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*Themed Issue: Transnational Labour Mobility Regimes: Organising  
Production and Social Reproduction Beyond Borders*

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Depletion through transnational social reproduction: guestworker migration and uneven development in the South Pacific

Matt Withers, [matt.withers@anu.edu.au](mailto:matt.withers@anu.edu.au)  
Australian National University, Australia

The recent expansion of regional guestworker migration schemes has altered the political economy of the South Pacific, creating a ‘permanent labour reserve’ (MacWilliam, 2022) for low-wage industries in rural Australia and New Zealand. Historical structures of uneven development, against which the ‘blackbirding’ of indentured Kanaka labourers took place more than a century prior, have again enabled a transnational labour (im)mobility regime in which Pasifika workers are rendered unfree and situated as a ‘fix’ for accumulation: limited to racialised and gendered labour practices, tied to employer-sponsors in remote locations, and without the rights afforded to other migrant workers. Taking the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme as the paradigmatic example of a resurgent guestworker model in the region, this article foregrounds overlooked processes of transnational social reproduction that emerge from the interplay of restrictive migration policies and exploitative Local Labour Control Regimes (LLCRs). Drawing on extensive in-depth interviews with migrant workers, their family members, and government staff from four participating Pacific Island Countries (PICs), it examines how the PALM scheme spatially and temporally reconfigures care practices, skills formation, and communal labour to progressively *deplete* (Rai et al, 2014) socially reproductive capacity within the South Pacific. The article concludes by suggesting that the strains the PALM scheme places on social reproduction within PICs is itself a fundamental driver of uneven development across the region.

**Keywords** guestworker migration • social reproduction • uneven development • depletion • PALM scheme

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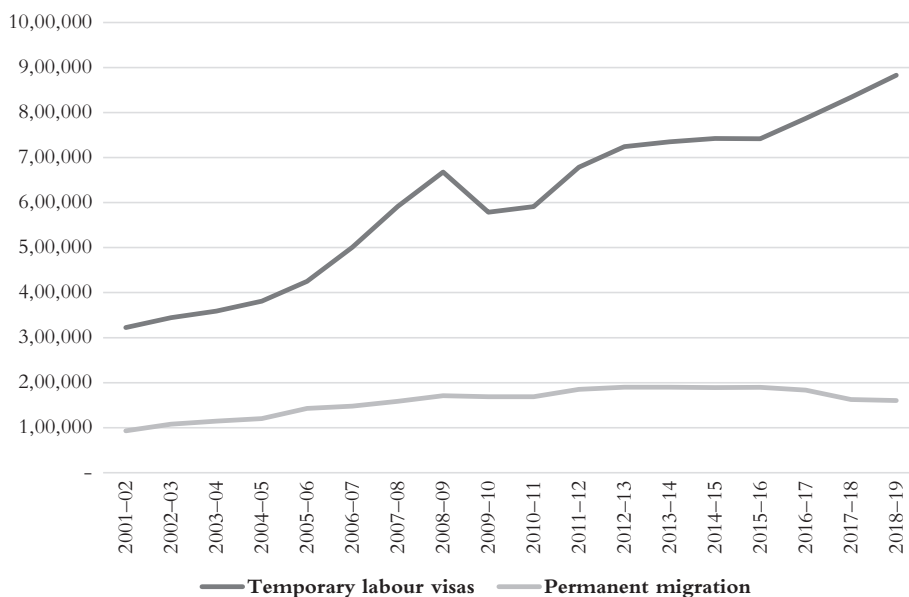
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## Introduction

Australia's immigration regime has undergone significant change over the past three decades. Beginning with the introduction of the 457 temporary skill shortage visa through the 1996 Migration Act, and spanning subsequent deregulations of work provisions attached to working holiday (subclass 417 and 462) and international student (subclass 485 and 500) visas, pathways into Australia have become increasingly selective and overwhelmingly temporary (Wright and Clibborn, 2020). Though permanent migrant intake has been subject to highly-politicised annual caps, temporary labour migration pathways have not. Inclusive of de facto work visas, the annual admittance of temporary migrant workers has increased from 3.4 times permanent migrant workers in 2001 to 5.5 times in 2022, representing a secular decoupling of temporary and permanent admittance (Figure 1). Within this assemblage of temporary labour migration pathways, two smaller schemes – the Seasonal Worker Programme introduced in 2012 and Pacific Labour Scheme introduced in 2018 – emerged as designated development assistance programmes for Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and Timor-Leste. As of 2022, these pathways have been amalgamated and expanded under a single Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. While almost all temporary labour migration visas entail caveats to Australia's labour regime and the standard employment relationship, most notably by imposing spatial and temporal restrictions that intend to subsume labour to the interests of particular segments of capital, these situations of exception are most pronounced for Pasifika workers participating in the PALM scheme.

The PALM scheme involves the recruitment of workers from nine PICs (Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu) and Timor-Leste for periods of up to nine months ('PALM Short') or four

**Figure 1:** Temporary labour visas vs. permanent migration in Australia, 2001 to 2019



Source: DHA, 2020.

years ('PALM Long'). Prospective workers are pre-screened for their qualifications, experience, fitness, and health – as well as 'good character' and 'positive attitude' (Australian Government, 2023) – before being deemed eligible for recruitment by approved employers in Australia. PALM workers can only be employed in rural and regional locations, and in positions that are classified as 'unskilled', 'low-skilled', or 'semi-skilled', and have passed local labour market testing – that is, low-waged work in remote locations that those unencumbered by visa restrictions are unwilling to perform. Their visa status is exclusively tied to the approved employer-sponsor (that is, changing jobs is not possible), who is solely responsible for providing accommodation, transport to the worksite, and welfare support (Australian Government, 2023). These accommodation and transport costs are deducted from workers' pay, as are the costs associated with their international travel and health insurance (as, despite paying taxes, PALM workers are ineligible to use the public Medicare system). Furthermore, PALM workers have no rights to family accompaniment, with participation thus necessitating transnational family separation for periods of up to four years. A pilot scheme for family accompaniment was announced in late 2022, but has been repeatedly delayed and criticised for stipulating that workers bear all associated costs and that employers have the final say in granting approval (Beazley, 2023). As of February 2023, there were almost 40,000 PALM workers employed across more than 200 worksites spanning the breadth of Australia, mainly in agriculture, the meat processing industry, and, increasingly, residential aged care (Field et al, 2023).

