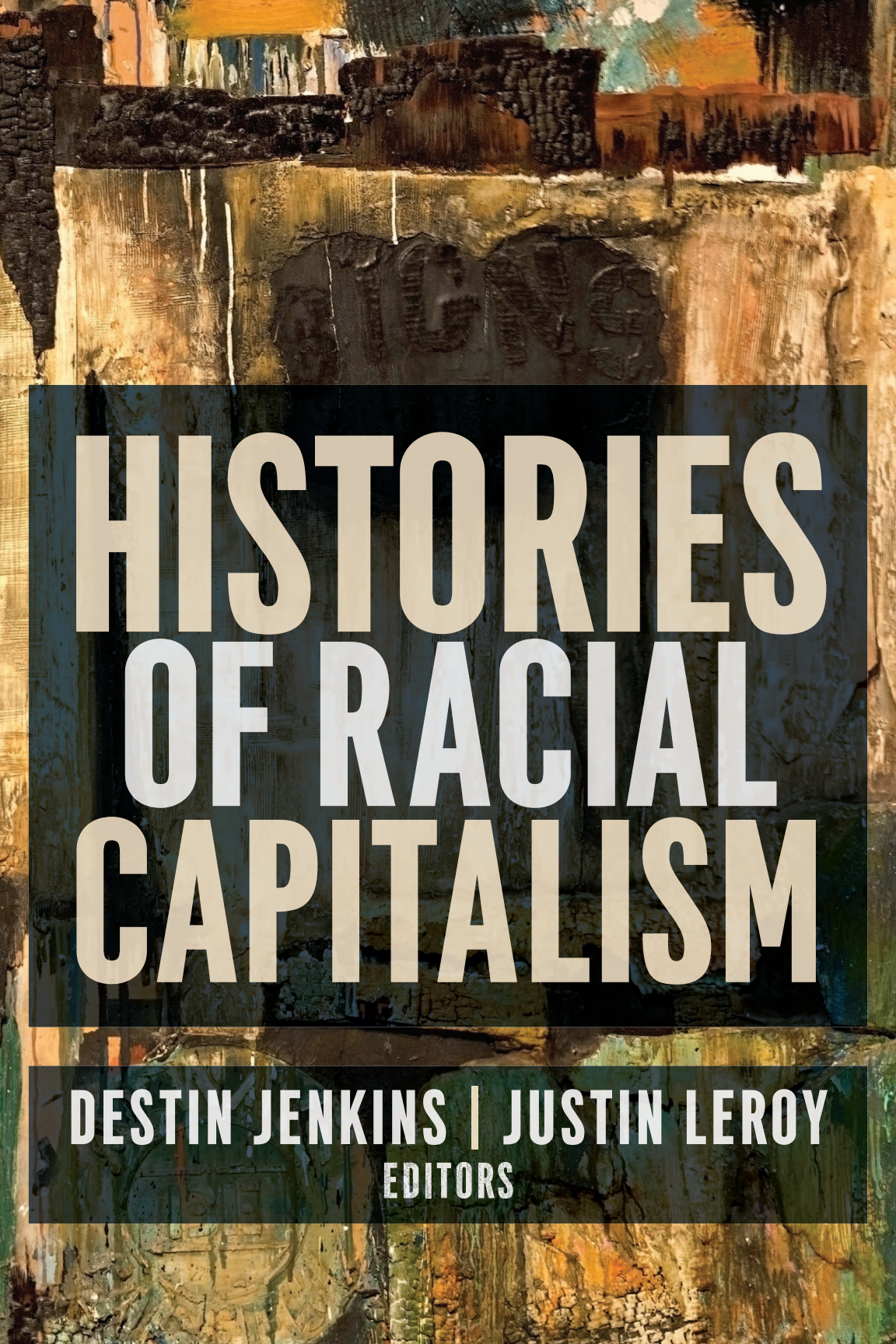
HISTORIES
OF RACIAL
CAPITALISM
DESTIN JENKINS | JUSTIN LEROY
EDITORS

HISTORIES OF RACIAL CAPITALISM

COLUMBIA STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF U.S. CAPITALISM

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Series Editors: Devin Fergus, Louis Hyman, Bethany Moreton, and Julia Ott

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CHAPTER 8

DEAD LABOR

On Racial Capital and Fossil Capital

RYAN CECIL JOBSON

By means of its conversion into an automaton, the instrument of labor confronts the laborer, during the labor-process, in the shape of capital, of dead labor, that dominates, and pumps dry, living labor-power.

