation and dispossession to another” (Arya and Roy 31).

The massive incorporation of devalorized migrant labour into the bottom structure of neo-liberal economies in the West has been made possible by the concurrent reorganization of transnational capitalist production, which has institutionalized new forms of employment and working practices. These represent a “shift away from full-time, state regulated and often unionized labor, reducing job rights and disorganizing labor” (Pettman qtd. in Peterson 192n.14). These restructurations have brought about an increase in flexible and informal work arrangements, achieved mostly through outsourcing and subcontracting.

Transnational corporations have consequently moved assembly-line production from the North to the South, encouraging at the same time the re-emergence of subcontracted sweatshops and various forms of industrial homework in the North (Sisson 140). At the same time, the downgrading of the manufacturing sector in the global North has been accompanied by the expansion of the service sector, with a new emphasis on finance, management, and other highly specialized knowledge industries. This has, in turn, led to the reorganization and polarization of the service sector into overvalorized and high-paying professional and managerial jobs in the corporate knowledge industry, as well as the explosion of devalorized and deskilled labour-intensive jobs in the rest of the service industry, such as cleaning, food preparation, maintenance, and care work (Sassen, *Globalization* 24–51). All of these factors combined have not only created the conditions for the incorporation of vast numbers of workers into the expanded low-wage end of the new economy, but they have increased the demand for workers who have been constituted as a deskilled, and hence devalorized, labour force.

Today, exploitable migrant labour is one of the central structural features of global capitalism (Ibarra de la Luz 288). Immigrant workers make up a reserve army of cheapened and often unprotected labour for agricultural, manufacturing, construction, service, and tourist industries in the formal and informal sectors.



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Their absorption into the low-wage end of the globally restructured economy generates huge profits for small and big business owners, who, through subcontracting and government-sponsored programs, shed “the social reproduction costs of workers” (Cranford 306) and evade “social security payments, minimum wage and overtime laws, and health and safety standards” (Cacho 402). These policies are the result of new legal measures adopted by the so-called liberal Western states that have reconfigured and eliminated the citizenship rights of immigrant workers by conferring on them a new legal status of permanently temporary labour: this, in turn, constitutes them as non-residents and as non-citizens. It is because of this discursive reclassification and its legal endorsement that immigrant workers can be “exempted from laws on minimum employment standards, collective bargaining and the provision of social services and programs such as unemployment insurance, social assistance, the old-age pensions, etc. This, in turn, cheapens and weakens the position of these workers” (Sharma 427). The capitalist state consequently plays an active role not only in constructing immigrant labourers as a highly flexible and precarious labour force, but also and primarily as unfree, indentured labour. Indeed, upon their entry into many of these countries, immigrant workers must now be already tied to one stipulated employer; they can neither leave this employer nor change the conditions of employment without running the risk of losing a work permit and facing deportation. This gives employers leverage in keeping immigrant workers compliant with conditions of pay as well as working and living arrangements that fall below the minimum standards. These policies and hence “the growth of new discriminatory, exclusionary and hyperexploitative migrant

labour systems” (Schierup and Ålund 127) are not unique to Canada or the USA, where they were first fully implemented in the early 1970s. Over the last twenty years, they have been replicated in exactly the same form across the spectrum of Euro-Atlantic states, with Sweden and Slovenia being among the most recent newcomers to “emerging all-European practices on so-called ‘managed migration’,” which critics have also dubbed an “emerging European Apartheid” (Schierup and Ålund 136).

As migrant workers are reduced to socially excluded working poor and dehumanized by being treated in terms of merely “useful economic assets,” they are also facing an increase in xenophobic discourse fuelled by anti-immigration policies. These have dire consequences for the already precarious well-being and survival of migrant workers. As pointed out by Joseph Wiltberger, migrant workers have been subjected to further processes of racial profiling and stigmatization following the introduction of the division between the categories of documented and undocumented workers, the latter category even liable to unwarranted prosecution (522). In addition, migrant workers have been subjected to processes of criminalization and pathologization, which have gone hand in hand with the processes of their scapegoating, as Western capitalist states have sought to displace their responsibilities for neo-liberal structural changes and the concomitant deterioration of the economic and

overall well-being of their (middle-class) citizens onto the shoulders of vulnerable and already underprotected migrant workers.

