

Techno-Racism, Manual Labor, and Du Bois's Ecological Critique

This chapter continues the exploration of the material conditions that sustain white democracies, whose popularly supported claims entail affective attachments to material wealth, secured through racial capitalist arrangements dependent on empire. Here I turn to the question of ecology, which extends Chapter 3's engagement with racialized labor to show that capitalism, in its quest for accumulation, appropriates labor alongside nature in colonial or postcolonial regions, a process facilitated by the technology-mediated devaluation of these two constructs. Beliefs in technological superiority and an attendant exaggeration of technology's value vis-à-vis manual labor and nature alienate white polities from their dependence on land and labor, further cementing an imperial popular sovereignty, now fully defined as also an ecologically destructive one. I make these claims via an ecological reading of W. E. B. Du Bois's writings on development, which track the racialized valuation of technology, manual labor, and nature, and reveal it to be political construction key for imperial racial capitalism to extract labor and natural resources from the colonies and the Global South.

The proposed reading of W. E. B. Du Bois has two aims, one theoretical and one political. Theoretically, it expands on the affective attachments that underpin popular sovereignty by examining the racialized meaning and ordering of manual labor, nature, and technology in modernity. This sheds critical light on the question of technology in advanced societies and its connection to underdevelopment in the Global South. Politically, it shows that imperial popular sovereignty depends on privileged citizens' attachments to technology and alienation from nature and the hard manual work that happens in proximity to nature

that sustains them. This shows that imperial popular sovereignty is also ecologically destructive.

In addition to tying imperial popular sovereignty to the question of ecology, the proposed account corrects or augments recent ecological political theory that focuses on humans' alienation from nature. It shows that the destruction of nature is not indiscriminate but organized through racial hierarchies and is a core component of imperialist projects that selectively and radically disrupt ecological and sociopolitical formations abroad. This global and racial division of labor and nature is connected to the divide between nature and technology that took shape alongside European industrialization and its growing need for raw materials. The construction of nature as obsolete and alienated from western societies proceeded along with ideologies of techno-racism, which facilitated the domination of colonial societies to secure sources of labor and raw material to sustain these societies' well-being. The alienation from nature among citizens from wealthy societies cements colonial constructions of backwardness and underdevelopment and hides the dependency of western standards of living and sustainable environments on the devastation of subjects, communities, and nature overseas. Thus, alienation from nature is an internally heterogeneous and racialized process, one which differently positions western and colonial peoples vis-à-vis nature. In particular, western alienation from nature depends on the racialized dehumanization of those who work the land's surface and mine its underground resources; this dehumanization allows for the more intense exploitation of their bodies and the natural environment they inhabit, a feat that, in turn, alienates colonial peoples from inwardly determined social and political projects. Ultimately, this account shows that imperial popular sovereignty and the racial capitalism it enables are inevitably entwined with our present ecological crisis, a crisis that cannot be solved without the dismantling of racism.

In the rest of the chapter, I first engage with recent ecological political theory, which deals with the politics of exploitation of nature and humans' alienation from it, to note the need to further specify how alienation from nature is racialized and structurally embedded within imperial capitalist regimes. To make this claim, I draw from the writings of Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg on land rent and imperialism, respectively, complementing Marx's writings on the joint robbery of the soil and the worker with Luxemburg's political account of imperialism, which exposes the alienation from nature of colonial subjects whose land and labor produce the raw materials needed to fuel industry and the well-being of the metropole.

In a third step, through an ecological reading of Du Bois, I explain how racial hierarchy underpins these processes. In particular, the devaluation and intensified exploitation of racialized subjects and nature follows from the alienation of technologized societies from nature, facilitating the care-less exhaustion of nature overseas, and the disruption of a metabolism with nature oriented toward human needs rather than capitalist accumulation. Du Bois's account of techno-racism turns upside down claims about whiteness and technological advances, contests the inferiorization of manual labor relative to technological work, criticizes capitalist-oriented development, and champions a vision of society oriented to satisfy societal needs rather than profit, wealth, and luxury.

4.1 ALIENATION: HOW AND FROM WHAT?

Human societies' material dependence on and destructive relation with nature has been examined by ecological political theorists. For example, Sharon Krause diagnoses the problem of the domination of nature as emerging from an excessive exercise of power over nature, which imperils its existence and its functioning. Such a regime, Krause argues, affects poor and marginalized groups in particular, but ultimately affects us all by involving us in the degradation of the earth.¹ Alyssa Battistoni addresses the related problem of how to account for nature as part of our political relations, and criticizes the conceptualization of nature as capital, an economistic response to its past classification as a free resource.² Battistoni's answer is to consider nature as labor, or, rather, as an aspect of hybrid labor or work of nature understood as a "collective, distributed undertakings of humans and nonhumans acting to reproduce, regenerate, and renew a common world."³ Jane Bennett, finally, contests an instrumentalist view of matter, which she contrasts with a vitalist and political account of ecosystems.⁴ The instrumentalization of matter, she argues, feeds earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption, preventing "greener forms of human culture and more attentive encounters between people-materialities and thing-materialities."⁵

¹ Sharon R. Krause, "Environmental Domination," *Political Theory* 48, no. 4 (2020).

² Alyssa Battistoni, "Bringing in the Work of Nature: From Natural Capital to Hybrid Labor," *Political Theory* 45, no. 1 (2017).

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 100.

⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

These approaches can be unified as attempts to grapple with the problem of alienation from nature, understood as estrangement (being cut off from something) and/or reification (the reduction of processes that involve human action to mere things).⁶ Alienation prevents us from understanding ourselves as responsible in the degradation of nature, considering nature as part of political and work relations, or allowing for a less dualistic understanding of matter. Alienation from nature, in Simon Hailwood's account, follows from the reification of and estrangement from landscape, understood as nature modified, interpreted, and ultimately "appropriated" for anthropocentric purposes, a construct which other thinkers term "Land" or land.⁷ If we do not recognize land or landscape as the result of social processes entwined with matter, we become estranged from it and fail to take responsibility for our participation in its creation and modification.⁸ Estrangement can take a variety of forms, notably the estrangement involved in the willful misrecognition of landscape as *terra nullius*, which opened the way for colonization and Indigenous dispossession.⁹ Alienation is also operative in the commodification of nature and the disregard for the impact of economic activity on landscape, which predominantly concerns Krause and Battistoni.¹⁰ While the understanding of nature as inert matter that Bennett criticizes is not considered by Hailwood, one can think of this problem in terms of alienation as well, as entailing the disregard of the potential agentic assemblages that human and nonhuman matter form together.¹¹

⁶ Simon Hailwood, *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 86, 100. When I refer to land and nature in this paper I rely on and modify Max Liboiron's account. Hence, I refer to nature as the "fixed geographical and physical space that includes earth, rocks, and waterways" and to land, which Liboiron capitalizes, as a "place grounded in interconnected and interdependent relationships, [and] cultural positioning" that is highly contextualized. This concept is akin to Hailwood's notion of "landscape," and, in Rob Nichols's Marxist terms, to land understood as "not a material object but a mediating device" that relates humans or labor to "nature." Max Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 300–1, Hailwood, *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*, Robert Nichols, *Theft Is Property!: Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 76, 83.

⁸ Hailwood, *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*, 86.

⁹ As Hailwood notes, building upon Axel Honneth, reification involves more than simple cognitive errors; it also entails a praxis that is distorted and atrophied. Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 22, cited in Hailwood, *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*, 93.

¹⁰ Hailwood, *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*, 100–2, 19.

¹¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 111.

The framework put forward in this book provides a constructive corrective to this literature because it points out that both the dependence on material sustenance of wealthy states and their citizens and its disavowal are racialized. In particular, this chapter complicates the question of alienation from nature by showing that it is mediated by techno-racism, thus completing the conceptualization of imperial popular sovereignty by noting its ecological consequences.

The more nuanced notion of alienation from nature that I conceptualize via Du Bois encompasses the racialized subjects who work closely with land. Race and racism, entangled with technology, organize estrangement from and reification of nature in ways that allow formally democratic collectives to satisfy their possessive attachments while disregarding the destructive effects of their wellbeing on human and nonhuman nature. Privileged subjects are alienated both from nature *and* from the racialized workers who engage with it, despite the dependence of their wealth on their twin exhaustion. This equation, moreover, forcefully alienates from nature the native peoples whose social and political structures are disrupted and redirected toward capitalist accumulation and the well-being of the privileged.