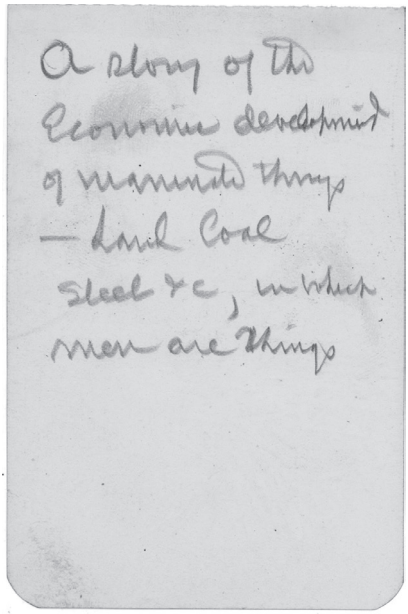
—Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1

Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human beasts which, in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed power veil and conceal.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*

A Story of the Economic Development of Inanimate Things

Alongside his many titles, W. E. B. Du Bois is a critical theorist of energy, race, and capital. In his personal papers, archived at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, a handwritten note dated to 1925 reads as follows: "A story of the economic development of inanimate things—land, coal, steel, etc., in which men are things" (figure 8.1). The note is not attributed to a specific manuscript. In fact, when weighed against his expansive oeuvre, the story to which the fragment refers could reasonably assume the form of historical narrative, personal memoir, sociological treatise, or speculative fiction.



8.1 "A story of the economic development of inanimate things—land, coal, steel, etc., in which men are things" (1925).

W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

As Adrienne Brown and Britt Rusert observe, Du Bois indulged literature as a leisure activity and a professional enterprise, often using "fiction to test out and amplify his developing philosophical and sociological positions."[1]

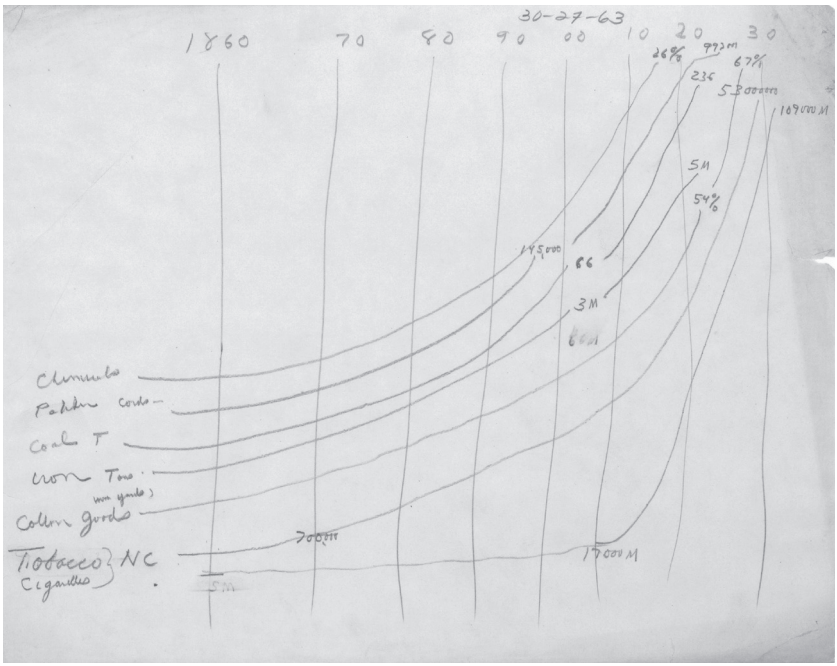
It requires a leap in logic and historiography to conclude that the story he conceived in 1925 culminated in his *magnum opus* published a decade later, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. Rather than insist on a definite link between them, however, I consider what can be derived from the later manuscript when read against the fragment from his private archive. In other words, to what extent does *Black Reconstruction* constitute a story of the economic development of inanimate things, and how does this alter conventional understandings of its contributions to the study of race and capital?