In the process, Western states have introduced many bills and propositions that “did not target the already brutal and exploitative relationship between laborers and capitalists” (Cacho 390) but instead focused on migrant workers, especially those classified as non-documented workers, who had already been excluded from minimum wage protection laws and the system of public benefits. Over the last two decades, neo-liberal governments, with the USA at the helm, have “eliminated public assistance to undocumented migrants, severely cut and restricted aid to legal immigrants, imposed harsher penalties for illegal immigration (including immigrants seeking asylum), and relaxed deportation procedures” (Cacho 389). At the same time, they have stepped up and legitimized repressive measures to facilitate the persecution of migrant workers, regardless of their official status. These measures, among others, include home and workplace raids followed by the detention and deportation of migrant workers without the right to appeal (Lendman), which, in countries such as the USA, Italy, and France, has resulted in the forceful separation of family members and the break-up of entire families.<sup>1</sup>

While migrant workers are increasingly victimized, criminalized, and finally threatened with deportation,

their employers and the organizations to which they belong—especially large transnational companies whose interests in maintaining a steady flow of (un)documented and temporary workers are directly translated into the formulation of Western government policies toward migrant workers (Sharma)—are made exempt from criminal charges. This happens despite the fact that the companies under question, be it meat-processing factories, agribusinesses, or garment sweatshops to name just a few, “procure false documents for their workers, underpay their employees, violate labor laws, and seriously mistreat their workers” (Lendman). As pointed out by Lisa Marie Cacho, Western capitalist states have been endorsing ever more draconian immigration laws that have “slashed the already minimal support allocated to immigrant workers and their families and increased undocumented workers’ anxieties of deportation” while at the same time completely dismissing the “efforts to make citizen employers follow basic health and safety standards, minimum wage laws and social security requirements—all of which would be more effective methods to decrease immigrants’ needs for assistance” (390). It seems clear that the policies and measures adopted by Western states have not been directed at securing but rather minimizing the already restricted socio-economic rights of migrant workers. Just as importantly, the policies have not been designed to “deter migrants from immigrating” but to create

new and hierarchically arranged categories of insiders and outsiders in order to “capitalize upon” the already devalorized work of migrants further. Under the threat of deportation, immigrant workers are thus even more amenable to systemic exploitation and mistreatment on the part of their employers, whose conduct is at best subjected to symbolic fines (Cacho 390; Sharma 415–17; Lendman).

In this article, I demonstrate how mainstream contemporary children’s literature is implicated in sustaining unequal socio-economic relations of power and being-in-the-world by focusing on how it reproduces and perpetuates the condition of “outsiderness” for those whose exploited labour and degraded living conditions constitute the hidden and unacknowledged part of the social contract that undergirds the wealth and prosperity of Western capitalist states. This paper argues that, in contemporary narratives that are heavily invested in the perpetuation of the status quo and the historical amnesia of capital accumulation, migrant workers are called forth as docile working bodies and useful economic assets while simultaneously obscured in their exploitation, their suffering, and their loss of humanity. In this way, migrant workers are given a particular kind of carefully crafted visibility, which indeed reduces them to a spectral presence that nevertheless haunts the centre from its assigned and endlessly reproduced margins. I focus here on Gary

Paulsen's novel *Lawn Boy*, a novel that not only papers over exploitative labour practices affecting migrant workers, but also justifies these practices as part of an adventure story that revolves around the aspirations and preoccupations of a white boy-turned-entrepreneur during his summer holiday.

In its treatment of immigrant workers and the broader social reality in which such workers appear, Paulsen's novel displays and recuperates storytelling strategies characteristic of a wide range of mainstream children's literature about migrant workers produced over the past forty years, characteristics that, as pointed out by A. Scott Beck, "systematically erase[] and silence[] migrant experience" (100). Beck points out, first, that such literature typically places and hides immigrant workers—and therefore by analogy also the harsh working conditions and exploitative labour practices to which they are subjected—"behind heroic-like or oversimplified, and culturally iconic white farmers [or other white, propertied central protagonists]" (100). Second, when mainstream children's literature does not simply elide immigrant workers' harsh experience, it tends to romanticize it by converting the life of migrants into a "life of contentment and acceptance of one's place" (107), so that, from the start, "economic and social oppressions faced by migrant[s]" (102) are removed from view. The picture offered instead is that of migrants being destined for the kind of

work they do, work that they welcome openly: by embracing such work unproblematically, they are presented as being clearly "content with their station in life" (108). As I will demonstrate, Paulsen's novel combines both approaches. Joelle Sano, following French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, argues that these technologies of misrepresentation constitute a form of symbolic violence and lead to the imposition of false consciousness on young readers (2561). Their ways of seeing and understanding their immediate social reality, including the actual circumstances that shape and define the lives of their fellow human beings, become seriously hindered.

In this way, Paulsen's novel falls in line with the long tradition of American mainstream children's literature whose focus on immigrant workers has always been to socialize young readers into the acceptance of the myth of seemingly unproblematic individual self-advancement in capitalist economies through hard work alone, while camouflaging the issues of racism and class, or, in Beck and Dolores E. Rengel's words, structural "oppressions of migrancy" that in fact hinder one's progress and overall well-being (21). In her extensive analysis entitled *Immigrants in Children's Literature*, Ruth McKoy Lowery investigates the ways in which images of immigrant workers have been presented in canonized children's literature written during the migrant waves of 1820–99, 1900–64, and 1965 onward. She draws the conclusion that, in spite