The conspicuously restrictive nature of employment in the PALM scheme has, perhaps unsurprisingly, provoked recognition of parallels with colonial practices of 'blackbirding' (Petrou and Connell, 2023) – during which so-called 'kanaka' labourers (largely originating from Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) were deceptively and coercively brokered as indentured labour for Australia's plantation economy (Banivanua Mar, 2019; Stead and Altman, 2019). The gendered and racialised circumscriptions of employment in the PALM scheme exhibit continuity with these colonial histories (Stead, 2021; Nishitani et al, 2023). While some have objected to the comparison on the grounds that contemporary guestwork involves free choice (Howes and Curtain, 2023), MacWilliam (2022) contends that regional uneven development has enabled temporary labour migration frameworks that situate the South Pacific as a 'permanent labour reserve' to facilitate accumulation in Australia's depopulated hinterlands. More so than any other of Australia's temporary visa subclasses, the restrictive interplay of migration, employment and welfare regimes that scaffold the PALM scheme typifies the definitional conditions of guestwork (Hahamovitch, 2003; Surak, 2013), lending weight to assertions that Australia has steadily become what it has professed never to be: a guestworker state (Wright and Clibborn, 2020). This claim is made all the clearer when comparing the actual policy settings of the PALM scheme, in terms of fundamental rights, to those prevailing in the more notorious guestworker regimes of East, Southeast and West Asia. Whereas Australian civil society organisations have vocally rejected the treatment of low-wage temporary migrant workers employed in the Persian Gulf (Walk Free, 2023), they have been comparatively silent on Australia's devising of a guestworker regime – in the PALM scheme – that is no less 'unfree' (Yea and Chok, 2018; Parreñas, 2022).

Like most guestworker regimes, the PALM scheme leverages uneven regional development to facilitate transnational labour supply as a 'fix' for accumulation in particular industries unable to employ a sufficient quantity of locally available labour

at desired wages (Campbell, 2019; Chang, 2022). Across the South Pacific, capital formation has been uneven and mired within colonial (and neocolonial) interests; compounded by challenges specific to small island economies, it is unsurprising that local labour markets are marked by low wages, few jobs, and a great willingness to pursue the ‘fast money’ offered by guestwork (Petrou and Connell, 2023: 24). In Australia, meanwhile, a range of industries located in varyingly depopulated rural and regional areas have struggled to recruit labour to undertake low-paid ‘3D’ jobs (the dirty, dangerous, and demeaning), such as those in agriculture, meat processing, and aged care. The PALM scheme thus reflects the interests of those segments of capital, culminating in the norm of ‘employer-sponsored’ guestworker arrangements in which control over immobilised workers becomes an essential feature of the labour process of participating industries (Scott and Rye, 2023). This results in a particular expression of what Jonas (1996) terms ‘Local Labour Control Regimes’ (LLCRs) that form when, in the face of increasingly mobile labour markets, particular capitals struggling to meet local labour needs ‘develop labour control strategies which limit the “freedom” of labour and regulate the conditions under which it enters the labour process’ (Jonas, 1996: 335).

Crucially, for the labour process and the experiences of migrant workers, this control extends beyond the realm of production itself: the employer routinely intermediates (and charges to workers) the costs associated with socially reproducing labour power manifest in workers’ daily arrival at the worksite. International travel, accommodation, appropriate clothing, transport, and health insurance are all costs borne by PALM workers, often at above market rates (Campbell, 2019), that is, as an additional avenue of surplus value extraction for employers. Thus, both uneven development and social reproduction – each a pivotal and longstanding theoretical extension of labour process theory (Jonas, 1996; Baglioni et al, 2022) – are fundamentally entwined with the LLCRs that the PALM scheme facilitates. Yet, in the context of transnational family separation and ‘enforced transience’ (Yeoh et al, 2023) produced through the policy settings of the PALM scheme, the interplay of uneven development and social reproduction becomes more complex. While uneven development is an underlying driver for guestworker migration that blurs productive and reproductive boundaries for individual migrant workers, it is also a means through which the productive and socially reproductive labour of transnational migrant households – and the social relations underpinning communities of origin more broadly (Bakker and Gill, 2003) – becomes spatially and temporally fragmented. This fragmentation, captured through the concept of transnational social reproduction (TSR), extends a crucial analytical connection between the composition of LLCRs in Australia and the depletion of socially reproductive capacities in the South Pacific.

In the following section, the article expands on this theorisation of TSR by situating the spatial and temporal features of guestwork in relation to the labour process, social reproduction, and depletion. This framework then informs the analysis of research findings in order to transnationally map out the productive and socially reproductive labour of PALM workers and their family members originating from four PICs: Kiribati, Fiji, Tonga, and Vanuatu. In establishing that the in-situ collapsing of productive and reproductive boundaries within LLCRs produces accompanying disruptions to TSR, it is argued that the outcomes for PIC households and communities satisfy the criteria of depletion – that is, when ‘resource outflows exceed resource inflows in carrying out social reproductive work over a threshold

of sustainability' (Rai et al, 2014: 89). In the context of the migration–development paradigm in which the PALM scheme operates, this is deemed to entrench uneven and unsustainable development.

