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“Longing for ‘Normal’ Post-Fordism: Cape Verdean Labor-Power on a Lisbon Periphery in Crisis”

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ABSTRACT

Starting in the late 1970s, Cape Verdean labor-power became indispensable in a number of sectors of the Portuguese economy, no longer merely filling gaps but serving as a vital part of the workforce in key industries such as civil construction and cleaning services. Assuming a central role in the productive process, these largely “low-skilled” immigrants came to form a reserve army of labor in the fragmented service-sector economy of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. Although they come from diverse backgrounds and belong to different migratory phases, Cape Verdeans continue to be concentrated in the most precarious and poorly paid strata of the Portuguese labor market. The tenuous situation of most Cape Verdean immigrants has made them especially

vulnerable to the post-2010 economic downturn and the accompanying IMF-mandated structural changes and liberalization measures. In this paper, I examine the trajectory of four Cape Verdean workers in the Portuguese labor market prior to 2010 and during the current “crisis economy.” While these accounts differ in the details, they are alike in how my interviewees have seen their daily lives become more difficult and insecure. In addition to exploring this sequence of events, I contextualize these case studies within the extant literature on precarity. In this regard, I identify a temporal gap in concept of precarity as it has been theorized to date. Whereas most scholars juxtapose the stability of the Fordist period with the precariousness of our post-Fordist times, I wish to highlight how my interviewees simply long for *pre-crisis* post-Fordism, not Fordism per se. [Cape Verde, Portugal, crisis, precarious work, wages]

Beginning in the mid-1950s, due to widespread underdevelopment in the countryside, Portugal's rural poor emigrated en masse to countries in Northern Europe and North America that were experiencing high levels of economic growth (Carling and Åkesson 2009:130). Concurrently, Portugal's two large coastal cities, Lisbon and Porto, started developing rapidly as well, creating employment opportunities in civil construction, services, public works, and manufacturing. As salaries in these sectors rose, Portugal's authoritarian corporatist regime arranged for workers from the Cape Verde Islands, then a colony of Portugal, to come to the metropole as a less-expensive "alternative." The entry of Cape Verdeans at the bottom of the labor market contributed to the promotion of white Portuguese workers to skilled, supervisory, technical, or white-collar positions with higher status and better conditions. At the same time, the Portuguese government made some tentative efforts to improve infrastructure in the Cape Verdean archipelago, contracting large domestic construction companies to build desalination and power plants, wells, roads, dams, runways, and ports in the historically neglected islands. Upon completion of these projects, many of the Portuguese companies offered contracts to their Cape Verdean employees to work for them in the metropole (Carling 2002:6; Batalha 2004:133).

For Cape Verdeans during this period, leaving the islands was often a matter of life or death. From the 1940s until the early 1980s, Cape Verde went through a number of multiyear droughts that caused widespread famine and mortality levels "that are exceptional in human history" (Carling 2002:19). These resulted from a colonial economic policy that favored cash crops for export (e.g., cotton, dyes, oil plants, sugarcane, etc.) over subsistence production, making the islands particularly susceptible

to famine during times of little or no rain (Moran 1982:77–82).<sup>i</sup> Staples such as maize and beans were not allowed access to limited water supplies and were thus subjected to the uncertain local climate. The inability of the country to sustain itself resulted in most Cape Verdeans believing that a life abroad was the only option available to ensure the well-being of themselves and their family members (Åkesson 2004; Carling and Åkesson 2009:135).

Once settled in Lisbon, the initial Cape Verdean “labor pioneers” passed word to family and friends in the islands that more workers were needed. Luís Batalha (2008:31) calls this phenomenon “chain migration,” and it caused the number of Cape Verdean labor immigrants in Portugal to increase rapidly. Starting in the late 1960s, Cape Verdean labor-power became indispensable to a number of sectors in the Portuguese economy, no longer merely filling gaps but serving as a vital part of the workforce in key industries. Assuming a central role in the productive process, these largely “low-skilled” immigrants came to form a reserve army of labor in Lisbon’s highly fragmented and compartmentalized service-sector economy. In the mid-1980s, a larger, more sustained migratory flux of approximately 15,000 islanders took place, as increasing numbers of women and children arrived to join family members already living in Portugal (Batalha and Carling 2008:68). The fifteen-year period that followed saw sustained economic growth precipitated by a construction boom and infrastructure improvements in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. Immigrants of this period found a job market in Lisbon buoyed by EU-fuelled growth, which created additional employment opportunities within a complex service economy.

The “boom” times did not last forever. In more recent years, Cape Verdean immigrants have faced an increasingly unstable labor market as a result of the post-2010 economic downturn and the accompanying IMF-mandated structural changes and liberalization measures. The Portuguese government’s reliance on its international creditors has meant that the national economy has been forced to undergo a massive “internal devaluation,” leading to permanently high structural unemployment and a politico-economic system that is prone to crisis.<sup>ii</sup>

In Portugal’s post-industrial economy of today, labor teams are frequently recruited at short notice, particularly in industries traditionally dominated by men, and so too can they be disbanded as quickly as they were formed. Consisting mostly of unaffiliated manual labor, labor remunerated at below minimum wage, or labor for the enterprises of kin or friends, these short-term activities, rarely “formalized,” are created and dissolved according to the whims of the market and do not guarantee more than temporary material survival for the workers (cf. Fu 2013:28). This high degree of instability creates intense inter-worker competition and forces wages downward for those toiling in these low-paying positions.

