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INTRODUCTION

Night Work across Time and Place: Introduction

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Abstract
This introduction provides context for this special feature on night work across time and place. It outlines past debates over the propriety and necessity of night shifts, as well as present and future challenges and opportunities for night workers, activists, and researchers.

Keywords: labor; reform; climate change; gender; night shifts; child labor

At the height of the Progressive Era in the United States, renowned social photographer Lewis Wickes Hine traveled the country's industrial workplaces and working-class homes, documenting proletarian lives and labors. Hine is best known for his often-shocking photographs of children at work, which captured young girls with smudged faces and boys with caps askew, standing alone or in pairs in darkened, dangerous factories. In this work, Hine created a visual accompaniment to Progressive reformers' calls to end child labor. In addition to unsafe working conditions and the visual incongruity of youthfulness amid machines, the emotional appeal of Hine's photographs hinges on the *time* at which he captured a scene. For example, from 1908 to 1911, Hine visited glassworks in Virginia, Indiana, and New Jersey; a "typical night scene" in these places, often taken at midnight or 1:00 am, featured young boys aged fourteen or under.[1] Hine's subjects worked under treacherous, cramped, and sweltering conditions, where they risked bodily injury and heat stroke on a nightly basis. Similarly, a 1908 photograph from a New York City tenement "late at night" captured a mother and her two children at work, "sewing tape on gloves."[2] Hine's emphasis on the lateness of the work—and children's participation in it—meant to inspire outrage and concern. Just as factories were deemed unsafe workplaces for many, thanks to myriad industrial hazards, so too was the night a dangerous terrain for work and other pursuits.

Yet the night has long been a site of labor, from the eponymous "graveyard shifts" of cemetery workers, to medical work, sex work, and other labor deemed marginal, illegal, or even immoral because of its association with darkness, vice, and secrecy.[3] Since the nineteenth century, capitalists and factory owners have been eager to use electricity and technologies of light to extend workers' work hours well into the night to enlarge their own profits at the end of the line.[4] As Hine and labor historians have

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extensively documented, night work has become part and parcel of living under early, mid, and late capitalism. (And, as any academic knows, the dark hours are often the time for unobstructed thinking and writing, whether one has willingly designed their routine that way or not).

Of course, there are sectors that require night labor to ensure others' safety and wellness, such as health-care employees (hospital nurses and doctors, wet nurses, midwives, home health-care providers), emergency responders, and certain service economies in food, retail, hospitality, and transportation. Recent reports on climate change and the alarmingly rapid heating of the planet reveal that more night work will become necessary as a response to intolerable working conditions. This is particularly the case for workers who harvest our food supply, which includes farmworkers, ranchers, and fisherpeople from California to Brazil to India.[5] By 2050, one forthcoming study predicts, nearly forty percent of the global population will likely face "extreme heat stress for at least one hour a day and a third of the year."[6] Night work itself comes with its own array of health risks related to disruption of our natural circadian rhythms; the risk of cardiovascular disease and certain types of cancer goes up, while the body's capacity to handle injury and stress goes down. In a more emotional sense, working untraditional hours can reduce workers' ability to socialize and feel a sense of belonging to their families and communities.

What the following articles in this special issue show, however, are moments across time and place in which workers desired to take on night work for supplemental wage earning or other reasons, while not completely giving up on their human wants of entertainment, relaxation, and pleasure. In fact, multiple case studies here feature workers who paradoxically sought to labor at night despite government or authorities' attempts to curb their ability to do so. The contradictions and unexpected behaviors found in worlds of night work are woven throughout this issue, including in the short introductory piece that begins it. **Wambua Muindi** examines the lyrics of the 2014 song "Riziki," written in response to the economic and political transformation of Nairobi into a "twenty-four-hour city" that affected its old labor rhythms and nightscapes, as well as the creation of new ones. This beginning piece sets up a question that resonates throughout the whole issue: Is night work a boon or a bane? Is it an evil to be reformed, as Hine directed his viewing audiences to believe? Or is it a space of economic opportunity, experimentation, libertinism, and autonomy? The pieces that follow—though they use different research methods—discuss these debates over the propriety and necessity of night work in various geographical contexts and chronological periods. Some other key themes that draw these works together include the paradoxes of night work as often quite dangerous but also necessary or, even, liberating for some laborers; the regulation of night work (for whom it is regulated, and who does the regulating?); and the gendered and racialized contours and contexts of labor at night.

