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# A Racial Theory of Labour: Racial Capitalism from Colonial Slavery to Postcolonial Migration

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## Abstract

A reconsideration of the crucial historical role of slavery in the consolidation of the global regime of capital accumulation provides a vital source of Marxian critique for our postcolonial present. The Atlantic slave trade literally transformed African men and women into human commodities. The reduction of human beings into human commodities, or ‘human capital’ – indeed, into labour and nothing but labour – which was the very essence of modern slavery, served as a necessary prerequisite for the consolidation and perfecting of what Marx called ‘labour in the abstract’, and requires us to re-situate enslaved labour as the defining and constitutive limit for how we comprehend labour as such under capitalism. The production of labour in the abstract, or labour ‘in general’, depended nonetheless upon concrete productions of sociopolitical *difference*, particularly the branding of race. The term ‘Black’, which was devised to literally and figuratively brand the flesh of enslaved people, was also contrived to signify their particular sociopolitical condition of brutal degradation as the ultimate limit for the subjugation of labour. Blackness names that limit. Thus, Blackness is in fact necessary for apprehending labour as such under capitalism. Marx’s scathing critique of wage labour is always haunted by the long shadow of slavery as its limit figure. If we comprehend labour to be the antithesis of capital, then to the extent that Blackness names the ultimate condition of labour’s subordination and subjection to capital, we need to recognise the tendency for *all* labour under capital to be pressed toward a sociopolitical condition of Blackness (or approximating Blackness), where Blackness does not name any kind of essential identity but the racialised sociopolitical condition

of that subordination/subjection. Consequently, the labour theory of value – which has always been in fact, more accurately, a value theory of labour – must be complemented with what we might posit to be a racial theory of labour. Such an ostensibly historical perspective on the foundational role of slavery in the genesis of capitalism is no mere scholastic exercise in the historiography of ‘primitive accumulation’, however, but rather must be re-purposed toward the ends of elaborating what has remained an as-yet underdeveloped Marxian theory of migrant labour. Extrapolating key insights from Marx’s corpus for the formulation of a racial theory of labour, this essay is ultimately concerned with the ways that slavery supplies capitalism with a defining horizon for *all* labour, and thus how this insight might instructively serve to comprehend the racialised subordination of migrant labour within our global/postcolonial socio-political order.

### Keywords

slavery – race – branding – abstract labour – difference – migration – migrant ‘illegality’ – immigration law – borders

The proposition in this essay of a racial theory of labour inevitably seeks to situate labour under capitalism in the broad historical context that would permit for a theory of labour capacious enough to encompass the legacies of enslaved labour in the era of colonial capitalism as inextricable from the contemporary postcolonial regime of global capital accumulation, for which migration – human mobility on a global scale – is a crucial and indispensable feature. While modern slavery and other forms of coerced labour under colonialism were indisputably predicated upon the mass capture and immobilisation of labour in what were, in effect, *de facto* prison labour camps, such as slave plantations, it is nonetheless also indisputable that such enterprises required the unprecedented mobilisation of human labour on a global scale. The trans-Atlantic slave trade is perhaps the most obvious instantiation of this world-historic phenomenon, but colonisation itself similarly entailed a variety of mass-scale human mobilities across the planet, including indentured labour, the transportation of convict labour, settler colonialism, as well as the more heterogeneous dynamics of installing and enforcing colonial rule, administratively and militarily. The present task is not, however, an exercise in historiography, but rather an exercise in theory. Thus, the empirical demonstration or validation of this exercise must, of necessity, be considered beyond the scope of what is feasible within the remit of this short essay. Instead, in the interests

of a rethinking of some of the elementary features of Marx's theorisation of labour under capitalism, this essay will rely upon a method that is principally exegetical. In short, a re-reading of Marx is undertaken here in order to reveal and highlight some of the key components for understanding the racial underpinnings of capitalism that have always been hiding, so to speak, in plain sight.

From the outset, let us be clear that what is at stake here is a reconsideration of Marx's theory of labour. When Marx famously initiates his greater project in Volume One of *Capital* with the proposition that Political Economy 'has never once asked the question ... why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product',<sup>1</sup> his solution to that puzzle is – tellingly, if perhaps counter-intuitively for some readers – that capitalism is 'a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man'.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, his purpose is not merely a technical (economistic) investigation into the calculation of economic value, as expressed in wages and the prices of commodities. His emphasis on mastery is emphatically and explicitly *political*. Building on this crucial but much-neglected (or commonly mis-read) formulation, Diane Elson proposes the concept of 'a value theory of labour'. In other words, Elson contends, the labour theory of value has always been in fact, more accurately, a value theory of labour. This reversal of terms serves to underscore that what really mattered for Marx was indeed to produce *a theory of labour* – a theory adequate to the specific ways in which labour is systematically understood and represented under capitalism, as if it were simply a matter of calculating and commensurating quantitatively different but qualitatively homogeneous and interchangeable exercises of labour (in the abstract). Elson explains: 'My argument is that the *object* of Marx's theory of value was labour. It is not a matter of seeking an explanation of why prices are what they are and finding it in labour. But rather of seeking an understanding of why labour takes the forms it does, and what the political consequences are.'<sup>3</sup>

Marx was interested in why the substance of labour assumes the particular form that it does under capitalism – a form in which what is predominant is its *abstraction* as something reducible to *quantity*. His contention was that this socially and historically specific predominance of abstract labour under capitalism signalled a particular sociopolitical organisation of the *mastery* of human life by production (as its own end), whereby the productive power and creative capacities of human life (refigured and perverted by capital as 'labour')

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1 Marx 1976, p. 173.

2 Marx 1976, p. 174.

3 Elson 1979, p. 123; see also Turner 2008.

are subordinated to a regime of production ‘for the sake of production.’<sup>4</sup> The crucial role of abstract labour in Marx’s analysis has inadvertently but very regrettably contributed to misreadings that (re-)fetishise and (re-)reify labour as an abstraction, lending apparent credence to reductive notions of the analytical and political primacy of ‘class’ that have frequently been presumed to be fundamentally opposed and inimical to race, relegating race and gender and all other sociopolitical differences to the secondary or derivative status of epiphenomena. The tragedy of such misreadings is that they uncritically recapitulate one of the most egregious and defining premises of capitalist social relations, taking recourse to a notion of labour that is fundamentally abstract, denuded, and disembodied.

Therefore, I will argue in this essay, in a manner that is analogous to Marx’s formulation, that if the mastery of human life – and labour – under capitalism has pervasively assumed the particular form of *racial* domination, we must similarly demand to understand why. With Marx, we must ask: Why has this content assumed that particular form? And what are the political consequences? This is a matter of deepening our comprehension of the Marxian theory of labour, a theory for which labour is its epistemic object, and sharpening our appreciation of its political ramifications. Such a theory must be adequate to the specific ways in which labour is systematically understood and represented under capitalism as something homogeneous and abstract, yet which in the materiality of lived practice is always embodied, and therefore gendered – and, indeed, racialised. Hence, the necessity of *a racial theory of labour*.

### Global Capitalism, Racial Capitalism

An elementary predicate of Marx’s analysis of the regime of capital accumulation is its *global* scope and scale. Indeed, Marx establishes repeatedly that one must understand capital to have been effectively global *from its inception*. In one of the most forceful articulations of this perspective, in his discussion of ‘the so-called primitive accumulation’ in Volume One of *Capital*, Marx declares with a flourish:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the

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<sup>4</sup> Marx 1976, p. 1038.

conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black-skins, are all things which characterise *the dawn of the era of capitalist production*. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. Hard on their heels follows the commercial war of the European nations, which has *the globe as its battlefield*.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, Marx's critique identifies slavery, colonialism, genocide, and warfare as veritable preconditions for the very possibility of capital accumulation. Arguably, this historical analysis, so integral as it truly is for Marx's understanding of capitalism as such, lends force to the contention that the Marxian critique of capitalism inherently, and of necessity, requires an appreciation that capitalism was always, from the outset, not only global but also racial.