Cape Verdean immigrants are now competitors in a market in which the labor supply is structurally larger than the incessantly fluctuating demand (Oliveira 2008:84; Batalha 2008:35). Hired and fired essentially at will, these workers go through prolonged and unpredictable periods of joblessness. Even when obtaining work, they find that many employment conditions are non-negotiable, including their restricted eligibility for benefits from the Portuguese national social security system. Although they come from diverse backgrounds and belong to different migratory phases, Cape Verdeans continue

to be concentrated in the most poorly paid strata of the Portuguese labor market, with many working without contract in the informal sector (cf. Grassi 2007:130–133). As a result, the majority of islanders in Lisbon has been transformed into a class of working poor, unable to gain entry into the middle class(es), let alone the proletariat. They now find themselves clinging to the few entry-level positions remaining in an economy undergoing painful structural changes and economic contraction.

The analysis in this paper is based on 1) quantitative data reflecting my interviewees' wages and hours worked and 2) how these have been affected since the beginning of the Eurozone crisis in 2009. It also emerges from extensive participant-observation and interviews with Cape Verdean immigrants exploring how the prolonged economic downturn has altered the way that they reflect on their status as workers. The article is divided into three principal sections. The first discusses the literature on precarity and how it relates to the experiences of Cape Verdean labor immigrants in contemporary Lisbon. Here, I identify a temporal gap in concept of precarity as it has been theorized to date. Whereas most scholars juxtapose the stability of the Fordist period with the precariousness of our post-Fordist times, I wish to highlight the desire of workers longing for *pre-crisis* post-Fordism, not Fordism per se. The second section explores four ethnographic case studies that detail the work histories and challenges common to the Cape Verdean immigrants currently living on a Lisbon periphery in crisis. These illustrative cases have been collected as part of a long-term project (started in 2010) on the experience of being a Cape Verdean labor immigrant in Lisbon. The final section analyzes the accounts of my informants, comparing and contrasting various features of their work histories. While these accounts differ in the details, they are alike

in how the interviewees have seen their daily lives become more difficult and insecure. As a result, these immigrants have had to intensify their use of a number of strategies to ensure their short-term material survival, including reliance on subcontracting networks and the help of family and friends (Weeks 2012b).

## PRECARITY

My informants' departure from Cape Verde and their current precarious status primarily result from external conditions over which they have little control (cf. Neilson and Rossiter 2008:63). While their societal position is marginal, their importance in the Portuguese workforce is central. Portugal, similar to many economies of the Global North, is more dependent than ever on the labor-power of immigrant workers: "migrants are the light infantry of global capitalism. Vast numbers vie with each other for jobs. Most have to put up with short-term contracts, with low wages and few benefits. The process is systemic, not accidental" (Standing 2011:113, cited in Allison 2013:53). My objective here is to contextualize and historicize the more universalizing and teleological claims about precarity by focusing on how these processes are understood and experienced in a specific cultural and social milieu (Muehlebach 2013:298). Following Kathleen Millar (2014:35), I highlight the relationship between precarious labor and the precarious lives of my informants, situating their experiences as low-wage workers in Lisbon within the larger context of politico-economic crisis in Portugal.

While numerous authors have made important contributions to the literature on precarity (Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Muehlebach 2013), my goal is to refocus our collective attention to questions of time. To date, the temporality of precarity has been explored in two regards. The first contrasts the precarity of today with the mid-century

Fordist era of the Global North (e.g., Allison 2013). Whereas people in many parts of the world used to be able to expect a stable economic situation, this narrative goes, now they can no longer take such predictability for granted. The second emphasizes the ongoing precarious conditions of people who have never experienced more stable livelihoods (e.g., Millar 2014). Taking Arne Kalleberg's definition of precarious work as a conceptual starting point, "employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker" (2009:2), this account of precarity stresses that work for most people around the world has been historically precarious, thus making precarity the rule and not the exception.

However, the experiences of Cape Verdean immigrants in Portugal demonstrate that these temporalities of precarity cannot always be conceived as distinct eras. Even though few Cape Verdean immigrants have ever known the stability or protections typical of the Fordist era (which came later and had a shorter duration in Portugal), they still wished for a return to previous times, not associated with Fordism but rather *pre-crisis post-Fordism*. This period roughly corresponds to 1992–2007, fifteen years characterized by sustained economic growth, a construction boom, and infrastructure improvements in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. During this time, Cape Verdean immigrants had little difficulty finding employment in the expanding service-sector job market that arose as Portugal adopted the post-Fordist economic "reforms" mandated by the EU. The case studies presented below reveal how my interviewees experienced the transition from this growing economy to the current shrinking one. By exposing these changes, I seek to "bring the worker back in" (Kalleberg 2009:14) to explanations of



precarity, helping us to understand more fully how these immigrants are negotiating their working lives during a prolonged economic downturn.

## PRECARIOUS EXISTENCE: FOUR CASE STUDIES

### *1. TAÍS*

Taís arrived in Lisbon on 1 May 2004 (International Workers' Day) from a small interior city on the island of Santiago in Cape Verde.<sup>iii</sup> For her first four years, she was the live-in domestic worker for a family in the residential neighborhood of São João de Brito. While still in Cape Verde, Taís learned of this job through a paternal aunt, who had returned to the islands to be with her children. Initially, Taís made €500 (\$675) per month and spent nothing on housing. In 2008, Taís had to leave this job due to a pregnancy and the arrival of her eleven-year-old daughter from rural Cape Verde, for her employers wanted their domestic worker to live alone in the house. In a similar manner to how she got the job in 2004, Taís arranged for a friend to take her spot as the live-in domestic worker for this family. In retrospect, she believes that this first job has been the best one she has had while in Lisbon.