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of there being clear historical and ongoing evidence of legally endorsed and systematically enforced forms of immigrant workers' socio-economic exploitation and exclusion, mainstream children's literature tends at best to reconstitute the problems migrants face as though these emanated only from a handful of individual citizens gone bad in an otherwise immaculate host society. These few "bad seeds" are in turn depicted as acting independently of any kind of "structural backing" (128), that is, causing and instigating isolated and randomly scattered problems for migrants out of their own personal whims. Lowery quotes *The Star Fisher* as a prime example of such a narrative approach. As a rule, a Western host country is represented as a land of opportunity, egalitarianism, and freedom, so that any kind of failure on the part of immigrants is taken to be a result of their own personal miscalculations, lack of effort, and even self-hatred or "self-discrimination" (130) for not being able to live up to the standards of the host culture. Such mainstream children's works, according to Lowery, range from *Land of Hope* and *Goodbye to the Trees* to *A Boat to Nowhere* and *Children of the River*. The common denominator of Western mainstream children's literature is that it systematically downplays the significance of structurally enforced socio-economic inequalities—even when it makes sporadic references to substandard housing and wages, child labour, or lack of access to social services—by never linking the glimpses it gives of these oppressions to the very "nature of the larger macroeconomic system that constrains [immigrants'] lives" (Beck and Rangel 21). In other words, it disconnects the systemic oppressions and exploitation of immigrant workers from the broader socio-economic context, which is the capitalist system itself. What makes Paulsen's *Lawn Boy* both different from and

similar to this strand of children's literature is its explicit evocation and detailed treatment of economics: *Lawn Boy* takes capitalist economy as its subject matter, yet in a way that naturalizes and invisibilizes the systemic exploitation upon which it is built, rather than exposing and questioning its shaky operating premises.

Cacho, Nandita Sharma, and Harald Bauder have explored the ways in which immigrants' conditions of socio-economic exploitation and constructed otherness are simultaneously papered over and justified in contemporary Western legal, political, and corporate media discourse. Wilkie-Stibbs has demonstrated how in children's literature such discourses "give legitimacy to ever more closely defined and refined articulations of 'Otherness,' located in and sustained by an 'insider'-'outsider' binarity" (2). I borrow the methods explored by these critics in order to accomplish a literary analysis that keeps in view the context of the current socio-economic system and its conditions that have "created and exacerbated divisions into in-groups and out-groups, haves and have-nots" (Wilkie-Stibbs ix). I adopt a dialectic materialist approach and make use of poststructuralist discourse analysis, always keeping in the foreground the ways in which the spectral presence of migrant workers in Paulsen's *Lawn Boy* is not only contained but also managed through constructs of difference and otherness. This is a process that does not only overlap with but is directly implicated in the reproduction and naturalization of the current socio-

economic system of exploitation and dehumanization of those constructed as migrant others, which, to appropriate Balibar, can be aptly named "racism of oppression or exploitation" (Balibar and Walkerstein 39). Paulsen's book subscribes to this project and stands out among the novels of its kind, for it reads not only as an implicit defence of this order, but as an explicit neo-liberal capitalist manifesto parading as a comic narrative of adventure aimed at young readers.

### ***Lawn Boy* and "Capitalism at Its Best"**

Paulsen is a three-time Newbery Honor Award winner and has written well over a hundred books for children and young adults. In particular, his outdoor survival novels—*Tracker*, *Hatchet*, and the latter's three sequels *The River*, *Brian's Winter*, and *Brian's Return*—have brought him critical acclaim and popular recognition. Yet, despite his immense popularity and the fact that in 2002 he was named one of the ten outstanding young-adult authors in the USA,<sup>2</sup> in-depth analysis of his extensive oeuvre remains scarce. Book-length studies on Paulsen concentrate primarily on his life as an animal hunter, trapper, and adventure-seeker, reflecting and commenting on the translation of Paulsen's arsenal of outdoor survival techniques and his lifetime experiences in the wilderness into his fictional worlds. These are populated by young adult male protagonists who typically "arrive at self-awareness by way of experiences in nature—often through

challenging tests of their own survival instincts” (“Gary Paulsen”). Similarly, a search for Paulsen in the Ebscohost database yields only two academic articles, “The Portrayal of Clergy as Parents in Juvenile Fiction Over Two Decades” by Patricia Tipton Sharp and “Teaching about Worlds of Hurt through Encounters with Literature: Reflections on Pedagogy” by Judith P. Robertson, which analyze Paulsen’s novels *Maggie* and *Nightjohn*, respectively. Even more disappointingly, a search for Paulsen in the MLA International Bibliography produces only a handful of articles on the role of Paulsen’s fiction in enhancing literacy levels among child and adolescent readers, while the rest of the material includes an immense number of interviews and reviews, some of which also tackle *Lawn Boy*, published by Wendy Lamb Books in 2007.

