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Background check: Spatiality and relationality in Nancy Fraser's expanded conception of capitalism

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Abstract

Nancy Fraser's recent work on the hidden abodes of capitalism has quickly become a critical point of reference for those concerned with the racialized, gendered, and ecological conditions of capitalist reproduction. With that in view, this article seeks to extend Fraser's conceptualization through a sympathetic critique of her approach to capitalism's foreground/background nexus. After situating Fraser's project in relation to Marx (and his own engagement with capitalism's background conditions of possibility), it argues that (1) Fraser fails to adequately theorize how capitalist crisis is produced and resolved in space and (2) that Fraser obscures the relational-dialectical constitution of her own hidden abodes. This article then develops an alternative theoretical approach to capitalism's foreground/background relationship, based on a synthetic reading of Fraser's framework and the work of geographer Jason W. Moore. Finally, it closes with some brief reflections on the implications of this theorization for contemporary socialist politics.

Keywords

Exploitation, expropriation, crisis, Marxism, spatiality

In a recent dialogue between an ecological economist and a Marxist geographer published in the pages of *Capitalism Nature Socialism* a pointed question was posed: Why is there so much uneasiness in Marxist circles surrounding the "simple fact that nature does work" (Kallis and Swyngedouw, 2018: 36)? It is a straightforward question, and one that outside of the context of Marxist theory seems to occasion as little anxiety as it does critical scrutiny. But within that domain, it is a veritable Pandora's box. Such a question is sure to ignite a cacophony of responses from a host of perspectives, beyond those strictly concerned with the work of non-human nature—from theorists of social reproduction and unwaged gendered work, to those concerned with

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racialization and the endurance of racialized expropriation and theft across capitalism's *longue durée*. Put otherwise, this question raises the more general issue of capitalism's historic conditions of possibility—of all kinds of unwaged or undercapitalized and dependent forms of work and their relation to the realm of waged exploitation under capitalism. As intimated in the dialogue itself, the "work of nature" invariably points toward the broader problematic of *all* those forms of "useful labour" performed by both humans *and* non-humans that help to facilitate the capitalist "trick" of using labor power to produce more value than the cost of labor power itself (Kallis and Swyngedouw, 2018: 38). It raises the problem—as Nancy Fraser has recently put it in her concise formulation—of capitalism's *background* conditions, and their relation to the *foreground* of exploitation and the wage nexus (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018).

Indeed, despite the hotly contested nature of this terrain, Fraser herself has recently emerged as one of the theorists most willing to take this question on directly—and all the baggage that comes along with it. Over the past several years, Fraser has developed a significant bibliography premised precisely on an attempt to move beyond "[f]amiliar, exploitation-centered conceptions of capitalism," while remaining grounded in the core insights of the Marxist tradition (Fraser, 2018: 1). This has meant an engagement not only with the question of ecological devaluation and theft—or with capital's disavowal and dependence on the "simple fact that nature does work"—but with those other zones of expropriated work named above as well.[1] Fraser has sought to establish the claim that the expropriation of the unpaid or underpaid work of people *and* ecologies represents the condition of possibility for capital accumulation and the exploitation of labor that is "doubly free" in Marx's sense: free from its own material means of reproduction and free to dispose of itself as a commodity on the market. And, in so doing, she has traced the variegated relationship between the so-called foreground of exploitation and the background of racialized, gendered, *and* ecological expropriation across four distinct regimes of accumulation—mercantile, liberal, state-managed, and financialized-neoliberal capitalism. These racialized, gendered, and ecological spheres are, in Fraser's words, the "hidden abodes" behind the abode of capitalist production—and they demand our analytical and political attention (Fraser, 2014).

