

### 3 Blackness of Labor, Blackness of Migration

*Nicholas De Genova*

#### Introduction

What is at stake in this chapter is a decolonial reconsideration of Marx's theory of labor through the lens of a fact of global Blackness. 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," his solution to what might at first glance appear to be an economic puzzle is tellingly that capitalism is "a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man."<sup>1</sup> Marx's emphasis on mastery, notably, is emphatically and explicitly political. This was never a merely "economic" matter. To make the point somewhat differently, then, the labor theory of value has always been in fact, more accurately, a value theory of labor.<sup>2</sup> What really mattered for Marx was indeed to produce a theory of labor—a theory adequate to the specific ways in which labor is systematically understood and represented under capitalism. Marx was interested in why the substance of labor 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 the socially and historically specific predominance of abstract labor under capitalism signaled a particular sociopolitical organization 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 "labor") is subordinated to a regime of production "for the sake of production."<sup>3</sup> Why, he demands, has this content assumed that form? In a manner that is analogous to Marx's formulation, I will argue in this chapter that if the mastery of human life—and labor—under capitalism has pervasively assumed the form of racial domination, we must similarly demand to understand why. Labor is systematically understood and represented under capitalism as something homogeneous and abstract, yet in the materiality of lived practice, labor is always embodied, and therefore gendered—and, indeed, racialized. Indeed, as I will argue here, the abstraction of labor that comes to distinguish capitalist social relations is fundamentally derived from the material and practical conditions that arise with the modern enslavement of Black labor. Hence, the labor theory of value, which has always been more accurately a value theory of labor, must be complemented with what we might posit to be a racial theory of labor.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003519621-5

This chapter has been made available under a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon issues a memorable caution with respect to precisely the racial character of colonial capitalism: “In the colonies ... the cause is effect: you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to deal with the colonial problem.”<sup>4</sup> In the interests of such a decolonial “stretching” and rethinking of some of the elementary features of Marx’s theorization of labor under capitalism, this chapter will undertake a rereading of Marx 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. Taking some vital cues from the Black radical tradition and, in the spirit of the larger decolonial goals of this volume, seeking to center the fact of global Blackness for a Marxian analysis of postcolonial capitalism, the proposition here of a racial theory of labor aims to situate labor under capitalism in the broad historical context that would permit for a theory of labor capacious enough to encompass the legacies of enslaved labor 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. What I will posit to be *the Blackness of labor*, then, will serve to elucidate what we may understand to be the Blackness of migration.

### **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 conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize 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 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 colonial and, thus, 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, inevitably, only 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 civilization 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, organization, 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 racialized feature of social inequality and hierarchy in the composition and organization of European social formations themselves. This was plainly not Marx’s perspective. Such historical inquiries and any ensuing disputes notwithstanding, however, for Robinson the entrenchment of capitalist social relations on a global scale could only ever be “permeated” by “racialism.” Without allowing ourselves to get detoured by historiographic quibbles over origin stories, capitalist civilization 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 epistemologically or ideologically but also materially and practically, with racialism (in Robinson’s phrase): capitalism has never been other than racial capitalism.

Considering this historical perspective, what has been insufficiently comprehended, furthermore, is that we are long overdue for a robust decolonial renovation of Marxist theory and radical anticapitalist political practice in light of a more thoroughgoing and comprehensive reevaluation of the central and defining concepts and theoretical categories of Marxian analysis through the critical lens of race. As a contribution to such an endeavor, this essay proposes a reconsideration of the crucial historical role of slavery, especially with respect to advancing a rigorous analysis of *labor*—and hence, of labor subordination—within

the larger configuration of capitalist social relations. Not simply reducible to a scholastic exercise in the historiography of what Marx called “the so-called primitive accumulation” of capital, and therefore a contribution to a more precise and more supple appreciation of the past, such an endeavor provides a vital source of Marxian critique for apprehending the mobility of labor (and its subordination as “migrant” labor, in particular) within our global postcolonial present and, thus, for formulating any plausible politics that might aspire to a postcapitalist future.

### Slavery, Labor, and Blackness

With specific reference to the disfigurement of the nascent struggles by the white working class in the US because of the coeval existence of 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 anticapitalist 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, prepolitical “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 plainly contends that slavery was *necessary* as the base or foundation that materially supported wage labor.<sup>14</sup>

Marx relies extensively on the heuristic utility of contrasts between slave labor and wage labor, precisely to underscore the affinities between the two. Furthermore, he does not shun depictions of ostensibly “free” (waged) labor 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>15</sup> The characterization of wage labor as a “veiled” form of slavery, notably, speaks directly to Marx’s preoccupation with why labor (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 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>16</sup> Nonetheless, Marx also discerned in the “unqualified slavery” of colonial capitalism the production

of commodities for the world market whereby “the civilized horrors of over-work are grafted onto the barbaric horrors of slavery.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, New World slavery was not only a material and practical prerequisite for that illusory freedom attributed to wage labor but also a kind of exemplar of the raw unveiled truth of labor under capitalism. Thus, Marx’s analysis would seem to command a deeper interrogation of labor *as such* by way of a more frank encounter with labor 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>18</sup> As a result, the “doctrine of race” arising from this primitive accumulation to justify and legitimate the subjugation of indigenous, colonized, and enslaved peoples thereafter had to be “frantically rationalized in every possible direction.”<sup>19</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 unnatural yet terrifyingly naturalized 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 condition—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>20</sup> Du Bois eloquently if acerbically exposed what he called the “religion of whiteness,” for which “whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!”<sup>21</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 racialized whiteness over and above all other categories of “racial” identity. Foundational racialized distinctions and meanings, such as “white” or “Black,” were literally invented, imposed, and enforced through various iterations of the global regime of European/colonial supremacy, retroactively. They appear as the transparent and self-evident (“natural” or “ontological”) names for differences that only came to have significance and gravity because the forms of exploitation and domination that created them required and relied upon their naturalization. Whiteness, like Blackness, is however no mere fact of nature; it is fact of a global/colonial regime of white supremacy.