*Lawn Boy* was given the 2010 Children’s Sequoyah Book Award by the Oklahoma Library Association, yet no critical analysis of the novel has been produced so far. This is even more surprising given that the book appears on a number of recommended reading lists for primary-school children. These reading lists are targeted at primary-school teachers and are heavily promoted as educational resources for teaching economics through children’s literature by banks such as the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia and by institutes such as University of Cincinnati’s Economics Center, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, and Rutgers University Project on Children

and Economics. The reading lists featuring *Lawn Boy* usually come with ready-made lesson plans or literature teaching units, the aim of which, according to their designers, is to introduce children to the “fundamental economic concepts” and “the beauty of capitalism,” where economy is primarily interpreted in terms of “making choices” (“Mowing”). Among other things, then, this paper attempts to redress the imbalance in the production of critically engaged analyses of Paulsen’s *Lawn Boy*.

Among reviewers, *Lawn Boy* has been greeted as a humorous (*Library Media Connection* 72) and “lighthearted” story (*Book Links* 20) about an average twelve-year-old boy turned into a successful preteen entrepreneur. His business enterprise is kick-started into life when he is given an unexpected birthday present: his grandfather’s old riding lawn mower. With a lot of time on his hands during the summer holiday and in need of a new inner tube for his bicycle, the boy begins to mow lawns for his neighbours in the adjacent “upper-middle-class neighborhood” (4). As his business takes off, he soon finds himself embarked on a series of “complex and economically advantageous adventures,” according to a review in *Kirkus Reviews* (507). Through a chance encounter with a former hippie-turned-stockbroker, the boy acquires essential knowledge about capitalism, underlined by the book’s chapter titles, which include “Capital Growth Coupled with the Principles of Production Expansion” (21) or “Labor

Acquisition and Its Effect on Capital Growth" (26), and invests his first earnings into a coffin company, an Internet start-up firm, and a local prizefighter. While all of his neatly diversified investments pay off, the boy also and primarily multiplies his earnings and expands his fortune by outsourcing his mowing services to a group of workers, so that, at the conclusion of the story, he has fifteen employees and a company of his own.

The novel ends on a positive note, driving home the point that capitalism is simple and "groovy" (23). It is touted as an open road of success available to everyone, since all you need to do is "take care of your tools [such as a lawn mower] and they'll take care of you" (88). Yet upon closer inspection, the secret, magic ingredient of the boy's entrepreneurial success does not lie in his grandfather's lawn mower, which he has brought back to life. Rather, it rests upon a specific form of "acquisition" and "utilization" of labour force, which is an issue that this adventure story simultaneously raises and evades by making it look of secondary importance. The success of the boy's business (ad)venture and his accumulation of wealth reside in the fact that he outsources his work to a group of workers whom he underpays and who in a brief, passing mention in the story are identified as mostly undocumented, migrant workers living in substandard housing conditions. This becomes evident from the following line dropped by the boy protagonist whose interest—and hence the focus of the reader—lies in

the quality of the lawn rather than the actual house in which his workers live packed like sardines in a tin can: "The house where Pasqual's relatives lived was more or less a big box, with a good yard because they worked on it when they had time off. . . . One of them was pretending to clean his fingernails with a knife. Several of Pasqual's family members were standing around by the door of the house" (57). Pasqual is depicted as a godsend for the boy's business and is symbolically cast in the role of an intermediary between the boy and the rest of the fourteen illegal Hispanic workers the boy eventually hires and whose names, apart from one other worker named Louis, remain unknown. This stands in stark contrast to the rest of the boy's business associates and the other white characters in the novel, all of whom are given their first names or at least functional names such as "mother" and "father."<sup>3</sup>

By failing to name or to explain the presence of the immigrant workers, the novel refuses to individualize or humanize them. Confined to a background existence, immigrant workers are conveniently presented as "always looking for work" (24): they just happen to be around, for example, when the boy seeks to outsource his services in order to secure and increase the profitability of his enterprise. All the boy needs to do is to pick up the workers, who always happen to be at his disposal, be it daytime or nighttime, and who never complain about their work



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conditions, but instead proceed to perform their jobs quietly, away from the public view. This notion is introduced in an unproblematic way in a chapter “humorously” titled “Labour Acquisition and Its Effect on Capital Growth”: Pasqual himself instructs the boy to “look for a small truck and a mower. A man named Louis will be driving. He’s my . . . cousin. Tell him which lawns to cut. I’ll come when it’s dark and do what silent work is needed” (27–28).