Such a perspective, readily corroborated by Marx's own analysis, could be taken to command the recognition that what we have come to know as the global regime of capital accumulation is inextricable from a (post)colonial sociopolitical order of white supremacy. Here, then, there is some justifiable grounds for retroactively discerning in the very foundations of the classic Marxian critique of capitalism an incipient conception (albeit insufficiently articulated) of what Cedric Robinson famously designated to be *racial capitalism*. As Robinson formulates his central argument in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*:

Racism, I maintain, was not simply a convention for ordering the relations of European to non-European peoples but has its genesis in the 'internal' relations of European peoples. As part of the inventory of Western civilisation it would reverberate within and without, transferring its toll from the past to the present. In contradistinction to Marx's and Engels's expectations that bourgeois society would rationalize social relations and demystify social consciousness, the obverse occurred. The development, organisation, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

For Robinson, the intrinsically racial character of capitalism in fact derived from a constitutive and already racialised feature of social inequality and hierarchy in the composition and organisation of European social formations

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<sup>5</sup> Marx 1976, p. 915; emphases added.

<sup>6</sup> Robinson 2000, p. 2.

themselves. This was plainly not Marx's perspective. Such historical inquiries and any ensuing disputes notwithstanding, however, it is plain that for Robinson the entrenchment of capitalist social relations on a global scale could only ever be 'permeated' by 'racialism'. Without allowing ourselves to get waylaid by historiographic quibbles over origin stories, capitalist civilisation was inseparable from what Robinson memorably calls 'the terrible culture of race': 'Race was its epistemology, its ordering principle, its organizing structure, its moral authority, its economy of justice, commerce, and power.'<sup>7</sup> But could one realistically expect or reasonably conclude otherwise from Marx's own depiction of 'the dawn of the era of capitalist production' as one 'chiefly' distinguished by such systemic phenomena as the mass 'extirpation, enslavement and entombment' and 'conquest and plunder' of indigenous peoples, worldwide, and the notorious 'commercial hunting of blackskins'? Capitalism, for Marx, was indeed saturated from its inception, not merely ideologically but also materially and practically, with racialism (in Robinson's phrase): capitalism has never been other than racial capitalism.

In light of this historical perspective, what has been insufficiently comprehended, furthermore, is that we are long overdue for a robust renovation of Marxist theory and radical anti-capitalist political practice in light of a more thoroughgoing and comprehensive re-evaluation of the central and defining concepts and theoretical categories of Marxian analysis through the critical lens of race. As a contribution to such an endeavour, this essay proposes a reconsideration of the crucial historical role of slavery, especially with respect to advancing a rigorous analysis of *labour* – and hence, of labour subordination – within the larger configuration of capitalist social relations. Not simply reducible to a scholastic exercise in the historiography of what Marx characterised as 'the so-called primitive accumulation' of capital, and therefore not merely a contribution to a more precise and more supple appreciation of the past, such an endeavour provides a vital source of Marxian critique for apprehending the mobility of labour (and its subordination as 'migrant' labour, in particular) within our global postcolonial present, and thus, for formulating any plausible politics that might aspire to a postcapitalist future.

### Slavery, Labour, and Blackness

With specific reference to the disfigurement of the nascent struggles by the white working class in the United States because of the coeval existence of

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<sup>7</sup> Robinson 2000, p. xxxi.

slavery, Marx famously proclaimed, 'Labour in a white skin can never emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin.'<sup>8</sup> This classic *racial* watchword of anti-capitalist struggle is no less pertinent today than in Marx's era. 'Labour in a white skin can *never* emancipate itself', Marx notably insisted – never! – wherever whiteness is predicated upon the systemic denigration of Blackness. And where, or when, we may rightly demand, has whiteness ever *not* been so predicated?

For this, indeed, is the precise historical meaning of whiteness, its significance and salience.<sup>9</sup> Rather than an immutable, transhistorical, pre-political 'biological' essence, racial whiteness is truly 'a very modern thing', as W.E.B. Du Bois memorably put it.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, whiteness is an invention of colonial/racial capitalism, originating in the brutal sociopolitical processes that have come to be known as primitive accumulation.<sup>11</sup> Referring to this global history of conquest as a material necessity for jump-starting and sustaining the processes of capital accumulation, Marx contends, 'The treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement and murder flowed back to the mother-country and were turned into capital there.'<sup>12</sup> 'In fact,' Marx concludes poignantly, 'the veiled slavery of the wage labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal.'<sup>13</sup> This formulation's meaning is unequivocal: with the phrase 'needed ... as its pedestal', Marx

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8 Marx 1976, p. 414.

9 Du Bois 1971. See also: Allen 1994 and 1997; Cox 1959; Du Bois 1915; Harris 1993; Roediger 1991; Roediger (ed.) 1998; Saxton 1990.

10 Du Bois 1971, p. 30.

11 Notably, the term 'primitive accumulation' – a phrase that originated in the works of bourgeois political economists, which Marx referenced with derision for its euphemistic and misleading character and depicted more precisely as 'the so-called primitive accumulation' – has over time reverted to widespread (unproblematised) usage, and has come to serve as a shorthand in Marxist scholarship for the violent processes that Marx exposes in his critique; see Marx 1976, pp. 873–4.

12 Marx 1976, p. 918.

13 Marx 1976, p. 925. For an extended reflection on this passage, see Johnson 2004; while my reading of Marx's discussion of this juxtaposition of slave labour and wage labour would reject Johnson's contention (p. 301) that Marx 'evaded' the question of slavery and purposefully provincialised the analysis of capitalism in a manner that was 'Anglo-centric in its spatial parameters and teleological in its temporal framing' (p. 302), I concur with his argument against the methodological nationalism or Eurocentrism of many customary Marxist accounts, dedicated to simply and dogmatically upholding the tautological notion that 'slavery was, like feudalism, "pre-capitalist", "archaic", and a "conservative" residuum' (p. 303), and consequently inclined to interpret the pedestal metaphor as a temporal/ historical one rather than as 'structural (or spatial)' (p. 305).

plainly contends that slavery was *necessary* as the base or foundation that materially supported wage labour.<sup>14</sup>

Here, it is perhaps helpful to briefly address the substantive historical relationship between slavery and wage labour. To try to address the empirical question of the relative importance of slave labour and wage labour, or their comparative proportions in the production of surplus value during the early history of capitalism, is, in a strict sense, plainly unanswerable. Apart from the sheer paucity of any comprehensive body of data that might plausibly support such an econometric comparison, there is the more fundamental dilemma of truly apprehending capitalism as an effectively global socioeconomic formation, for which any recourse to the fiction of a 'national' economy is inherently fallacious and misleading. 'The political economy of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic', Walter Johnson argues cogently, '[was] a single space, its dimensions defined by flows of people, money, and goods, its nested temporalities set by interlocking (though clearly distinct) labour regimes, cyclical rhythms of cultivation and foreign exchange, and shared standards of calculability and measurement',<sup>15</sup> in which slave labour and wage labour were 'two poles of [a] single Atlantic economy' characterised by 'dynamic simultaneity'.<sup>16</sup> Similarly advancing a 'broad conception of totality', Dale Tomich argues that slave labour was 'part of the organisation of social labour on the world scale ... a specific form of commodity production that [was] related to other such forms through the world market and international division of labour', while it was precisely the world market and division of labour that supplied and sustained the conditions of possibility for the reproduction of slave labour.<sup>17</sup> 'A materialist and historical analysis', Johnson clarifies, 'begins from the premise that in actual historical fact there was no nineteenth-century capitalism without slavery. However else industrial capitalism might have developed in the absence of slave-produced cotton and Southern capital markets, it did not develop that way.'<sup>18</sup>

Cotton was indeed 'the Industrial Revolution's most essential commodity',<sup>19</sup> and cotton produced by enslaved labour in the southern United States became 'the most widely traded commodity in the world'.<sup>20</sup> As the world's primary

14 Less elegantly, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx notably proclaimed: 'without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry' (Marx 1920, p. 121).