## Guestworker migration and transnational social reproduction

Guestworker migration schemes like PALM necessarily entail the transnational reconfiguration of paid and unpaid labour practices in ways that are relevant to 'development'. The vast literature interrogating the so-called 'migration–development nexus' – a loosely-knit policy framework that presupposes that temporary labour migration yields beneficial outcomes for countries of origin (Faist and Fauser, 2011) – has overwhelmingly considered this proposition through the lens of paid labour (Withers and Hill, 2023). Critical accounts have situated guestworkers as recruited from a 'global reserve army of labour' (Ness, 2016): a transnational extension of what Marx (1981) theorised as capital's tendency to systematically produce populations whose labour power is surplus to its own requirements for accumulation, but who are nonetheless periodically absorbed and expelled as productive conditions change. The global reach of capital exacerbates these tendencies, so that labour reserves maintained by uneven development or the prevalence of non-capitalist social relations – like those MacWilliam (2022) identifies throughout the South Pacific – are mobilised across borders and fixed in place to maximise surplus value extraction for particular segments of capital in countries of destination (Scott and Rye, 2023). Individual workers are subject to heightened exploitation within resultant LLCRs, their residual incomes (remittances) are transferred to households and communities that in turn experience varying degrees of poverty clearance, and countries of origin enter into a knotted set of trade-offs implied by a macroeconomic reliance on migration (Withers, 2019). The particularities of this critique are beyond the scope of this article, but hinge upon recognition that remittances are a fundamentally limited source of developmental capital, and that guestwork constitutes a form of unequal exchange between poorer and richer regions of the global economy (Chi, 2008; Ness, 2023).

However, far less consideration has been given to the ways in which guestworker migration similarly reconfigures multiple sites, institutions and processes linked to social reproduction: that is, the various but largely unpaid forms of labour that collectively reproduce labour power itself (Marx, 1981). While there is a substantial literature on the transnational reorganisation of unpaid care practices through and during migration, consolidating in the wake of Parreñas's (2000) pioneering work, this scholarship has trained a narrow lens on socially reproductive labour as care work (Mezzadri, 2019). Contemporary elaborations of social reproduction have instead tended to identify three central processes requiring attention (Bhattacharya, 2017): the biological reproduction of human and ecological life (Bakker and Silvey, 2008); the daily and intergenerational reproduction of future, present, and past workers (Brenner and Laslett, 1991); and, in following Marx's (1981) original meaning, the reproduction of the social relations and institutions necessary for continued production (Bakker and Gill, 2003). As Mezzadri (2019) has commandingly argued, these socially reproductive processes cannot be disentangled from the value itself. Examination of the labour process across 'majority world' settings reveals how socially reproductive activities are central to extending labour control beyond work hours, subsidising the operating costs of capital, and expanding the formal subsumption of labour

through home-based work (Mezzadri, 2019). Yet, in contributing to valorisation, the performance of socially reproductive labour incurs measurable costs – for embodied individuals, households, and entire communities – if the balance of available resources deteriorates beyond a sustainable threshold: what Rai et al (2014) term ‘depletion through social reproduction’ (hereafter ‘depletion’).

Guestworker migration introduces important spatial and temporal variations to these processes, as ‘place-bound’ migrant workers become dislocated from household and communal sites of social reproduction (Bakker and Silvey, 2008), and must navigate the often asynchronous ‘relational timescales’ of transnational family life (Yeoh et al, 2023). Together, these transnational reconfigurations of social reproduction can be thought of as TSR. On the one hand, TSR entails disruptions to the daily and intergenerational reproduction of life and labour power for migrant workers, their households, and their communities. Considered through the accounting framework of depletion (Rai et al, 2014), TSR is imputed as a loss of socially reproductive resources for individual migrant workers (insofar as they now receive fewer resource inflows than outflows) as well as households and communities in countries of origin (insofar as the now-displaced migrant worker contributed more to collective resource inflows than outflows). On the other hand, TSR also spans multiple sets of social relations, implying a more diffusive reallocation of resources required for home and host societies’ ability to reproduce in general. In the context of the PALM scheme, this can involve very different social institutions at either end of the migration corridor, reflective of the persistence of variegated social relations present throughout much of the majority world (Hoskyns and Rai, 2007; Bakker and Gill, 2019; Mezzadri et al, 2022). These social relations, including of subsistence production abundant within PICs, are no less impacted by the transnational remapping of socially reproductive labour that guestwork implies. Indeed, studies concerned with the social implications of the PALM scheme have pointed to the displacement of unpaid labour that, in hitherto supporting customary and environmental practices, has undermined the sustainability of traditional ways of life (Craven, 2015; Chatter, 2019; Petrou and Withers, 2023). This, too, constitutes depletion.

Numerous studies have considered aspects of TSR in other guestworker migration contexts (Burawoy, 1976; Truong, 1996; Parreñas, 2000; Ferguson and McNally, 2015; Yeoh et al, 2023). However, few have attempted to systematically chart the reconfiguration of these processes across multiple sites and scales of social reproduction (Kofman and Raghuram, 2015; Shah and Lerche, 2020<sup>1</sup>) or situate them in relation to the ‘migration-development’ logic underpinning guestworker migration (Withers and Hill, 2023). In mapping the implications of TSR through the PALM scheme, I therefore make two departures from the existing literature:

1. I respond to Bakker and Silvey’s (2008: 4) call for ‘an analytic approach to [socially reproductive] governance that extends beyond a focus on the formal regulatory mechanisms of the state’ by conceptualising TSR with relation to the labour process. Though the policy settings of the PALM scheme are central in establishing the parameters in which TSR occurs, it is the various LLCRs those policies enable that most explicitly determine the spatial and temporal affordances for socially reproductive labour. Just as ‘the conditions of production are at the same time the conditions of reproduction’ (Marx, 1981: 711), so too are the possibilities for TSR mirrored in the particular labour processes through which guestworkers are employed.