A migrant labour force does not appear out of nowhere, however, as migration flows are in fact “produced” and “patterned” (Sassen, *Globalization* 56). Mostly, they are a direct result of the so-called structural adjustment programs dictated by the IMF and the WTO in association with private economic actors in the receiving northern countries. These measures, which also include cuts in social expenditures and in subsidies to local industry and agriculture, have led to the imposition of export-oriented agriculture and export-oriented manufacturing on debt-ridden postcolonial countries. The introduction of export-oriented, large-scale commercial agriculture and manufacturing depends on the deregulation of a local economy as well as on the privatization of land and of natural resources in the targeted countries by multinational corporate businesses and their subsidiaries. For example, the promotion of export-oriented cash crops forcibly and “increasingly replace[s] survival agriculture and food production for local or national markets” (Sassen, “Strategic Instantiations” 48), resulting in a massive loss of jobs and means of self-sustainable existence for the citizens of these states. Similarly, the imposition of export-oriented manufacturing results in the “closure of a large number of typically small and medium-sized enterprises oriented to the local or national market” (Sassen, “Strategic Instantiations” 43). Domestic industry, which is left unprotected, is eventually dismantled and

eliminated by multinational branch plants, which offer little or no investment in research, human resources, and development (Denis 493). As people's traditional and alternative means of livelihood are wiped out in favour of the production of food and consumer goods for export, displaced farmers and laid-off local service and domestic industry workers end up constituting a large pool of mobile, cheap, vulnerable, and easily exploited rural and urban wage labourers. They are all forced to seek whatever forms of employment are available either abroad or in the export-production areas where employment opportunities are limited and the labour turnover rate is high. In the end, all of these factors combined together represent the "push factors" (Sassen, *Mobility* 99) that drive people to seek alternative means of survival in the global economy of growing flexible and precarious work arrangements as legal or illegal immigrants. Rendered unskilled, they are absorbed into the restructured economies of the North in expanding low-wage sectors.

By portraying migrant workers as always already inconspicuously there, as freely available and simply ready for use when needed by the white middle-class boy protagonist to build up and consolidate his business empire—which at the end of the story specializes not only in lawn-mowing services but in a number of other low-wage, seasonal service work like "shrub trimming, pool cleanup, garage cleaning and sidewalk edging" (32)—Paulsen's narrative does more

than just gloss over the "conditions promoting the supply of workers and the formation of these circuits" in the receiving countries of the global capitalist system (Sassen, "Strategic Instantiations" 56). The novel also commodifies immigrant workers, turning them from the start into economic assets, so that their outsourced and subcontracted—that is to say, subordinated and underpaid—labour can be innocently represented as the boy's accidental stepping stone to his own personal fortune, and not as a structural feature of the economic system that the narrative paints as "groovy" and "fun" for preteen, white, middle-class boys-turned-entrepreneurs in summertime.

Instrumental to this project and to the disavowal in the narrative of the protagonist's complicity in sustaining exploitative labour practices and harsh working conditions, is the invisibilization of the immigrant labour force, whose presence is thus "known but not really felt" (Bauder 44). Working irregular and long hours either in pressing summer heat or at night, the hired migrant workers constitute an invisible army of flexible labour, which is again encapsulated in the only one of these workers who becomes visible at all: that is, the figure of Pasqual, the immediate supervisor of the migrant workers and the boy's first subcontractor. Pasqual is in fact the only migrant worker in the novel who is given a voice, but only on occasions when justifications of gross exploitation are needed. Pasqual, who comes to work

in the evenings and early mornings “to do edge work and cleanup” (31), does the trimming, the fertilizing, and other gardening jobs neatly and efficiently without drawing attention to himself. This is demonstrated in the following exchange between the boy entrepreneur and Arnold, his stockbroker and personal business consultant:

“ . . . [Pasqual] knows lots of people who are always looking for work. He’s a good, reliable person, known him for years. . . . Pasqual looks after his kids during the day. When his wife comes home from her job, then he goes to work.”

“He mows lawns when other people are sleeping?”

Arnold shook his head. “No. He does other work that is not noisy. Trimming, fertilizing—that sort of thing. Quiet things that won’t wake the neighborhood.”

“In the dark?”

“He wears a headlamp. Ingenious, really. I admire his creativity in the face of opposition. Entrepreneurship at its finest—there are no impossibilities, just hurdles to be overcome.” (24)

One of the basic operating principles of what the novel portrays as “capitalism at its best” is that most immigrants are rendered unskilled and semi-skilled, and as such they are channelled into the low-wage end of

the restructured economy where they remain saddled with precarious and often non-union jobs. These jobs, as pointed out by Denise A. Segura and Patricia Zavella, pay below-minimum wages, have few benefits, and are subject to frequent relocation due to the seasonal nature of work (Introduction 13). All of these conditions also pertain to the status of the immigrant workers hired by the boy protagonist and symbolically embodied in the figure of Pasqual. Yet Pasqual is not only appreciated for the fact that he is an underpaid service worker, but is equally valued for the fact that he does “quiet things that do not wake the neighborhood” (24). He is like a “lawn fairy[] who work[s] on the grass when everybody is asleep” (65), so that in the mornings, the upper-class, white neighbourhood can wake up to find their lawns and gardens in perfect condition. All of them are maintained, of course, by the invisible but busy working hands of migrant workers. Their working conditions and the enormous amount of work they perform in exchange for a pittance also remain conveniently invisibilized and marginalized. Just as significantly, their structurally induced compliance with such working conditions—after all, under constant threat of deportation or of having their already meagre earnings slashed, undocumented immigrant workers constitute “unfree labour” (Bauder 43)—is likewise rendered a non-issue. Instead, the fact that Pasqual is resourceful enough to wear a headlamp at night, enabling him to perform the work right and with maximum skill is, in

a turn of phrase, praised by the boy's financial advisor as admirable ingenuity and "[e]ntrepreneurship at its finest" (24). It is, of course, not Pasqual but the boy protagonist who will benefit from this entrepreneurship.