After leaving this family's house, Taís signed up with an agency and found a spot working for a woman in the upscale residential area of Estrela. Quickly, however, she realized something was amiss, as the woman rifled through her bags without permission and blamed her for breaking a toilet.<sup>iv</sup> Needless to say, Taís quickly left this situation and went to work for a family in Encarnação, a residential neighborhood near the airport and her apartment. This arrangement did not work out either because the family would not allow her flexibility to spend time with her young daughters.

Since 2010, Taís has been working off the books for three members of a Lisbon family, a job she learned about through a cousin. She begins her workday by spending two hours, six times per week, helping an elderly great-grandmother, Dona Manuela, eat breakfast and get dressed. Afterwards, Taís does two hours of similar work for Dona Manuela’s sister, Dona Carolina, but only three times per week. She is paid an hourly rate of €6.50 (\$8.60) for working in their apartments. Taís spends fewer hours and earns less money cleaning the home of Inês, the granddaughter of Manuela and Carolina. She is at Inês’s house four hours per week, in two two-hour intervals, at an hourly rate of €6 (\$7.90). Inês has been unemployed since May of 2013. Before Inês lost her job, Taís worked in her home for three hours per day, five days a week, including going to pick up her children from their school in the middle-class Campo de Ourique neighborhood. Taís feels that the new schedule, four hours per week, is not nearly enough time to do a proper job in this five-person household. She likes Inês but finds her cheap and difficult about work-related matters. Due to the loss of hours in Inês’s home, which accompanied a 22% reduction in pay (see table one below), Taís began looking for additional work.

**SEE TABLE ONE (BELOW)**

While looking for work in the shopping and residential district of Bairro Azul, Taís saw a help-wanted classified for a cleaning-service company. She called the number, and the man who answered the phone happened to be nearby and immediately offered her a job – what luck. This is how she got work cleaning a nearby office building, which she now does twice weekly, for a total of three hours, at an hourly rate of €6.50 (\$8.75).

In response to having markedly lower take-home pay, Taís has reduced her spending by buying fewer clothes and substituting meat and fish with other, less

expensive kinds of food. Likewise, she has put off getting a driver's license and sending her four-year-old daughter to swim lessons. In Taís's ten years in Lisbon, her employers have always insisted that she work under the table. Thus, she has never been able to make contributions (*desconto*) to the Portuguese national social security program, which means she is ineligible for its benefits, including a retirement pension. Taís says that her life would be easier if she had more working hours, could save money, could make contributions to social security, could help her teenage daughter find a job, and "if [she] won the Euromillions lottery."

## 2. DJON

In 2007, Djon came to Portugal from a village on the island of Fogo in Cape Verde to study information technology at a private university in Guimarães, a city in the north of Portugal. While a full-time student at night, Djon worked from 8:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. as a civil construction assistant (*servente*) remodeling a large old house. This job lasted a year, provided Djon with a daily lunch, and paid him €1200 (\$1620) per month, almost three times Portugal's minimum monthly salary at the time of €426 (\$575). Looking back on his work experience, he said that this job was without a doubt his best, in terms of remuneration and amiable relations with his boss and colleagues.

However, this good job ended and, unable to find another in Guimarães, Djon had to leave his studies and move to Lisbon, where work was supposedly more plentiful and he could live in his cousin's house without paying rent. His first Lisbon-area job was in the residential and industrial suburb of Loures, where he made the *calçada* cobblestone walkways that are so recognizable in Portugal. As an attendant, Djon made €40 (\$54) per day, ten fewer than he had earned while working in Guimarães. When this job came to an

end, he was without work for five months, unable to receive unemployment benefits because Djon's employer had not made contributions (*fazer desconto*) into the Portuguese national social security program on his behalf. Eventually, Djon found work again making *calçada* in Estoril, a wealthy seaside suburb of Lisbon, for which he was paid €50 (\$67.50) per day.

At the end of this job, Djon was unemployed for nearly a year. He finally found work building luxury homes with pools in Santarém, a small city 70 kilometers north of Lisbon, as a mason's assistant. His tasks included loading and mixing cement and organizing the worksite. The project lasted almost two years, and he earned €40 (\$54) per day. He had 13 coworkers at this site, all of whom were Cape Verdean. He got a ride daily to Santarém from his boss, who picked him up in the morning at his cousin's home in a "shantytown" (*bairro clandestino*) on the Lisbon periphery. After this work finished, Djon had irregular, day-labor jobs (*biscate*) for many months. When working as a day laborer, Djon described days staying glued to his cell phone, constantly checking in with potential employers or trying to arrange work for the next day. In this regard, he never knew in advance whether a job would materialize or, worse, get canceled the minute he showed up at the site (cf. Allison 2013:46).

Finally, he found some steady work in Estremoz, a town in the rural Alentejo region, building single-family homes and two municipal pools. Like for the Santarém job, Djon went to the site in the boss's car and all of his coworkers were Cape Verdeans. This project, however, only lasted seven months, and his daily rate was only €30 (\$40.50), a twenty-euro (\$27) decline since the job in Guimarães in 2007. Additionally, unlike at his previous jobs, he now had to provide his own lunch. Regardless, Djon liked his boss in

Estremoz, and even though the wages were paltry, he never missed a paycheck. “The pay was low, but it’s better than nothing,” he stressed.