To capture these racial dynamics, it is necessary to first conceptualize more systematically how land is connected to labor, and why racialized groups align themselves or are forcefully aligned with nature and technology in particular ways. For this, before turning to Du Bois's account, I conceptualize the joint appropriation of nature and labor in the colonial world via Marx and Luxemburg.

4.2 LAND WITH LABOR

The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the background of its development, as in the case of the United States, the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the *techniques* and the degrees of *combination of the social process* of production by simultaneously undermining the *original source of all wealth*—the *soil* and the *worker*.

Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 638, my emphasis

Imperialist appropriation of nature only makes sense along with the appropriation of another form of energy that comes attached to seized foreign land: racialized labor. The surface of the land and the riches underground are worthless without labor. Thus, the appropriation of

the former does not make sense without the social and political relations that force the availability of the latter.¹² Marx's writings on land and its enclosure, and the recent attention given to the rift in land regeneration caused by capitalism, alert us to the displacement toward cities of workers who are free to sell their own labor (because they are neither serfs nor in possession of means of production).¹³ Yet this quick turn toward the proletariat created by the enclosures and the cities that emerge around industry obscures other ramifications of private ownership of the earth, which become more salient as industrialization in the core leads to a scramble for raw materials elsewhere in the world. In the colonies, the exclusion of workers "from the very earth itself" is vital not to displace them toward industrial centers but to make sure their waged work is available to produce the raw materials required by European industry. This process chains labor to the land in order to produce rent; it amounts to a tribute for "the very right to live on the earth."¹⁴

The lack of access to land for the nonpropertied, in other words, permits the accumulation of land rent through the simple addition of a certain amount of unpaid labor to the soil that is now privately owned.¹⁵ Marx's eloquent language reveals the exploitative conditions behind the commonsensical appearance of landed property and shows that nature can be conscripted into capital's project of accumulation only when subjected to the proper social relations and fully entwined with labor. Importantly, the private ownership of land and the channeling of profits toward *accumulation* upsets labor understood as a process occurring between "man" and nature, set in motion by man's own natural forces to appropriate the materials of nature to serve *human needs*.

¹² These social relations naturalize the appropriation of the surplus value extracted from the worker and depend on an absurd proposition: that earth can be owned. In particular, for Marx, the holding of land as private property, a key development in the emergence of capitalism, always operates against the background of a more rational social formation, in which subjects are mere possessors of the land, beneficiaries who have to "bequeath it in an improved state." Marx, *Capital Volume III*, 911, John Bellamy Foster, Richard York, and Brett Clark, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 60.

¹³ Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 874, 91.

¹⁴ Marx, *Capital Volume III*, 908.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 914, 28.

While man's actions mediate, regulate, and control "the metabolism between himself and nature,"¹⁶ capitalism can and does introduce an antagonistic rift in this self-directed appropriation devoted to serve human needs.¹⁷ Differently put, the metabolism between man and nature that is constitutive of labor is shaped by the social relations that determine land ownership and labor conditions. Capitalism drastically transforms society and, in so doing, redirects the forces of men away from the appropriation of nature to serve individual and social needs and toward appropriation for accumulation. All along, capitalist agriculture progresses through "the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil."¹⁸ Both worker and soil are, moreover, exhausted in the process through the extraction of labor's surplus and the land's nutrients.¹⁹ Here Marx's language explicitly echoes and expands organic chemist Justus von Liebig's notion of "robbery agriculture," that is, processes by which soil minerals in the countryside are diverted to cities, preventing the replenishment of the soil.²⁰ Marx adds labor to this metabolic process, and considers its exploitation alongside that of soil exhaustion as entailing the redirection of its bodily energies – combined with nature – away from the fulfillments of its needs and toward accumulation.²¹ The exhaustion of nature in

¹⁶ Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 283. While Marx condemned the relations of personal and political domination of feudalism (which would disappear in the consciously constructed unity between humans and nature), he contrasted the close relation between producers and land prevalent in this system with the destruction of this link by capitalism. Capitalism not only creates a rift in labor–nature relations, but also hides the domination previously sanctioned by traditional systems under the myth of the "free worker." Marx, *Capital Volume III*, 911, Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," in *Collected Works, Volume 3 Marx and Engels 1843–1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1975 [1944]), 268, Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 43.

¹⁷ Saito, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy*, 61. As Kohei Saito makes clear, starting with *The German Ideology*, Marx abandoned his earlier Feuerbachian/naturalistic account of human essence in favor of a historical account of nature, which is constantly transformed through social production, namely, the mutually constitutive action of humans and nature upon each other, *ibid.*, 59.

¹⁸ Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 638.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Kohei Saito, "Marx's Theory of Metabolism in the Age of Global Ecological Crisis," *Historical Materialism* 28, no. 2 (2020): 14–15, Kohei Saito, "Marx's Ecological Notebooks," *Monthly Review* 67, no. 9 (2016), Marx, *Capital Volume III*, 949.

²¹ The ecosocialist literature takes this metabolic rift in the conditions of human life caused by capitalism to constitute its own "general law of environmental degradation" within the ecological realm of the law of accumulation. John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, *Marx and the Earth: An Anti-Critique* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 6–7.

turn sets up barriers to its reproduction, subsequently overcome through expansion into further areas not yet deployed in the service of capitalism,²² a process masterfully described by Rosa Luxemburg.

4.3 IMPERIALISM AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE NATURAL ECONOMY

The demand for the highest possible profit, the quickest possible timeline, the cheapest possible operation, seems to translate eventually into the understanding ... that the troublemaker must go. The blame rarely if ever makes its way back up to a corporation's HQ. But it should.... [T]he people who inhabit these places never really share in the riches produced there: colonialism is still running strong.

Bill McKibben, "Climate activists are being killed for trying to save our planet. There's a way to help," *The Guardian*, September 13, 2021

Luxemburg's work on the reproduction of capitalism is helpful to conceptualize the specificities of the global rift in metabolic relation between man and nature brought about by imperialism. Luxemburg connects the health of the soil and the broader viability of ecosystems, water sources, and biodiversity to the social and political dynamics of colonized and postcolonial societies. Luxemburg's account of imperialism distinguishes between the "natural economy" and the regimes shaped by capitalist interests that emerge after its destruction. "Natural economies" are social formations that have no inclination or ability to exchange commodities due to their property structures.²³ Imperialism upends these social formations and subjects societies to capitalist logics, which alienate them from nature and from the ability to direct their engagement with nature toward communal needs. This is a twin alienation: from nature and from self-directed development, a break akin to a "political rift." This rift is caused by capitalism's expansionary hubris and need to appropriate land, including its rich resources underneath (minerals) and on the

²² O'Connor, "Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Theoretical Introduction," 13–14, István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 599, Saito, "Marx's Theory of Metabolism in the Age of Global Ecological Crisis," 17–20. Consider, for example, the turn to nitrate fields in Peru/Chile to regenerate exhausted European and US American soils (deposits that were eventually depleted along with the ecology of the area) and the indentured Chinese laborers conscripted into the task of extracting the natural resource. *Ibid.*

²³ Luxemburg, "The Accumulation of Capital: A Contribution to the Economic Theory of Imperialism," 266.

surface (pastures, forests, waterways, and livestock raised by natives), which necessarily clash with and destroy self-directed relationships with nature and societal arrangements.²⁴

This framework conveys the deep interconnections of humans, political regimes, and ecosystems, as well as the frictions, tensions, and harms to these systems produced by imperialism and the capitalist drive to accumulate.²⁵ Moreover, judging from the vastly unequal patterns of land use between western peoples and the Global South,²⁶ surprisingly little seems to have changed in terms of capitalism's targets of expropriation. But re-reading Luxemburg's texts is striking because the resources she focuses on not only continue to drive capitalism's land- and resource-grab, but can also be re-recognized as leading causes of global warming and biodiversity loss via fossil fuel use, deforestation, and cattle raising.

This structure of expansion, conflict, and appropriation, for Luxemburg, makes the idea of restricting capitalism to "peaceful competition" an illusion. Despite it still being the animating assumption behind many liberal cosmopolitan accounts and the field of international political economy, Luxemburg makes clear that the drive to appropriate natural resources violently clashes with the "social bonds of the indigenous inhabitants," which Luxemburg sees as the strongest bulwark of their society and its material basis. Because the incorporation of new territories into the realm of accumulation of European capitalism threatens the very existence of native peoples, Luxemburg predicts they will resist until they are exhausted or exterminated. Capitalism's response to this resistance is the "systematic, planned destruction and annihilation of any non-capitalist social formation."²⁷ The need to quash resistance to the colonial appropriation of land and labor requires colonial powers to establish permanent military occupation in the colonies to repress Indigenous uprisings that constrain accumulation.²⁸ Via militarized

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., chapter 27, David Naguib Pellow, *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 10.