Of essential importance here is that the exploited work of migrant workers remains invisible even though it in fact constitutes the very platform of the boy's profits. The novel even recommends, as evident from the instructions voiced by Arnold, the stockbroker and financial advisor, that the easiest way for a newly fledged entrepreneur to multiply his earnings is to take on illegal immigrant workers, who are presented as the most reliable and trusted workers: "Pasqual is honest, which is really what you wanted to know. And yes, he's safe. If you don't want to meet him, that's fine. Just keep your business at your present level. But if you want to expand, I think Pasqual can help you" (25). The implication is that, because immigrant workers have no legal authority to turn to for their protection, they cause no trouble, which, from the financial advisor's point of view, makes them a "safe" bet (25) for any "business head" (37). The implicit lesson imparted by the novel at this point (and the boy entrepreneur is a fast learner) is that immigrant workers who are classified as undocumented and are kept in this state for an extended period of time or indefinitely can be "legally exempted from laws on minimum employment standards, collective bargaining and the provision of social services and programs such as unemployment insurance, social

assistance, old-age pensions, etc." (Sharma 427). It is for this reason that the hiring of migrant workers is strongly recommended by the boy's business consultant: it is this very "choice" exercised on the part of the boy entrepreneur that not only creates and multiplies the profit of his lawn-mowing service, but helps to expand it through its diversified investment into other enterprises.

Pasqual functions in this scene as a narrative prototype and, by extension, as a symbolic embodiment of all Hispanic immigrant workers whose presence is acknowledged only as long as they are reconstituted and dehumanized as invisible economic assets. It is not in their power to protest the conditions of their exploitation. The hiring of immigrant workers in this novel is represented in the bland terms of capitalist economy as another in the series of "successful business decisions" (as naively stated on the blog of a "Mr. Odle") undertaken on the part of the boy entrepreneur who, as described in the novel, only wants to learn how to start a business, accumulate capital, and eventually "see the beauty of what [he's] doing" (36). Because Pasqual just happens to "know[] lots of people who are always looking for work" (24), he is the person to keep around when you want your business to expand. He is safe and valuable at the same time, representing a guarantee of success for the company because he can always be easily recruited for hiring or subcontracting other migrant workers in the informal service sector, which, as explained by the boy's stockbroker friend, is



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“the very nature of the concept of the economic structure” and the way “your business [prosper and] grows” (23). Not quite concealed here is the fact that new immigrant recruits endure long working hours, as witnessed in the round-the-clock shifts Pasqual performs. Yet, as long as these practices benefit the young entrepreneur, this is called “capitalism at its best” (36), without irony.

The meagre payment these anonymous workers receive is depicted as being of no major concern or, for that matter, of no serious consequence for their overall well-being. Even worse, it is foregrounded as part and parcel of the way a business should be conducted and an economy should be run. The ideological trick the novel performs at this point is that the exploitative practice of underpaying the migrant workers is passed off as unproblematic because it appears to be endorsed by one of the migrant workers himself. It is on this occasion alone that Pasqual emerges out of his obscure anonymity to act as an instructor to the boy narrator, as seen in the following exchange:

“I receive half of what you get for the lawns that Louis and I do and I shall pay Louis out of that half.”

“Half? I do not do anything and I get half.” I shook my head. “That doesn’t seem fair. Shouldn’t you get more?”

Pasqual smiled, his moustache turning up at the corners and then down. “You take half because you are the boss. You found these jobs, and will find more. That’s the way it’s done.” (28)

Here it is Pasqual, the immigrant worker, who with a smile

on his face and “his moustache turning up at the corners and then down,” kindly enlightens the boy about his entitlements, “the way [things are] done.” Even though the rest of the money earned by the workers is slashed into smaller and smaller portions as it travels down the chain, the narrative insists that these practices are perfectly legitimate, for in the long run, everybody has work: “everybody is happy; everybody makes money” (69). Because the paying of slashed and substandard wages in this didactic exchange between the “pupil” and the “teacher” is depicted as a proposition coming from the migrant worker himself, the impression conveyed in the novel is that migrants, not their employers or their host governments acting on behalf of capital interests, are the real inventors and upholders of the exploitative labour schemes aimed at immigrant workers. Pasqual, the immigrant worker, is thus perversely portrayed as somebody who willingly partakes in the conditions of his own economic exploitation and comes to serve as the mouthpiece of his own subordination. The boy entrepreneur seems to be simply going along with the proposal coming from the migrant worker himself, which is how the novel exonerates the newly fledged business owner from any kind of social responsibility. In this way, the novel raises and avoids the issue of exploitation, camouflaging and naturalizing the fact that the boy’s path to success is paved by the arduous work of underpaid, non-documented migrant workers. Their

below-the-minimum wage and prolonged, round-the-clock working are rendered insignificant.