In the years surrounding the publication of *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois grew increasingly preoccupied with the science of carbon-based fuels and the labor enlisted for their extraction. In February 1932, he ventured to Harlan County, Kentucky, where he observed the violent repression of striking coal miners by private security forces and law enforcement. The scene struck an already seasoned Du Bois, who confided that he had never encountered "so much persecution, so much constant repression, ruthlessness, brutality, and utter disregard of human life and property" in his sixty-four years.[2]

As political scientist Timothy Mitchell observes, the expansion of coal in the second half of the nineteenth century produced a specialized class of labor that governed the production of energy. While this endowed labor with an unprecedented ability to disrupt channels of distribution and exact concessions from private capital and state authorities, it also threatened to conceal this essential labor in enclaves far removed from the blinkered landscape of cities and industrial centers.[3] Du Bois sought to remedy this distance in his writings. In an October 1936 column for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, he reviewed the collections of the German Museum in Munich, reserving special praise for its instructional facsimile of a coal mine and survey of the evolution of hauling techniques, from elementary manual hauling to the steam and electric methods of his contemporaries. Perhaps lamenting the suppression of the striking workers in Harlan County, he opined, "We know, of course, how much we depend on coal and iron and salt and metals. . . . But how many people see and know about a coal mine?"[4]

Appearing less than a year after the initial publication of *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois's contribution to the *Courier* offers a window into his preoccupations at a moment of world energy transition. His praise for the museum display, in which visitors "penetrate story after story until you are four or five stories under the ground," provides an instructive foil for the narrative structure of *Black Reconstruction*.[5] In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois posits the foreclosure of Reconstruction democracy as the foundation of "a new feudalism based on monopoly . . . in raw material, in copper, iron, oil and coal."[6] Ephemeral items from his papers further underscore this concern. Presaging his argument in the monograph's fourteenth chapter, "Counter-Revolution of Property," a hand-sketched graph dated to 1933 charts the exponential rise in U.S. coal, iron, cotton, and tobacco production from 1860 to 1930 (figure 8.2). Looking backward from a global economic depression, Du Bois turned to the history of Reconstruction for a diagnostic of his political present.

Penned at a moment when carbon-based fuels began to dominate the U.S. energy complex, *Black Reconstruction* offers an early contribution to the study of "fossil capital" that enjoys greater purchase in the contemporary moment of anthropogenic climate change.[7] Recent studies of this ilk, however, either neglect the genealogies of race and capital offered by Du Bois and his interlocutors or limit an engagement with racial capital to an epoch of chattel slavery prior to the advent of fossil energy. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois resists this tendency by narrating the history of capital as a



8.2 "Goods production, 1933."

W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

racialized production of dead labor in which dynamic human labor is reduced to instrumental labor power.

Following Marx, all capital is extracted from human labor: "*Capital is dead labor* which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks."[8] As a concept, dead labor attunes us to the "dominance of past, materialized, accumulated labor over immediate living labor."[9] Even so, the relationship between dead labor and living labor is mediated by a racial calculus that Du Bois elaborates in his archetypal formulations of "the black worker" and "the white worker." In what follows, I frame *Black Reconstruction* as a history of fossil capital. As a story of the economic development of inanimate things, *Black Reconstruction* demonstrates how the production of coal and oil came to be narratively detached from prior accumulations of dead labor that consolidated the spoils of plantation slavery in the form of capital and the machine. Heeding Du Bois,

the imperative of fossil capital to replace living labor with dead labor is secured alongside a false premise in which the white and black worker comprise ontologically distinct categories of labor—a fiction enforced by antiblack violence and the dispensation of a public and psychological wage of whiteness. But as Du Bois reminds us, to accept this premise uncritically is a fatal error.

Racial Capital / Fossil Capital

The indivisible histories of slavery and capitalism are at once histories of energy. The historical formation of the proletariat—the forcible separation of humans from their means of subsistence and reproduction—constitutes the foundational gambit of capital, which Marx christens as "so-called primitive accumulation." Yet, as careful readers of Marx demonstrate, this process is not confined to a foundational moment of colonial violence and expropriation.[10] Indeed, this violence of "war capitalism" persists in efforts to compel living labor to emulate the qualities of dead labor as inert and machinelike.[11] The transmutation of dynamic human labor into instrumental labor power, then, is one in which human labor is rendered in thermodynamic terms as a reserve of potential energy.[12]

But this subjection of labor is never total. For this reason, Karl Polanyi classifies human labor alongside land and money as "fictitious commodities" whose aims are to "annihilate all organic forms of existence and to replace them by a different type of organization, an atomistic and individualistic one."[13] Nevertheless, the dictates of capital insist upon treating labor as an uncomplicated commodity, reserves of energy called upon to compete with the spoils of prior labor and the organic remains of prior life—namely, automated machinery and carbon-based fuels.