²⁶ Yang Yu, Kuishuang Feng, and Klaus Hubacek, "Tele-Connecting Local Consumption to Global Land Use," *Global Environmental Change* 23, no. 5 (2013), James Rice, "Ecological Unequal Exchange: Consumption, Equity, and Unsustainable Structural Relationships within the Global Economy," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 48, no. 1 (2007).

²⁷ Luxemburg, "The Accumulation of Capital: A Contribution to the Economic Theory of Imperialism," 267.

²⁸ Ibid. Such conflict is today clearest among Indigenous and environmental activists around the world, their lives threatened by the paramilitary squads of governments

colonial rule, capitalist accumulation can appropriate foreign productive forces, after forcefully integrating native property structures into the global markets for commodity exchange. This turn also redirects societies' organization for subsistence toward exchange, including through the creation of nonsubsistence consumption satisfied by international trade. Therefore, these processes – in contrast with older forms of trade – entail a radical transformation of societies that cannot proceed without the deployment of force to expand the sphere of accumulation.²⁹

Luxemburg anticipates contemporary conceptualizations of the colonial attitude toward nature, that is, “the ruthless exploitation of natural resources and the arbitrary transformation of the environment without regard for regional traditions and experiences.”³⁰ Luxemburg, moreover, centers political and social struggles as important determinants of the particular forms of capitalist use and abuse of nature and labor.³¹ Indeed, her work highlights the intensity of capitalist exploitation, and the speed with which imperial capitalism radically transforms noncapitalist societies in order to integrate them into its conduits of accumulation: “In its drive to appropriate these productive forces for the purposes of exploitation, capital ransacks the whole planet, procuring means of production from every crevice of the Earth, snatching up or acquiring them from civilizations of all stages and all forms of society.”³²

and corporations. Global Witness, “How Many More? 2014’s Deadly Environment: The Killing and Intimidation of Environmental and Land Activists” (London: Global Witness, 2015); Nina Lakhani, “Indigenous Environmental Defender Killed in Latest Honduras Attack,” *The Guardian*, December 29, 2020; Nina Lakhani, “Berta Cáceres Assassination: Ex-Head of Dam Company Found Guilty,” *The Guardian*, July 5, 2021.

²⁹ Luxemburg, “The Accumulation of Capital: A Contribution to the Economic Theory of Imperialism,” 267, 339. Notwithstanding the importance of colonial violence, it is worth noting that “peaceful” exchange also leads to vast transformations when local elites are coopted into these projects and the violence is displaced downstream. This is the case with developmental authoritarianisms in the Cold War period, some of which were beneficiaries of benign imperialism, such as South Korea or Turkey. Begüm Adalet’s recent account of the operation of modernization theory in Turkey is a good example of the intellectual and bureaucratic concerns that animated Turkey’s integration into the global economy. While not concerned with nature or climate as such, Adalet’s focus on hotels and highways further illustrates the extent to which modernization theory and practice was a colonial climate project as much as a particular school of developmentalism. Begüm Adalet, *Hotels and Highways: The Construction of Modernization Theory in Cold War Turkey* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018).

³⁰ Radkau, 153.

³¹ See also O’Connor, “Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Theoretical Introduction,” 25.

³² Luxemburg, “The Accumulation of Capital: A Contribution to the Economic Theory of Imperialism,” 258.

This voraciousness is both about spatial reach (“every crevice,” “all stages and all forms of society”) and speed. Regarding the latter, Luxemburg argues that for capital to await the disintegration of the non-capitalist social formations that possess the minerals and lands that it covets “would be tantamount to forgoing the productive forces of these territories altogether.”³³ A parallel taste for speed and intensity characterizes capitalism’s refusal to “wait for the natural increase in the working population” when it requires labor in excess of that available in Europe.³⁴ Capitalism, in other words, always opts for the method that is most expedient (in terms of both rapidity and intensity, and thus profitability), regardless of the violence and destruction that it entails.³⁵

Yet Luxemburg’s account falls short of theorizing what is behind the belligerence with which capitalism attacks peripheral societies. When she addresses this point, Luxemburg suggests that “the precapitalist soil of more primitive social relations” is particularly fertile for “develop[ing] such a power of command over the material and human forces of production” and for conjuring amazing transformations in brief periods of time.³⁶ While she is aware of the role of “myth” in facilitating many of these transformations,³⁷ her framework does not develop further how ideologies of white superiority make these distant lands populated by nonwhite subjects the target of a particularly destructive exploitation of human and nonhuman nature. She does not, in other words, consider how race intersects with the imperial exploitation of nature and destruction of social relations she describes, i.e., how racialization results in capitalist accumulation.

4.4 NATURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND RACIAL OPPRESSION

Du Bois’s essays on development and imperialism are indebted to the writings of Marx and Luxemburg on land and imperialism, but he substantively amends their frameworks by incorporating race and technology into the analysis. Du Bois makes two diagnostic and two critical normative points. Diagnostically, Du Bois first argues that the intensification of racism follows western technological needs, turning upside down then-prevalent techno-racist claims that equated whiteness to the ability

³³ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 267.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 258.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 269, 72.

to devise technological objects and operate them.³⁸ Second, Du Bois contests the inferior place given to manual labor by this ordering. On the critical side, Du Bois first contests the desirability of speedy “development” and integration into the global economy. Second, Du Bois claims that the technological mindset is a poor standard by which to measure the progress of humanity.

Technology and Race

Du Bois intervened in an intellectual arena that coupled racial and technological superiority. In the nineteenth century, accounts of science and mastery of nature and scientific racism had proceeded separately, but by the end of that century they converged to tie racial superiority to the belief in the greater ability of westerners to develop technology and regimes of social cooperation that positioned them above nature.³⁹ This convergence connected Baconian ideas of control over nature with modified accounts of Darwin’s theory of evolution and/or Alfred Wallace’s evolutionary account to argue that the white race’s scientific achievements were evidence of its superior morality and intellect, which allowed it to dominate and displace the “lower and more degraded [races].”⁴⁰ These beliefs have affinities to long-standing accounts of the separation of physical labor and intellectual/political work dating back to ancient Athens that even Luxemburg accepted without much skepticism.⁴¹ When joined with technology and race, however, accounts that posited that human progress depended on science and the mastery of nature also marked nonwhite races as incapable of advancing.⁴² The global division of labor completed in the nineteenth century, which turned Europe into a “pre-eminently industrial field” and converted the other part of the globe into a “chiefly agricultural field for supplying the other part,”⁴³

³⁸ Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Dangers of Fossil Fascism* (London: Verso, 2021), 442.

³⁹ Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 310–11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 23, 311, Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 192–93, 288.

⁴¹ Jane Anna Gordon, “A Political Economy of the Damned: Reading Rosa Luxemburg on Slavery through a Creolizing Lens,” in *Creolizing Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Jane Anna Gordon and Drucilla Cornell (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 125.

⁴² Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, 23, 297, 312, 14–18.

⁴³ Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 579–80.

facilitated these racial beliefs. Du Bois saw this division as not simply about the kinds of labor performed, but about race:

The interesting thing about modern commercial organizations is that white Europe and white America have organized industry and commerce so as to employ *raw materials* from colored countries and colored labor for the raising of these materials. The low wages of these workers and the high selling price of *manufactured* articles represent the immense profit which modern civilization is making at the expense of colored folk.⁴⁴

This global division of labor and its racialization alienated raw materials/nature from technology, identifying the modern west with the latter and disavowing that the “deep base of technological progress” was biophysical resources.⁴⁵ Here Du Bois’s account anticipates critiques of alienating views of nature as an input to the productive process, that is, “a passive set of assets to be scientifically assessed, used and valued in commercial (money) terms.”⁴⁶ When nature is quantified and explicated in mathematical terms, scientific narratives separate reality from normative ends and make the exploitation of both nature and humans a scientific and rational affair.⁴⁷ Yet references to “nature” and “humans” incorrectly specify that it is particular portions of nature and the treatment of certain humans that are more systematically detached from normative ends. This is facilitated by the equivalence between whiteness and technology, an equivalence facilitated by the re-mapping of the world through the industrialization of Europe and the global division of labor it necessitated, which attached the fetish of the machine to the white race.⁴⁸ By the end of the nineteenth century, the estrangement from the natural basis of western modernity and its disavowed reliance on the destruction of social

⁴⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Story of Cocoa,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, September 9, 1931, 8, my emphasis.

⁴⁵ Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Dangers of Fossil Fascism*, 443.