To adequately adapt Marx’s critique of the racial coordinates of capitalism and the perplexities of labor 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 global conception of Blackness that corresponds to the full range of racialized categories that colonial 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 predictably 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 imperialism unrelentingly produced as its colonized and enslaved “natives” and thus as specifically not-“white.” Indeed, 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 colonized 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 preeminent figure of racialized 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 labor—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>22</sup> Indeed, if the Atlantic slave trade literally transformed African men, women, and children into “human-objects, human-commodities, human-money,” the term “Black,” that was devised to brand their particular flesh nonetheless, “was invented to signify exclusion, brutalization, and degradation, to point to a limit constantly conjured and abhorred.”<sup>23</sup> Consequently, and above all else, Blackness names that limit.

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 racialized as Black, however, we require a more expansive and capacious understanding of Blackness as a sociopolitical category that *tendentally* encompasses the whole spectrum of racialized social identities produced as nonwhite within our global post/colonial regime of white supremacy.<sup>24</sup> 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>25</sup> In the aftermath of the era of decolonization that defined the latter half of the twentieth century, the problem of the color line has become widely synonymous with borders. In this respect, contemporary postcolonial migration and refugee movements may be recognized as providing crucial sites for what Mbembe has tellingly depicted as “the Becoming Black of the world,” 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,” in which “the term ‘Black’ has been generalized,” and there is a “tendency to universalize the Black condition.”<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, inasmuch as such an objectification of human productive power and creative capacity is precisely what is at stake in Marx’s critique of the capital–labor relation, predicated as it is upon the commodification of the capacity for work (labor-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 resituate enslaved labor as the defining and constitutive limit for how we comprehend labor itself under capitalism.<sup>27</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) labor:

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-valorization 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>28</sup>

Marx’s scathing critique of wage labor is always haunted by the long shadow of slavery as its limit figure.<sup>29</sup> Insofar as Blackness is inextricable from the historical experience of modern slavery as a kind of name, indeed a racialized branding, for that historically specific limit of human objectification and commodification, we may begin to recognize that *all* labor under capitalism may itself be understood to be at least *tendentially* encompassed under this racialized sign as the antithesis of capital. This, indeed, is what ensures that labor “in a white skin”—labor 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 labor-*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 racialized as white, which Du Bois famously recognized to be the symbolic and psychological “wage” of whiteness.<sup>30</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>31</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 racialized 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 labor to be the antithesis of capital, then to the extent that Blackness names the ultimate condition of labor's subordination and subjection to capital, we need to recognize the tendency for all labor 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 racialized 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 labor under capitalism and that there is a tendency to press all labor 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 (racialized or otherwise) along an unstable and contingent continuum of relative freedom/unfreedom.

### **Race, Difference, and the Abstraction of Labor**

If I am emphasizing race (and specifically Blackness) as a decisive analytical tool for ultimately unpacking the global question of labor within our postcolonial condition, generally (and for the question of migrant labor, in particular) it is because Blackness is in fact necessary for apprehending *labor 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 words well. By evoking the *branding* of the flesh of enslaved African/American labor, Marx tersely but precisely named the visceral corporeality and sheer cruelty of slavery's dehumanizing violence, while yet naming a more diffuse process of racialization 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 quite simply 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, prepolitical (quasi-natural) pretext for various properly political tactics of labor 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 labor under capitalism, as such, without further pursuing this inquiry into the puzzle of "labor in a white skin" and, concomitantly, labor branded as Black.

Capital can never extract from labor the abstract (eminently social) substance that is "value" except with recourse to the abstraction of labor-power, which,



however, can only be derived from the palpable vital energies of living labor. As an operative, indeed decisive, category of capital accumulation, labor-power (abstract labor) never ceases to pertain to real flesh and blood (embodied, and hence, racialized) working people (concrete labor). 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>32</sup>

Marx affiliated concrete (variegated) labor with the use-value of the distinct products of that labor 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 labor 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 US.

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>33</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 US—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 labor in the racialized “skin” of Blackness was likewise exceedingly advanced, that there emerged the purest form of the abstraction of “labor” as such, of labor “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 valorize 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, 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>34</sup> In this regard, there is an emphatic heuristic contrast drawn between the figures of “free workers” (or “free labor”) and “slaves.” It is precisely this figure of “free” labor that serves to underscore the historically specific character of the emergence of labor-power as the commodified objectification of the human capacity to work (labor in the abstract), which distinguishes the ostensibly contractual and purely voluntary transaction that is understood to transpire between owners of the means of production and wage laborers in the capitalist labor market. Nonetheless, these putatively “free” workers are scathingly depicted by Marx as those “who have nothing to sell except their own skins.”<sup>35</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>36</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>37</sup> Nevertheless, these processes of expropriation and dispossession, we know, just as Marx knew, were—and *continue to be*—coterminous with the generalization of the wage-labor 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 they have coexisted with the more pure ideal type of capitalist (wage-)labor relations throughout the ongoing history of “actually existing” capitalism, which has never ceased to be written in blood and fire.<sup>38</sup> In this respect, centuries of New World slavery cannot be reduced to a mere residual of some putative prehistory of “true” capitalist relations.