Djon’s most recent job was remodeling a house in the São Bento neighborhood of Lisbon. He worked on the floors, walls, and hung drywall. He did not care much for the boss, who was racist toward Cape Verdeans and knew that he could get away with paying them very little. Djon mentioned that at this site, of the eight workers, four were Cape Verdeans, three were Brazilians, and one was Portuguese. He received only €25 (\$33.75) per day and was forced to work 9.5 hours daily instead of the usual eight. As in Estremoz, lunch was not provided. “It’s like the new slavery,” Djon said of this experience, a particularly haunting comment given Cape Verde’s 350-year history as a slave entrepôt between West Africa and the Americas.

**SEE TABLE TWO (BELOW)**

**SEE FIGURE ONE (BELOW)**

During his work career in Portugal, Djon has twice not been paid for jobs he completed. Because he is working without a contract, Djon knows that the boss can withhold pay with little fear of retaliation. He missed a paycheck in São Bento, his last month’s wages of €650 (\$877). This also happened during the time he was doing day labor, another stolen €250 (\$337). Adding to his precarious position, Djon, like Taís, has never been able to contribute to the Portuguese national social security system.

Apparently he is not alone in this regard. Djon mentioned that few of the male Cape Verdeans who work in civil construction in Portugal make these contributions. With an air of frustration, he noted that Portugal receives inexpensive brawn from Cape Verdean workers and does not have to “pay the bill” for their health care or retirement.

Friends and family from Cape Verde have helped Djon find each of these jobs. As I saw a number of times, compatriots stop him in the street to inquire if he has work, while others will call or use social media to let him know about a particular job. Djon's friend Zé, also a fellow co-islander from Fogo, works as a subcontractor for a number of Portuguese construction companies that have fixed contracts with local municipalities. Zé gives work to his friends, but does not pay much, no more than a daily rate of €30 (\$40.50), for budgets these days are squeezed and he spreads the work around to friends and family members (see section on "Work Triage"). Additionally, Djon said that the bar "Melissa" in the suburban parish of Buraca is a well-known meeting spot for civil construction subcontractors and workers. According to Djon, this is a good place to socialize and look for work.

The crisis has affected Djon's working life in five ways. One, he only has sporadic work these days. Two, he earns much less than before. Three, bosses are requiring longer hours and his commuting time has increased, as he has had to travel progressively farther from Lisbon to find work. Four, jobs are less likely to provide lunch. Five, and perhaps most importantly, the crisis has resulted in Djon being unable to continue his studies at the university in Guimarães. If he could have kept that job he liked so much, Djon would have finished his bachelor's degree by now. In sum, the crisis has dramatically altered his life plans. "It's like not being able to dream," he lamented (cf. Martins 2013:75).

Djon has adapted to hardship and uncertainty by saving money for eventual use during the long periods of unemployment he must endure. His living situation helps, in that he does not pay rent to live in his cousin's place in a "shantytown" (*bairro*

*clandestino*) on the Lisbon periphery. Even as rent-free living is certainly advantageous, Djon is trapped in this situation to a certain extent. Officials from the municipality make unannounced “inspections” of the “squatter homes” in his neighborhood once per month. If the owner, or a family member of the owner, is not found living in the house, the inspectors will order it demolished (Pardue 2013:119). If the owner is not there (e.g., if she is working), the inspectors will leave a message with the neighbors insisting that she, or a family member living in her home, go see the municipal authorities in person.

Djon’s plans for the future involve trying to work for two years in the United States, where his mother and brothers live, and eventually returning to Guimarães to finish his university degree.<sup>v</sup> Ultimately, Djon wants to return to the island of Fogo and pursue a career in I.T. In the short term, however, he said that his situation in Portugal would improve if he earned more money and could make contributions to social security. Djon would also like to gain enough experience to become a *calçada* specialist (*calceteiro*) instead of an assistant. The pay difference between these two positions is about €30 (\$40.50) per day.

### 3. LURDES

Lurdes arrived in Portugal in 2007 from an interior town on the island of Santiago in Cape Verde. She came initially to study management at a private university in Lisbon, which meant that it was difficult for her to get a work permit. Her student visa, after all, stated that she could not work legally on a full-time basis. Lurdes recounted her struggle to find a first job and secure a work visa, which she finally got with the help of an aunt. After much searching, Lurdes landed a job in a cleaning-services firm, Limpotec, which in turn contracted out her labor-time to three companies. Unlike Taís and Djon, Lurdes

has a work contract and makes payments into the Portuguese national social security system. Because her status is formalized, she will be able to apply for Portuguese citizenship starting in 2014.

The first of her three jobs with the cleaning firm is at an administrative center of a large Portuguese bank, where she works for 2.5 hours per day, six days a week. At the bank, Lurdes likes her supervisor and has nine colleagues: five Cape Verdeans, two Brazilians, and two Bissau-Guineans. Each weekday, she also cleans for one hour in the office of an import-export business, and on Mondays and Wednesdays, she sweeps the stairwells and elevators in an architectural firm for three additional hours each day.