2. In considering the effect of these reconfigurations, I bring TSR into conversation with the depletion framework for mapping the resource flows that enable social reproduction (Rai et al, 2014). Depletion is articulated with reference to three sites – the embodied individual, the household, and the community – where resource inflows (for example, from welfare systems, income, or social networks) meet resource outflows (for example, the expenditure of time, energy, or emotion) in the performance of socially reproductive labour. Depletion occurs when the balance of resources deteriorates below the sustainable threshold of a given site (noting that thresholds vary by site but also overlap), and thereafter manifest as disguised forms of harm that threaten the stability of social relations (Rai et al, 2014; Goldblatt and Rai, 2017). Transposed against the spatial and temporal fragmentation of these same three sites through TSR, I examine depletion occurring in Australia and within participating PICs to expose a series of concealed harms that intensify uneven development.

To do so, I draw on extensive in-depth interviews with PALM Long workers (n=56), their family members (n=22), and PIC government staff (n=18) employed in ‘labour sending units’ (LSUs) that administer the PALM scheme within countries of origin. Gathered over four years,<sup>2</sup> across multiple sites and industries in three Australian states,<sup>3</sup> and involving participants from four PICs – Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga, and Vanuatu – these data represent the largest and most comprehensive qualitative study of PALM Long to date. The multi-sited, multi-scalar, and multi-situational nature of the study offers diverse empirical insights that collectively illuminate the depth and breadth of depletive processes arising from TSR. Findings are therefore presented in a manner that is purposively inattentive to the preoccupations of more conventional migration-development analyses, such as assessing the net economic benefits of participation or exploring the subjectivity of individual experiences, instead seeking to use these varied insights to chart ‘ideal types’ of depletion emerging from the policy settings and labour processes that constitute the PALM scheme. This is an important caveat, as participants reported varying degrees of personal and financial satisfaction associated with the PALM scheme, corroborating other qualitative studies’ attentiveness to the complex ambivalence of migration outcomes (Smith, 2019; Stead et al, 2022; Petrou and Connell, 2023). The experiences highlighted in the following section are thus representative only of the *potential* for various forms of depletion to occur as a result of TSR. These findings are firstly organised around the productive and reproductive boundaries of individual PALM workers navigating LLCRs in Australia, before examining three broad facets of TSR – care practices, skill acquisition, and communal labour – that have a bearing on the erosion of households and communities in the South Pacific.

## Production and reproduction in Australia

This section attends to the first site of depletion: the embodied individual. The PALM Long workers I spoke to during their employment in Australia, or upon return to their country of origin in the South Pacific, worked across a diverse range of low-wage industries with notably different labour processes and affordances for the possibilities of life outside of work. A common theme, however, was that employer-sponsors – in meeting their responsibility for providing the transport and

accommodation that workers require – had the ability to exert significant control over workers' socially reproductive lives and labour practices. Ubiquitously, they did so in a manner that narrowed the scope of social reproduction and aligned those processes with those of capital accumulation. Similar to accounts of the dormitory system in Chinese factories, in which the spheres of production and reproduction are 're-fused' into a single labour regime that disciplines workers and permits just-in-time labour supply (Pun, 2007; Pun and Smith, 2007), PALM employers provided the minimum necessary resources required for workers to physically reproduce their labour power and return to the worksite. Whether for rural farms and abattoirs, where minibuses would ferry workers between provided accommodation and the worksite, or for tourism and residential aged care jobs where PALM workers lived within (or in immediate proximity to) the worksite, control over life outside of work enabled employers to set unnegotiable work hours that reflected the fluctuating labour demands of their business.

Loti, a recently returned ni-Vanuatu worker, explained her inability to negotiate hours while performing a supervisory role on a fruit farm during the harvest period:

'Sometimes you do seven to seven at night, seven to eight o'clock at night. It goes as far as nine o'clock.... Some can go home earlier and then some of us can come in a little bit late, but that's with the packing people. For us [supervisors], we have to go whatever time it starts, whatever time ends. So, it's like 12 or 13 hours every day except for Sunday. We have only one day off.'

Similarly, Teretia, an I-Kiribati aged care worker who had recently started her job in Australia, remarked that she regularly worked 70-hour weeks because her employer would always call on her to cover staffing shortages:

'It's a long week. I usually have two days off, but not for now, because they are short-staffed. When they call me, it's very hard in our culture, it's very hard to say no, and yet, I know I should because they are always calling us, they're calling me or my friend. For me, it's better to get extra hours.... I'm very happy for that, because when I'm staying at home on the day off, I have nothing to do. It's very boring. So, it's better to go back to work when they call you, you must go.'

In both cases featured here, and in others observed during interviews that took place in the accommodation provided to Tongan men working in the meat-processing industry, it was clear that life outside of work often presented few opportunities beyond the most functional acts of daily social reproduction. Workers endured considerable income constraints in Australia, including those associated with deductions levied by employers for accommodation and transport, and had little financial scope for recreation. Though some PALM workers might be located in larger country towns, with greater opportunities for social life, most that I spoke with indicated that their time at home was spent cooking, shopping, cleaning, communicating with partners and family via video calls, and resting before the next shift. For some, like Loti, even these daily acts of social reproduction were constrained by the length of the working day and the crowdedness of accommodation.