The racial branding of labor 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 labor but also for the elaborate socio-political 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 racialized difference, that served as a necessary predicate for the consolidation and perfecting of what Marx called “labor in the abstract.” Labor in the abstract—a figure of labor literally shorn of its humanity and stripped of all qualitative specificities—was literally possible historically only through the real stripping and degradation of the actual human life of the enslaved and colonized into a form of life that could be classed as virtually subhuman. And after all, as Gargi Bhattacharyya notes, “capitalism cannot function if we all are allowed to become fully human.”<sup>39</sup>

To be rendered as labor in the abstract is to be reduced to labor and nothing but labor. This was the precise 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>40</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 labor-power. However, there never could have emerged this social fiction of labor-power—whereby the capacity to work could be rendered as if it were simply one more commodity for sale in the market—without a prehistory in which the myriad forms of concrete labor became reduced and generalized (indeed, abstracted) into a figure of labor in the abstract, labor “in general.” For the historically specific emergence and consolidation of this peculiarly modern form of generic “labor,” slavery was constitutive. There was simply no more perfect approximation of the elusive figure of labor in the abstract than the social condition inflicted on enslaved people by modern slavery—that distinctly capitalist sociopolitical regime that worked assiduously and unrelentingly to reduce a whole category of human life into labor and nothing but labor.

The production of labor in the abstract, or labor “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 organizing principle for the historical production of difference, inequality, and hierarchy within the global labor regime of capitalism.

The homogenized abstraction of labor-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,” or analogously, what Partha Chatterjee has designated as “the rule of colonial difference.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the capital–labor 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>42</sup> As Bhattacharyya incisively puts the question, alongside an “overarching instrumentalisation of human life, how are some deemed (even) less?”<sup>43</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 *differentiate* living labor toward the very instrumental end of maximizing its subordination and exploitation. Such a politics of difference at work within the genesis of abstract labor has always been inextricable from the real history of racial subjugation, for which slavery remains a primal scene.

### **Migrant “Illegality” as Racial Branding**

In the remainder of this chapter, I will repurpose such an ostensibly historical perspective on the foundational role of slavery in the genesis of colonial capitalism toward the decolonial ends of elaborating what has remained an as-yet-underdeveloped Marxian theory of migrant labor within the contemporary postcolonial condition.<sup>44</sup> My endeavor is not to identify and denounce the contemporary existence of diverse forms of “virtual” or “new slavery” nor to subsume a discussion of migrant labor 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 sensationalization of such spectacles of victimization, both because they often serve, however inadvertently or unwittingly, to restabilize “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>45</sup> Rather, having extrapolated key insights from Marx’s corpus for the formulation of a racial theory of labor, I am concerned with the ways that slavery supplies capitalism with a defining horizon for *all* labor and thus how this insight might instructively serve to comprehend the racialized subordination of migrant labor within our global/postcolonial sociopolitical order. A comprehensive Marxian theory of migration commands a critical attention to theorizing questions of the state, law, nationalism, borders, citizenship, and race (among other social formations of “difference”). My focus here will continue to highlight questions of race and labor.

Migration provides a key site for contemplating the mobility of labor “as such”—labor “in general,” or labor in the abstract. Simply put, there could be “no capitalism without migration.”<sup>46</sup> Simultaneously, the global mobility of labor is in fact inexorably embroiled in the production of difference, particularly the spatialized difference that is produced by (“national”) state borders.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, in a world social order that delegates the expressly political tasks of labor’s subordination and coercion to localized (territorially delimited) formations of more or less organized violence (customarily, “national” state formations<sup>48</sup>), borders and their enforcement become critical sites of labor subordination, mediating the global relation of capital and labor through various interventions that differentiate the

mobility of labor according to the juridical categories that govern migration. Thus, if there were no borders, there would be no “migration” as such—only mobility.<sup>49</sup>