For Du Bois, this transmutation of labor necessarily begins in the plantation Americas and "the most extreme case of theft of labor that the world can conceive; namely, chattel slavery."[14] Marx likewise maintained the history of so-called primitive accumulation as one of racial capital. In an oft-cited passage, Marx opines: "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in the mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and plunder of India, 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."[15] Despite his

insistence that racial violence constitutes the basis of a capitalist mode of production, select cohorts of Marxist critics have relegated the production of race to a moment either prior to or constitutively outside of capitalism, which is eclipsed by the formation of an undifferentiated working class comprised of free labor. Or, in the eyes of political Marxists such as Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood, the centrality of the colonial theater is disputed and the English countryside is recast as the staging ground for the historical genesis of the proletariat. By this account, proletarian labor is necessarily free labor and emerges concurrent with, but independent from, chattel slavery.

Recent works in the new history of capitalism echo earlier scholarly treatments of slavery and capitalism in their challenge to prescribed metropolitan narratives of the origin of capitalism. Narratives of the latter sort, however, have found renewed conceptual purchase in an emergent body of criticism loosely assembled under the banner of "fossil capital." Although the ideological leanings of its chief architects are by no means uniform, their writings are united in their framing of fossil capital as a distinct and unprecedented epoch in the history of capitalism. As Andreas Malm puts it, "industrial capital hinges upon a popular exodus from the countryside," in which "the fossil fuel of coal was coupled to the machine through the rise of stationary steam power in the mills of Britain."[16] Steam, rather than slavery, is offered as the decisive variable in the genesis of the industrial capitalist. Companion texts, including Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy*, refuse an explicit fidelity to political Marxism but nonetheless stop short of a substantive engagement with histories of race and capital. My intention is not to dispute the value of this literature, but to offer a critical addendum. In doing so, I follow Du Bois in my contention that any genealogy of fossil capital necessarily departs from an earlier moment in which human labor was first rendered in thermodynamic terms as labor *power*—a productive machine fated to compete with nonhuman machines.

The slave is the original expression of human labor as labor power. In the form of enslaved labor, the black worker was transfigured as pure labor power divorced of all human characteristics. It is this premise—of labor as a genuine rather than a fictitious commodity—on which the category of wage labor is later elaborated. As Marx puts it, "the veiled slavery of the wage workers in Europe needed for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world."[17] Race, in other words, amounts to more than an unscrupulous plot devised by propertied classes *ex post facto* to drive a wedge between segments of an otherwise uniform working class. Rather, race supplies the premise on

which select classes of labor are appraised for their thermodynamic capacity for work, rather than their material needs and creative potential.

Marx cautions us to distrust accounts of original accumulation that laud the spendthrift and ingenuity of the industrialist in his fortuitous inheritance of the means of production. Rather, the cult of private ownership is a product of deception such that in "the tender annals of political economy, the idyllic reigns from time immemorial."[18] The perpetuation of fossil capital is made possible by a context in which human labor is regarded as machine-like and the dead labor accumulated as capital and machinery is regarded as the natural province of private property. The victory of capital in the age of carbon energy was not guaranteed. After all, fossil fuels held the potential to emancipate labor rather than further its subjugation. It is only when human labor is taken for granted as an inert reserve of energy and work that the spoils of fossil capital are narratively detached from the prior accumulations, or dead labor, on which they depend.

The Old History of Fossil Capital

The burgeoning literature on fossil capital, epitomized by Malm's monograph of the same title, attributes the production of an undifferentiated and atomized class of proletarian labor to the rise of steam power and fossil fuels. In *Fossil Capital*, Malm traces the historically contingent origins of a fossil economy characterized by "a cementation of fossil fuel–based technologies, deflecting alternatives and obstructing policies of climate change mitigation: a poisoned fruit of history." The question at the heart of this narrative, then, is how potentially labor-saving technologies of carbon-fueled automation came to serve the interests of capital rather than of labor. For Malm, the answer lies in steam. While hydropower was easily accessible, less capital intensive, and more sustainable, it did not suit the requirements of capital. It was not "stock" energy; it could not be stored and accumulated in private reserves. Steam, on the other hand, lent itself to a "division and organisation of labour that we recognise as typically capitalist . . . a certain cast of capitalists and workers, foremen and assistants." Malm reasons that coal-fired steam engines occasioned the spatial and temporal characteristics that water could not: "The engine was a superior medium for extracting surplus wealth from the working class, because, unlike the waterwheel, it could be put up practically anywhere. . . . Conditioned by the properties of the landscape,

supplies of moving water were found only in some places; impossible to detach from the surface of the earth."[19] In its reliance on stocks of carbon-based energy that could be transported from country to city, capital was liberated from the strictures of absolute space. Striving for an ever "greater annihilation of space by time," steam liberated capital from its reliance on spatially contingent reserves and created new impediments to subversion by organized labor.[20]