Fraser's effort is therefore highly ambitious and highly productive; and it has rightly attracted a readership from across disciplinary boundaries, coming to function as a critical point of reference within the vast literature on the reproduction of capitalism (see, e.g., Battistoni, 2019; Mezzadri, 2021; Saito, 2017a). And yet, with the exception of several key texts (Dawson, 2016; O'Kane, 2021), Fraser's recent work has also surprisingly escaped sustained, immanent critique—with most scholars developing their criticisms in passing, or in the context of short-form exchange (see, e.g., Brenner, 2017; Camp et al., 2019). It is thus with this basic agenda in view that this paper sets out: it aims to undertake a critical reading of Fraser's expanded conception of capitalism as it has developed across a series of articles and books stretching back to 2014, with a particular focus on Fraser's understanding of capitalism's racialized, gendered, and ecological conditions of possibility (see, in particular, Fraser, 2014, 2018, 2021; Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). To do so, this article will proceed in several steps. First, it will briefly outline how Marx engaged the so-called foreground/background nexus, so as to situate and set the stage for Fraser's intervention. Then, it will attempt to take stock of Fraser's project itself, underscoring that she *extends and elaborates* on Marx's theorization, establishing the relationship between (racialized, gendered, and ecological) expropriation and waged exploitation as a dynamic and dialectical one, which endures across capitalist history in the *longue durée*. Next, this article will turn to a sympathetic and immanent critique of Fraser's conceptualization, based on two key arguments: (1) that Fraser's expanded conception of capitalism fails to adequately theorize how capitalist crisis is produced and resolved in space and (2) that Fraser obscures the relational-dialectical constitution of her own hidden abodes, in spite of her dialectical elaborations of Marx (or, to put this latter point otherwise, that Fraser obscures how her various foreground and background abodes relate to one another in a dynamic of reciprocal

co-constitution). I will then attempt to develop an alternative theoretical approach to the foreground/background relationship, based on a synthetic reading of Fraser's framework and the work of geographer Jason W. Moore. Finally, I will close with some brief reflections on the implications of my theorization of capitalism's hidden abodes for contemporary socialist politics, teasing out the structural barriers to solidarity that emerge in the context of global capital accumulation.

Marx and the foreground/background dialectic

As suggested above, one way in which we might understand and situate Fraser's recent work on capitalism's hidden abodes is in relation to the work of Marx himself; and by attending, more specifically, to how Fraser extends and elaborates on Marx's theorization. To do so, however, we would do well to first briefly sketch out Marx's own approach to capitalism's background conditions of possibility—and its requisite forms of unpaid or underpaid work.[2] Of course, in that context, we will recall that such work was not Marx's primary concern. His comments on that front are largely scattered across his writing, with much more emphasis placed (unsurprisingly) on exploitation, and on the purchase of labor power for a wage "under the guise of a *free contractual exchange*" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 40, emphasis added). Indeed, the issue of unwaged, gendered social reproductive work and the work of reproducing labor-power, in particular (see, for context, Munro, 2019)—which is a key hidden abode (or background condition of capital) in Fraser's schema—fell almost entirely from Marx's view. As Harvey (2017: 107) has recently put it, "there is nothing substantial in [Marx's] works about … social reproduction (including the reproduction of labour power)" (see also, Harvey, 1984: 163). And, as Alessandra Mezzadri similarly observes, "Marx is mostly silent about the circuits producing the most extraordinary commodity of all under capitalism; namely, the worker" (Mezzadri, 2019: 36).[3] Still, dispossession, theft, and plunder, more broadly conceived, were not outside of Marx's theorization of capitalism and capitalist society. He clearly recognized those forms of brute confiscation—which circumvented the contractual "niceties" attendant to exploitation (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 40)—that supported the historical emergence of capitalism, and which remained integral to the industrial capitalism of his day. And indeed, we gain a clear sense of how he understood the so-called foreground/background relation of capital—and the limits of his theorization—by turning directly to his comments on both slavery and nature.