As the veritable source of all value, it is not unreasonable to say that labor-power is the premier commodity in the global circuitry of capitalist exchange. Capital has made and relentlessly remade 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 profitmaking and the continuous reconsolidation of a global division of labor.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, necessarily and inevitably, there has also been a concomitant escalation in the mobility of labor-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 labor-power requires that living labor must be constantly replenished in order that it may be repeatedly “consumed” anew.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the global movement of homogenized, abstract labor is finally embodied in the restless life and death of labor 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 labor” to refer to the heterogeneous variety of specific forms of work that produced distinct products or contributions to the larger labor process, I adapt this distinction between abstract and concrete labor here to insist on the ways in which labor in the abstract is never separable from its embodiment in living labor, replete with all the qualitative differences that may otherwise be assembled under the heading of “concrete” labor. The accelerated mobility of labor-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 recognized what he characterized as “a systematic process.”<sup>52</sup> The Irish exodus entailed “a new way of spiriting a poor people thousands of miles away from the scene of its misery.”<sup>53</sup> It also served, in effect, as “one of the most lucrative branches of [Ireland’s] export trade.”<sup>54</sup> By exporting the labor-power of its surplus population while also mobilizing the migrants themselves as a source of remittances, Marx noted, the exodus not only subsidized those left behind but further fueled migration by financing the travel costs of subsequent generations of migrants. From the opposite vantage point of the US, Marx discerned with respect to Irish labor migration a concomitant importation—“the importation of paupers.”<sup>55</sup> As Michael Burawoy classically demonstrated, migrant labor likewise entails a systematic separation of the exploitation of labor-power from the sites (and costs) of its reproduction.<sup>56</sup> As with the mobility of capital itself, which exudes a pronounced indifference toward the particular forms of the labor process where it invests in favor of a maximization of surplus value and is in this sense exceedingly versatile, so also with the human mobility of labor. Migrant labor mobility is a supreme instance of flexibility, compelled to regard the content of one or another type of work with relative indifference and to render up its labor-power wherever 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 labor.<sup>57</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>58</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>59</sup> The “tendency to universalize the Black condition,” so provocatively articulated by Mbembe for the contemporary postcolonial subaltern condition on a global scale, was plainly evident already for Marx.<sup>60</sup> This is so, I am insisting, because slavery was already the inexorable limit figure for all forms of labor under capitalism, and consequently Blackness always already supplied the racialized cipher for signaling the most extreme manifestations of modern exploitation.

For present purposes, it is likewise crucial to recall that even for those who come to be racialized as Black, we must guard against naturalizing what has 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>61</sup> In other words, although the centuries-old racialization 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 account, tantamount to a migration into Blackness, a *reracialization*, 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)racialized subjects, and thus compelling them to “rediscover” themselves racially. It is necessary, then, that we recognize the fundamentally *racial* character of migration within and throughout the world capitalist system, while also underscoring the contemporary salience of the figures of migration and refugee movements for destabilizing, denaturalizing, and deessentializing 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. 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, racialization itself has operated as a kind of sociopolitical branding. Such sociopolitical processes of branding have always required multifarious and reiterative operations, including, of course, 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 to sear their racialized designations onto their bodies and identities. Analogously, we may begin to comprehend how other (ostensibly nonracial or race-neutral) forms of sociopolitical categorization 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 labor “in a Black skin” presents itself also in a “foreign” costume.

The putative “illegality” of migrants or so-called asylum-seekers (itself a derivative 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 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>62</sup> has been to recognize 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>63</sup> Indeed, it is the law that brands particular migrations and categories of migrants as “illegal.” Simply put, migrant *illegalization* 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 racialization) are never finished. Rather than *faits accompli*, established once and for all time, these diverse and historically specific productions of migrant and refugee “illegality” must continue to be reproduced through border struggles and ongoing practices of (re)bordering. The concepts of deportability and a global deportation regime, furthermore, help to elucidate how illegalized migrants’ and refugees’ susceptibility to deportation—the prospect of deportation, beyond the actual fact of deportation—contributes decisively to the production of migrant precarity in everyday life.<sup>64</sup> In short, it is precisely deportability that plays a distinctly disciplinary role in the production of the conditions of possibility for

migrant labor-power to serve as a highly desirable commodity for employers, often converting what Marx called the “reserve army” of labor into an enthusiastically recruited labor force of choice.

Capital requires a surplus population both to absorb displaced workers but also to serve as a pool of potential workers when production expands.<sup>65</sup> The operation of the reserve army of labor serves to discipline labor 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>66</sup> The sociopolitical and legal branding of migrant labor as “foreign” and especially as “illegal” supplies a crucial disciplinary mechanism for managing all labor through a multiplication of the categories of difference that serve to decompose and fragment labor into competing rival factions riven by racialized and other essentialized antagonisms that are naturalized as “unpassable boundaries” and “fictions of embodied otherness.”<sup>67</sup> Alternating mass deportations with a more or less permanent mass importation of illegalized and deportable labor 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 “reserve army” of labor.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, the bordermaking and border-enforcing activities of immigration enforcement have been increasingly and pervasively relocated to sites within the “interior” of migrant-receiving states, such that illegalized migrants and refugees are made, in effect, to carry borders on their very bodies as border enforcement and the prospect of deportation come to permeate the full spectrum of racialized everyday life activities and spaces.<sup>69</sup> The global class politics of human mobility, which routinely transposes a transnational relation of capital and labor into the ostensibly insular “national” politics of “immigration” and border policing, continuously reinvigorates “unpassable boundaries” and thus reinvents racialized distinctions. Thus, the global class politics of human mobility ever increasingly instigates the consolidation of what Étienne Balibar (among others) has depicted as “a world apartheid,” which institutes a “color bar” that now no longer merely separates the so-called center from “periphery,” or North from South, but effectively runs through all “national” state formations.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the branding processes of migrant illegalization 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 labor, more generally. As with the racial branding of Blackness that was a constitutive feature of the historical production of enslaved labor, so also does migrant “illegality” today entail a sociolegal branding that is crucial for the creation and maintenance of migration as a reliable, eminently mobile, flexible, and ultimately disposable source of labor-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>71</sup> Hence, we may begin to recognize how the sociopolitical production of difference and the branding of diverse categories of laboring humanity into racialized “skins”

has operated as an absolutely central and constitutive feature of labor's subordination to the requirements and mandates of capital accumulation, and thus the continuous (re)production of labor-for-capital. Analogously, the sociopolitical and legal mediations of human mobility on a global scale—and thereby, the bordering of labor mobility as “migration”—thus becomes apprehensible as a comparable production of difference that brands various particular categories of labor as “foreign,” if not indeed as “illegal.”<sup>72</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,” 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>73</sup> Hence, a contemporary corollary to Marx's axiom would seem to be: Labor in the prison inmate's uniform of citizenship can never emancipate itself where labor in the migrant's garb of “foreignness” is branded as “illegal.”

