

Labor, place, and the production of race

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In order to broaden our understanding of labor mobilities, displacements and racializations, I suggest that we go further back in time, expand our scope and raise our ambition regarding conceptual work. Let us venture to a site in the historical past at the root of the nexus between labor, capital, land/place, and the production of race: the plantation world. Not Marx's feudalism or industrial capitalism, but the intersection of empire and capitalism, or the capitalist core of colonialism, theorized by Eric Williams and described by Sidney Mintz. The plantation system revolved around sugar and other commodities, fueled by external "markets," as economic historians put it. But it also stood upon the colonial appropriation of indigenous land in the so-called New World. Above all, the plantation economy depended on a massive displacement of labour. This was no mere trajectory of worker mobility, but a brutal process of capture, captivity, traffic, sale, purchase and forced labor: the enslavement of human beings, or slavery. Enslavement, particularly in the Americas, de-humanized its subjects and ultimately produced its targets as a "race." This process was central to the plantation economy. As Edgar Thompson described it, the plantation is a site of race-making.

From then on, race was naturalized as a pre-existing category, as if it had always been there, produced by nature, supported by natural philosophy and later by biology. Until the concept of race was tabooed from science in the aftermath of the horrors of the twentieth-century Holocaust (and hence the cognitive split between the inexistence of human races, according to science, and the social reinforcement of their existence via racist practices and racialized existences), scholars produced a vast number of typologies and nomenclatures to depict human variation. During the high age of empire, race had been ratified by science and entered common knowledge, both supporting white supremacy and legitimating European colonialism. The cognitive duo also underwrote a twin counterpart to white supremacy, in the form of a presumed inferiority of non-whites – whether Africans trafficked across the Atlantic for the plantations across the Americas and the Caribbean, or later, Melanesians kidnapped (“blackbirded”) to labor on plantations in Australia and Fiji, South Asians displaced to many of these same sites and more as indentured laborers, or still other groups involved in the major, global, long-distance mobility that fed the labor needs of plantations – from China, Java, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the Portuguese Atlantic Islands, and Southern Europe.

In a nutshell: race is historically produced in the context of labor displacement. Such is the scope and argument of the project *The Colour of Labour- the racialized lives of migrants*. We refer to this process as *racialization*, in order to keep the focus on its dynamic process and keep a clear distance from racist naturalizations. We investigate those processes in multiple settings and situations, exploring how the social categories associated with positions in labor may appear as ethnicities, nationalities, cultures, races, or other collective entities. While hierarchized by the production system,

those categories can be perceived in different ways, from explicit racialism to a projected equalitarian multiculturalism.

The Caribbean and American plantations based on an enslaved African workforce may stand as the quintessential historical settings of race-production, but they are not the only ones. Other plantation and plantation-like economies based on imported, indentured, contracted, contingent and mobile migrant work across political boundaries to also produce racialized categories. In *The Colour of Labour* we use a shared angle to examine different contexts – from sugar plantations in post-abolition colonial British Guiana to independent and post-annexation Hawai‘i, from cocoa- and coffee-producing colonial São Tome to industrial New England, from post-plantation Mauritius to contemporary agrobusiness in southern Europe, and further enactments of labour mobility and racializations.

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