15 Johnson 2004, p. 304.

16 Johnson 2004, p. 305.

17 Tomich 2004, p. 30.

18 Johnson 2013, p. 254; see also Baptist 2014, p. 128.

19 Baptist 2016, p. 33; see also Beckert 2014.

20 Baptist 2016, p. 53.



producer of cotton, the United States occupied 'a distinctive position in the global economy'.<sup>21</sup> In 1860, on the eve of the US Civil War, fully three-quarters of US cotton was being produced for export, providing British industry in particular (the global epicentre of wage labour) no less than 70 per cent of this vital raw material.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, slavery must be recognised to have been 'indispensable to the economic development of the United States' as evidenced by 'some basic facts: that slave-grown cotton was the most valuable export made in America, that the capital stored in slaves exceeded the combined value of all the nation's railroads and factories, that foreign investment underwrote the expansion of plantation lands ... that the highest concentration of steam power in the United States was to be found along the Mississippi [River]; the waterway traversing the heartland of the expanded slave economy, rather than any site in the northeastern region where economic development was driven by industrial capitalism.<sup>23</sup> Exceeding the total number of free migrants who moved to the United States between the time of the Revolution and 1850, and despite British and US abolitions of the slave trade in 1808, the fifty years that preceded the Civil War saw more than four million enslaved people forcibly imported into New World slavery's most intensive zones of production and profit-making, with 'the total number of enslaved people in the New World [increasing] dramatically, from about five million to about seven million'.<sup>24</sup> Comparatively, the population engaged in wage labour in the United States during this period remained quite small, especially in agriculture. 'The wage labour market in the US was perennially plagued by labour shortages ... as late as 1860 there was only one wage labourer for every two farms in the North.'<sup>25</sup> Moreover, slavery was indispensable for the dramatic advances in industrial capitalism in Britain, and thus for the very creation of its wage-labour proletariat.<sup>26</sup> 'Neither Britain nor any other country that followed it down the path of textile-based industrialisation could have accomplished an economic transformation without the millions of acres of cotton fields of the expanding American South.'<sup>27</sup> To substitute the cotton that British industry imported from US slave labour camps with a comparable amount of wool, for instance, 'Britain in 1830 would have had to devote 23 million acres to sheep

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21 Beckert and Rockman 2016, p. 5.

22 Ashworth 1995, p. 89.

23 Beckert and Rockman 2016, p. 1.

24 Baptist 2016, pp. 53–4.

25 Ashworth 1995, p. 84.

26 Beckert 2014, pp. 32, 198.

27 Baptist 2014, pp. 128–9.

pasture – more than the sum total of the island’s agricultural land.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, as Edward Baptist demonstrates, ‘The total gain in productivity per [enslaved] picker from 1800 to 1860 was almost 400 percent – precisely the same as ‘the increase in the efficiency of [wage] workers who tended spinning machines in Manchester cotton mills’ between 1819 and 1860, when the same figure for workers in weaving mills ‘improved by 600 to 1,000 percent’. Therefore, Baptist argues, ‘even as textile factories harnessed increasingly complex machinery to more powerful non-human energy sources ... [enslaved] cotton pickers produced gains in productivity similar to those of [wage labour in] cotton factories.’<sup>29</sup> Driving all of this world-historic capitalist expansion, in a fundamental sense, was the feverish ever-rising productivity of slave labour, which was derived from what Baptist depicts as ‘a dynamically evolving technology’ predicated on measurement, forced innovation, and torture:<sup>30</sup> ‘Whips rose and fell. And cotton-picking rates rose inexorably. ... The whip made cotton.’<sup>31</sup> ‘The scientific principle of every cotton labour camp [was] a metaphorical whipping-machine: a technology for controlling and exploiting human beings, calibrating increments of torture to extract both efficient production of pounds of cotton and endless, dynamic improvements to that efficiency.’<sup>32</sup> These continuous increases in the efficiency of slave labour meant ever-lower real prices for cotton, which then increased the surplus value that was reinvested as capital in still more efficient factory machinery, as well as bolstering the astounding profits of both industrial capitalists and slave owners, revenues for governments, and higher wages for the new industrial working class.<sup>33</sup>

In Marx’s invocation of slavery as the proverbial pedestal for the exploitation of wage labour, he identifies a particular condition for the actual historical genesis of capital, but provides no extended elaboration of the interrelation of slavery and wage labour. Instead, because Marx’s principal aim is to theoretically clarify the capital–wage labour relation, he prioritises the logical development of its form in a manner that, in effect, treats slavery as a kind of externality.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, contemporary historiography abundantly verifies what Marx already plainly knew: ‘historically, slavery was a key means of expanding commodity production, creating a world market, and providing

28 Baptist 2014, p. 129.

29 Baptist 2014, p. 129. There were analogously dramatic and persistent increases in the productivity of slave plantations for Cuban sugar and Brazilian coffee; Baptist 2016, pp. 54–5.

30 Baptist 2016, p. 57.

31 Baptist 2016, p. 52.

32 Baptist 2016, p. 57.

33 Baptist 2014, p. 129; see also Beckert 2014, pp. 334, 621–2.

34 Tomich 2004, p. 23.

the substantive conditions for the development of the capital–wage labour form.<sup>35</sup> However, as Dale Tomich notes, ‘the historical hierarchy among forms of labour is not, and cannot be, the same as the theoretical hierarchy’.<sup>36</sup> This conceptual autonomy of slavery and ‘capitalism’ has regrettably led many would-be Marxists astray, treating both terms as ahistorical, static, abstract categories presumed to be fundamentally inimical, and in this way recapitulating some of the elementary conceits of classical bourgeois political economy regarding the presumptively greater productivity and efficiency of wage labour over slave labour, and thus upholding the notion of their irreconcilability.<sup>37</sup> As James Oakes remarks tellingly, ‘Nowadays, the bourgeois critique of slavery is kept alive primarily by Marxist historians.’<sup>38</sup> Indeed, whereas for much of history wage labour was ‘perceived as something akin to slavery’,<sup>39</sup> it was precisely one of the paramount ideological achievements of the advancing bourgeois ethos of industrial capitalist society during the early to mid-nineteenth century, particularly in the form of what is known as labour republicanism in the United States, that wage labour came to be pervasively coded as ‘free labour’. The racialisation of ‘free’ labour as the proper station and comparatively virtuous status of white workers, in contradistinction to African American enslavement as well as the ‘slavish’ condition of myriad other categories of people of colour, was utterly crucial and decisive.<sup>40</sup>

Marx relies extensively on the heuristic utility of contrasts between slave labour and wage labour, precisely to underscore the affinities between the two. Furthermore, he does not shun depictions of ostensibly ‘free’ (waged) labour as a reconstructed form of servitude: ‘The starting-point of the development that gave rise both to the wage-labourer and to the capitalist was the enslavement of the worker.’<sup>41</sup> The characterisation of wage labour as a ‘veiled’ form of slavery, notably, speaks directly to Marx’s preoccupation with why labour (and its mastery) systematically appears under capitalism in this particular form: ‘the value and price of labour-power’ come to be expressed in the form of wages, and thus ‘makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents

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35 Ibid.