⁴⁶ David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Malden: Blackwell, 1996), 131, Peter F. Cannavò, *The Working Landscape: Founding, Preservation, and the Politics of Place* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 6.

⁴⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 163.

⁴⁸ Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Dangers of Fossil Fascism*, 443. See the work of Paul Cicantell and David Smith, who show that contemporary research on global commodity chains continue this trend, by forgetting that natural resources constitute the “beginning” of the chain.” Paul Cicantell and David A. Smith, “Rethinking Global Commodity Chains: Integrating Extraction, Transport, and Manufacturing,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50, no. 3–4 (2009): 362.

and political structures in the racialized periphery was complete, and Du Bois saw it as such:

[I]n the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Color Line was drawn as at least a partial substitute for [social hierarchy in Europe]. Granting that all white men were born free and equal, was it not manifest—ostensibly after Gobineau and Darwin, but in reality after James Watt, Eli Whitney, Warren Hastings and Cecil Rhodes—that Africans and Asiatics were born slaves, serfs or inferiors? The real necessity of this fantastic rationalization was supplied by the demands of modern colonial imperialism.⁴⁹

Thus, while conventional wisdom indicated that the inferiority of nonwhites was dictated by the scientific racism of Gobineau and neo-Darwinian theories of natural selection, which provided legitimate grounds to subject nonwhites even after social hierarchy among whites was waning, Du Bois suggests otherwise. For him, technological change and the drive to feed machines with raw materials explained racism as well as the political subjection entailed by empire. Du Bois posits the steam engine (Watt) and the cotton gin (Whitney) – which respectively allowed for the more efficient operation of coal-fueled machinery and vast productivity increases in the mechanized separation of cotton fibers from their seeds – as what requires racist ideologies, which facilitate a stronger political hold over the colonies (Hastings) to allow capital to secure the raw materials that its machinery requires (Rhodes).⁵⁰ Thus, Du Bois reveals that the identification of the west with scientific and technological superiority, which provides legitimacy for its political dominion, omits that technology would simply not *be* without the ability to appropriate cheap racialized labor alongside land and raw materials, which were the main attractions Africa offered to an increasingly technologized west. In this regard, Du Bois's singled out Germany, whose demand for raw materials such as “vegetable oils, fibres and foods from Africa in equal terms,” he argued, became its main motivation to enter the First World War.⁵¹

The geographical spread of imperialism and the appropriation of land and labor abroad was itself the result of technological change. The introduction and expansion of machinery and the relative exhaustion of

⁴⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Realities in Africa: European Profit or Negro Development?,” *Foreign Affairs* 21, no. 4 (1942): 725.

⁵⁰ Coal-fueled machinery included warships. See the excellent discussion of the steam engine and colonial wars in Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Dangers of Fossil Fascism*, 343–63.

⁵¹ Du Bois, “The Realities in Africa: European Profit or Negro Development?,” 729.

natural resources in Europe, as well as the limited domestic demand for products, started to confine the growth of “large-scale industry.”⁵² These barriers were and are eliminated by developing and deploying technology to overcome natural limitations and by conscripting the subjects and lands of the colonial world, where natives and settlers alike labor in “fields for the production of [Europe’s] raw materials,” whose supply is also increased by technology (e.g., cotton and the cotton gin).⁵³

The rift in the regenerative metabolism of nature, then, is magnified by a technology-enabled temporal rift between natural time and capital’s time, that is, the inability of natural processes of soil renewal and forest culture to keep up with the continuous acceleration of capitalism’s turnover time.⁵⁴ The geographic division of labor between town and country, first, and then between Europe and the rest of the world adds a spatial dimension to this rift, because the soil’s nutrients are transported away from the countryside, or even the countries of origin, preventing the natural cycle of regeneration that otherwise returns nutrients to the soil.⁵⁵ It is important to note the twofold work of technology in creating the temporal and spatial rifts in nature’s metabolism, respectively. First, technological advancement shifts the production and labor profile of European countries toward manufacturing, requiring industry and workers to be supplied with raw materials and nourishment, respectively, that depend on the conscription of racialized labor and nature from abroad. Second, by developing scientific tools to overcome the limits to accumulation set by nature (through the cotton gin, fertilizers, and industrial modes of cattle raising and feeding, among other technological fixes), technology accelerates the pace at which capitalist production and accumulation demand foreign raw materials and the labor that can extract them.

The increasingly tight mapping of technology onto Europe and of nature onto the periphery creates the conditions of possibility for Europeans’ estrangement from nature as an essential component of their well-being and a disavowal of responsibility for the destructive effects of the extraction of raw materials, whose speed is magnified by technology.

⁵² Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 579.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 579, 758, Saito, *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy*, 78.

⁵⁴ Saito, “Marx’s Theory of Metabolism in the Age of Global Ecological Crisis,” 16–20.

⁵⁵ Here I follow Kohei Saito’s development of the three dimensions of the metabolic rift, though I see the spatial and temporal dimensions of the rift as not separable, but as factors that contribute to its first dimension, i.e., the rift in the metabolic cycle of nature, *ibid.*, 14–17.

Racial hierarchy magnifies this estrangement, moreover, fastening the identification between whiteness and technology. The accumulation of wealth by the metropole, however, is not due to technology, as Du Bois makes clear:

Coal gave England during the nineteenth century an immense industrial advantage. She trained her working classes and became a manufacturer of iron, steel, cotton and woolen goods and other commodities on a world scale. She sold these all over the world to pay for the food and raw material which she imported. But imports were cheap, because they were raised largely by primitive, undeveloped countries, with low wages and slave labor; and goods were dear because England set the price according to her skill and wants, and she wanted wealth and leisure.⁵⁶

England accumulated wealth through, first, an advantage built upon a *natural* resource: coal.⁵⁷ This advantage (in industry and warfare) made possible colonial domination which allowed for “low wages and slave labor,” which depended, in turn, on *political* dominion, that is, the control of supply and the arbitrary setting of prices of manufactured goods to fulfill England’s *normative* account of the good society, one that catered to wealth and leisure for the privileged. Du Bois finds this reactionary program still active in “sinister” 1940s narratives about Africa in the United States, which emphasize “‘free access to raw materials’ and partitioning of Africa among white owner nations” without explanation to natives.⁵⁸ Here the lack of concern for natives, which opens the way for capitalist accumulation, depends on the successful construction of racial hierarchy – that is, racialization – meaning that as capital is accumulated, so is whiteness and its other.⁵⁹ In this sense, imperialism is a “race-making project.”⁶⁰ To the extent that this structure depends on any particular “skill,” it is the skillful application of violence, which facilitates the monopoly of “finance, capital and technique” that allows imperial countries to set wages and prices, which Du Bois contrasts to the

⁵⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Crisis in England,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, September 2, 1931.

⁵⁷ See also Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Dangers of Fossil Fascism*, 343–63.

⁵⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Silence on Africa,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, July 8, 1942, 6, The Committee on Africa the War and Peace Aims, “The Atlantic Charter and Africa from an American Standpoint” (New York: 1942), 102.

⁵⁹ Siddhant Issar, Rachel H. Brown, and John McMahon, “Rosa Luxemburg and the Primitive Accumulation of Whiteness,” in *Creolizing Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Jane Anna Gordon and Drucilla Cornell (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 350. See also Sylvia Federici’s account of accumulation through difference and hierarchy: Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 63–64.

wiser program of making property common and educating “all classes and nations in modern technique.”⁶¹

With this framework in mind, it is possible to re-read the extreme violence of imperialism as having to do with the geographic partition of the world and the organization of human mobility with the goal of accomplishing the right combination of labor and nature to maximize profit unhindered by moral qualms and local political projects, which would have continued or emerged in the absence of hierarchical racial ideologies and colonial political control, respectively. Racial ideologies, in Du Bois’s terms, were designed to “ease [the] consciences and increase [the] incomes” of those who championed them.⁶² Thus, the slave trade was deemed an appropriate solution to solve the labor scarcity produced by the genocide and dispossession of Indigenous peoples in conquered lands in the American continent.⁶³ Indentured servitude was seen as a similar solution after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire; this involved the transportation of Indian and Chinese labor to plantations, mines, and railroad-building sites to set up the transport of raw materials extracted from overseas. Throughout this period, European migrants circulated and settled around the non-European world alongside these racialized groups but accessed vastly different conditions owing to their heterogeneous but nonetheless credible claim to whiteness (Chapter 2). The late nineteenth-century “scramble for Africa,” yet again, secured control of both land and labor, this time in African territory.⁶⁴ While Indian and Chinese indentured labor was transported to several regions of Africa, a host of other measures, including land enclosure, taxation, and force, was used to ensure that native African labor abandoned subsistence activities and made itself available to work the land, whose surface or undersoil would be exploited by colonial powers in monopolistic conditions.⁶⁵

⁶¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, “As the Crow Flies,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, November 15, 1941, 15.