The matter of slavery in Marx is one of profound disagreement and confusion. Nevertheless, it seems fair to suggest that while those interested in slavery—and in racialized expropriation—find only a handful of references in Marx's primary theoretical texts, the issue in fact plays a central role in his conceptual schema. In the first volume of *Capital*, two brief references are particularly useful to point out. The first, which famously appears in the concluding moments of the text, suggests that the "veiled slavery of the wage-workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world" (quoted in Johnson, 2004: 302). The opaqueness of this reference to slavery has produced a number of analytical misfires; it has led countless scholars to suggest the "inevitable [temporal] succession" of slavery by capitalism (Johnson, 2004: 302); and it has led some to presume that Marx rejected or obscured the coevalness and structured articulation of waged exploitation and unfree work during the first industrial revolution (see, for context, Jenkins and Leroy, 2021: 11). Indeed, this passage—taken together with Marx's writing more broadly—has led scholars to wrongly suggest that Marx understood slavery to be *at odds* with capitalism, due to the fact that under slavery: (1) "there was no separation of labor from the land"; (2) "labor," rather than "labor power," was commodified; and (3) the "domination of labor" was concrete rather than abstract (Johnson, 2004: 303). However, when this passage is read in full, such an understanding becomes harder to substantiate. In fact, in the sentence immediately preceding Marx's comment on the "pedestal and the veil," he notes that: "Whilst the cotton industry introduced child-slavery in

England, it gave in the United States *a stimulus to the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery, into a system of more or less commercial exploitation*" (quoted in Johnson, 2004: 305, emphasis added). Marx's use of "whilst" is particularly pertinent here; it implies simultaneity and coevalness, situating waged labor and black slavery as "two poles" within a "single Atlantic economy" (see Johnson, 2004: 305). Moreover, it suggests that slavery in the United States *was intensified* in order to support the forms of "waged slavery" and "child slavery" that constituted industrial production in England.

And it is not only in these final pages of the first volume of *Capital* that Marx addresses the question of slavery, and racialized expropriation, in this way. Just earlier in the text—in the famed chapter on "The Working Day"—he suggests that slavery takes a distinct form when articulated within a broader capitalist social formation; that is, that slavery takes on a decidedly *more brutal* form as it shifts toward production for a "world market dominated by the capitalist mode of production" (Marx, 1990: 345). Regardless of the historical perspective immanent to these claims—that is, regardless of Marx's understanding of the "patriarchal" character of an ostensibly pre-capitalist American slavery (see Smallwood, 2018)—it is clear that Marx understood plantation slavery, as it was practiced in the Americas during the first industrial revolution, as part and parcel of a capitalist world-system (see, for further context, Wallerstein, 2011). Slavery appears as a practice that predated capitalism; that provided the conditions of possibility for its emergence (with the help of a state that had "become dependent upon capital accumulation … for its own existence and functioning" (Roberts, 2020: 534)); and which was in some ways "corrupted" by its relation to dynamics of surplus extraction and capital accumulation (Smallwood, 2018). Thus, Marx writes: "as the export of cotton became of vital interest to these [Southern] states, the over-working of the Negro, and sometimes the consumption of his life in seven years of labor, became a factor in a calculated and calculating system" (Marx, 1990: 345).

Moreover, for all the shifts in Marx's writing throughout his corpus, this fundamental perspective on slavery—as a mode of racialized expropriation—remained remarkably constant. Even prior to his systematic study of texts like John Cairnes's *The Slave Power* (published in 1862)—which informed Marx's most mature writing (see Anderson, 2016: 170)—we find much the same basic understanding of the relationship between capitalism and slavery. For example, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, published some 20 years before the first volume of *Capital*, Marx underscores that "[d]irect slavery is as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry" (Marx, 2000a: 221; see also Clegg, 2020: 75). From this presupposition, he goes on to say that "wiping" North America "off the map of the world" would not only lead to complete anarchy, but that it would constitute the dissolution of modern capitalism itself. Of course, with that said, there *were* some minor shifts in Marx's perspective on slavery. As Foster et al. (2020: n.p.) point out, Marx moved in definite stages "from a consideration in the 1840's of capitalism's dependency on slavery, to a notion of slaveowner capitalism in the 1850s, to a mature political economy of slavery in the 1860s." But the notion that racialized expropriation was foundational to the history and present of capital accumulation in the mid-nineteenth century was unwavering.[4]