36 Tomich 2004, p. 31.

37 For a classic example, see Genovese 1965; see also Ashworth 1995, for whom the ‘principal thesis’ is that it was ‘increasing difficult, and finally impossible, for slavery and capitalism to coexist’ (p. 115). For relevant critiques, see Baptist 2014; Beckert 2014; Johnson 2013, pp. 252–4; Oakes 2003; Tomich 2004, pp. 9–13.

38 Oakes 2003, p. 47.

39 Ashworth 1995, p. 114.

40 Roediger 1991.

41 Marx 1976, p. 875.

to the eye the precise opposite of that relation', thereby supplying the basis for 'all the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist ... all capitalism's illusions of freedom'.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, Marx also discerned in the 'unqualified slavery' of colonial capitalism the production of commodities for the world market whereby 'the civilised horrors of over-work are grafted onto the barbaric horrors of slavery'.<sup>43</sup> Hence, New World slavery was not only a material and practical prerequisite for that illusory freedom attributed to wage labour, but also a kind of exemplar of the raw unveiled truth of labour under capitalism. Thus, Marx's analysis would seem to command a deeper interrogation of labour *as such* by way of a more frank encounter with labour in its proverbial Black 'skin'.

The 'trade in men' (and women, and children), in Du Bois's account, 'came in time to be founded on racial caste, and this caste was made the foundation of a new industrial system'.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the 'doctrine of race' arising from this primitive accumulation to justify and legitimate the subjugation of Indigenous, colonised, and enslaved peoples thereafter had to be 'frantically rationalised in every possible direction'.<sup>45</sup> That racial whiteness has, since its inception, been an equivocal and treacherous fabrication, therefore, ought to be fairly evident. Nevertheless, the semblance of objectivity and purity customarily attributed to whiteness – its precisely un-natural yet terrifyingly naturalised social reality – has been forged and exalted only through a bloody history and a system of rule predicated on racial hierarchy in which whiteness has systematically been exclusively guarded as the most privileged status – which is to say, in short, white supremacy. As Du Bois memorably remarked, 'there was but one unanimity' among the various rivals for imperial prerogative – 'the doctrine of the divine right of white people to steal'.<sup>46</sup> Du Bois eloquently if acerbically exposed what he called the 'religion of whiteness',<sup>47</sup> for which 'whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!'<sup>48</sup>

White supremacy is a social and political order of domination and subordination that systemically generates and upholds inequalities of wealth, power, and prestige by privileging racialised whiteness over and above all other categories of 'racial' identity. Foundational racialised distinctions and meanings, such as 'white' or 'Black', were literally invented, imposed, and enforced through

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42 Marx 1976, p. 680.

43 Marx 1976, p. 345.

44 Du Bois 1915, Chapter IX; see also Du Bois 2014, p. 97.

45 Du Bois 2014, p. 91.

46 Du Bois 1971, p. 48.

47 Du Bois 1971, p. 31.

48 Du Bois 1971, p. 30.

various iterations of the global regime of European/colonial supremacy, retroactively. They appear as the transparent and self-evident ('natural') names for differences that only came to have significance and gravity because the particular forms of exploitation and domination that created them required and relied upon their naturalisation. Whiteness, like Blackness, is however no mere fact of nature; it is fact of white supremacy.

To adequately adapt Marx's critique of the racial coordinates of capitalism and the perplexities of labour in one or another racial 'skin', we must conceive of Blackness as more capacious than a mere synonym for African origin or ancestry alone. We need recourse to a conception of Blackness that corresponds to the full range of racialised categories that white supremacy has orchestrated under the sign of negation. In other words, I refer here not to any supposedly 'objective' or 'natural' sort of (phenotypic, quasi-'biological') racial Blackness that might be more conventionally attributed to people of African origin or descent in particular, but rather to the pronouncedly heterogeneous spectrum of all those categories of humanity that European settler colonialism and imperialism unrelentingly produced as colonised and enslaved 'natives', and thus as expressly not-'white'. Indeed, this was never merely a matter of racial ideology alone, but also of the material and practical transfer of plantation management personnel and 'expertise' across the colonial world, within and between empires, whereby the practices of racialised labour subordination were inextricable from the racial subjugation and denigration of subject peoples.<sup>49</sup> Hence, in the annals of colonial white supremacy, the compendium of heterogeneous terms and epithets devoted to racial Blackness has often been deployed rather promiscuously to name or denigrate a quite variegated array of phenotypically diverse colonised subjects. What has always been paramount, however, is their relegation to a subordinated status denied and expelled from whiteness.

Moreover, we may instructively apprehend 'Blackness' not primarily (or not exclusively) as a literal attribute of the 'skin' per se, but rather as the pre-eminent figure of racialised subordination within a global regime of white supremacy. The people of Africa – who were hunted, captured, kidnapped, commodified, trafficked, shackled, deported, tortured, raped, mutilated, and killed, all in order to subject them to a permanent regime of brutally coerced labour – were the only category of humanity in the modern world order, as Achille Mbembe argues, 'whose skin has been transformed into the form and spirit of merchandise – the living crypt of capital'.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, if the

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49 Beckert 2014, van der Linden 2010; see also Roediger and Esch 2012, Rosenthal 2018.

50 Mbembe 2017, p. 6.

Atlantic slave trade literally transformed African persons into ‘human-objects, human-commodities, human-money’,<sup>51</sup> the term ‘Black’ that was devised to brand their particular flesh nonetheless ‘was invented to signify exclusion, brutalisation, and degradation, to point to a limit constantly conjured and abhorred’.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, and above all else, Blackness names that limit.

Inasmuch as the objectification of human productive power and creative capacity is precisely what is at stake in Marx’s critique of the capital–labour relation, predicated as it is upon the commodification of the capacity for work (labour-power), the reduction of human beings into ‘human-objects, human-commodities, human-money’ – indeed, ‘human capital’ – which was the very essence of modern slavery, requires us to re-situate enslaved labour as the defining and constitutive limit for how we comprehend labour itself under capitalism.<sup>53</sup> This, after all, is precisely what Marx describes in his analysis of the struggle over the working day. From the standpoint of capital, Marx clarifies, even for ostensibly ‘free’ (waged) labour:

The working-day contains the full 24 hours. ... Hence it is self-evident that the labourer is nothing other than labour-power for the duration of his whole life, and that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and by right labour-time, to be devoted to the self-valorisation of capital, to be devoted to the self-expansion of capital. ... But in its blind measureless drive, its insatiable appetite for surplus labour, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even the merely physical limits of the working-day. ... It is not the normal maintenance of the labour-power which determines the limits of the working-day here, but rather the greatest possible daily expenditure of labour-power, no matter how diseased, compulsory and painful it may be, which determines the limits of the workers’ period of rest. Capital asks no questions about the length of life of labour-power. What interests it is purely and simply the maximum of labour-power that can be set in motion in a working day. It attains this objective by shortening the life of labour-power. ...<sup>54</sup>

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51 Mbembe 2017, p. 2.

52 Mbembe 2017, p. 6.

53 John Clegg makes a similar point: ‘There is something pristinely capitalist about the total commodification of labour under slavery. Slaves are doubly alienated, for they lack property in both the means of production and in themselves.’ Clegg 2015, p. 302.