In addition to this work with the agency, Lurdes cleans the inside of the same architectural firm as an “independent contractor” for two hours each weekday. She likes her boss at this firm far less than the one at the bank. This is in part because here she is made to work on *recibos verdes* (literally, “green invoices”), which is different from salaried work in that the employer does not match an employee’s social security contributions. Likewise, a worker on *recibos verdes* is afforded no sick leave or vacation time from the business. Even though most people who work on *recibos verdes* end up making a bit more per hour, it is an undesirable arrangement that ends up costing workers extra money and time due to all the paperwork. However, Lurdes stresses, “it’s better than nothing.”

Since 2008, Lurdes’s working situation has taken a turn for the worse in four regards. First, Limpotec reduced her salary in 2010. Second, her hours at the bank with Limpotec were cut from three to 2.5, and she used to spend three hours daily on *recibos verdes* cleaning the architectural firm; now, it is only two. These reductions mean that



Lurdes is working eight fewer hours per week, a decrease in time and wages of almost 20 percent. Third, similar to most workers in Portugal, the number of paid vacation days to which she is entitled has been reduced from 26 to 22. Last, Lurdes's Limpotec supervisors have reduced personnel at the bank job from eleven to nine, which means that fewer people have to do more work in order to make up for the lost productivity of those who have been laid off.

Most importantly, the crisis has caused Lurdes to stop her university education, which means that she has put off her life goals of working as a human resources specialist in Cape Verde and building a house in her hometown (cf. Martins 2013:272). Likewise, her partner had to move to the Netherlands in order to find a job in civil construction, an example of how "unstable work destabilizes daily living" (Allison 2013:349). More concretely, Lurdes said that her current work situation would improve if she could return to working three hours per day in the architectural firm (instead of two) and if she could go full time at Limpotec and not have to work on *recibos verdes*.

#### 4. MÓNICA

Mónica came to Lisbon in 1994 from Praia, the capital of Cape Verde, to work in the home of a family in the residential neighborhood of Quinta das Conchas. Her initial monthly salary was the equivalent of €200 or \$270. Like many other Cape Verdean women working in Portugal, Mónica found this job while still in Cape Verde. She happened to be riding in a car with a close friend and a friend of his from Portugal. She recalls with a smile the moment when she learned that the son of this Portuguese man was looking to hire a live-in domestic helper. Leaving her previous job of 17 years, cleaning the house of a close family friend, Mónica seized the opportunity and left Cape

Verde to “make a better life abroad.” That Mónica made this decision so quickly speaks to how omnipresent the prospect of gaining a better life abroad is among islanders (cf. Drotbohm 2009:138).<sup>vi</sup>

After two years in this initial job, Mónica moved in with another family in the wealthy seaside suburb of Carcavelos, where she earned €500 (\$675) per month. With this family, she secured a work contract and began to make contributions to the Portuguese national social security system (which continues to this day). After saving money for two more years as a live-in domestic helper, she began renting an apartment alone and started to charge clients by the hour. Mónica did this for two to three years, but ultimately stopped because the work was inconsistent. Her first daily, but non-live-in, job was in the residential and commercial area of Sete Rios, where she put in five hours per day for four years. While still with this family, Mónica came across her best job yet, working for Dona Paula in the nearby neighborhood of Laranjeiras. She started out working part time in both locations, but quickly transitioned to working only in Laranjeiras, where she continued for the next 13 years.

In 2012, Mónica took a risk and left Portugal to join the father of one of her daughters, who had become a successful construction subcontractor in Luxembourg. After saving up money for the travel and initial expenses, she quit her job in Laranjeiras, arranged for a friend to replace her at Dona Paula’s, and left by bus for the Grand Duchy. Unfortunately, life in Luxembourg was much harder than she expected. Due to the linguistic barriers and the fact that she lacked a professional network, Mónica tried for weeks without success to find work. Concurrently, her relationship with her daughter’s father soured, thus taking away a vital source of emotional, logistical, and financial

support. After four months, during which she could find only two weeks of temporary work cleaning office buildings, Mónica returned to Lisbon. Alluding to the relationship between precarious labor and precarious life (cf. Millar 2014:35), she lamented, “I wasted hard-earned money in Luxembourg.”

Back in Lisbon once again, Mónica found that she could not return to the job she liked so much in Laranjeiras. However, Dona Paula was able to find Mónica work taking care of an elderly, bedridden woman who lives near Parque das Nações (Nations’ Park), the neighborhood in Lisbon that hosted the World’s Fair Expo in 1998. Mónica currently works the night shift with this woman, 8:00 p.m. to 8:30 a.m., while a Portuguese colleague is there during the day. Mónica is responsible for washing, dressing, helping the woman get in and out of bed, and making her dinner and breakfast. While she is paid a meager rate for the 12.5 hours, says that the job is only really three hours of work, for the woman is asleep the remainder of the time.

Mónica’s return to Lisbon resulted in a reduction in salary and a less fulfilling work experience than her years with Dona Paula. The fragile health of her employer means that Mónica could, at a moment’s notice, become unemployed once again. Moreover, with her current wages, she can neither afford to buy the food items she used to be able to purchase nor can she plan a trip back to Cape Verde to see her adult daughters and extended family. While with Dona Paula, Mónica saved enough money to send one of her daughters to study law in Brazil, while the other was able to attend a school of management in Cape Verde. To save such money now would be unthinkable. Understandably, after working nonstop since 1977, Mónica is tired and wants to retire in Cape Verde. To do this though, she will have to work for at least another three years in

order to amass enough savings and social security benefits, which she can receive even after returning to Cape Verde (Carling and Åkesson 2009:139–140).