### Acknowledgments

Some of the ideas developed in this essay initially began to take shape in the course of an extended dialogue with Nahum Chandler, to whom I owe a debt of deep gratitude and appreciation. I am also grateful for the enduring inspiration and encouragement of Dave Roediger and Howie Winant. Thanks are also due to Hannah Schling, whose questions pushed me to clarify various points. The earliest iteration of key ideas in portions of this essay appeared in my essay “Migration and the Mobility of Labor” in *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Marx*, eds. Matt Vidal, Tony Smith, Tomás Rotta, and Paul Prew (New York: Oxford University Press, December 2018). A more elaborated version was published as “A Racial Theory of Labor: Racial Capitalism from Colonial Slavery to Postcolonial Migration” in “Race and Capital,” ed. Ashok Kumar and Robert Knox, *Historical Materialism* 32, nos. 2 & 3 (May 31, 2023), [www.historicalmaterialism.org/articles/racial-theory-labour#\\_edn3](http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/articles/racial-theory-labour#_edn3).

### Notes

- 1 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage/Random House, [1867] 1976), 173, 174.
- 2 Diane Elson, “The Value Theory of Labour,” in *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, ed. Diane Elson (London: CSE Books, 1979), 115–80; cf. Terence Turner, “Marxian Value Theory: An Anthropological Perspective,” *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 1 (2008): 43–56.
- 3 Marx, *Capital*, 1038.
- 4 Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, [1961] 2004), 5.
- 5 Marx, *Capital*, 915, emphases added.
- 6 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, [1983] 2000), 2.
- 7 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, xxxi.

- 8 Marx, *Capital*, 414.
- 9 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: AMS Press, [1920] 1971), 29–52. See also Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume One: Racial Oppression and Social Control* (New York: Verso, 1994), and *The Invention of the White Race, Volume Two: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (New York: Verso, 1997); Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959); Du Bois, *The Negro* (New York: Holt, 1915); Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Roediger, ed., *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990).
- 10 Du Bois, "Souls of White Folk," 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 (unproblematized) usage and has come to serve as a shorthand in Marxist scholarship for the violent processes that Marx exposes in his critique; see Marx, *Capital*, 873–74.
- 12 Marx, *Capital*, 918.
- 13 Marx, *Capital*, 925.
- 14 Less elegantly, in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (trans. Harry Quelch [Chicago: Charles Kerr, (1845) 1920]) Marx notably proclaimed: "without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry" (121).
- 15 Marx, *Capital*, 875.
- 16 Marx, *Capital*, 680.
- 17 Marx, *Capital*, 345.
- 18 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Folk Then and Now: An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 97; see also Du Bois, *The Negro*, chapter IX.
- 19 Du Bois, *Black Folk*, 91.
- 20 Du Bois, "Souls of White Folk," 48.
- 21 Du Bois, "Souls of White Folk," 31, 30.
- 22 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 6.
- 23 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 2, 6.
- 24 On the historical specificity of African experiences, cf. Nahum D. Chandler, *Toward an African Future: Of the Limit of the World* (London: Living Commons Collective, 2013), and *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*.
- 25 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet/Penguin, [1903] 1982), 15; see also Nahum D. Chandler, "The Figure of W.E.B. Du Bois as a Problem for Thought," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 (2006): 29–56, and "Of Horizon: An Introduction to 'The Afro-American' by W.E.B. Du Bois—circa 1894," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2, no. 1 (2010), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8q64g6kw>.
- 26 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 6, 4.

- 27 Methodologically, my emphasis concerns how slavery worked to subordinate the vital creative, productive, and reproductive (world-making) powers of Black life *as labor* and, of course, did so only through the most vicious and brutal extremes; for the present purposes of this analysis, it is crucial to retain a central focus on how those enslaved persons, reduced juridically to the condition of “things” (property, indeed capital), nonetheless remained living labor and thus a veritable *power* that capitalism continuously sought to harness and subordinate.
- 28 Marx, *Capital*, 375–76.
- 29 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” (*Capital*, 916 n.4).
- 30 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*; see also Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*.
- 31 Marx, *Capital*, 382.
- 32 Marx, *Capital*, 128.
- 33 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage/Random House, [1858] 1973), 104–5.
- 34 Marx, *Capital*, 874.
- 35 Marx, *Capital*, 873.
- 36 Marx, *Capital*, 875.
- 37 Marx, *Capital*, 874–75.
- 38 There has been a robust Marxian debate around the contemporaneity of such violent processes of dispossession; see, e.g., Werner Bonefeld, “The Permanence of Primitive Accumulation: Commodity Fetishism and Social Constitution,” *The Commoner* 2 (September 2001): 1–15; Massimo De Angelis, “Marx and Primitive Accumulation: The Continuous Character of Capital’s ‘Enclosures,’” *The Commoner* 2 (September 2001), <https://thecommoner.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-Permanence-of-Primitive-Accumulation-Bonefeld.pdf>; Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003); David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Sandro Mezzadra, “The Topicality of Prehistory: A New Reading of Marx’s Analysis of ‘So-Called Primitive Accumulation,’” *Rethinking Marxism* 23, no. 3 (2011): 302–21, <https://thecommoner.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Marx-and-primitive-accumulation-deAngelis.pdf>; Midnight Notes Collective, “The New Enclosures,” *Midnight Notes* 10 (1990), <https://thecommoner.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/New-Enclosures-Midnight-Notes-Collective.pdf>.
- 39 Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), x.
- 40 Du Bois famously depicted the general aims of the strivings of “the American Negro” in a manner that 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” (*Souls of Black Folk*, 9); see also Chandler, “The Figure of W. E. B. Du Bois”; “Of Horizon”; *Toward an African Future*; and “Beyond this Narrow Now” or, *Delimitations, of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).
- 41 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 3, 15; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- 42 David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 43 Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, xi.