54 Marx 1976, pp. 375–6.

Marx's scathing critique of wage labour is always haunted by the long shadow of slavery as its limit figure.<sup>55</sup> Insofar as Blackness is inextricable from the historical experience of modern slavery as a kind of name, indeed a racialised branding, for that historically specific limit of human objectification and commodification, we may begin to recognise that *all* labour under capitalism may itself be understood to be at least *tendentally* encompassed under this racialised sign as the antithesis of capital. This, indeed, is what ensures that labour 'in a white skin' – labour identified with racial whiteness, and thus invested in the treacherous material and practical benefits of white supremacy – can *never* emancipate itself. Such an investment in whiteness obfuscates what Marx decried as 'the enslavement of the worker' to capital, and very reliably renders 'white' workers as labour-*for*-capital. This, furthermore, is why capitalism requires white supremacy and will always sustain the advantages that accrue to those who have come to be racialised as white, which Du Bois famously recognised as the symbolic and psychological 'wages' of whiteness.<sup>56</sup> Marx underscores the centuries-long incubation and development of capitalist social relations 'required before the "free" worker ... makes a voluntary agreement, i.e. is compelled by social conditions to sell the whole of his active life, his very capacity for labour, in return for the price of his customary means of subsistence, to sell his birthright for a mess of pottage.'<sup>57</sup> This same historical process was substantially concurrent with the genesis of a global (colonial capitalist) regime of white supremacy, which similarly compelled those putatively 'free' workers racialised as white to trade their human birthright for the disfigurement of whiteness, and to accommodate themselves to capital's mastery over them in exchange for the paltry benefits of their sociopolitical alignment with the master race – a mess of racial pottage.

If we comprehend labour to be the antithesis of capital, then to the extent that Blackness names the ultimate condition of labour's subordination and subjection to capital, we need to recognise the tendency for all labour under capital to be pressed toward a sociopolitical condition of Blackness (or approximating Blackness), where Blackness does not name any kind of essential identity but the racialised sociopolitical condition of that subordination/subjection. This may be taken to be a corollary to the proposition that enslavement is the limit figure for all labour under capitalism, and that there

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55 Referring to a French slave code, Marx declares: 'This subject one must study in detail to see what the bourgeois makes of himself and of the worker when he can model the world according to his own image without any interference.' Marx 1976, p. 916, n. 4.

56 Du Bois 1935; see also Roediger 1991.

57 Marx 1976, p. 382.

is a tendency to press all labour toward that limit. Inasmuch as this dynamic is relational and tendential, and thus signals the larger workings of a system, we have an analytic that can encompass the full range of sociopolitical differences and contradictions (racialised or otherwise) along an unstable and contingent continuum of relative freedom/unfreedom.

While never denying or disregarding the historical specificity of African experiences of white supremacy and the particularity for Africans and all people of African ancestry of being racialised as Black,<sup>58</sup> we nonetheless require a more expansive and capacious understanding of Blackness as a sociopolitical category that, likewise, *tendentially* encompasses the whole spectrum of racialised social identities produced as non-white within our global postcolonial regime of white supremacy. Here, we may recall that in his landmark text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois proposes a *global* conceptual framework for apprehending his subject: ‘The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.’<sup>59</sup> In the aftermath of the era of decolonisation that defined the latter half of the twentieth century, the problem of the colour line has become widely synonymous with borders. Contemporary postcolonial migration and refugee movements may therefore be recognised as providing crucial sites for what Mbembe has tellingly depicted as ‘the Becoming Black of the world’,<sup>60</sup> whereby ‘the systematic risks experienced specifically by Black slaves during early capitalism have now become the norm for, or at least the lot of, all of subaltern humanity’,<sup>61</sup> in which ‘the term ‘Black’ has been generalised’,<sup>62</sup> and there is a ‘tendency to universalize the Black condition.’<sup>63</sup>

### Race, Difference, and the Abstraction of Labour

If I am emphasising race (and specifically, Blackness) as a decisive analytical tool for ultimately unpacking the global question of labour within our postcolonial condition, generally (and for the question of migrant labour, in particular) it is because Blackness is in fact necessary for apprehending *labour as such* under capitalism. When he proclaimed, ‘Labour in a white skin can never emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin’, Marx chose his

58 Cf. Chandler 2013 and 2014; Gilroy 1993; Mbembe 2017.

59 Du Bois 1982, p. 15; see also Chandler 2006 and 2010.

60 Mbembe 2017, p. 6.

61 Mbembe 2017, p. 4.

62 Mbembe 2017, p. 6.

63 Mbembe 2017, p. 4.



words well. By evoking the *branding* of the flesh of enslaved African/American labour, Marx tersely but precisely named the visceral corporeality and sheer cruelty of slavery's dehumanising violence, while yet naming a more diffuse process of racialisation whereby Blackness itself could be inferred to be both the result of a kind of sociopolitical branding as well as that very physical process of branding itself. In other words, the production of racial distinctions in the modern capitalist world has itself been a continuous and ever unfinished process of branding. Blackness (and race, more generally) has been an elemental and foundational figure for theoretically interrogating the sociopolitical production of *difference* within our capitalist modernity.

The theoretical stakes of this intervention revolve around what is necessarily a mutually constitutive engagement in my scholarly work with both race and migration; they are not reducible, however, to any ostensibly delimited question of 'identity'. In other words, the stakes here are emphatically not to apprehend 'difference' as if it were merely an unfortunate or cumbersome, pre-political (quasi-natural) pretext for various properly political tactics of labour subordination and strategies of divide-and-rule, serving to undermine the unity of a presumptively unitary 'working class'. Rather, I am proposing that we cannot adequately comprehend Marx's theory of labour under capitalism, as such, without further pursuing this inquiry into the puzzle of 'labour in a white skin' and, concomitantly, labour branded as Black.

Capital can never extract from labour the abstract (eminently social) substance that is 'value' except with recourse to the abstraction of labour-power, which however can only be derived from the palpable vital energies of living labour. As an operative, indeed decisive, category of capital accumulation, labour-power (abstract labour) never ceases to pertain to real flesh-and-blood (embodied, and hence, racialised) working people (concrete labour). As Marx explains:

With the disappearance of the useful character of the products of labour, the useful character of the kinds of labour embodied in them also disappears; this in turn entails the disappearance of the different concrete forms of labour. They can no longer be distinguished, but are all together reduced to the same kind of labour, human labour in the abstract. ... There is nothing left of them in each case but the same phantom-like objectivity; they are merely congealed quantities of homogenous human labour, i.e. of human labour-power. ... As crystals of this social substance, which is common to them all, they are values – commodity values.<sup>64</sup>

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64 Marx 1976, p. 128.

Marx affiliated concrete (variegated) labour with the use-value of the distinct products of that labour, and therefore with the whole heterogeneous panoply of positive, determinate, qualitative specificities – in short, with *difference* as such, and therefore with the historically specific and socially distinctive aspects of human life. In contrast, it was the systemic requirement for abstract labour as a generic form that served to elucidate the historically specific but global character of alienation, exploitation, and fetishism under capitalism.

Notably, Marx discerned these global capitalist socioeconomic processes to be uneven in their development, and therefore, to be most abundantly evidenced in the United States.

Indifference toward specific labours conforms to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. ... Such a state of affairs is at its most developed in the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society – in the United States. Here, then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category ‘labour,’ ‘labour as such,’ labour pure and simple, becomes true in practice. The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.<sup>65</sup>

Remarkably, what for Marx was the epitome of ‘the most modern society,’ or more precisely, ‘the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society’ (as a virtually ‘pure’ form of capitalist society) – the United States – was, we may recall, precisely a social formation that had been materially and practically built upon large-scale plantation slavery, and a sociopolitical order of white supremacy. And it was here, where the branding of labour in the racialised ‘skin’ of Blackness was likewise exceedingly advanced, that there emerged the most pure form of the abstraction of ‘labour’ as such, of labour ‘in general’.