⁶² W. E. B. Du Bois, “As the Crow Flies,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 15, 1942, 6.

⁶³ This required, as Anna More explains, an exception to natural law that authorized the death of a population defined by race and geography. Anna More, “Necroeconomics, Originary Accumulation, and Racial Capitalism in the Early Iberian Slave Trade,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 2 (2019): 68.

⁶⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Worlds of Color,” *Foreign Affairs* 3, no. 3 (1925): 434.

⁶⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Liberia and Rubber,” *The New Republic* 44, no. 572 (1925): 328, Du Bois, “The Realities in Africa: European Profit or Negro Development?,” 723, W. E. B. Du Bois, “A Cup of Cocoa and Chocolate Drops,” *W. E. B. Du Bois Papers – Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries* MS 312 (1946): 2, 3. See also Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 48, Luxemburg, “The Accumulation

This means that the rift in the relationship between natives and land, through their forced conscription into the production of raw materials for the benefit of colonial powers, is central to the “irreparable rift” in the natural and social metabolism that Marx associates with the separation of nutrients from the soil and their transport “far beyond the bounds of a single country.”⁶⁶ The rift, and the wealth produced thereby, does not result from technology, but from politics, that is, the coercion involved in the colonial control of nature and labor and the monopolistic conditions of both the extraction and sale of manufactures. This means that the project of African development, in combination with free trade considered during the brief interlude between abolition and territorial colonialism, could not possibly produce the drastic societal transformations required for accumulation.⁶⁷ This explains the quick transition toward imperialism, with the support of abolitionists – who saw colonial power as necessary to stop the slave trade and abolish slavery – and English capital, which “saw that transporting material could be made to pay better than transporting black men.”⁶⁸

Du Bois is keenly attentive to how nature and labor are jointly required to cheaply and quickly extract raw materials from the land and sell them dearly.⁶⁹ Free trade on its own does not provide the needed societal control to expropriate the land, and land expropriation does not deliver rent without human labor, which must be tied to the land and forced to work beyond what is required to satisfy its own needs.⁷⁰ The capture of both nature and racialized labor and their intensified exploitation creates a political rift that destroys local political projects, which would have otherwise kept these societies away from the pliant and accelerated provision of raw materials for European machinery. This political alienation, which serves to make nature available for western societies, moreover, coexists with the alienation from nature in the core, that is, the belief

of Capital: A Contribution to the Economic Theory of Imperialism,” 261. The rationale of these measures can be seen in South African colonists’ concerns about the low propensity to work by African natives and the need for taxes and the civilizing influences of industrial education to overcome this problem. Imperial South African Association, *The Chinese Labor Question: Handy Notes*, 5.

⁶⁶ Saito, “Marx’s Theory of Metabolism in the Age of Global Ecological Crisis,” 15, Marx, *Capital Volume III*, 949.

⁶⁷ Du Bois, “The Realities in Africa: European Profit or Negro Development?,” 722.

⁶⁸ Du Bois, “Worlds of Color,” 434, Du Bois, “The Realities in Africa: European Profit or Negro Development?,” 722. See also Du Bois, “The Crisis in England,” 8.

⁶⁹ Du Bois, “The Realities in Africa: European Profit or Negro Development?,” 723, 29.

⁷⁰ Marx, *Capital Volume III*, 928.

that that these societies have overcome their dependence on nature, a step facilitated by the mythical identification of whiteness with technology.

Soil, Sweat, and Status

Du Bois's insistence in putting nature at the center of his critique of imperialism counters the avowed separation between nature and a technologized modernity. This separation is accomplished through geographical spread and the racial division of labor domestically and worldwide proper of racial capitalism. Racial hierarchy, and the reification of wealth as a moral accomplishment that marks western civilization as separate from and superior to others, obscures the fact that the metropole remains intrinsically dependent on nature.

Central to Du Bois's project of highlighting this dependence is his recasting of "humble work," the manual toil performed in proximity with nature, as the core of "modern marvels," in opposition to prevailing devalued accounts of this labor as dirty work fit only for racialized workers. Du Bois makes this argument in a series of columns in the *New York Amsterdam News* that counter the "economic illiteracy" that underlies the devaluation of manual labor. He proposes an "honest and intelligent" framework of property as a social creation to consider the value of work and wages.⁷¹ He acknowledges the diversity of tasks involved in production, noting that some work is of inestimable value, while the contribution of other forms of work is very small, only to turn upside down the common values assigned to each of the steps. Thus, the work he considers most valuable includes "mothers in a household," employers in "science and geography," and "most of the work of most artists." He similarly asserts that some profitable work is evil, like stock market gambling on "land values ... and much of the profit in the distribution of food and raw materials."⁷² An elimination of the profit motive, he argues, would mean "more valuable work and work better paid."⁷³ Such a world would provide an alternative way of distributing "toil and wealth and enjoyment," which, rather than apportioning labor as has long been the norm, would acknowledge that most "wealth, most well-being, depends

⁷¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Economic Illiteracy," *The New York Amsterdam News*, May 30, 1942, 6.

⁷² W. E. B. Du Bois, "Economic Illiteracy, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Value of the Product," *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 6, 1942, 6. Du Bois wrongly asserts, however, that the work of mothers yields no profit for employers.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

on labor and sacrifice.”⁷⁴ The products we enjoy, he argues, emerge from an intricate cooperative process, where engineers who plan the machines that are built out of metal depend both on the “miners [who] dug the metals,” the “teachers [who] taught the engineers,” and the laborers who raised food to feed those workers who “made the road bed” for the railways which transported these materials.⁷⁵

The badly paid tasks within the production chain are seldom acknowledged, not because of manufacturing’s essential or self-sufficient character, but because racial prejudice organizes the vastly unequal distribution of wealth and care attached to different groups of laborers and variously located nature. Thus, although industry and the capitalist system were built “on the backs of Negro slaves,” and manual toil is inescapable for modern life and its marvels, manual labor is badly paid and disrespected and its contribution to modernity mostly ignored through its construction as backward and too close to nature.⁷⁶ Here Du Bois re-politicizes wages, and, more generally, value, as a problem of political judgement within the economy.⁷⁷ Rather than accepting the strict separation between economic and normative value judgments, he unveils the thick background social formations that determine economic value. By questioning the devaluation of manual labor and the disproportionate wealth that accrues to investors and highly skilled work, Du Bois reveals that economic determinations are always value-ridden, that there is no objective, rational rule that distributes resources. Instead, there is a political determination to elevate the judgment of a few, whose wealth and leisure depends on the domination of poorly remunerated workers and extracted natural resources from abroad, to the level of objective economic law.⁷⁸

This account by Du Bois reverses the racist logic by showing that racism naturalizes the exploitation on nonwhite workers; he uncovers the performative contradiction of basing technological prowess and wealth on forced labor and nature while allocating these inputs the lowest value. Two distinct debates about the labor imports of nonwhite

⁷⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Work and Wealth,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, September 12, 1942, 6. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Income Again,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, September 5, 1942, 6.

⁷⁵ Du Bois, “Work and Wealth,” 6.

⁷⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Humble Work,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 21, 1940, 10.

⁷⁷ See also Samuel Chambers’s argument about the misguided separation between the realm of “the economy” and that of value. Samuel Chambers, *There’s No Such Thing as “the Economy”*: *Essays on Capitalist Value* (Goleta: Punctum Books, 2018), 47–48, 63–64.

⁷⁸ Du Bois, “The Crisis in England.”

populations in South Africa and the United States, respectively, show the prevalence of this logic: the parallel work of acknowledgment and disavowal of the centrality to modern commerce needed to devalue work performed under strenuous conditions by racialized subjects and in close contact with nature.