- 44 See also De Genova, "Bare Life, Labor-Power, Mobility, and Global Space: Toward a Marxian Anthropology?" *CR: The New Centennial Review* 12, no. 3 (2012): 129–52; "The 'Crisis' of the European Border Regime: Towards a Marxist Theory of Borders," *International Socialism* no. 150 (2016): 33–56, <http://isj.org.uk/the-crisis-of-the-european-border-regime-towards-a-marxist-theory-of-borders/>; and "Toward a Marxian Anthropology? Bare, Abstract, Mobile, Global," *Dialectical Anthropology* 40, no. 2 (2016): 125–41.
- 45 Cf. Rutvica Andrijasevic, *Migration, Agency and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Claudia Aradau, *Rethinking Trafficking in Women: Politics out of Security* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Wendy Chapkis, "Trafficking, Migration, and the Law: Protecting Innocents, Punishing Immigrants," *Gender and Society* 17, no. 6 (2003): 923–37; Nandita Sharma, "Travel Agency: A Critique of Anti-trafficking Campaigns," *Refuge* 21 (2003): 53–65; see also De Genova, "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 7 (2013): 1180–98.
- 46 Sandro Mezzadra, "The Gaze of Autonomy: Capitalism, Migration, and Social Struggles," in *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity*, ed. Vicki Squire (London: Routledge, 2011), 125.
- 47 De Genova, "The 'Crisis' of the European Border Regime"; Sianne Ngai, "Visceral Abstractions," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 1 (2015): 33–63; Nandita Sharma, *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and the Separation of Natives and Migrants* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).
- 48 John Holloway, "Global Capital and the National State," *Capital and Class* 18, no. 1 (1994): 23–49.
- 49 De Genova, "The 'Crisis' of the European Border Regime."
- 50 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 524.
- 51 De Genova, "The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement," in *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*, ed. Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 33–65; "Bare Life"; and "Toward a Marxian Anthropology?"
- 52 Marx, *Capital*, 862.
- 53 Marx, *Capital*, 862.
- 54 Marx, *Capital*, 862.
- 55 Marx, *Capital*, 939.
- 56 Michael Burawoy, "The Functions and Reproduction of Migrant Labor: Comparative Material from Southern Africa and the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 81, no. 5 (1976): 1050–87.
- 57 Marx, *Capital*, 1013.
- 58 Marx, *Capital*, 863.
- 59 Karl Marx, "From Confidential Communication," in *Ireland and the Irish Question*, ed. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Moscow: Progress, [1870] 1971), 254, emphases in original.
- 60 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 4.
- 61 Stuart Hall and Les Back, "At Home and Not at Home: Stuart Hall in Conversation with Les Back," *Cultural Studies* 2, no. 4 (2009): 662.
- 62 De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 419–47; "The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant 'Illegality,'" *Latino Studies* 2, no. 1 (2004): 160–85; and *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and "Illegality" in Mexican Chicago* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).



- 63 De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality'"; *Working the Boundaries*; and "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality.'"
- 64 On deportability, De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality'"; *Working the Boundaries*; "The Deportation Regime"; and "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality.'" On a global deportation regime, see De Genova and Nathalie Peutz, eds., *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
- 65 Marx, *Capital*, 784.
- 66 Marx, *Capital*, 789.
- 67 Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, 2.
- 68 De Genova, "The 'Crisis' of the European Border Regime."
- 69 On bodies as borders, see Shahram Khosravi, "*Illegal*" *Traveller: An Auto-ethnography of Borders* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 97–120.
- 70 Étienne Balibar, "What Is a Border?" in *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. Christine Jones, James Swenson, and Chris Turner (New York: Verso, [1993] 2002), 82.
- 71 Marx, *Capital*, 414.
- 72 De Genova, "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality,'" and "The 'Migrant Crisis' as Racial Crisis: Do Black Lives Matter in Europe?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 10 (2018): 1765–82; Sharma, *Home Rule*.
- 73 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore in cooperation with Frederick Engels (New York: Pluto Press, [1848] 1967), 84, 61.