She explained that, in sharing a four-bedroom house with 12 other workers, there was limited opportunity to condense all of her housework and self-care into a single day off:

‘Mostly, we go home and it’s dark and you don’t have any choices to go anywhere, like to go and sit somewhere and watch the sunset or something. It’s not going to happen for you. But, because we only have one day off on Sunday, it’s hard.... You go shopping, do your groceries, come back, pack for the following week, and then you’re going to wait for somebody to finish before you’ve got to do your laundry. It’s not a very easy life out of work, too... it’s tied up, like you don’t even have a full day or a half-day to spend free. Like, you can only get three hours in the afternoon or three hours in the morning, just to sleep, like have a nap or something, or do something like watch a movie or something on your phone.... And Saturday nights, like you wanted to sleep, because you come home after work tired. In the house where I lived, you couldn’t do it. Sometimes, we have to run away. We have to spend money on somewhere else to go and sleep, spend the night, if it’s too noisy.’

Her colleague, Eva, another ni-Vanuatu worker who resigned and returned early, described the provided accommodation as being in a poor state, with broken fittings, no bedding, and presenting “like my backyard at home”. She also detailed how the employer had charged them \$150 per person, but maintained this rate of deduction as more PALM workers were brought into the household:

‘When we had another group came in, they had to put like, four people into one bedroom, three people into one bedroom, two people. But they’re still charging like \$150 to \$160 per person, per bed... when they first told us that it’s going to be \$150, we understood, because you have your own room and all – but then when they came back after we had the second group come, they were saying “oh, you’re going to have share people, but still the accommodation rate is still going to be the same”.’

Though aware that average rent in that town was many times lower than what they were being charged,<sup>4</sup> Eva’s attempt to find her own accommodation was obstructed by the employer, who threatened to rescind use of the company-provided vehicle:

‘Most of us, when they’ve heard that the rent is like that, like the accommodation is like that, they just moved away.... I wasn’t happy, because they [the employer] said “oh, if you move out of the company house, you’re not allowed to use the car, you’re not allowed to use anything provided by the company unless at work”. Like, if you go to work, yes you can use the microwave, you can use the fridge, whatever. But if you were thinking that one of the boys or girls need to drive you home, that would not happen.’

Under such circumstances, employers’ control over workers’ lives is not only a means of extending the working day and conditioning just-in-time labour supply, but a fundamental part of the labour process itself, where the LLCR permits the extortion of various rents from workers to subsidise the cost of labour (Campbell, 2019). This

model was not isolated to the case of the two farmworkers in question, but evident among the aforementioned Tongan meat-processing workers I interviewed, all of whom paid significantly above market rates for accommodation – including recurring weekly expenses for basic furnishing – and each paid \$100 per week for a seat on a bus, owned by the employer, that shuttled them between their accommodation and the abattoir located a few kilometres outside of town. These employer-levied costs, alongside others borne by workers under the policy settings of the PALM scheme, such as the structured repayment of costs associated with international flights and compulsory medical insurance, further condition the financial circumstances that compel PALM workers' need to perform additional hours.

Indeed, beyond an inherent lack of bargaining power due to visa sponsorship, all workers had strong financial incentives to perform overtime when requested. As the experiences of Leva, a recently arrived Tongan abattoir worker, illustrated, deductions during the early stages of employment could be substantial:

'This is our fourth pay slip. The first one was very good. The second one was good, but this fourth one... the gross pay was \$740, but after all the deductions, we clear out \$218. So that \$218, it's not good. And for the other expenses, they're going to deduct \$41 from the \$200. That's about \$150 leftover, I think. And we have to send money back home – \$150 is not enough and we have to do our weekly shopping.'

Leva went on to explain that these financial pressures, both to remit to family at home and to meet basic needs in Australia, informed a desire to work more hours:

'We just have to keep our health, keep working – we don't want to miss any workdays. That's our main priority, work.... If the boss asks for overtime, we'd be so happy to work overtime. We want to work overtime every day.'

Yet, overwork and daily constraints on social reproduction often made 'health' a difficult attribute to maintain. Loti described depletion leading to embodied harm when recounting the illness of her co-workers, which was exacerbated by the employer's neglect of their duty of care and the convoluted process through which PALM workers can access medical treatment:

'That [overwork] leads to sickness as well. Like, if one of us in the house gets sick, I've got to go to work, but then I have to look after the other person. I have to look after myself. It's very hard.... They said you can stay home if you're really sick and like, that's the beginning, but when we get into the job, they couldn't accept any sick leave. They couldn't accept any conversation about getting sick. Like, they want you to be at work.'

She continued to explain that, when she didn't show up for her shift because she was caring for a co-worker who had to be hospitalised, her employer threatened to deport her:

'If you want me to come to work, you've got to turn up and take her to the hospital so I can see that and then I can go to work. And he came up saying,

“I’m paying your ticket for flying home next week, just because you’ve been like this to me”...I said, “Do you want me to save her life or just leave her and she’ll be dead here?”.... So he apologised. And it was okay, but that’s one of the things that is happening. Whenever someone is sick, they don’t care.’

By contrast, life outside of work was typically much less strained for workers employed in resort-based tourism, for whom many aspects of daily social reproduction were facilitated by the employer – for example, by the provision of free meals and on-site accommodation. On the one hand, this speaks to prevailing features of resort LLCRs, in which such reciprocities are used to entice experienced but otherwise low-waged workers who submit to having their personal and work lives emotionally and temporally governed by the resort (Jordhus-Lier and Underthun, 2015). On the other hand, though, it speaks to the sheer diversity of labour processes contained within the parameters of the PALM scheme, and the disparity of individual outcomes arising from differences *at* work, but also in the affordances given to life *outside of* work.