Malm entices us with a passage from *The Poverty of Philosophy*: "The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist." He later adduces, "steam begets capital—not the other way around."[21] Although Malm successfully demonstrates how steam was called upon to serve the basic objectives of capital accumulation, he does not sufficiently justify steam as a worthy point of origin. Akin to his political Marxist compatriots, Malm lionizes Marx in certain instances while discarding elements that, even if they do not disprove, would necessarily complicate his thesis. In this respect, Malm's analysis is not incorrect, but incomplete. Malm observes that the "diffusion [of self-acting machinery] in the cotton industry would coincide with a general revolution in energy use: the triumphal procession of the self-acting mule—or the 'Iron Man', as it would be known among the operatives—was also that of steam."[22] But what "revolution" was necessary to generate the raw material, the cotton, required to make this development possible in the first instance?

Thanks to black critiques of political economy, there is little occasion to rehearse critiques of political Marxism that posit the centrality of Atlantic slavery to the rise of modern industrial capitalism.[23] Scholars in this tradition return to Marx to demonstrate that the colonial Americas served as a principal theater of primitive accumulation in which the forced and unrequited labor of enslaved Africans generated the necessary injection of capital and raw materials that culminated in the industrial revolutions of the North Atlantic. In tandem with the concluding chapters of *Capital*, Volume 1, Marx's 1846 letter to Pavel Annenkov is where he advanced this argument in clearest terms: "Without slavery there would be no cotton, without cotton there would be no modern industry. It is slavery which has given value to the colonies, it is the colonies which have created world trade, and world trade is the necessary condition for large-scale machine industry."[24]

Despite renewed attention to this passage, it is my contention that this observation is not limited to the expropriation of land and raw materials via chattel slavery, but extends to the production of unprecedented and

distinctly racialized subjects as the ideal form of commoditized labor power. Whereas the "new histories of capitalism" and their discontents focus their competing claims on the question of whether slavery was essential to the rise of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, my objective in this essay is not to substantiate or repudiate this thesis. In turning attention to colonial theaters of proletarianization as the foundation of racial capital, I am less interested here in the extent to which slavery generated the requisite productive surplus to supply English textile factories than I am in the production of racial laboring subjects that underwrite the fossil economy of the present.

Mintz reminds us that the distinction between the plantation slave and the proletarian is one of appearance rather than substance: "Like proletarians, slaves are separated from the means of production; but of course, it is not that they have nothing but their labor to sell. Rather, they are *themselves* commodities . . . they themselves appear to be a form of capital, though they are human beings."[25] The plantation slave, then, is the figure in which the fictitious commodification of human labor appears and is accepted as total. Under this false projection, the slave is pure labor power, an ideal type against which the category of free labor is later elaborated. When Malm describes the expropriation of the commons in the English countryside as a historical process in which "ex-farmers and ex-artisans no longer own anything but a capacity to perform labour, or labour power, naked and unequipped, a mere potential screaming for tools with which to work," he unfortunately neglects the ways chattel slavery provided a staging ground for the subsequent degradation of free labor.[26]

Malm's framework resonates with our present conjuncture of expanded and unconventional fossil-fuel extraction, disputes over pipelines, and heightened frequency and intensity of adverse climatic impacts. His framework is not wrongheaded so much as it is belated. Rather, it is my hope that a revision to his genealogy of proletarianization, one that departs from the plantation Americas rather than the British countryside, will generate new insights into a theory of fossil capital. In the most basic terms, *Fossil Capital* is impoverished by a perspective in which raw material and machine, but not the human, can be reduced to property. With this in mind, we might recall that this imperative of capital reaches its highest form in the black worker as "the ultimate exploited . . . that mass of labor which has neither power to escape from labor status, in order to directly exploit other laborers, or indirectly, by alliance with capital, to share in their exploitation."[27]

Race Against the Machine

In the "Fragment on Machines" from the *Grundrisse*, Marx imagines mechanical automation as a harbinger of the end of capitalist work and the emancipation of labor from wage slavery. In this instance, the surplus of prior labor fixed in capital and machinery creates the conditions for "the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum."[28] Yet he cautions that this could be achieved only through the abolition of private property. Under the dictates of capital, machinery instead degrades labor, as living labor is "cast merely as its conscious linkages" in a matrix of automated production.[29]

Malm regards the steam engine similarly. His is not a technologically deterministic narrative of fossil capital. Instead, he is motivated by "the question of the steam engine . . . the question of why it was adopted and diffused."[30] While coal and the steam engine may have supported the immediate interests of capital better than the water mill, Malm awards less consideration to the organization of labor under steam. What explains the persistence of capital under a fossil economy?