## Bibliography

- Allen, Theodore W. *The Invention of the White Race, Volume One: Racial Oppression and Social Control*. New York: Verso, 1994.
- Allen, Theodore W. *The Invention of the White Race, Volume Two: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*. New York: Verso, 1997.
- Andrijasevic, Rutvica. *Migration, Agency and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Aradau, Claudia. *Rethinking Trafficking in Women: Politics out of Security*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Balibar, Étienne. "What Is a Border?" In *Politics and the Other Scene*. Translated by Christine Jones, James Swenson, and Chris Turner, 75–86. New York: Verso, [1993] 2002.
- Bhattacharyya, Gargi. *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.
- Bonefeld, Werner. "The Permanence of Primitive Accumulation: Commodity Fetishism and Social Constitution." *The Commoner* 2 (September 2001). [www.commoner.org.uk/02bonefeld.pdf](http://www.commoner.org.uk/02bonefeld.pdf).
- Burawoy, Michael. "The Functions and Reproduction of Migrant Labor: Comparative Material from Southern Africa and the United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 81, no. 5 (1976): 1050–87.
- Chandler, Nahum D. *"Beyond this Narrow Now" or, Delimitations, of W. E. B. Du Bois*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022.
- Chandler, Nahum D. "The Figure of W.E.B. Du Bois as a Problem for Thought." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 (2006): 29–56.
- Chandler, Nahum D. "Of Horizon: An Introduction to 'The Afro-American' by W.E.B. Du Bois—circa 1894." *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2, no. 1 (2010). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8q64g6kw>.

- Chandler, Nahum D. *Toward an African Future: Of the Limit of the World*. London: Living Commons Collective, 2013.
- Chandler, Nahum D. *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.
- Chapkis, Wendy. "Trafficking, Migration, and the Law: Protecting Innocents, Punishing Immigrants." *Gender and Society* 17, no. 6 (2003): 923–37.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Cox, Oliver C. *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959.
- De Angelis, Massimo. "Marx and Primitive Accumulation: The Continuous Character of Capital's 'Enclosures.'" *The Commoner* 2 (September 2001). [www.commoner.org.uk/02deangelis.pdf](http://www.commoner.org.uk/02deangelis.pdf).
- De Genova, Nicholas. "Bare Life, Labor-Power, Mobility, and Global Space: Toward a Marxian Anthropology?" *CR: The New Centennial Review* 12, no. 3 (2012): 129–52.
- De Genova, Nicholas. "The 'Crisis' of the European Border Regime: Towards a Marxist Theory of Borders." *International Socialism* 150 (2016): 33–56. <http://isj.org.uk/the-crisis-of-the-european-border-regime-towards-a-marxist-theory-of-borders>.
- De Genova, Nicholas. "The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement." In *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*, edited by Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz, 33–65. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- De Genova, Nicholas. "The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant 'Illegality.'" *Latino Studies* 2, no. 1 (2004): 160–85.
- De Genova, Nicholas. "The 'Migrant Crisis' as Racial Crisis: Do *Black Lives Matter* in Europe?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 10 (2018): 1765–82.
- De Genova, Nicholas. "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 419–47.
- De Genova, Nicholas. "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 7 (2013): 1180–98.
- De Genova, Nicholas. "Toward a Marxian Anthropology? Bare, Abstract, Mobile, Global." *Dialectical Anthropology* 40, no. 2 (2016): 125–41.
- De Genova, Nicholas. *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and "Illegality" in Mexican Chicago*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.
- De Genova, Nicholas, Gleda Garelli, and Martina Tazzioli. "The Autonomy of Migration within the Crises." *SAQ: South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 2 (2018): 239–65.
- De Genova, Nicholas, and Nathalie Peutz, eds. *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, [1935].
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Negro*. New York: Holt, 1915. [www.gutenberg.org/files/15359/15359-h/15359-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15359/15359-h/15359-h.htm).
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Signet/Penguin, [1903] 1982.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. "The Souls of White Folk." In *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, 29–52. New York: AMS Press, [1920] 1971. Reprinted in Roediger, ed., 1998, pp. 184–99.
- Elson, Diane. "The Value Theory of Labour." In *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, edited by Diane Elson, 115–80. London: CSE Books, 1979.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, [1961] 2004.

- Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia, 2003.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Hall, Stuart, and Les Back. "At Home and Not at Home: Stuart Hall in Conversation with Les Back." *Cultural Studies* 2, no. 4 (2009): 658–87.
- Harris, Cheryl. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91.
- Harvey, David. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Holloway, John. "Global Capital and the National State." *Capital and Class* 18, no. 1 (1994): 23–49.
- Khosravi, Shahram. *"Illegal" Traveler: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage/Random House, [1867] 1976.
- Marx, Karl. "From Confidential Communication." In *Ireland and the Irish Question*, edited by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 252–55. Moscow: Progress, [1870] 1971.
- Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. New York: Vintage/Random House, [1858] 1973.
- Marx, Karl. *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Translated by Harry Quelch. Chicago: Charles Kerr, [1845] 1920.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Pluto Press, [1848] 1967.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Critique of Black Reason*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Mezzadra, Sandro. "The Gaze of Autonomy: Capitalism, Migration, and Social Struggles." In *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity*, edited by Vicki Squire, 121–42. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Mezzadra, Sandro. "The Topicality of Prehistory: A New Reading of Marx's Analysis of 'So-Called Primitive Accumulation.'" *Rethinking Marxism* 23, no. 3 (2011): 302–21.
- Midnight Notes Collective. "The New Enclosures." *Midnight Notes* 10 (1990). [www.midnightnotes.org/newenclos.html](http://www.midnightnotes.org/newenclos.html).
- Ngai, Sianne. "Visceral Abstractions." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 1 (2015): 33–63.
- Robinson, Cedric. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, [1983] 2000.
- Roediger, David R., ed. *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*. New York: Schocken Books, 1998.
- Roediger, David R. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso, 1991.
- Roediger, David R., and Elizabeth D. Esch. *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Saxton, Alexander. *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America*. New York: Verso, 1990.
- Sharma, Nandita. *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and the Separation of Natives and Migrants*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020.
- Sharma, Nandita. "Travel Agency: A Critique of Anti-Trafficking Campaigns." *Refuge* 21 (2003): 53–65.
- Turner, Terence. "Marxian Value Theory: An Anthropological Perspective." *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 1 (2008): 43–56.