Documents from the colonial administration of post-Boer War South Africa record a variety of rationalizations of the differential ability of whites and nonwhites to perform different types of work. For example, an analysis of an unusual experiment with white labor in unskilled mining work claims that “white labourers cannot successfully compete with blacks in the lower fields of manual industry,” because their wages are simply uneconomical for particular jobs and that these laborers are anyway “unwilling to do more ‘dirty work’.”⁷⁹ If mining in South Africa attempts to fill unskilled positions with white workers, the argument continues, “it would mean the cessation of profitable work in most of the mines of the Witwatersrand.”⁸⁰ Reliance on white labor would mean leaving undone the most bodily strenuous activities that white workers refused to perform, such as the sorting of rocks and breaking rocks manually rather than by drilling.⁸¹ The need to limit “white labour to the performance of skilled work” traditionally associated with detachment from nature and the machinery-led processing of minerals follows from their “insuperable objection ... to put forth his best endeavours as a wage earner by manual labour in the presence of a black man,” a trait common to the “southern States of America.”⁸² This racialized organization of labor is taken to be traditional custom in South Africa, where labor is strictly distributed between “the sphere of the white man and that ... of the native,” to which Chinese imported labor is assimilated.⁸³

The differential assignment of value and rewards is implicit in the economic impossibility of enlisting white labor, understood as neither

⁷⁹ Transvaal Labour Commission, “Memorandum on the Evidence with Regard to the Employment of White Unskilled Labor in the Mines Given to the Transvaal Labour Commission,” *British Library Add/MS/88906/22/1* February (1904): 2–3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 6. The Witwatersrand, or the Rand, is the location of large gold reserves in South Africa.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 36–37.

⁸³ Lord Selborne (High Commissioner for South Africa), “Memorandum to Alfred Lyttelton (Secretary of State for the Colonies),” *British Library, Add MS 88906/22/12* October 7 (1905): 1–2.

affordable nor exploitable enough to fit the cost requirements of mining.⁸⁴ This economic assessment presumes that racialized workers can be gotten for cheap, for “climatic and physical reasons.” The claim, moreover, is that Chinese workers’ performance of the *unskilled* labor “which white men could not do” provides the “necessary basis for white man’s labour – *skilled* labour.”⁸⁵ Thus, racialized labor emerges as essential, the *sine qua non* of both white labor and – as noted later – commercial riches, a conclusion that is both in tension with and dependent on its economic devaluation and violent treatment. Such treatment is assured by minority rule over a native majority, which in turn requires maintaining the status and prestige of white workers in the eyes of African natives.⁸⁶ Racism is a central mediating mechanism in a circular logic in which the priority of accumulation requires the construction of a population at once endowed with hyper-resistant bodies and the ability to live at or below subsistence levels to get production off the ground. The work of processing and manufacturing made possible by the hyper-exploited group, in turn, is performed by white workers, whose dignity and higher standards of living prevent them from engaging in strenuous jobs.⁸⁷ These divisions are enabled by a political regime that sanctions racial hierarchies and authorizes the hyper-exploitation that *makes possible* the further processing of raw materials – by dignified white workers – and the industrial machinery that depends on these resources.

In other words, however “natural” this division of labor appears, its operation requires violent coercion sustained by white rule, whose stability must be ensured partly by rigidly excluding white workers from undignified work and nonwhite workers from skilled professions or the territory altogether.⁸⁸ Through these and other measures, “brain toil” is kept as “the province of the white,” while “brawn or spade work that of the black or some coloured race,” a necessity for the “salvation of

⁸⁴ Walter Rodney reaches a similar conclusion though critiquing the racial oppression entailed in the arrangement rather than presuming it as natural. He argues that Black South African workers in South Rhodesia “recovered gold from deposits which elsewhere would be regarded as noncommercial.” Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (New York: Black Classic Press, 2012 [1972]), 179.

⁸⁵ Imperial South African Association, *The Chinese Labor Question: Handy Notes*, 4, 7.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

⁸⁷ These lower wages cannot match the “higher scale of civilisation and standard of living” of whites, let alone “the greater dignity of the higher race.” Reed, *The Gold Fields of South Africa*, 9.

⁸⁸ Consonant with this priority, proponents of Chinese labor imports are adamant that their plan involves the strict prohibition on entry of Chinese workers into skilled profession, as well as the repatriation of workers after a period. Imperial South African Association, *The Chinese Labor Question: Handy Notes*, 8–9.

South Africa” as a white settler colony.⁸⁹ Thus the manual and strenuous work of nonwhites (African natives and Chinese alike) sustain the skilled employment and dignity of whites, but also continues to feed technologically enabled manufacturing in England.⁹⁰ In fact, the Transvaal mining industry was considered “vast[ly] importan[t]” to the mother country by the vice president of the Manchester Geographic Society, J. Howard Reed. This is because the demand for foodstuffs, clothing, and general stores by the “populous hive of busy workers – white, black, and yellow – employed in the mines,” but also for the “large quantities of machinery and continuous supply of stores” for the mining industry.⁹¹ Reed concludes that if the progress of the mining industry were to be interrupted, it would “cause a baneful disturbance of our commercial life.”⁹² Hence, the mining industry, which gets off the ground through racialized exploited labor, enable more comfortable jobs for white workers in South Africa and also realizes commercial gains for producers of foodstuff and machinery.

A similar paradoxical combination of devaluation and need for non-white labor appears in the 1920 US congressional debate on waiving the entry tax for illiterate Mexican labor to address farm labor scarcity (attributed to the emigration of Black farmworkers toward cities). Proponents highlight the superior adaptability of Mexican peons to the strenuous tasks of “prepar[ing] [the land] for the plow” by grubbing from the roots a “scrubby growth of timber” and harvesting cotton.⁹³ Texas congressmen argued that the Mexican laborer is “specially fitted for the burdensome task of bending his back to picking the cotton and the burdensome task of grubbing the fields,” labor that is beneath the “raised dignity of the [white] laborer.”⁹⁴ In addition to highlighting the higher efficiency of Mexican laborers at this task, proponents stress that the technologically enabled processing of the cotton fiber cannot proceed without securing enough labor at the lower wages that illiterate Mexicans are paid.⁹⁵ Texas Congressman Carlos Bee predicts that up to half of the cotton crop that contributes to the “material prosperity of this country will lie rotting in the field” without the Mexican labor to

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁰ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 179–80.

⁹¹ Reed, *The Gold Fields of South Africa*, 7.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ U.S. Congress, *Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization on H. J. Res. 271 Relating to the Temporary Admission of Illiterate Mexican Laborers*, 4.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4–6.

pick it.⁹⁶ Thus, Mexican labor is the single, essential, initiating step for prosperity, even though the laborers themselves are devalued. In fact, there is no disagreement between proponents and opponents of this measure regarding the undesirability of Mexican peons as citizens; proponents assured their peers that about 80 percent of migrant laborers will return to Mexico, not least because of the biology and adaptability to climate of “the Mexican,” who is a “hot-weather plant” that avoids the cold and returns to his tropical climate when he is done with his labor.⁹⁷

These vignettes show that Du Bois’s writings on manual work capture a widespread narrative that both acknowledges and obscures its centrality to technology and commercial wealth, and further shows that the securing of this labor depends on coercive white rule. Given these constructions, Du Bois is not surprised that everyone seeks frantically to escape the burdens of manual toil, but responds by turning upside down the devaluation of manual labor. He argues that this labor, alongside nature and the raw materials produced by the combination of both, supports the entire edifice of industry, an arrangement that only an entrenched racialized hierarchy can obscure.⁹⁸ That labor can be procured to work in contact with nature more intensively and for lesser pay is a consequence of coercive social and political forms. Thus, the burdensome character of manual toil and its meager pay is by no means a logical necessity: “higher labor costs and less docile labor might have forced a *less spectacular but more humane development*.”⁹⁹

Speed, Ecology, and Development Critique

Du Bois’s nod toward “less spectacular but more humane development” is an example of his advocacy for slower but more sustainable change in the colonial world. He writes in 1946 that the Gold Coast could have become a wealthy community of peasant farmers engaged in the production *and* processing of raw materials. Gradually, Du Bois argues, this country could have achieved autonomous status within the Commonwealth, like Australia or South Africa did as providers of wool

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3–4, 18.

⁹⁸ Walter Rodney puts this succinctly: “Wealth has to be produced out of nature—from tilling the land or mining metals or felling trees or turning raw materials into finished products for human consumption ... things done by the vast majority of the population who are peasants and workers,” Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 23.