## Mapping transnational social reproduction in the South Pacific

This section examines two further sites of depletion: households and communities within countries of origin. The LLCRs described in the previous section all imply a certain ‘blurring’ of productive and reproductive boundaries for workers in Australia, as employers exerted control over life outside of work (reproduction) to realise their interests at the worksite (production). Yet, the conditions of transnational guestwork entail the reconfiguration of socially reproductive processes that extend far beyond the ‘place-bound’ individual worker (Bakker and Silvey, 2008). The obverse implications of an in-situ contraction of socially reproductive activities for PALM workers in Australia is the disruption of their involvement in the socially reproductive activities of their households and communities in PICs. To capture forms of depletion affecting life, labour power and social institutions within PICs, three facets of TSR that emerged from the findings are considered: care practices, skills formation, and communal labour.

### *Care practices*

Participation in the PALM scheme involves the disassembly and partial reassembly of household care practices. In the absence of the migrant worker, the ‘proximate’ care activities (for example, interpersonal care and domestic work) they previously performed are reallocated or form care deficits, while ‘aspatial’ care roles (for example, emotional and moral responsibilities) continue across borders to varying extents, intermediated by enabling technologies and return travel (Withers and Hill, 2023). While some of these changes have entailed a welcome gender-normative rebalancing of unpaid care work, insofar as some remaining male partners have been observed to take on the domestic work hitherto performed by their wives and girlfriends, these stand in contrast to the norm of men migrating and women meeting additional care demand (Bailey, 2014; Chattier, 2019; Petrou and Withers, 2023). In the first instance, interviews with workers and remaining family members shed light on strategies used to compensate for the displacement of unpaid care work, which ranged from the (temporary) reorganisation of gender norms concerning household

care practices, through to paid and unpaid substitute caregiving arrangements, and instances of neglect.

Kiante, an I-Kiribati woman working in aged care, remarked at her husband's professed epiphany concerning the toil associated with the socially reproductive labour of everyday life:

'He said it's hard. Last time he said, "Now I know that washing, cooking, cleaning dishes is so hard, it's a hard job, taking care of the kids to go to school, everything is hard". But we always complain. I work hard here also.'

Paulieana, a single mother from Vanuatu, meanwhile described how she was able to use remitted income to secure substitute caregiving for her children: "Yeah, she [the nanny] lives with them, she sleeps with them and does everything... my friends take my eldest to school, but my nanny picks her up, picks him up, and then brings them home".

Another ni-Vanuatu woman, Nettie, was hesitant to involve anyone else in substitute care giving while her husband worked in Australia. She explained the difficulty of "playing the dad and mum's role at the same time" while caring for her teenage sons, who she saw as lacking role models due to high rates of male migration in her community:

'It's hectic. My eldest son is 15 and this is an age where they want to experience a lot of things. And he has been smoking cigarettes and he was suspended for taking drugs to school. That's without a father figure. That's the change.... So when you come out, step out from the door, who is out there? It takes a whole community for an upbringing, but this Port Villa, it has changed.'

Brian, a ni-Vanuatu man whose wife was about to join the PALM scheme as an aged care worker, reflected on how migration was breaking down traditional care roles and resources to the detriment of elderly people in Vanuatu:

'More and more, you see young people neglecting their parents when they get old. They live their own lives, they don't look after their parents, and you find old people struggling for themselves. Because, in the islands, it's hard to get water, food from the garden, and you find old people trying very hard – daily – struggling to survive.'

Meanwhile, possibilities for 'care circulation' (Merla et al, 2020) were seen to be limited by LLCRs in Australia, whether owing to workers' financial constraints (which limited opportunities for return travel), or the structuring of life at and outside of work (which could result in asynchronous relational timeframes with remaining family members). Though many workers reported that they were able to maintain close relationships with their families, most also reported widespread experiences of estrangement among their co-workers. Indeed, in speaking with remaining families and LSU staff, the prevalence of relationship breakdowns and extramarital affairs during periods of protracted transnational separation was a major concern. An LSU staff member from Fiji remarked:

‘For every deployment that we undertake, we encounter those issues on a regular basis.... Issues are relating to extramarital affairs, not sending in enough money to support the people back at home, also issues with... people back home having affairs and our workers on the other side finding out through social media platforms. It’s not an isolated case, but nearly every deployment there will be a family separation issue.’

As Nettie put it:

‘It’s a cruel scheme. One partner goes and the other one stays, maybe they find some other relationship, so when they come back there is chaos and now who is affected? It is the kids. Young couples where they have no kids and whatnot it’s fine, maybe they can do that, but not for families.’

However, the dissolution of family relationships was also heavily associated with adverse financial outcomes, as estranged migrant workers would often stop remitting income, thus affecting the ability of remaining partners and children to satisfy their everyday needs. Asked to expand on the social implications of these ‘EMAs’ – as they were ubiquitously referred to – a member of the Fijian LSU team reported:

‘For most of the families that go, there is only one person working in the family – so they need to send over money to make sure that the children are fed, they are prepared for school, school fees are paid, making sure that the rent is paid so they can stay live in a good home.... We’ve recently had a case where one of the wives came in and she wasn’t getting money from her husband. It was really sad because she brought her two kids with her, who she said were very sickly because she’d only get \$40 from her husband. And that wasn’t enough to buy anything, even food for her children. She had no other option but to come back to her parents’ place so that her children can be looked after well.’