Du Bois supplies an answer in his history of Reconstruction in the United States. Indeed, at this moment, "the opportunity for real and new democracy in America was broad." Dispensing with the idealist propositions of nineteenth-century liberalism, Du Bois insists that genuine democracy would involve a comprehensive reparations. Here, the demand for land is fundamental: "to have given each one of the million Negro free families a forty-acre freehold would have made a basis of real democracy in the United States that might easily have transformed the modern world."[31]

The specter of automation haunts the narrative of *Black Reconstruction*. In the chapter "Counter-Revolution of Property," Du Bois uncovers how a new regime of racial capital thwarted the march toward this real and new democracy. During the transition from an economy dominated by enslaved labor to one of nominally free labor, working-class consciousness across racial lines threatened to raise the "question as to whom this wealth was to belong and for whose interests laborers were to work."[32] The liminal period of Reconstruction, then, was a pivotal one in which the endurance of private property could not be guaranteed. The emancipation of enslaved peoples abolished one regime of chattel property, and the new political subjects it produced posed an imminent challenge to the dictatorship of property in general.

For Du Bois, the foreclosure of the question of property redistribution and its eventual abolition hinges fundamentally on the fossil economy.

Writing in the throes of the Great Depression, Du Bois enjoyed the luxury of hindsight in his historical treatment of the abolition of slavery and the dawn of a new epoch of capital in the United States. By 1930, domestic fossil-fuel consumption—including coal, natural gas, and petroleum—had reached a number thirty-three times greater than in 1865. Under the genuine democracy that the end of Reconstruction foreclosed, this new fossil economy held the potential to further emancipate labor from the dictates of capital.

But it was not to be. The corrupt end of Reconstruction in the United States was a world historical event. It did not simply foreclose the possibility of democracy under the guardianship of a unified working class through crude racial violence that served to suppress the black vote and to embolden segments of white workers across the South. It enabled the persistence of private property and the dominance of capital over labor through what Du Bois describes at several junctures as either a "new feudalism," a "new imperialism," or a "new enslavement of labor." As he writes:

> Far from turning toward any conception of dictatorship of the proletariat, of surrendering power either into the hands of labor or the trustees of labor, the new plan was to concentrate into a trusteeship of capital a new and far-reaching power which would dominate the government of the United States. This was not a petty bourgeois development, following the overthrow of agrarian feudalism in the South. It was, on the contrary, a new feudalism based on monopoly—but not monopoly of the agricultural possibilities of the land so much as of its wealth in raw material, in copper, iron, oil and coal, particularly monopoly of the transportation of these commodities on new public iron roads privately sequestered, and finally, of the manufacture of goods by new machines and privileged technique.[33]

How, then, was labor consigned to this "new feudalism," in which living labor was once again forced to compete irrevocably with the residual surplus of its predecessors? Marx tenders a clue when he asserts that "past labor always disguises itself as capital."[34] However, Du Bois reminds us that it is the projection of enslaved people as laboring machines that first permits their labor to be disguised as capital. The subjection of labor to capital under a fossil economy can only be guaranteed if labor is treated as machinelike—in which *men are things*. That Du Bois opens *Black Reconstruction* with a chapter titled "The Black Worker" rather than "The Plantation Slave" provides us with the clearest evidence of this thesis. Lifting the veil on the proverbial secret of primitive accumulation, Du Bois

refuses to conflate the appearance of plantation slaves as "a series of investments in fixed capital" with the fact of "the Negro . . . [as] an average and ordinary human being."[35]

For Du Bois, the treatment of the black worker *qua* plantation slave as fixed capital—or, *dead labor*—is a distortion of their status as an ordinary human being in service of the accumulation of surplus value. At present, the dilemma facing black studies involves whether to more thoroughly occupy this distortion or to demystify its troubled origins. Not only did black workers generate the surplus value fixed in the machine that they would later be forced into competition with, but they also served as the "founding stone of a new economic system" in which free labor is also degraded. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois disputes that the black worker is unthinkable as an ordinary worker, rather than as a fixed capital investment. It is only by approaching the slave as the black worker—and analytically, as equivalent with the proletarian—that we can avoid the hazards of this illusion that beleaguered organized labor and provided the conditions necessary for the defeat of Reconstruction democracy by fossil capital.