# **Decoloniality in the Break of Global Blackness**

Movement, Method, Poethics

**Edited by Michaeline A. Crichlow and  
Patricia M. Northover**

Cover image © Ayanna Irish with Graphic design by Sara Shabaka

First published 2025

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2025 selection and editorial matter, Michaeline A. Crichlow and Patricia M. Northover;  
individual chapters, the contributors

The right of Michaeline A. Crichlow and Patricia M. Northover to be identified  
as the authors, of the editorial material and of the authors for their individual chapters,  
has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and  
Patents Act 1988.

The Open Access version of this book, available at [www.taylorfrancis.com](http://www.taylorfrancis.com), has been made  
available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivative Licence  
(CC-BY-NC-ND) 4.0 International license.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks,  
and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Crichlow, Michaeline A. editor. | Northover, Patricia, editor.

Title: Decoloniality in the break of global Blackness : movement, method, poethics /  
edited by Michaeline A. Crichlow, Patricia M. Northover.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2025. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024057883 (print) | LCCN 2024057884 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781032857374 (hbk) | ISBN 9781032857381 (pbk) | ISBN 9781003519621 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Black people--Social conditions. |

Black people--Race identity. | Decolonization.

Classification: LCC HT1581 .D43 2025 (print) | LCC HT1581 (ebook) |

DDC 305.896--dc23/eng/20250211

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024057883>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024057884>

ISBN: 9781032857374 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781032857381 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781003519621 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003519621

The open access version of the book is funded by the Global Partnership Network (GPN) by means  
of the DAAD with funds from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development  
Cooperation (BMZ), Germany.

For Product Safety Concerns and Information please contact our

EU representative: [GPSR@taylorandfrancis.com](mailto:GPSR@taylorandfrancis.com)

Taylor & Francis Verlag GmbH,

Kaufingerstraße 24,

80331 München, Germany.

# Contents

<i>Lists of Figures</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>List of Maps</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>About the Editors</i>	<i>xiv</i>
<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xix</i>
 Introduction: Decoloniality in the Break of Global*Blackness—Movement, Method, Poethics MICHAELINE A. CRICLOW AND PATRICIA M. NORTHOVER	 1
 <b>PART I</b> <b>A Pluriversal Politics for Worlds Otherwise</b>	  <b>37</b>
1 Whatever Happened to Diaspora, and Why Not Global-Blackness?: Interrogating Black Time-Spaces for a Decolonial Agenda MICHAELINE A. CRICLOW AND PATRICIA M. NORTHOVER	39
2 Caribbean Theorizing and/in the Decolonial Turn NELSON MALDONADO-TORRES	59
3 Blackness of Labor, Blackness of Migration NICHOLAS DE GENOVA	80
4 A Spectral Decoloniality in the Wake of the Slave Nomos PATRICIA M. NORTHOVER AND MICHAELINE A. CRICLOW	103



**PART II**

**Race Space Place: De/Colonial Intimacies** **141**

- 5 Oceanically Black: Decolonial Struggle in an Anti-Apartheid Port City 143  
SHARAD CHARI

- 6 Waves of the Familiar: Black Radicalism, Abolition, and the  
Carcerality of Civil Rights 162  
DYLAN RODRÍGUEZ

- 7 Reperforming Germanness from an Afropean Lens:  
European Others, Afropean Decolonial Aesthetics, and  
Performances of No-thingness 190  
JULIA ROTH

- 8 From Afro-Asia to Outer Space: Speculative Histories of Black  
Centrifugality 211  
VINCE SCHLEITWILER

**PART III**

**Decolonial Time on the Move** **235**

- 9 Specters of the Aegean: Decolonial Subjectivities in the Long Present 237  
MINA KARAVANTA

- 10 Sovereignty, Blackness, and the Ethics of Affectable Flesh 257  
JOSEPH WINTERS

- 11 Decolonial Notes on the Journey toward the Future: Négritude,  
Abject Blackness, and the Emancipatory Force of Spectrality 282  
PATRICIA M. NORTHOVER AND MICHAELINE A. CRICLOW

**PART IV**

**Act, Create, Rebirth: An/Other Uprising to End the World** **313**

- 12 Through the Obsidian Mirror: Onto-Corporeal Experimentations  
at Twilight 315  
MARÍA REGINA FIRMINO-CASTILLO, WITH PERFORMATIVE TEXTS  
BY LUKAS AVENDAÑO AND ALMAH LAVON RICE, AND  
IN DIALOGUE WITH TAISHA PAGGETT

13	Unassuming Bodies: Trans Decoloniality	345
	MARQUIS BEY	
14	Blackneese Fungible Errantries: To Expel a Sweet and Savory Substance	359
	YANIQUE NORMAN	
	Afterword: ... After [the] Wor[l]d—Blackness	375
	DENISE FERREIRA DA SILVA	
	<i>Index</i>	388