⁹⁹ Du Bois, “Humble Work,” 10. My emphasis.

and minerals, respectively.¹⁰⁰ But because the Gold Coast was not a “white colony,” instead of such “swift and direct” development, every penny was extracted from the farmers and they were denied participation in government. Racialization and racism here allowed for a more intense exploitation of labor and nature, the curtailment of the development of manufactures associated with extracted crops, and for the denial of native subjects’ political voice, all factors contributing to capitalist accumulation.¹⁰¹

Du Bois connects the more ruthless exploitation of colonial areas to the lack of interest in the conditions of these regions in the metropole. This, he notes, is not necessarily “conscious discrimination based on race” but sheer disinterest, which allowed for exploitation in the service of selfishness to proceed.¹⁰² Development discourse conceals these actions by claiming to operate on behalf of natives, but the practices are one-sided: while the west relies on colonial areas such as the West Indies for “vital necessities as rubber, hemp, quinine and palm oil,” it does not try “good wages, civilized conditions or work, and democratic forms of government.”¹⁰³

These statements contain a normative critique of the colonial integration into the global capitalist economy and capitalist development as a whole. Regarding the former, it contains Du Bois’s account of colonial alienation or “political rift,” that is, the political re-orientation of raw materials and racialized labor away from local needs and desires and toward accumulation, that is, the estrangement of natives from relations with nature that could fulfill community goals while regenerating nature. Against the ruthless exploitation of land and labor which politically reorganizes colonies “for business,” Du Bois advocates gradual development in Africa through the recognition of native ownership of “land and natural resources,” and development based on fair taxation over higher local wages.¹⁰⁴ His 1925 essay on Liberia and the rubber trade expands on these points. Liberia’s troubles, he argues, are not about climate, scarcity of skilled labor, transportation, or markets – even though these factors pose challenges. Instead, the problem is that “world public opinion” will not let a small country “develop simply and slowly,” not if it can produce

¹⁰⁰ Du Bois, “A Cup of Cocoa and Chocolate Drops,” 2.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Du Bois, “As the Crow Flies,” 6.

¹⁰⁴ Du Bois, “The Realities in Africa: European Profit or Negro Development?,” 732. See also Du Bois, “The Crisis in England,” 8.

large quantities of world commodities, such as “palm oil, rubber, coffee, sugar [and] piassava,” in high demand in world markets. Western desire for raw materials drives small countries such as Liberia to produce these crops “quickly and cheaply,” and makes foreign interference fair game if these products are not forthcoming.¹⁰⁵

Thus, Du Bois identifies the speed and intensity of capitalist development as sources of harm and dehumanization. These features, moreover, produce a political rift that alienates native peoples from alternative social and political forms that could be pursued in the absence of their forceful integration into the global economy. Were it not for the accelerated capitalist extraction typical of empire, countries would also not be inserted into networks of trade and would not demand “modern comforts” before they were ready to afford them.¹⁰⁶ This dual process forces these countries “into the turbulent currents of world commerce” from without and within.¹⁰⁷

The alienation from domestic collective goals imposed by imperial relations that is proper of the political rift reappears in Du Bois’s comments on United States–Mexico relations. In 1940, he argues that Mexican soil, oil, and minerals were “filched” at an enormous profit by the United States, an exploitative exchange that was only slowed down by the revolution, which educated and provided land to “peons.”¹⁰⁸ The revolutionary transformations that Du Bois highlights are congruent with his social understanding of property; they are tied as well to his vision of development as slower and more rational, guided by free peoples.¹⁰⁹ Du Bois is after an understanding of property where owners are responsible to the social good: “It is not, of course, easy to think of this Social Public as the real owner and spender; but unless we become socialized we cannot become human; and unless we become human we cannot end war.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Du Bois, “Liberia and Rubber,” 328.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. Du Bois here follows quite closely Luxemburg’s account of capital accumulation through the dominion of natural resources and labor power of pre-capitalist societies and the incorporation of noncapitalist purchasers of surplus value. Luxemburg, “The Accumulation of Capital: A Contribution to the Economic Theory of Imperialism,” 263.

¹⁰⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Mexico and Us,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 21, 1940, 1, 10.

¹⁰⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Economic Illiteracy and a Social Obligation,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 20, 1942, 6, Du Bois, “The Crisis in England,” 8.

¹¹⁰ Du Bois, “Economic Illiteracy and a Social Obligation,” 6.

Violence and imperial war, in other words, result from a racial capitalist system where private property rules and racial difference are leveraged to expand imperial domains and over-exploit nonwhite labor and nature, regardless of its social effects. The imperialist pursuit of territory, cheap racialized labor, and raw materials that feeds racial capitalism both covets these goods and declares them objectively worthless compared to the technological societies they feed. This alienation from nature in wealthy countries results in the forceful alienation of colonial peoples, whose societal arrangements are turned into regimes that guarantee accelerated development through intensified exploitation of human and nonhuman nature and ecologically destructive and destabilizing integration into global markets. Such speed of development is far from humane because it is geared toward ever-accelerating capitalist drives for profit and accumulation. This drive, therefore, necessarily produces a rift in the social and political organization of colonial countries conscripted into this structure, away from democratic aims of education and access to land by the masses.

Overall, Du Bois reveals that what ecosocialists call the “general law of environmental degradation” of capitalism is not general at all, but racialized.¹¹¹ The exertion demanded of white labor and the intensity of land and mineral extraction do not match the levels of exploitation of human and nonhuman nature at play vis-à-vis racialized labor and (post)colonial regions. In metabolic terms: there are qualitative and quantitative differences in how the labor of different groups “mediates, regulates, and controls the metabolism between himself and nature” and the degree to which this mediation exhausts labor and departs from sustainable forms that allow for the replenishment of the soil and its natural fertility.¹¹² In the colonies, and in sectors where nonwhite labor can be put to work, the energy that is extracted from humans and nature is several times higher than that which is obtained from “protected” labor and nature. This quantitative bonus is made possible by imposed political arrangements that alienate natives from nature by re-directing their labor and their land’s use away from public needs. Instead, colonial arrangements conscript natives as unfree laborers who aid the unrestrained exploitation of nature. This scheme sustains the well-being of white privileged subjects, who are alienated from the natural resources and manual labor that sustain their lifestyles. These two disjunctures are made possible by the color line.

¹¹¹ Foster and Burkett, *Marx and the Earth: An Anti-Critique*, 6.

¹¹² Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 283, 637.

Technology, Humanity, and Critique

When Nishnaabeg are historicized by settler colonial thought as “less technologically developed,” there is an assumption that we weren’t capitalists because we couldn’t be—we didn’t have the wisdom or the technology to accumulate capital, until the Europeans arrived and the fur trade happened. This is incorrect. We certainly had the technology and the wisdom to develop this kind of economy, or rather we had the ethics and knowledge within grounded normativity to *not develop* this system, because to do so would have violated our fundamental values and ethics regarding how we relate to each other and the natural world. We chose not to, repeatedly, over our history.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 78

It is important not to lose sight of the connections between Du Bois’s critique of dehumanizing and ecologically destructive development and his critique of technology, and the relation between both and the account of the modern self that he develops in the aftermath of his dispute with Booker T. Washington. Years after Washington’s death, Du Bois’s thinking perceptively returns to that debate in an effort to dis-alienate both Black subjects, whose education ill-prepares them for understanding their position vis-à-vis a racist capitalist system, and, more universally, white Anglo-Europeans, whose faith in technology and the disproportionate rewards they appropriate orients them toward unthinkingly participating in existing imperial structures. These writings, moreover, reveal Du Bois’s broader critique of capitalism, which focuses not only on its destructive effects over (post)colonial countries, but also over the wealthy societies that most benefit from it.

In a speech to Howard University graduates delivered in 1930, Du Bois faults both technical and liberal arts education for their lack of a “disposition to study or solve our economic problem.”¹¹³ Liberal arts education, he argues, fails if it does not come with “first-hand knowledge of real every-day life and ordinary human beings” and instead seeks professional advancement and wealth that despises work and toil.¹¹⁴ This route is taken by college graduates who take after “the white undergraduate,” who unthinkingly participate in the industrial machine in which they were born.¹¹⁵ Instead, both colleges and vocational institutions must

¹¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Education and Work,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 1, no. 1 (1932): 64.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69–70.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

prepare students to understand the business organization of the modern world and acquaint them “with human beings and their possibilities.”¹¹⁶ Rather than becoming cogs in the machine, where the machine is a merciless mechanism of enslavement, Black graduates must critically understand how to use the machine as an instrument to improve their well-being.¹¹⁷ Here, Du Bois centers the question of technology and industry to distinguish a world that pursues advancement and discovery without guiding ideals from one that devotes knowledge, that is, “critically tested and laboriously gathered fact martialed under scientific law,” to the goal of feeding (rather than choking) fancy and imagination that can orient us to create new worlds.¹¹⁸

This is a severe critique of the technological subject, characterized as a dehumanized being unable to lead a self-shaped life outside of the machine. This is not what Du Bois envisioned for emancipated Blacks. Instead, he argued, the South and, in particular, Black groups needed not just land but “to learn the meaning of life,” through gifted teachers that would work *not* to make “men carpenters, but to make carpenters men.”¹¹⁹ This requires not simply “reading, writing, and counting,” but “knowledge of this world.”¹²⁰ Such is the kind of education that prepares subjects to grow into citizens, and their voices to guide political development and contribute to the “reformation of the present social conditions.”¹²¹

This connection between education, political subjecthood, and the ability to politically steer societies is at play in his analysis of British West Africa, where he depicts educated Black leaders as “a thorn in the flesh of the new English industrialists.”¹²² White colonial officials, Du Bois argued, were interested in the development of Africans as long as they remained “primitive,” and prevented any union of forces between the masses and the educated group.¹²³ Colonial officials feared this latter group because their criticisms of the colonial system of domination revealed it to be an anomaly and disadvantageous for West Africans. Moreover, this group demanded an effective voice for the people in their

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹²⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Knowledge,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, July 4, 1942, 6.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Du Bois, “Worlds of Color,” 435.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 434–35.

affairs and attempted to steer countries toward forms of development more responsive to their population. In the terms of this chapter, the aim of anticolonial actors was to repair the rift in the politics of these regions, including by redirecting the use of raw materials for the benefit of African peoples, and thus removing a threat to European access to these resources.