## ANALYSIS

### *Precarity*

From their already tenuous place as immigrants in an economy of secondary global importance, Portugal's Cape Verdean working poor have been especially hard hit by the post-2010 economic downturn. The most susceptible of this population are those who have arrived in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area within the past 10 years, with nothing but their labor to sell. While their decision to leave Cape Verde was based on a number of factors, such as Djon and Lurdes's desire to pursue university education, they also sought to alleviate shrinking incomes (Couto 2012), transcend impediments to social mobility (Carling 2002:20), and escape high youth unemployment (Martins 2013:75) in the islands by engaging in wage labor in Lisbon.

In normal times of economic hardship, my informants' families might simply increase the number of hours they collectively worked and perhaps send some members abroad to toil in the more robust economies of Northern Europe. According to this logic, parents would take on second or even third jobs, or seek out additional hours at their primary workplace. Their teenage children would work after school and during breaks, and their retired parents would return to the labor force in either a part- or full-time capacity. Taís's hope that her family's situation would improve if her high school-aged daughter could find summer employment illustrates this strategy.

In the current crisis, however, in which even the most undesirable jobs are difficult to come by, such a tactic no longer works (cf. Harvey 2003:149). For example,

Taís and Djon have been pushed deeper into the informal labor market, which has come to serve as an “employer of last resort” (Millar 2014:33) in Portugal’s contracting economy. In the informal sector, these two are left to get by as small-scale service providers or day laborers, often within their own neighborhoods. While this informal work can provide Taís and Djon some temporary respite from a loss of income caused by joblessness, it undoubtedly means a future of lower pay, few or no benefits, and more frequent and prolonged periods of unemployment.

Unfortunately, for low-wage immigrant workers like my informants, many of the job losses that have taken place in Portugal since 2010 are not temporary (Sol 2013). Employers in industry, civil construction, retail, cleaning services, and other sectors have used the crisis as an excuse to reduce personnel and forgo productive activities. While most Portuguese workers have seen some reduction in pay and benefits since 2010, the downward pressure on the wages of Cape Verdean immigrants has been particularly savage due to a reduction of hours and personnel, increased workloads, unpredictable schedules and pay, and higher levels of unemployment. Djon and Lurdes’s experiences most clearly reflect this combination of factors. Those “lucky” enough to be employed are now obliged to increase the amount of work they do, to make up for the production of those whose jobs have been cut. Added to this toxic mix is heightened workplace and job-market competition (Oliveira 2008:84; Batalha 2008:35), as employers use insecurity as a threat and a means to increase productivity. As the recently unemployed become more willing to consider lower-level jobs, all workers are forced to compete among themselves simply to hold on to one of the limited number of positions available.

In Taís's case, it is striking how precarious her experience in Portugal has been to date. Tragically, she is located at the bottom of a hierarchy found among Lisbon's working class(es); she receives casual rather than protected wages, does not benefit from a stable contractual relationship with employers, is eligible for few if any working benefits, has limited access to state and welfare protections, and is denied many of the voting rights of Portuguese citizens. None of her jobs to date has provided much security or even formalized her status with a work contract. The onus is on her to continually adjust to the employers' needs. With little reason to be hopeful, she does not believe that the situation in the country will improve.

### *Subcontracting*

In Djon's case, one can see the importance of subcontracting in Portugal's civil construction industry. This phenomenon mirrors trends that have become widespread in the country's service sectors during the past fifteen years. On the upside, for Cape Verdean labor immigrants like Djon, subcontracting outfits have become vital sources of employment. Cape Verdean subcontractors are able to draw upon workers from a vast network of compatriots (Thiel 2012:416), thus providing fellow immigrants some flexibility in an otherwise unfavorable job market. It also helps Cape Verdeans to bypass some of the labor-market difficulties they encounter: discrimination, un- and under-employment, and "competition" from other immigrants from Brazil and Eastern Europe (Batalha 2008:35).

The downside is that subcontracting arrangements, such as the one between Djon and Zé, can start to resemble client-patron relationships. On a number of occasions, Zé has arranged some desperately needed short-term work for Djon. As in other client-

patron arrangements, Djon receives these employment opportunities while Zé gains access to inexpensive labor and Djon's loyalty. Similar to other Cape Verdean subcontractors in Lisbon, Zé can mobilize a labor team to complete a job at short notice, though neither he nor the workers retain any permanent commitment to the employer.

Over time, these subcontracting "networks" have multiplied within the same sectors, meaning that a heavy Cape Verdean presence has come to mark many of the precarious jobs in Portugal. Pedro Góis (2008:17) writes that Cape Verdean immigrants prefer to work alongside their fellow nationals due to similarities in culture and language (Kriolu), thus "reproducing and amplifying the very network into which they insert themselves"; this phenomenon "can either be seen as a job-market advantage or inversely a curse." As Cape Verdeans risk saturating a particular subsector of the service economy, a strategy designed to help them find work can lead to high levels of unemployment during a period of crisis. Furthermore, a social network of inclusion ends up being, in certain cases, a network of exclusion, impeding access to different employment and educational opportunities (cf. Roggeveen and Van Meeteren 2013:1080).