The enslavement of African peoples constituted the broadest effort to consolidate stores of energy under private ownership. This fact should serve as a cogent reminder that the private ownership of energy necessitates extractive violence, whether the source of that energy is fossil fuels, the harnessed energy of solar, wind, or water, or human labor power. A principal feature of capitalism is the imperative to reduce the creative capacities of human labor to the thermodynamic principles of human labor power. As philosopher Amy Wendling puts it, "In the paradigm of production, the body is reconceived as a productive machine, and, as such, a unit whose contribution to the production process comes in the form of measurable work."[36] On the plantations of the Americas, labor was first conceived of in these terms. The plantation is the origin ground of machine fetishism, in which the surplus value generated by machinelike human labor came to be regarded as the exclusive property of planter-capitalists. In turn, our critique of capital cannot proceed from a critique of the peculiar forms of capital forged under the fossil economy. Any alternative to capital must necessarily proceed on the basis of a critique of racial capital that refuses to cast human labor in thermodynamic terms; that is, as a mere linkage in a matrix of automated production. Du Bois takes this as his starting point when he reanimates the labor of the black worker not as dead labor but in its highest expression of political potential: the general strike.

The defeat of Reconstruction foreclosed the potential for radical democracy not only in the United States, but the world over.[37] Du Bois reminds us that its tragic defeat was not inevitable. The refusal to treat the black worker as a worker, or more fundamentally as an ordinary human being, signaled that this defeat was imminent. Subsequently, "the United States was turned into a reactionary force. It became the cornerstone of that new imperialism which is subjecting the labor of yellow, brown, and black peoples to the dictation of capitalism organized on a world basis; and it has not only brought nearer the revolution by which the power of capitalism is to be challenged, but also it is transforming the fight to the sinister aspect of a fight on racial lines embittered by awful memories."[38] As a historian of capital, Du Bois demonstrates how contingent relations of production came to be understood as timeless and inevitable consequences of racial difference. In turn, the present conjuncture of fossil capital, in which human labor power is further displaced by the bounty of prior accumulations of capital—namely, industrial technologies and extractive fuels—can only be understood alongside constitutively older histories of racial capital.

Therefore, when Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman draw a parallel between the plantation economy and the fossil economy, in which "enslaved workers grew the cotton that made the United States into the nineteenth-century version of what Saudi Arabia would become with respect to oil in the twentieth,"[39] I want to extend the observation a step further to demonstrate that such contexts are not merely analogous but genealogically linked. Race not only pervades the labor regimes of contemporary extractive ventures[40] but permits the fruits of prior labor to be consolidated under the private domain of multinational capitalists and elite state actors. On the backs of the black worker arose "a new capitalism and a new enslavement of labor" founded in the dictatorship of capital, private property, and a monopoly over the resources that would come to define the age of fossil fuels.[41]

Instructively, racial capitalism has found renewed purchase in a series of festschrifts for the work of Cedric Robinson and his most widely engaged work, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Unfortunately, this renaissance is tempered by misguided readings of racial capitalism as a peculiar variant of capitalism in general. In Robinson's account, all capitalism is necessarily racial capitalism in that its fundamental "tendency . . . [is] not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones."[42] As such, he does not presuppose an unchanging ontology of racial difference. On the

contrary, racial capitalism incorporates dynamic regimes of accumulation driven by technologies of putatively racial differentiation. With an eye toward Robinson's original intent, I return to the extractive calculus of racial capital to trouble the totalizing suffix attached to racial capitalism. Rather than an economic system defined by a fixed logic of racial difference, racial capital attunes us to the always contingent relations of race, capital, and extraction that pervade ongoing regimes of accumulation by dispossession.

That racial capital exceeds the normative categories of bourgeois or Marxist political economy does not endorse the dubious conclusion that "work is a white category."[43] In fact, to do so is to be complicit in purging the uncredited labor of the dead from memory. The exploitation of black labor is neither natural nor invariable. As such, we must avoid an analytical conflation in which we consider the black worker as nothing more than dead labor in the same fashion as planters' logs and accounting ledgers. Indeed, the dead lurk among us in the capital and machines extracted from the labor of prior generations: "we suffer not only from the living, but from the dead."[44] Our task after Du Bois is no less than a redoubled critique of political economy. It is to reanimate the accumulated labor that sits frozen in the form of surplus capital and machinery. As such, the concept of social death describes a material relation, not an ontological condition.[45] Or more precisely, social death indexes a material relation between living labor and dead labor—in which the latter preys ever more completely upon the former—that deceptively appears as an ontological predicament.