That Du Bois's interventions moved seamlessly between domestic and colonial affairs is no surprise given the continuity in discourses of development and education between these realms, including the welcome reception of Washington's Tuskegee model in German and British Africa as a way to keep "the African true to his own best nature."¹²⁴ These debates also eventually led to a shift in French colonies, from assimilationist education emphasizing literature and the sciences toward "technical and vocational training" and the "most modest" level of training in the sciences.¹²⁵

Understanding Du Bois's writings about education as applying to the operation of the color line domestically and globally allows for a broader reading of his critique and the political imagination that fuels it. It expands on existing accounts that focus on Du Bois's condemnation of the myth of the competitive society and the exposure of its racialized character.¹²⁶ As Andrew Douglas notes, Du Bois viewed the Black college as a crucial site of critique, from which a new notion of universality could emerge.¹²⁷ The current reading reveals this critique to be richer, because it engaged centrally with questions of nature and capitalist accumulation, extended its notion of racism to account for its entanglement with technology, and applied to the global colonial condition.

The critique of the technological mindset rejected both imperialism and domestic visions of greatness based on "mechanical horsepower ... electric power, manufacture, and [the] army."¹²⁸ Du Bois wanted to rid Africa of colonial powers, but also – through knowledge and liberal and

¹²⁴ Begüm Adalet, "Development and Empire in American Political Thought," *Manuscript on File with Author* (2021), Kenneth King, *Pan-Africanism and Education: A Study of Race Philanthropy and Education in the Southern States of America and East Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 49, cited in Adalet "Development and Empire," 23–24.

¹²⁵ Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, 319–20, 24.

¹²⁶ Andrew J. Douglas, *W. E. B. Du Bois and the Critique of the Competitive Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019), 45.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

¹²⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Menace of the United States," *The New York Amsterdam News*, July 29, 1931, A8.

radical thought coupled with self-denial – to help rescue the “terrible” United States from itself, and in the process redirect Black Americans away from “aimlessly imitat[ing]” the desire to be “big and powerful and all-conquering.”¹²⁹ Du Bois’s repurposes his criticisms of the British Empire, which built its success on coal, low wages, and slave labor, to engage with the newfound world power status of the United States.¹³⁰ He hoped that greatness and power could be used to invest in “human intelligence for the masses” and “humanitarian ends for all sorts of people.”¹³¹ In other words, US culture and its accomplishments were wrong not just because of racial injustice, but wrong in themselves because they followed no clear program of “rightness in religion or in morals” and its technological superiority was used for wealth accumulation and caused poverty all over the world.¹³² Du Bois’s normative critique demanded a radical reorientation of the US project and its citizens from a “wealth-worshipping plutocracy” toward the leadership of a “real missionary effort for the uplift of the world.”¹³³

4.5 POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY, RACIAL CAPITALISM, AND ECOLOGY

Never once in their arrogance did they stumble upon the single fact that in subsuming the wilderness and the Indian within their synthesis they were irrevocably cutting themselves off from the very substance of the new life they were forging in North America.

Winona LaDuke (White Earth, Ojibwe),
“Natural to Synthetic and Back Again”¹³⁴

This chapter reconstructs how the melding between ideas of racial superiority and technology mediates capitalist accumulation by allowing the destructive exploitation of racialized manual labor and nature. This critique is grounded in an ecological reading of Du Bois that makes two diagnostic and two normative critical claims. Diagnostically, Du Bois first

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Du Bois, “The Crisis in England,” W. E. B. Du Bois, “Change America,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, October 31, 1942, 8.

¹³¹ Du Bois, “The Crisis in England”, Du Bois, “Change America,” 8.

¹³² W. E. B. Du Bois, “Want to Be American,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, October 24, 1942, Du Bois, “Change America,” 8.

¹³³ Du Bois, “Change America,” 8.

¹³⁴ Winona LaDuke, “Natural to Synthetic and Back Again,” in *Marxism and Native Americans*, ed. Ward Churchill (Boston: South End Press, 1983), i.

turns upside down the claim that technological superiority stems from racial superiority, a claim that dictates the confinement of nonwhites to manual work better adapted to their nature. Instead, he notes, racism makes possible technologically advanced societies because it allows the violent exploitation of human and nonhuman nature that would otherwise be found outrageous and unacceptable. Racial ideology and the violent extraction of resources that it allows sustain technologically enabled superiority. Second, Du Bois exposes the primacy of nature and “humble work” in making modern life and its technologically enabled comforts possible: there is no modern life without soil and sweat. Normatively, Du Bois first denounces the breakneck speed of the development required by global capitalism’s conscription of land in the colonies and, in particular, its prioritization of private property over socialization and the good of society. Second, Du Bois condemns the technological mindset as a poor measure of human achievement and a deviation from the good life. Technology, in other words, reflects a peculiar and not particularly admirable western obsession with speed, efficiency, and the mastery of nature.

This account adds to the picture of imperial popular sovereignty and excessive self-and-other-determination painted in this book so far. It illuminates that imperial popular sovereignty, which rules other societies despotically, operates over both human and nonhuman nature. On the one hand, techno-racist popular sovereignty alienates wealthy publics from their dependence on nature and manual labor. On the other hand, their “other-determination” coercively alienates colonial peoples and peoples in the Global South from their own projects of economic cooperation and socialization, which would require a slow and humane approach to nature and economic development, creating a political rift.

Wealthy societies’ alienation from nature and racialized manual labor not only illuminates a crucial mechanism for racial capitalism to access nature and labor on the cheap, but also reveals the mechanism by which formally democratic collectives embrace it. The alienation from nature of these collectives stems from an identification or integration of whiteness with technology as indicative of modernity/superiority and a concomitant identification of Blackness/brownness with bodily exertion and strenuous work in contact with nature. This alienation from “nature” does not apply to humans in general but to the group racialized as white and is more precisely a double alienation from both nature and the nonwhite humans who work the land. This alienation depends on the disavowal of the intimate dependence of the technologically enabled comforts on this manual labor and nature. Differently put, alienation from nature cannot

be understood without the racialized mapping of the nature/technology divide, which results in indifference toward the destruction of nature implemented through a variety of unfree labor forms. Consequently, the undoing of an ecologically destructive capitalism cannot proceed without the dismantling of racism.

It follows that the problem of environmental injustice is not just about the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation over racialized people but about how capitalist accumulation occurs through hierarchically produced vulnerabilities, making inequalities and dispossession drivers of environmental destruction.¹³⁵ In other words, racialized political formations are entwined with our present ecological crisis because they facilitate both the more intense devastation of nature overseas and its disavowal.

By adding an ecological substratum to the material underpinnings of white democracies, this chapter completes the critical account of popular sovereignty and excessive self-determination, making clear that labor exploitation and the destruction of nature are entailed in political regimes that are brought together by possessive attachments. Racial hierarchy is required for these groups to demand and enjoy riches that are made possible by a regime of accumulation that depends on the destruction of racialized families, communities, and their natural environment.

Having spelled out an imperial popular sovereignty and its material presuppositions, *Democracy and Empire* turns now to exploring the emancipatory possibilities that remain in this concept and practice. Such an exploration, conducted in Chapter 5, grapples with the transnational aspects of racial capitalism and the structures of imperial and post-imperial domination that enable it, and contests the cooptation of democratic discourse for the legitimization of societal models dependent on destructive forms of capital accumulation.

¹³⁵ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 63–64, and Ajay Chaudhary, “The Climate of Socialism,” *Socialist Forum*, Winter (2019): 2, 3.