Mark Pierre Dries transports us to the late sixteenth-century mercury mining site of Huancavelica, Peru (second only to Potosí in size) to discuss how Spanish imperial authorities and Andean laborers tried to negotiate cinnabar nightwork. Silver extraction drove Spain's trading ambitions and pursuit of wealth, but the Viceroy wanted to squash perceptions that Andean workers would have to suffer immensely (or even die) in the toxic, dangerous mines to enrich a European empire. A resulting decree that forbade night labor was a "paradoxical effort," in Dries's words, to ameliorate the issue.

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What surprised Spanish authorities was how many Andean workers insisted upon or maneuvered their way into nightwork in the mines, either because the shifts were shorter (from 2 or 3 a.m. until dawn), or paid higher wages, or liberated men during the days to gamble and drink. Some miners elected to work day and night shifts back to back for more money. Looking out for their own interests in what appeared to be exploitative enterprises, these workers will surely surprise readers expecting rebellion of a different kind.

Though we did not intend this issue to fast forward so far into the twentieth century, the next two pieces tackle early 1900s developments in the United States regarding night work. Much like the labor law from colonial Latin America that sought to restrict Andean mining, reformers in the early twentieth-century United States framed their battles as ones about *protection* of workers. To that end, they focused specifically on restricting *who* could work at night, deeming it unsafe for women and children in particular. While reformers argued that night presented unique dangers of injury, sexual predation, and moral decay, many workers resisted such characterizations of threat, offering counternarratives of night work as liberating, professional, and economically necessary for themselves and their loved ones. Night work became a stage on which marginalized workers, particularly working-class women, built solidarity and political power through gendered rhetoric of self-sufficiency, equality, and respectability. **Rachel Tiven**'s "'We were put out of good jobs': Women Night Workers in New York and the Origins of the Women's Equal Opportunity League" explores the ramifications of (and resistance to) Progressive Era efforts to regulate night work. In 1913, the state of New York placed a ban on women's night work, ostensibly as a protective measure, putting thousands of women in printing, streetcar operation, and industrial jobs out of work. Tiven examines "a small contingent of night-working women" who successfully organized against New York's bans through the Women's Equal Opportunity League (WEOL). Focusing on three women in particular—Ella M. Sherwin (a printer), Margaret Hinchey (a transit guard), and Mary A. Murray (a streetcar worker)—Tiven underscores the importance that night work had for their sense of selfhood and economic independence. These three women and the WEOL lobbied vigorously against single-sex protective laws, arguing that they were "intrusive, paternalistic," and severely limited working-class women's economic opportunities. In advocating for their right to work at night and articulating working-class critiques of gendered protections, Tiven notes, these women also presaged larger battles over the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in the United States.[7]

Similarly, **Sarah Pollnow**'s "A 'Promise to Preserve Proper Decorum': Organized Dancers, Filipino Patrons, and the Politics of Night Work in 1920s Seattle" explores localized battles over the legality of night work and women's rights to engage in this kind of labor. This piece also enters into this history through workers' experiences and voices, illuminating paid dancers' vigorous defense of their work against the protective impulses of Seattle's moral regulators. Through their union, the Women Dancing Entertainers' Union (WDEU), dancers framed their work as professional, difficult, and physically taxing, and complementary to their roles as mothers and caretakers. As Pollnow details, the WDEU was initially successful in beating back anti-vice campaigns, particularly by separating their dancing from fears of sexual solicitation. Yet the racial implications of nocturnal dance halls—and the patronage of Filipino men

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especially—bolstered reformers' arguments to protect white women from sexual and racial threats (made all the more concerning because of the late hours of their work). In the end, these racial anxieties trumped dancers' gendered arguments that their labors were necessary, moral, and professional.