Consistent with other studies examining the dynamics of transnational care practices in the PALM scheme (Chattier, 2019; Petrou and Withers, 2023), these findings point to the gender imbalanced divisions of labour that respond to daily care deficits arising from guestworker migration, as well as the intergenerational constraints on social reproduction that occur in this context.

### *Skill acquisition*

Interpersonal and domestic care practices are, however, only the most immediate aspects of social reproduction, beyond which lie the involvement of a broader set of institutions and processes that collectively reproduce the workforce in the sense implied by ‘human capital’. While the family is often the primary site of *individual renewal*, welfare provision and educational attainment are key to the *intergenerational renewal* of labour power as a factor of production (Bhattacharya, 2017). In the context of guestwork, it is immediately apparent that the costs of reproducing labour power are confined to countries of origin (public investments) and migrant households (private investments), while the surplus value generated from its employ is realised in the

country of destination (Withers, 2019; Ness, 2023). As such, there is a fundamental element of unequal exchange occurring through the de facto subsidisation of capital accumulation in Australia by countries and households in the South Pacific.

Yet, focusing on skill acquisition and development that occurs during migration – a key pillar of the migration–development promises of the PALM scheme (Conroy, 2022) – allows for a reframing of TSR with relation to the relative productive needs of local and foreign labour markets. PIC labour markets are, generally speaking, heavily constrained: prevailing wages are low, unemployment is high, and yet there are shortages of qualified workers within narrow growth sectors of local economies (Petrou and Connell, 2023). This is due, in no small part, to PICs being (varyingly) characterised as ‘MIRAB’ economies – that is, with lasting dependencies on migration-driven remittance flows and aid-driven bureaucratic employment (Bertram, 2006) – accompanied by widespread subsistence agriculture (Georgeou et al, 2022) and a variety of sovereign rents including fishing rights, internet domains, stamps and passport sales (Boland and Dollery, 2006). Tourism is the main preserve of the private sector in most PICs, yet employment in tourism and hospitality makes up only a fraction of job placements in PALM Long, which is dominated by meat processing and non-seasonal agriculture, but is increasingly recruiting to address shortages in Australia’s aged-care sector (Conroy and Wells, 2023).

Interviews with workers revealed that they often had little say in the work they performed in Australia, particularly when contracted to labour hire firms brokering labour to multiple industries, and described routine ‘deskilling’ in their jobs. As Manu, a recently arrived Tongan man employed in a West Australian abattoir, recounted:

‘Yes, I was applying as electrician. When I found out, they called me to say I’m lucky and in a group chosen to come. When I came here they told me it was meat processing, not electrical work. Then I don’t have a choice.’

A member of the Tongan LSU reflected on the labour market outcomes associated with meat processing becoming the largest occupational group for Tongan PALM workers:

‘One of the incentives for Tonga participating in the Pacific Labour Scheme was skills development and skills transfers when workers come back. We haven’t really achieved that, because the demand is coming from one major industry and we don’t have a meatworks industry here... we’re seeing an increased number of trades workers, chefs, skilled, semi-skilled workers going on low-skilled horticulture and meatworks jobs, because that’s the only thing that’s available. And yet they could have gone in more semi-skilled roles that are linked to their training and their area of interest and their potential career development. That becomes a skill strain, effectively.’

Similar deskilling was observed in the experiences of Ekerā, an I-Kiribati woman who previously worked as a registered nurse in one of South Tarawa’s two hospitals, but was now employed as an aged care assistant:

‘We got this opportunity working here when I was working as a nurse... we took leave from our work to go and study for six months in Fiji and that’s



how we qualify to be working here, not in our qualification as a nurse, but in our qualification as an aged care assistant. It's a very different environment to back home, very specific. We just work with old people... we don't deal with the medication, we just help with the activity of daily living.'

These observations echo PIC government concerns that the PALM scheme is not developing skills, as it claims to, but rather constitutes a 'brain drain' of existing workforces that creates skill shortages across private and public sectors ([Dziedzic et al, 2023](#)). The Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry recently published a report documenting labour mobility-related skill shortages and negative labour-market impact affecting a majority of employers across multiple sectors ([Vega Orozco and Spencer, 2023](#)), while a World Bank report has advocated the prioritised recruitment of workers from 'low-skill industries' as a means of mitigating 'human capital flight' ([World Bank, 2023](#)). The later suggestion is wholly impractical in the context of the prevailing wage disparities and the employer-sponsor recruitment model, as there is no meaningful (or legal) way of restraining the departure of highly-qualified workers, and to do so would only create perverse disincentives for local skills training and acquisition. Instead, cast as a process of social reproduction, what emerges is confirmation of [MacWilliam's \(2022\)](#) depiction of a 'permanent labour reserve' being shaped in the image of the productive demands of industries located in depopulated rural and regional areas of Australia. Crucially, as illustrated in the case of healthcare workers, this not only distorts the intergenerational renewal of labour power required by PIC industries, but also that required by the very educational and welfare institutions involved in such renewal – that is, representing a cumulative loss of reproductive capacities.

### *Communal labour*

Finally, some consideration also needs to be given to the transnational displacement of labour involved in reproducing social relations in general. In the context of the PALM scheme, I term this 'communal labour', as this speaks to its appearance in Australia (for example, as unpaid volunteering in migrant workers' host communities) and in PICs (for example, as unpaid labour that maintains cultural and ecological systems at the village level). A key distinction is that, in Australia, these forms of communal labour attend to the reproduction of capitalist social relations by supporting the daily needs of those neglected by that mode of production, whereas in PICs they are frequently entwined with sustainable land management and customary practices that are integral to subsistence food production.