### *Work Triage*

In addition to subcontracting, Cape Verdean immigrants have developed other strategies to combat their precarity, including a form of "work triage." In its common usage, *triage* describes the process of assigning precedence to patients in a hospital emergency room, such that those with the gravest illness or injury will be treated first. In my conversations with Djon, I realized that he and his colleagues have an arrangement along similar lines, which they call *quinzena* or "fortnight," meaning a period of 15 days. Like a head triage nurse in an emergency room, Zé, as leader of the subcontracting group,

is charged with allocating work among the members of social network based on whoever needs money the most. Such a process is particularly difficult, yet essential, during a time of crisis, when wage labor becomes a scarce resource that Zé must divvy up among a group of workers. Djon laments, “We do *quinzena* so that everyone can have money to pay their bills, to guarantee everyone a bit of work... It’s better than nothing. We’d like to work the entire month, but that is not possible. We have to do this.”

This system of work triage is called *quinzena* because, within the construction sector in Portugal, the number of working days per month is divided into two fortnights. Whereas normally one worker would toil full time for a month (roughly 26 days), under *quinzena* two workers would split this number of working days, thus dividing one job between two people (13 days each). For example, at Djon’s job building houses and pools in Estremoz, the *quinzena* leader chose a group of 18 family and friends originating from Fogo, Djon’s home island in Cape Verde: nine people worked the first part of each month while the remaining nine worked the second half for the duration of the project.

A prerequisite for *quinzena* arrangements is trust among participants. Like those of triage patients waiting for the attention of a doctor, participants’ needs have to be deemed real, so that no one takes advantage of the system by feigning undue hardship. It is the *quinzena*’s leader who is responsible for determining the levels of neediness among the group. In this regard, Djon lauded Zé’s capacity to keep abreast of people’s personal situations. Djon mentioned that supporting a family, paying school fees, and keeping up with high rents are among the criteria for establishing who is a higher priority case within a *quinzena*. Unfortunately, under such criteria, Djon is personally at a disadvantage: he is not married, has no children, and lives rent-free in his cousin’s house. He empathizes,



however, with the more difficult plights of his co-workers: “I understand that others have more needs than I do.” Group members who support large families and have many expenses, especially university tuition for their children, often work full time, that is, two *quinzenas* in one month. It is also common for particularly needy workers to be paired up with more-secure counterparts, dividing a working month into 20- and 10-day increments. Djon had an arrangement along these lines with Carlos, a friend from Fogo who has a child to support and needs to make an expensive rent payment each month.

One afternoon, I saw the *quinzena* process in action in a “shantytown” on the Lisbon periphery. Djon and I ran into Brito, the leader of a group of 30 painters who hail primarily from Brito’s home island, Santo Antão.<sup>vii</sup> Needing a job and knowing that Brito had a number of current projects, Djon was forthcoming about his inability to find work, yet was careful not to be seen as “taxing” his friend or as asking too much. I found out later that this instance did not lead to more work for Djon, presumably because Brito was in contact with other people who were in more desperate situations. Djon recounted how he went to the work site of Brito’s *quinzena*, but stated that “there were already too many people, people with greater needs.”

#### *The Social Network in Precarious Times*

Though Cape Verdeans work in a variety of professions in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, they are disproportionately concentrated in two sectors according to their gender: men in civil or infrastructure construction and women in domestic work or cleaning services (*limpeza*). As elsewhere, these are the sectors that have traditionally incorporated new immigrants in Portugal, such as the arrival of Brazilians and “Ukrainians” in the early 2000s.<sup>viii</sup> Both Lurdes’s and Taís’s experiences reflect the

tendency for Cape Verdean women to work as cleaners which, unfortunately, has meant that they have experienced little socioeconomic mobility in Portugal (Oliveira 2008:74–75; Weeks 2011:610; Thiel 2012:416).

Due to these limited employment prospects, the high hopes that Cape Verdean immigrants harbor upon arrival in Portugal often lead to frustration and disillusionment. Such a reduction in expectations is most striking in the cases of Djon and Lurdes. Both left Cape Verde with high aspirations for educational achievement (cf. Martins 2013:144), seeing university study as a way to pursue a professional career in Cape Verde. Due to the crisis, however, each had to abandon their studies for financial reasons and brave a job market in which precarious work was the only option available to them. The desire of Djon and Lurdes to pursue higher education suggests that they initially saw their time as a means to an end, a period that would result in the higher-paying and more-prestigious jobs that supposedly follow a university degree. However, their desire to achieve the symbolic value associated with the completion of higher education was never realized (cf. Millar 2014:36). In other words, while Lurdes and Djon did not come to Portugal as “immigrant workers,” the crisis forced this lower-status distinction upon them.

In the work histories of Lurdes and Taís, matrifocal households have functioned as a support network for them and their extended families. Allison (2013:14) believes that this kind of sociality is in part a response to precariousness: “the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other.” While present fathers and male kin are usually treated with respect and obedience within the family, women are the primary initiators of this mutual help (Weeks 2012a:26). These undertakings become especially

important when family members or friends first arrive in Portugal from Cape Verde. It was Lurdes's aunt, after all, who helped her find a job and secure a work visa, while a female cousin allowed Lurdes to stay in her apartment for ten months while she looked for housing.