Moving to the Cold War period in Czechoslovakia, **Lucie Dušková** focuses on how night work schemes played out in a state socialist system. Amassing an archive including Communist Party meeting minutes, factory reports, economic data, police documents, and legal and popular culture sources, Dušková reveals how state authorities implemented uniform night-shift bonuses that allowed the state to solve its labor shortage problem but still save face amidst Marxist critiques of night work as a destructive force on people's health and personal lives. Thus, contrary to its global image, Czechoslovakia was not really eradicating night work but pushing for its standardization in a new economic plan because the greater (and mostly agrarian) bloc needed to be industrialized at a grander and faster pace. While some workers took on night work out of a brand of patriotism, others wanted more autonomy and less supervision by management, and women in particular wanted more opportunities to make money since their night work in various sectors (such as bakeries) had been previously banned in the name of gendered protection.

Speaking of bakeries, **Nate Holdren**'s "Labor History and the Violence of Class: A Meditation on the Anniversary of *Lochner v. New York*" uses the 120th anniversary of a 1905 U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down work hour limits in the baking industry to ask how our consensuses as labor historians are rooted in more complexity and diversity than is evident on the surface. While historical, labor, and legal scholars generally agree that *Lochner* was a setback to the labor movement in the United States, Holdren points out that some people's opposition is rooted in wanting to see an "amelioration of time- and place-specific problems in working-class people's lives" while others want to see an elimination of "class as … a category of violence and injustice" altogether. The problems of *Lochner* are multiple and manifest in many different industries and scenarios, and as such, Holdren muses, this case brings into question the base values and goals each of us brings to the table while doing our work as scholars of labor history.

As we face a future in which night work may become a more central part of our lives due to climate change or new economic schemes, these pieces are useful springboards for thought and discussion. While we originally planned for this issue to have more geographical reach into other areas of the world like China, India, Western Europe, and middle America, authors and articles fell out of the issue as time went on, for various reasons. We also would have loved to have multiple centuries represented in our temporal sweep. Despite these gaps and limitations, we hope these articles will help readers think about cases of night work as both cautionary tales and blueprints for action. At certain times, darkness and night seem menacing or appear to aid the obfuscation of mistreated or exploited working people; at other moments, however, they can be viewed as spaces for politicization, labor organizing, and community building.

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Notes

1. Lewis Wickes Hine, "#81. Typical Night Scene in an Indiana Glass Works," August 1908, Lot 7478, National Child Labor Committee Collection, Library of Congress Online Catalog, https://www.loc.gov/item/2018673719/ (accessed 11 December 2024).
2. Hine, "Late at night. Sewing tapes on gloves. The boy helps. Family of five sleep in room where the work is done. Location: New York, New York (State)," February 1908, Lot 7481, National Child Labor Committee Collection, Library of Congress Online Catalog, https://www.loc.gov/item/2018673622/ (accessed 11 December 2024).
3. For more on cemetery labor, which has generally moved out of the evening hours since the late 19th century, see Allyson P. Brantley, "To Live and Die in Catholic L.A.: Cemetery Workers, Catholic Employers, & Labor's Future," *Modern American History* (forthcoming).
4. On illumination technologies and expanding hours of work, see Jeremy Zallen, *American Lucifers: The Dark History of Artificial Light, 1750-1865* (Chapel Hill, 2019).
5. Ayurella Horn-Muller, "The Night Shift," December 11, 2024, https://grist.org/food-and-agriculture/overnight-work-extreme-heat-adaptation-agriculture/ (accessed 16 December 2024).
6. Naia, "The Silent Crisis: Heat Stress & the Future of Agriculture in Key Global Regions," December 11, 2024, https://medium.com/@naiacasina/the-silent-crisis-heat-stress-and-the-future-of-agriculture-in-key-global-regions-b2ad5ccb6403?source=user_profile_page———0———-fb97906204e8 – – – – – (accessed 16 December 2024).
7. On debates over the Equal Rights Amendment in the twentieth century United States, see Amy E. Butler, *Two Paths to Equality: Alice Paul and Ethel M. Smith in the ERA Debate, 1921–1929* (Albany, 2002) and Emily Suzanne Johnson, *This Is Our Message: Women's Leadership in the New Christian Right* (New York, 2019).

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