In his account of the formation of capital, Marx establishes an analytical opposition between ‘two very different kinds of commodity owners; on the one hand, the owners of money, means of production, means of subsistence, who are eager to valorise the sum of values they have appropriated by buying the labour-power of others; on the other hand, free workers, the sellers of their own labour-power, and therefore the sellers of labour. Free workers,

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65 Marx 1973, pp. 104–5.

in the double sense that they neither form part of the means of production themselves, as would be the case with slaves, serfs, etc., nor do they own the means of production.<sup>66</sup> In this regard, there is an emphatic heuristic contrast drawn between the figures of ‘free workers’ (or ‘free labour’) and ‘slaves’. It is precisely this figure of ‘free’ labour that serves to underscore the historically specific character of the emergence of labour-power as the commodified objectification of the human capacity to work (labour in the abstract), which distinguishes the ostensibly contractual and purely voluntary transaction that is understood to transpire in the capitalist labour market between owners of the means of production and wage labourers – *as if* they were the mere sellers of just another commodity like any other. Nonetheless, these putatively ‘free’ workers are scathingly depicted by Marx as those ‘who have nothing to sell except their own skins’.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, Marx explains, referring specifically to the historical dissolution of feudalism, ‘these newly freed men became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And this history, the history of their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.’<sup>68</sup> This indeed is one of the premier formulations by which we understand the concept of (‘the so-called’) primitive accumulation: ‘So-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as “primitive” because it forms the pre-history of capital, and of the mode of production corresponding to capital.’<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, these processes of expropriation and dispossession, we know, just as Marx knew, were – and *continue to be* – coterminous with the generalisation of the wage-labour relation. Their character as ‘prior’ to capitalism proper is strictly apparent and is presented in this manner by Marx for analytical purposes. In fact, they were not only constitutive, historically, of capital and indeed necessary preconditions for the formation of a regime of capital accumulation, but have co-existed with the more pure ideal type of capitalist (wage-)labour relations throughout the ongoing history of ‘actually existing’ capitalism, which has never ceased to be written in blood and fire.<sup>70</sup> In this respect, centuries

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66 Marx 1976, p. 874.

67 Marx 1976, p. 873.

68 Marx 1976, p. 875.

69 Marx 1976, pp. 874–5.

70 There has been a robust Marxian debate around the contemporaneity of such violent processes of dispossession; see, for example: Bonefeld 2001; De Angelis 2001; Federici 2003; Harvey 2003; Mezzadra 2011b; Midnight Notes Collective 1990.

of New World slavery cannot be reduced to a mere residual of some putative pre-history of 'true' capitalist relations.

The racial branding of labour that Marx identifies in the context of New World slavery was a necessary and truly definitive feature of the brutality required for the subjugation of enslaved African/American labour but also for the elaborate sociopolitical and sociolegal machinations devised to produce the global/colonial fact of Blackness. Importantly, I contend, it was likewise this same branding, this same production of racialised difference, that served as a necessary predicate for the consolidation and perfecting of what Marx called 'labour in the abstract'. Labour in the abstract – a figure of labour literally shorn of its humanity and stripped of all qualitative specificities – was possible historically only through the real stripping and degradation of the actual human life of the enslaved and colonised into a form of life that could be classed as virtually sub-human. And after all, as Gargi Bhattacharyya notes, 'capitalism cannot function if we all are allowed to become fully human'.<sup>71</sup>

To be rendered as labour in the abstract is to be reduced to labour and nothing but labour. This was the very project of modern slavery. This of course is not to suggest that such a project was ever successfully fulfilled or completed. Enslaved people were never reduced to a condition so abject as to be shorn of their distinctly human subtlety and suppleness. On the contrary, the irrepressibly human creative powers and potentialities of enslaved African/Americans were not only a veritable font of continuous insubordination and rebellion, but also a foundational source for the very notion of freedom and the unfinished work of emancipation in our modern world.<sup>72</sup> Nor is it to suggest, on the other hand, that enslaved people were the ostensible owners and sellers of that distinctly capitalist commodity that Marx designated as labour-power. However, there never could have emerged this social fiction of labour-power – whereby the capacity to work could be rendered as if it were simply one more commodity for sale in the market – without a pre-history in which the myriad forms of concrete labour became reduced and generalised (that is to say, abstracted) into a figure of labour in the abstract, labour 'in general'. For the historically specific emergence and consolidation of this peculiarly modern form of generic 'labour', slavery was constitutive. There was simply no more perfect approximation of the elusive figure of labour in the abstract than the social condition inflicted on enslaved people by modern slavery – that distinctly

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71 Bhattacharyya 2018, p. x.

72 Du Bois famously depicted the general aims of the strivings of 'the American Negro' in a manner which anticipated that another world was possible: 'to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to ... use his best powers and his latent genius.' Du Bois 1982, p. 9; see also Chandler 2006, 2010 and 2013.

capitalist sociopolitical regime that worked assiduously and unrelentingly to reduce a whole category of human life to labour and nothing but labour.

The production of labour in the abstract, or labour ‘in general’, furthermore, depended upon concrete productions of sociopolitical difference, for which acts of physical, corporeal branding were merely a cruel punctuation to the more general branding of race. Once again, I hasten to clarify that this is in no sense an essentialist proposition about ‘race’ as any kind of ‘real’ (pseudo-natural, phenotypic, quasi-biological) category of difference among distinct varieties of human being, but rather an insistence on the eminently social and political reality of race as a defining and organising principle for the historical production of difference, inequality, and hierarchy within the global labour regime of capitalism.

The homogenised abstraction of labour-power could be generated only under the aegis of the social production of real heterogeneity and inequality, such as that which Du Bois famously called ‘the problem of the color line’,<sup>73</sup> or analogously, what Partha Chatterjee has designated as ‘the rule of colonial difference.’<sup>74</sup> In other words, the capital–labour relation – which appears to be merely a matter of narrowly ‘economic’ relations – must always be understood in terms of its actual politics, which is to say, the power struggles at stake in the disputes over the historically specific social production of difference.<sup>75</sup> As Bhattacharyya incisively puts the question, alongside an ‘overarching instrumentalisation of human life, how are some deemed (even) less?’<sup>76</sup> Capital’s apparent (economic) indifference to, or disregard for, the specificities of the terms of conditions for extracting the maximum surplus value has only ever been sustained in practice through the actual (political) struggles that *differ-entiate* living labour toward the very instrumental end of maximising its subordination and exploitation. Such a politics of difference at work within the genesis of abstract labour has always been inextricable from the real history of racial subjugation, for which slavery remains a primal scene.

### Labour Mobility, Migrant ‘Illegality’, and Branding

In the remainder of this essay, I will re-purpose this ostensibly historical perspective on the foundational role of slavery in the genesis of colonial capitalism toward the ends of elaborating what has remained an as-yet underdeveloped

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73 Du Bois 1982, pp. 3, 15.

74 Chatterjee 1993.

75 Roediger and Esch 2012.

76 Bhattacharyya 2018, p. xi.

Marxian theory of migrant labour within the contemporary postcolonial condition.<sup>77</sup> My endeavour is not to identify and denounce the contemporary existence of diverse forms of ‘virtual’ or ‘new slavery’, nor to subsume a discussion of migrant labour within a comparable exposé of the vicious and coercive features of human trafficking. While there is surely no shortage of truly horrific exploitation and oppression in the world today, including a whole sordid spectrum of forms of outright enslavement, I am reluctant to contribute to the sensationalisation of such spectacles of victimisation, both because they often serve, however inadvertently or unwittingly, to re-stabilise ‘normal’ exploitation as effectively legitimate and proper, and because they tend to conceal or suppress the subjective dimensions, however constrained and contradictory, of those who are thus objectified and subjugated by the cruelty of their exploiters.<sup>78</sup> Rather, having extrapolated key insights from Marx’s corpus for the formulation of a racial theory of labour, I am concerned with the ways that slavery as a specific system of (colonial capitalist) labour subordination supplies capitalism with a defining horizon for *all* labour, and thus how this insight might instructively serve to comprehend the racialised subordination of migrant labour within our global/postcolonial sociopolitical order. A comprehensive Marxian theory of migration requires a critical attention to theorising questions of the state, law, nationalism, borders, and citizenship, as well as race (among other social formations of ‘difference’). My focus here will continue to highlight questions of race and labour.