Mónica and Djon's cases are not only notable examples of how personal contacts in Cape Verde can segue to a job in Lisbon, but they also speak to the social relations between people and places, the transnational networks that are at the heart of Cape Verdean social relations. As mentioned before, "making one's life abroad" is an imperative shared by most Cape Verdeans, which means that emigration becomes more of a collective process than an individual one (Trajano Filho 2009:522–526; Drotbohm 2009:133). The majority of immigrants remain deeply embedded in transnational kin networks that provide them with the material and emotional support essential to making their act of migration a "success." Therefore, the "kin" (both by birth and otherwise) of an aspiring migrant, both in Cape Verde and in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, commonly support a migration attempt for its entire duration, from the point of departure to arrival in the destination country, and even to the rare instance of "retirement repatriation" in the island of origin (not yet realized in the case of Mónica). In this regard, Cape Verdeans in Lisbon who have the means to do so visit the islands as frequently as possible, where they can reconnect with members of their support network (Åkesson 2011).

## CONCLUSION

In Portugal today, Cape Verdean immigrant workers are earning progressively less remuneration from the sale of their labor-power. Among my informants, this reduction ranges from around twenty percent, in the cases of Taís, Lurdes, and Mónica, to

fifty percent, in the case of Djon. Their declining wages have resulted in a significant loss in their purchasing power. As a result, my informants have not only had to change the kinds of food they buy (e.g., Taís, Mónica) and forgo obtaining a driver's license (Taís), but also put off trips to Cape Verde to see family (Mónica) and delay or forgo completing university studies (Djon, Lurdes).

Furthermore, the jobs available to Cape Verdean immigrants, which entail *a priori* that workers will be heavily exploited, have become harder and harder to come by since 2010. Because their expectations for dependable jobs and fair wages have diminished so significantly, many immigrant workers now desperately *want* to have their labor-power exploited, for not having a job at all is, after all, the ultimate form of precarity (Kalleberg 2009:6). In other words, people are “willing” to join the ranks of the super-exploited because that is their only way to ensure short-term material survival.

The situations of my interviewees did not used to be this dire. While few Cape Verdeans in Portugal ever knew the stability or protections typical for workers during this country's brief Fordist era, they uniformly wish for a return to the “boom” years of 1992–2007. During this period, “flexible” sectors such as cleaning, geriatric care, and civil construction expanded in accordance with “normal” post-Fordist economic development. As a result, my interviewees quickly found employment in Portugal's expanding service sectors, albeit in jobs that featured low pay and poor working conditions.

I believe that my interviewees' “longing for ‘normal’ post-Fordism” can serve as a framework for viewing how workers are negotiating the gravest economic crisis in the Global North since the 1930s. While social scientists have long sought to explain the consequences brought about by the market economy, the rapid social change inflicted by

the post-2008 Great Recession has given many pause. Now that risks such as these mark the everyday lives of increasing numbers of people, a better understanding of precarity may be our only means to combat against what has become for many a new politics of survival.

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<sup>i</sup> Slaves worked these plantations until the mid-19th century, after which the colonial authorities were resigned to organizing “labor teams” that toiled in conditions markedly similar to those during the slavery era.

<sup>ii</sup> In April 2011, Portugal was forced to ask the EU-ECB-IMF “troika” of lenders for a financial bailout. Since then, the country has gone through an unremitting austerity program, which has caused a grave crisis of legitimacy for Portugal’s representative institutions, including the near collapse of the ruling center-right government in July 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> All personal names and those of neighborhoods and businesses have been changed to respect the privacy of the study’s participants.

<sup>iv</sup> White Portuguese bosses (*patroas*) reportedly leave money or other valuables around to “test” the honesty of the domestic worker.

<sup>v</sup> The U.S., in particular the metropolitan areas of Boston, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island, is home to the largest Cape Verdean population in the diaspora (Batalha and Carling 2008:35).

<sup>vi</sup> In recent years, this sentiment has become even stronger, as increasingly restrictive laws in Europe and North America have resulted in fewer opportunities for islanders to immigrate legally (Carling 2002:7; Weeks 2012c:164).

vii This was the largest *quinzena* that Djon knew about. They more typically include around 20 workers.

viii “Ukrainians” in this regard refers to white Eastern Europeans from Ukraine, Romania, or Moldova.

**TABLE ONE** – TAÍS’S WORK SCHEDULE

BEFORE INÊS LOST HER JOB IN MAY OF 2013

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Manuela	2	2	2	2	2	2
Carolina	2			2	2	
Inês	3	3	3	3	3	

Total hours: 33/week

18 hours @ 6.50 euros/hour = 117 euros

15 hours @ 6 euros/hour = 90 euros

Total weekly pay = 207 euros (\$280)

AFTER INÊS LOST HER JOB IN MAY OF 2013

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Manuela	2	2	2	2	2	2
Carolina	2			2	2	
Inês	2				2	
Office		2			1	

Total hours: 25/week

21 hours @ 6.50 euros/hour = 136.50 euros

4 hours @ 6 euros/hour = 24.0 euros

Total weekly pay = 160.50 euros (\$215)

= 22% CUT IN WEEKLY PAY

**TABLE TWO** – DJON’S WORK EXPERIENCE

Job	Date	€/Day	Hours/Day	Days/Week	Months	Lunch?	€/Month
Guimarães	2007	50 euros	8	6	12	Yes	1200
Loures	2009	40 euros	8	6	3		960
Estoril	2009–10	50 euros	8	6	5		1200
Santarém	2010–12	40 euros	8	6	19	Yes	960
Estremoz	2012	30 euros	8	6	7	No	720
São Bento	2013	25 euros	9.5	6	7	No	600



**FIGURE ONE**