What is in fact a textbook case of exploitation, where the employer keeps the lion’s share of the results of his workers’ labour—which in the boy’s case amounts to fifty percent of all the money earned by the subcontracted workers—is reconstituted on the part of the boy employer. The boy keeps half of the money earned by his employees, yet the novel presents the immigrant workers as being the boy’s “partners in a way” who supposedly “share the income from the work with the company head” (37). The relationship between the boy and his migrant workers, “who can now earn their living because [he] has found them jobs” (37), is presented and sanitized as an act of benevolence on the part of the boy, not as the structural dependence of his company on a cheapened labour force. The fact that the boy takes half of his workers’ earnings is presented as something to be taken for granted, the justification being that immigrant workers should be grateful for an employment opportunity and keep in mind the fact that “they earn their living because [the boy] found them work” (37). Even though the migrant workers in fact receive at least fifty percent less than their due, the whole operation of business expansion through subcontracting and underpaying the workers is, in another twist of phrase, praised as a way of “distribut[ing] work and dispers[ing] wealth” (25). In this way, the expansion of the boy’s business through

outsourcing and subcontracting, behind which lurks an array of dehumanized labour practices and an institutionalization of below-subsistence-level wages, is perversely touted as a way of lifting jobless immigrants out of poverty and as a form of social responsibility exercised on the part of the boy.

In addition to being invisibilized, migrant workers in this narrative are also simultaneously and prototypically romanticized as naturally skilled and obedient workers, which, as noted by Bauder in a different context, helps again to “conceal the structural disadvantages and conditions of [their] unfreedom” (48). In one of his only two appearances, Pasqual also serves as an embodiment of such a romanticized image of an immigrant worker whom the boy’s financial advisor praises as a “good” person. He is understood to be a true asset to the company because he is a quiet and “reliable” worker: that is, the kind of worker who is not only dexterous and hard-working as witnessed in his round-the-clock shifts, but also “honest” and, just as importantly, compliant. At this point, the narrative performs two discursive acts. First, as noticed by Kristen Maher Hill in a different context, because the narrative channels migrant workers exclusively into low-wage service jobs like gardening and cleaning, it also helps to perpetuate the common fantasy of white, middle and upper classes that migrant workers “‘choose’ to be nannies, housekeepers, and gardeners in order to make something better of their lives,” while their employers’

relationship to them is interpreted as that of a “helping hand” (800–01). Secondly, and just as importantly, the poverty wages paid to migrant workers who endure substandard working conditions and usually poor living arrangements are perversely depicted as high wages in comparison to those that migrants would have made in their countries of origin. It is in this way that what are in fact exploitative and coercive labour practices in the receiving countries become justified as pure economic opportunities for migrant workers (Bauder 52-53), while the employer’s willingness to hire their devalued and cheapened labour is whitewashed as a way of coming to their rescue. This is exactly the rationale that is also embraced and defended by Paulsen’s *Lawn Boy*, where the distribution of work among subcontracted migrant workers is automatically, though erroneously, equated with and lauded as dispersal of the boy’s wealth, regardless of the actual wages paid.

As migrant workers are pushed into the background and represented in a way that diminishes and devalues their economic contribution, they are at the same time strategically placed and thus “hidden behind the heroic-like” figure (Beck 100) of the preteen white middle-class boy-turned-successful-entrepreneur. Although their underpaid and arduous labour holds up the structure of the boy’s diversified business empire and constitutes the hidden ingredient of his eventual prosperity (and, presumably, his move up the class ladder), the very presence of the migrant workers is made to look

coincidental, and their working and living experience is “systematically silenced and erased” (Beck 100). In this way, as foregrounded by Beck in a different context (117–18), the narrative disconnects the link between the structural exploitation and the resulting impoverished, hand-to-mouth existence of migrant workers on the one hand, and the affluence of the general economy on the other. The affluence of the receiving countries, ironically, is facilitated exactly by the cheapened and underpaid work of migrants.

This hidden exploitation of the (un)documented workers is given an additional twist at the end of the story, when the boy refuses to go to the police to report on a group of extortionists who are after his lawn business. The explanation given this time is “that it’s difficult to go to the police because some of his employees are poor people who really need the money and if the authorities come into it, perhaps they’ll find the workers aren’t all documented the way they should be” (77). The pittance these workers are given in exchange for their work is again not raised as an issue, nor is the responsibility of the employer, who is instead once again turned into a figure of benevolence. The oppressiveness of the economic system that feeds on the structural inequalities it creates to provide riches for the few is dismissed in favour of foregrounding the oppressiveness of the police authorities who wrongly come to be featured as the only culprits responsible for the plight of the undocumented workers. The real

question to pose here, as correctly observed by one of the adult and rare critical bloggers, would be why this company has no small-business licence, and why there is no health insurance paid to the workers, which is where the conflict of the story should lie (Hannah).