Migration provides a key site for contemplating the mobility of labour ‘as such’ – labour ‘in general’, or labour in the abstract. Simply put, there could be ‘no capitalism without migration’.<sup>79</sup> Simultaneously, the global mobility of labour is in fact inexorably embroiled in the production of difference, particularly the spatialised difference that is produced by (‘national’) state borders.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, in a world social order that delegates the expressly political tasks of labour’s subordination and coercion to localised (territorially delimited) formations of more or less organised violence (customarily, ‘national’ state formations),<sup>81</sup> borders and their enforcement become critical sites of labour subordination, mediating the global relation of capital and labour through various interventions that differentiate the mobility of labour according to the

77 See also De Genova 2012, 2016a and 2016b.

78 Cf. Andrijašević 2010; Aradau 2008; Chapkis 2003; Sharma 2003; see also De Genova 2013.

79 Mezzadra 2011a, p. 125.

80 De Genova 2016a; Ngai 2015; Sharma 2020.

81 Holloway 1994.

juridical categories that govern migration. Thus, if there were no borders, there would be no 'migration' as such – only mobility.<sup>82</sup>

As the veritable source of all value, it is not unreasonable to say that labour-power is the premier commodity in the global circuitry of capitalist exchange. Capital has made and relentlessly re-made the world in its own image, and according to its chaotic requirements – bursting asunder every apparent barrier in the creation of an ever more unobstructed global arena for profit-making and the continuous re-consolidation of a global division of labour.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, necessarily and inevitably, there has also been a concomitant escalation in the mobility of labour-power – arguably, above and beyond that of any other commodity (except money capital itself). Whereas other commodities are generally transported in order to be exchanged and consumed, once and for all, capital's continuous and unrelenting appetite for labour-power requires that living labour must be constantly replenished in order that it may be repeatedly 'consumed' anew.<sup>84</sup> Thus, the global movement of homogenised, abstract labour is finally embodied in the restless life and death of labour in a rather more 'concrete' form – which is to say, actual migrant working men and women. While Marx restricted his use of the concept of 'concrete labour' to refer to the heterogenous variety of specific forms of work that produce distinct products or contributions to the larger labour process, I adapt this distinction between abstract and concrete labour here to insist on the ways in which labour in the abstract is never separable from its embodiment in living labour, replete with all the qualitative differences that may otherwise be assembled under the heading of 'concrete' labour. The accelerated mobility of labour-power is similarly inseparable, then, from the migration of actual (corporeal) human beings and all the concomitant differences that accrue to them through the mediation of border regimes and immigration law.

In the mass exodus of the Irish fleeing the potato famine of 1846, for instance, Marx notably recognised what he characterised as 'a systematic process'.<sup>85</sup> The Irish exodus entailed 'a new way of spiriting a poor people thousands of miles away from the scene of its misery'.<sup>86</sup> It also served, in effect, as 'one of the most lucrative branches of [Ireland's] export trade'.<sup>87</sup> By exporting the labour-power of its surplus population while also mobilising the migrants themselves as a

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82 De Genova 2016a.

83 Marx 1973, p. 524.

84 De Genova 2010, 2012 and 2016b.

85 Marx 1976, p. 862.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

source of remittances, Marx noted, the exodus not only subsidised those left behind but further fuelled migration by financing the travel costs of subsequent generations of migrants. From the opposite vantage point of the United States, Marx discerned with respect to Irish labour migration a parallel process of importation – ‘the importation of paupers.’<sup>88</sup> As Michael Burawoy classically demonstrated, migrant labour likewise entails a systematic separation of the exploitation of labour-power from the sites (and costs) of its reproduction.<sup>89</sup> As with the mobility of capital itself, which exudes a pronounced indifference toward the particular forms of the labour process where it invests in favour of a maximisation of surplus value, and is in this sense exceedingly versatile, so also with the human mobility of labour. Migrant labour mobility is a supreme instance of flexibility, commonly compelled to regard the particular content of one or another type of work with relative indifference, and to render up its labour-power wherever and however it may be required.

The inclination that Marx discerned with regard to the mobility of capital to surmount any ‘legal [or other] extra-economic impediments to its freedom of movement’ is yet another aspect of this versatility of migrant labour.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, depicting Ireland’s precisely colonial condition in terms of ‘a government ... maintained only by bayonets and by a state of siege sometimes open and sometimes disguised’,<sup>91</sup> Marx also discerned how the ‘*forced immigration* of poor Irishmen’ into the industrial cities of England had enabled the capitalist class to cultivate ‘two hostile camps’ defined by the ‘profound antagonism between the Irish proletariat and the English proletariat’, whereby ‘the average English worker hates the Irish worker ... [and] regards him somewhat like the *poor whites* of the Southern States of North America regard their black slaves.’<sup>92</sup> The ‘tendency to universalize the Black condition’,<sup>93</sup> so provocatively articulated by Mbembe for the contemporary postcolonial subaltern condition on a global scale, was plainly evident already for Marx. This is so, I am insisting, because slavery was already the inexorable limit figure for all forms of labour under capitalism, and consequently, Blackness always already supplied the racialised cipher for signalling the most extreme manifestations of modern exploitation.

For present purposes, it is likewise crucial to recall that even for those who come to be racialised as Black, we must guard against naturalising what has

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88 Marx 1976, p. 939.

89 Burawoy 1976.

90 Marx 1976, p. 1013.

91 Marx 1976, p. 863.

92 Marx 1971, p. 254; emphases in original.

93 Mbembe 2017, p. 4.



always and everywhere been an historically specific sociopolitical process of *producing* them as 'Black'. In this regard, Stuart Hall's reflections on his experience as a Black migrant are quite poignant: 'I'd never called myself black ever in my life. ... So it was a discovery for me, a rediscovery [in Britain] of the Caribbean in new terms ... and a rediscovery of the black subject. ... I didn't choose that. I had no alternative.'<sup>94</sup> In other words, although the centuries-old racialisation of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the New World was indisputably a defining crucible for the global/colonial racial formation of Blackness, it was nonetheless the postcolonial migrant encounter with Europe that was, in Hall's experience, tantamount to a migration into Blackness, a *re-racialisation*, a subordination and subjection that was inextricable from the ongoing and unfinished business of (re-)producing racial distinctions and meanings. His migration, and moreover, his migrant condition, required that he be socially and politically inscribed, and thus racially branded – as Black.

The 'Blackness' of racially subjugated migrants is therefore always something fundamentally new, to be continuously 'discovered' by migrants as they endure and confront the larger social forces working to produce them as racial objects and thereby also as (re-)racialised subjects, and thus compelling them to 're-discover' themselves racially. It is necessary, then, that we recognise the fundamentally *racial* character of migration within and throughout the world capitalist system,<sup>95</sup> while also underscoring the contemporary salience of the figures of migration and refugee movements for destabilising, de-naturalising, and de-essentialising yet again the pernicious persistence of encrusted and ossified racial nomenclatures. The persistently racial salience of migration is as indisputable as is the pivotal importance of migration in demonstrating the profoundly unstable and historically mutable character of race as an eminently social construction, implicated always in unresolved sociopolitical struggles over its meanings and lived consequentiality.<sup>96</sup> Thus, it is productive once more to insist on a conception of Blackness that exceeds the constrictions of the more rigid and conventional racial codifications that have been generated and sedimented historically.