The unpaid communal labour performed by PALM workers in Australia has been well documented and widely praised ([Raela and Boucher, 2023](#)). As Pat Conroy, Minister for International Development and the Pacific, recently expressed before parliament ([Conroy, 2023](#)):

'PALM scheme workers are reliable and productive, ensuring businesses can continue to run and support their communities when there are not enough local workers available. And they make a positive contribution in their communities. Fijian workers in Swan Hill have joined the Country Fire Authority as volunteer fire fighters. In Stawell, ni-Vanuatu workers spend

time in the community visiting the elderly and people living with disabilities, helping them with general chores like gardening and moving furniture. And during the flooding in Lismore, PALM scheme workers volunteered to be part of the rescue effort, working with the SES to rescue people trapped by flood waters and get them safely to evacuation centres.'

By contrast, existing research has indicated that the migration-related displacement of unpaid communal labour from PICs has disrupted traditional land management practices and social structures: impacting food production and security (Nef et al, 2022), underpinning dietary shifts linked to diabetes (Hughes and Sodhi, 2006), exacerbating climate vulnerability (Craven, 2015), and destabilising customary practices that bind the subsistence economy (Chattier, 2019). Reflecting on these complex social and environmental outcomes, a member of Tonga's LSU team questioned:

'And how do you define economic development and development impact in sending countries? Because the focus is really on the number of workers being mobilised. And there's very little focus on worker welfare. There's very little focus on social issues, on reintegration. And yet, those are the things that are significant to development impact.... When you have in the MOU that priority of economic development impact in sending countries, how are we measuring ourselves? How are we defining success?'

Certainly, if 'development' is understood from a perspective that recognises the importance of sustainable societal reproduction, it becomes hard to sustain the notion that existing capacities are not being depleted by the PALM scheme.

## **Conclusion: Depleting the Pacific labour reserve**

The findings discussed in this article are not representative of all experiences of living and labouring within the PALM scheme: the labour process varies markedly by sector and industry; some employers are certainly more committed to workers' rights and welfare than others; and many participants report very positive outcomes due to the magnitude of income earned and remitted. Undoubtedly there are others, too, who experience conditions and outcomes markedly worse than those relayed by participants within my sample. What the findings do illustrate, however, is the general scope of TSR where the policy parameters of the PALM scheme meet with LLCRs in rural Australia: 'ideal types' of structural and institutional constraints on social reproduction at the worksite, the significance of which is not invalidated by the existence of milder permutations thereof.

As findings have shown, these constraints give rise to depletion at multiple sites that extend transnationally from the place-bound individual worker to their households and communities in countries of origin. LLCRs in Australia were seen to configure workers' daily socially reproductive labour in alignment with productive imperatives, frequently entailing an imbalance of productive and reproductive demands that saw the latter reduced to the rudimentary physical regeneration of labour power. In instances where thresholds of sustainability were surpassed, as in the case of workers being unable to rest and subsequently falling sick, this resulted in depletion manifest as physical

and emotional harm. The contraction of socially-reproductive frontiers in Australia is, meanwhile, accompanied by the fragmentation of other socially-reproductive processes at a transnational scale. In lieu of absent PALM workers, migrant households in the South Pacific were seen to experience disruptions to daily and intergenerational care practices, the most severe expressions of which were seen in instances of neglect and relationship breakdown. Broader processes of social reproduction – including those relating to the intergenerational renewal of labour power and non-capitalist societal relations – were likewise interrupted by systematic deskilling and the displacement of unpaid communal labour, resulting in more atrophic forms of depletion relating to the gradual erosion of ‘human capital’, cultural practices, and ecological systems that are deeply linked to the sustainability of PICs. In examining a gamut of socially reproductive processes, many of which are ‘invisible’ to conventional migration-development analyses, the study affirms that depletion serves as a powerful lens for evaluating the dynamics of TSR and the harms that arise when bodies, households and communities are strained beyond their capacity for renewal.

That these forms of depletion occur transnationally, and as a systematic outcome of the PALM scheme, fundamentally reframes the relationship between migration and development. Uneven regional development, minimally reflected by differential labour costs between countries of origin and destination, is uncontroversially recognised as a structural precursor for guestworker migration. Indeed, the PALM scheme is explicitly predicated on leveraging economic disparities within the Pacific labour reserve, and actively invokes the reductive axiom of ‘triple win’ migration to contend that remitted incomes will be developmentally beneficial for participating PICs and Timor-Leste. Notwithstanding the evident shortcomings of remittance-driven development (Chi, 2008; Withers, 2019; Ness, 2023), the PALM scheme’s claim to occupying space within Australia’s regional aid and development framework rests on a narrow, income-centric measure of ‘development’ itself. Broadened to include the full scope of socially-reproductive activities on either side of the production boundary – the biological reproduction of human and ecological life, the daily and intergenerational reproduction of labour power, and the reproduction of the social relations themselves – it becomes clear that the PALM scheme and the LLCRs it enables are simultaneously eroding institutions and processes that are pivotal to sustainable development. By imposing conditions of transnational family separation that generate care deficits and fracture family structures; by deskilling workers and shaping future workforces in the image of Australia’s rural economy; by displacing unpaid labour that is integral to maintaining customary practices and ecological regeneration outside of capitalist social relations; in these ways the PALM scheme is actively depleting the Pacific labour reserve and driving uneven development. The timescales at which resultant harms become visible may lag far behind the immediate recognition of material gain derived from remitted income but, as lessons from more established remittance economies suggest, may prove more significant in the long run.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the context of internal migration within India.

<sup>2</sup> 2019–2023.

<sup>3</sup> Resort tourism in Queensland, aged care in New South Wales, and meat processing in Western Australia.

<sup>4</sup> \$265 per week in 2021, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2021).

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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