Capitalism, once you have grasped it, is fun, according to Paulsen’s narrative; it is a benevolent institution and an impeccable, “groovy” system. It is also simply the way “[things] are done” (28). Through the positioning of its readers’ point of view, the narrative hides the fact that capitalism is built on the backs of underpaid and dehumanized migrant workers. In this novel, those workers count only as useful economic assets rather than as human beings.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the ways in which exploitative labour practices affecting the lives of immigrant workers are not only glossed over but justified in Paulsen’s novel *Lawn Boy*. The narrative strategies Paulsen uses in turn help to maintain the myth of Western hegemony while desensitizing young readers to the actual plight of migrants and concomitantly to the very mechanisms by means of which migrant subjectivities are produced as “different” and rendered invisible. *Lawn Boy* may be a comical story about a white boy’s rapid “ascent up the financial ladder” (*Booklist* 44), an adventure that leaves him worth half a million dollars, but there is a shadowy

underside to this story that is also neatly suppressed. The fact that the outsourcing and subcontracting of the services to the underpaid migrant labourers represents a launching pad for the boy's success is dealt with in a lighthearted manner and is justified as an integral part of the "groovy" workings of the capitalist machine. It is in this respect that Paulsen's book not only fails to raise the basic question of social justice, but also helps to perpetuate the notion that exploitation of the workforce cannot be seen as a major issue as long as it guarantees one's individual success. The narrative thus constructs a specific point of view, interpellating readers and orienting them to embrace and to identify with the subject position offered, from which practices of exploitation are not only neutralized, but also are made to look innocently harmless and perfectly acceptable.

An important aspect of the critical socio-historical approach I have used in building my argument is the use of analytical strategies by means of which it is possible to dissect "the mechanisms at work in the fabrication and transmission of 'commonsense'" (Cacho 394). The "commonsense" of dominant hegemonic discourses as reproduced in Paulsen's novel stands for

and is "dependent upon a multitude of ideological constructions" (Cacho 394), the point of which is to re-establish differently constructed and hierarchically organized groups of citizens and non-citizens at the heart of neo-colonial empires. Children's literature (or any other literature) is among the forms of discursive practices that partake in the construction of our socio-material reality through the understandings it offers and the attitudes it fosters. I am not arguing that literary discourses should go to the other extreme and portray migrant workers as romanticized, helpless victims. I would prefer instead that texts offer a rounded depiction of their diversified experience that inevitably also rests on the analysis of the real sources and forms of their—and by extension our—systemic socio-economic oppression (Beck 102). Only in this way can we cultivate much-needed critical literacy and raise the awareness of children and young adults to the power structures that frame our social realities. Perhaps such education may give rise to a different collective consciousness and the kind of young people who will not perpetuate the socio-political status quo, but, rather, make a difference.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The illegal targeting and scapegoating of the Romany in France is one of the most recent cases to illustrate this point. Yet France is not alone in pursuing state-sponsored racist policies directed at the restriction of movement, persecution, and expulsion of its Romany population. Deportations of the Romany have been carried out in Italy, Denmark, Sweden, and Germany, and are being reconsidered by the Finnish government (Kushen; Phillips, Connolly, and Davies). The French case is alarming because the measures adopted to legalize the expulsion of the Romany have been accompanied by two other policies also targeted at them. These include the “criminalization of entire families” instead of just individual law offenders and the “stripping of citizenship from immigrants with criminal convictions,” a law from which the non-immigrant population would be made exempt (Brooks). The expulsion measures and accompanying restrictions geared toward the criminalization of the already disempowered migrants set a dangerous precedent because, as Amnesty International officials warn, these policies can be easily extended from one randomly selected group of migratory people to another, thus eventually encompassing all migrant populations (Phillips, Connolly, and Davies), subjecting them to further disempowerment and containment within the artificially created and racially motivated category of second-class citizenship.

<sup>2</sup> Also, the popularity that Paulsen enjoys can be seen from the fact that *Hatchet* has sold more than 750,000 hardcopies, while paperback sales have topped three million copies (Latrobe and Hutcherson 71).

<sup>3</sup> The boy protagonist may be unnamed, yet this does not automatically mean that he can be lumped into the same category as the unnamed and dehumanized migrant workers. At this point, it is very important to distinguish between who is narrated and who narrates, as this leads to the creation of hierarchically arranged categories of people. The narrative is told from the point of view of a twelve-year-old, middle-class protagonist who, in his namelessness, stands for a generic prototype of an average, white, middle-class boy who can supposedly always prosper and grow. The implication is that he can easily turn into a successful business manager and property owner for this is supposedly the nature of the American dream reserved for the aspiring middle classes. The unnamedness of the white, middle-class protagonist thus exemplifies a very specific human universality, as opposed to the constructed non-humanity of immigrant workers within the racially classed society the narrative inadvertently helps to prop up and naturalize.

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