The historical production of Blackness (and thereby, also of whiteness) required the literal branding of the flesh of enslaved Africans and their descendants across the Americas. Furthermore, racialisation itself has operated as a kind of sociopolitical branding. Such sociopolitical processes of branding have always required multifarious and reiterative operations, including of course

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94 Hall and Back 2009, p. 662.

95 De Genova 2018.

96 Omi and Winant 2015.

those of the law, to truly accomplish the task of allocating and resolutely attaching sociopolitical categories of difference to diverse varieties of human persons, and thus searing their racialised designations onto their bodies and identities. Analogously, we may begin to comprehend how other (ostensibly non-racial or race-neutral) forms of sociopolitical categorisation and regimentation, such as ostensibly 'national' differences come to operate as effectively racial categories of difference, and how generic figures of 'foreignness', or indeed the durable designation of particular categories of migrants as 'illegal', also bear a compelling resemblance to branding. Without effacing the irreducible historical specificity of Marx's discussion of modern slavery, it has indeed become increasingly common today, given our global postcolonial condition, that labour 'in a black skin' presents itself also in a 'foreign' costume.

The putative 'illegality' of migrants or so-called 'asylum-seekers' (itself a derisive term predicated on suspicion) has become the single most prominent 'problem' for immigration and asylum law and policy on a global scale during recent decades. Seldom does public debate consider precisely where and how this 'illegality' came into being, however. Nonetheless, migrant and refugee 'illegality' always has a history within each particular juridical and border-enforcement context. One of the central hypotheses of a critical analysis of what I call the legal production of migrant 'illegality'<sup>97</sup> has been to recognise that a spectacle of border policing in fact systematically distracts us from discerning how migrant and refugee 'illegality' is truly generated elsewhere, through law and policy formulated and promulgated at a great remove from the actual physical/territorial borders of states.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, it is the law that brands particular migrations and categories of migrants as 'illegal'. Migrant *illegalisation* is a process of sociopolitical branding.

Furthermore, the ethnographic study of present-day border policing and immigration enforcement practices confirms that such histories (much like the histories of racialisation) are never finished. Rather than *faits accomplis*, established once and for all time, these diverse and historically specific productions of migrant and refugee 'illegality' must continue to be (re-) produced through border struggles and ongoing practices of (re-)bordering. The concepts of deportability<sup>99</sup> and a global deportation regime,<sup>100</sup> furthermore, help to elucidate how illegalised migrants' and refugees' susceptibility to deportation – the prospect of deportation, beyond the actual fact of deportation – contributes

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97 De Genova 2002, 2004 and 2005.

98 De Genova 2002, 2005 and 2013.

99 De Genova 2002, 2005, 2010 and 2013.

100 De Genova and Peutz (eds.) 2010.

decisively to the production of migrant precarity in everyday life. In short, it is precisely deportability that plays a distinctly disciplinary role in the production of the conditions of possibility for migrant labour-power to serve as a highly desirable commodity for employers, often converting what Marx called the disposable ‘reserve army’<sup>101</sup> of labour into an enthusiastically recruited (deportable) labour force of choice.

Capital requires a surplus population to both absorb displaced workers and also to serve as a pool of potential workers when production expands.<sup>102</sup> The operation of the reserve army of labour serves to discipline labour at the same time that it meets the requirements of capital accumulation on an expanding scale. ‘The over-work of the employed part of the working class swells the ranks of its reserve, while, conversely, the greater pressure that the reserve by its competition exerts on the employed workers forces them to submit to over-work and subjects them to the dictates of capital.’<sup>103</sup> The sociopolitical and legal branding of migrant labour as ‘foreign’ and especially as ‘illegal’ supplies a crucial disciplinary mechanism for managing all labour through a multiplication of the categories of difference that serve to decompose and fragment labour into competing rival factions riven by racialised and other essentialised antagonisms that are naturalised as ‘unpassable boundaries’ and ‘fictions of embodied otherness.’<sup>104</sup> Alternating mass deportations with a more or less permanent mass importation of illegalised and deportable labour has long ensured that the state’s mediation of migration through diverse tactics of border policing and immigration law enforcement provides capital with an exquisitely flexible, eminently disposable ‘reserve army’ of labour.<sup>105</sup>

Furthermore, the border-making and border-enforcing activities of immigration enforcement have been increasingly and pervasively relocated to sites within the ‘interior’ of migrant-receiving states, such that illegalised migrants and refugees are made, in effect, to carry borders on their very bodies<sup>106</sup> as border enforcement and the prospect of deportation come to permeate the full spectrum of racialised everyday life activities and spaces. The global class politics of human mobility, which routinely transposes a transnational relation of capital and labour into the ostensibly insular ‘national’ politics of ‘immigration’ and border policing, continuously reinvigorates ‘unpassable boundaries’ and thus reinvents and reanimates racialised distinctions. Thus, the global class

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101 Marx 1976, p. 784.

102 Ibid.

103 Marx 1976, p. 789.

104 Bhattacharyya 2018, p. 2.

105 De Genova 2016a.

106 Khosravi 2010, pp. 97–120.

politics of human mobility (the mobility of labour) ever increasingly instigates the consolidation of what Étienne Balibar (among others) has depicted as ‘a world apartheid’, which institutes a ‘colour bar’ that now no longer merely separates the so-called ‘centre’ from ‘periphery’, or North from South, but effectively runs through all ‘national’ state formations.<sup>107</sup> Thus, the branding processes of migrant illegalisation generate open-ended sites not only for border struggles and immigration and refugee politics, taken more narrowly, but also for unforeseen and expansive disputes over race, citizenship, and labour, more generally. As with the racial branding of Blackness that was a constitutive feature of the historical production of enslaved labour, so also does migrant ‘illegality’ today entail a socio-legal branding that is crucial for the creation and maintenance of migration as a reliable, eminently mobile, flexible, and ultimately disposable source of racially subjugated labour-power.

Finally, let us recall once more Marx’s poignant insight: ‘Labour in a white skin can never emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin.’<sup>108</sup> Hence, we may begin to recognise how the sociopolitical production of difference, and the branding of diverse categories of labouring humanity into racialised ‘skins’, has operated as an absolutely central and constitutive feature of labour’s subordination to the requirements and mandates of capital accumulation, and thus the continuous (re-)production of labour-for-capital. Analogously, the sociopolitical and legal mediations of human mobility on a global scale – and thereby, the bordering of labour mobility as ‘migration’ – thus becomes apprehensible as a comparable production of difference that brands various particular categories of labour as ‘foreign’, if not indeed as ‘illegal.’<sup>109</sup> If, as Marx and Engels famously proclaim in the closing lines of *The Communist Manifesto*, the working people ‘of all countries’ have ‘a world to win’,<sup>110</sup> it may be all the more vital and more relevant than ever to recall another decisive and conceptually more ambitious proposition that precedes that resounding battle cry, and which migration serves continuously to verify: the working people of the world ‘have no country.’<sup>111</sup> Hence, a contemporary corollary to Marx’s axiom would seem to be: Labour in the prison inmate’s uniform of citizenship can never emancipate itself where labour in the migrant’s garb of ‘foreignness’ is branded as ‘illegal’.

107 Balibar 2002, p. 82; see also Besteman 2020.

108 Marx 1976, p. 414.

109 De Genova 2013 and 2018; Sharma 2020.

110 Marx and Engels 2008, p. 84.

111 Marx and Engels 2008, p. 61.

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