We have not eclipsed racial capital. Racial capital forms the contractual basis on which fossil capital came to pervade the extractive complexes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Fossil capital continues to rest on a racial logic that, as Peter Hudson reminds us, "dislodges the pretension of a universal working-class subject, who is invariably white."[46] Yet, when confronted with an oil rig, a nuclear cooling tower, or a wind farm, scholars of energy armed with attendant neologisms—the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and fossil economy—are eager to allow racial capital to fall out of view. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois demonstrates the fixed capital of machinery and the dead labor of surplus capital supplanted the possibility of real and genuine democracy after emancipation. Indeed, it is the failure of Reconstruction that gave rise to this new imperialism in which the very capacity to imagine democratic futures is beholden to the expansion of carbon energy. It was a "splendid failure," however, because the history of Reconstruction demonstrates that another future was, and is, possible.[47]

NOTES

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, Adrienne Brown, and Britt Rusert, "The Princess Steel," *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (May 2015): 819–29 (819).
2. David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: 1919–1963: The Fight for Equality* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 296.
3. Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011), 19.
4. W. E. B. Du Bois, "56: Forum of Fact and Opinion," in *Newspaper Columns by W. E. B. Du Bois*, Vol. 1, *1883–1944*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (White Plains, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson, 1986), 120.
5. Du Bois, "56," 120.
6. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Free Press, [1935] 1998), 583.
7. See Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016).
8. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, *A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), 342 (emphasis added).
9. Salvatore Veca, "Value, Labor and the Critique of Political Economy," *Telos* 1971, no. 9 (Fall 1971): 48–64 (48).
10. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 2004); David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Nikhil Pal Singh, "On Race, Violence, and So-Called Primitive Accumulation," *Social Text* 34, no. 3 (September 2016): 27–50.
11. Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage, 2014).
12. Amy Wendling, *Karl Marx on Technology and Alienation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
13. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon, [1944] 2001), 171.
14. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 604.
15. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 915.
16. Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 298, 16.
17. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 925.
18. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 874.
19. Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 7, 33, 124.
20. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, [1939] 1993), 539. Here, Malm lends a worthy preamble to Mitchell's musings of the material properties of coal and oil, in which the relatively light and malleable properties of oil permitted greater ease of transport across long distances and undermined the capacity for labor to disrupt production and articulate broader claims for social and economic justice. See also Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*.
21. Marx cited in Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 32, 33.
22. Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 66.

23. Peter James Hudson, "The Racist Dawn of Capitalism," *Boston Review*, March 2016, http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/peter-james-hudson-slavery-capitalism.
24. Letter from Marx to Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, Vol. 38, trans. Peter Ross and Betty Ross (New York: International Publishers, [1846] 1975).
25. Sidney W. Mintz, "Was the Plantation Slave a Proletarian?," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1978): 81–98 (90).
26. Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 280.
27. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 15.
28. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 706.
29. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 692.
30. Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 17.
31. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 17, 591, 602.
32. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 591.
33. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 583.
34. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 757.
35. Tomich cited in Mintz, "Was the Plantation Slave a Proletarian?," 91; Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, xix.
36. Wendling, *Karl Marx on Technology and Alienation*, 64.
37. On the relevance of Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* to the study of Latin America and the Caribbean, see Jason P. McGraw, "A Tropical Reconstruction," *Labor* 12, no. 4 (December 2015): 29–32.
38. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 631.
39. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 13.
40. See Hannah Appel, *The Licit Life of Capitalism: US Oil in Equatorial Guinea* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019).
41. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 634.
42. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, [1983] 2000), 26.
43. Frank Wilderson III, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?," *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 225–40 (238).
44. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 91.
45. In a new preface to *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson underscores social death as a historical, rather than ontological, condition: "Social death was not a theory I imposed upon the historical realities of slavery. It is there screaming in the facts of life under slavery for any historian who cares to look with eyes unfiltered by agentic romance." Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, [1982] 2018), xiv.
46. Peter James Hudson, "Racial Capitalism and the Dark Proletariat," *Boston Review*, February 2018, 64.
47. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 708.