Marx's engagement with nature—and with what we might identify (anachronistically) as capitalism's ecological background conditions of possibility—was, by contrast, much more discontinuous. As recent research into Marx's ecological notebooks has shown, his understanding of the relationship between capitalism and nature shifted quite markedly as a result of his protracted and critical engagement with developments in soil chemistry and ecology, not least between 1864 and 1872 (Fagan, 2019; Saito, 2014). It was during this late moment that Marx moved away from an earlier optimism regarding the promise of scientific knowledge, and the possibilities for ecological replenishment through the application of fertilizer, and toward a critique of the ecological ramifications of capitalist agriculture and the town/country antagonism. Of course, Marx's early writing was acutely aware of the notion that capitalism creates an antithesis between "man"

and "nature"—estranging "man" from his "species-life," or, "the transformative, creative activity that defin[es] human beings as a given species" (see Foster, 2000: 72; Marx, 2000b: 87). But it was not until this later period that Marx truly arrived at a clear sense of how "man's" movement "upon" nature—or the expropriation of the so-called "free gifts of nature"—might be understood in relation to the broader crisis dynamics of capitalism.

This emergent understanding finds perhaps its clearest expression in the first volume of *Capital*, wherein Marx suggests that capitalist production (and, more specifically, industrial capitalist urbanization and the emergence of large-scale commercial agriculture) "disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth"; that it simultaneously undermines and impoverishes the two "original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker" (Marx, 1990: 637–638; see also, Fagan, 2019; Foster, 2000: 140)—due to the treadmill effect that attends to societies propelled by the "temporal determination of value" (see Burkett, 1999; Postone and Brick, 1982). The influence of German chemist Justus Von Liebig was, as is well known, particularly strong in this late moment. Liebig's "immortal merits," for Marx, were in recognizing the "destructive side of modern agriculture" not only to labor but to capital itself (Marx, 1990: 638). And it was through the work of Liebig that Marx began to integrate the concept of "metabolism" (*Stoffwechsel*)—on full display in *Capital*—into his theorization of the nature/society relation; to develop the observation that capital proceeds "through the 'robbing' of the soil of its constituent elements, requiring its 'systematic restoration'" if accumulation is to proceed (Foster, 2000: 156). Put another way, it was in his mature writings in *Capital*—and through his engagement with Liebig (to say nothing of contemporary scientists like James W. F. Johnston and Léonce de Lavergne)—that Marx most clearly developed the notion that abstract social labor "abstracts from all the different kinds of labor *and nature* that go into production" (Huber, 2017: 45, emphasis original); and that "the contradiction between exchange value and use value intrinsic to the commodity is also a contradiction between wealth's specifically capitalist form and its natural basis and substance" (Burkett, 1999: 82).

And yet, if Marx's writing on nature is relatively discontinuous—moving from an early set of philosophical reflections on alienation and species-being, to a mature critique of political economy and "metabolic rift"—there was no sharp break. The *German Ideology*, for example, might be identified as an intermediary text—a bridge between these two conceptualizations of capitalism and its ecological conditions of possibility. As Kohei Saito recalls, it is in the *German Ideology* that Marx "discerns the inadequacy of his earlier project, which simply oppose[d] a philosophical 'idea' against the alienated reality" (Saito, 2017b: 14). It was precisely this dissatisfaction with his earlier idealism that led Marx to "criticize the degradation of the natural environment as a manifestation of the contradictions of capitalism" in that text (Saito, 2017b: 14–15). And Marx continued to slowly develop this theorization of capitalist political ecology in the years preceding the publication of *Capital* in both his manuscripts and notebooks. It is specifically elaborated on, in-depth, in the *Grundrisse*, where he worked to "comprehend the transhistorical universal natural conditions of human production but also to investigate their radical historical transformations under the development of the modern system of production" (Saito, 2017b: 15). And the themes of ecology and metabolic rift are also present in work published *after* the first edition of *Capital*, volume one—not least in his rightly famous chapter in volume three, "The Genesis of Capitalist Ground Rent" (see Marx, 1991: 949). (Though, of course, we would do well to recall here that the manuscripts used by Engels as the basis for volume three were written *before* the publication of volume one in 1867 (see Heinrich, 1996).) Put otherwise, if Marx's conception of nature and its relation to capitalism provides the basis for a distinction between the young and the old Marx, one must take care to note that this transformation was quite gradual. It certainly culminated in the abandonment of any "reductionistic Promethean model of social development" (Saito, 2017b: 19; see also, Burkett, 1999); but this was the result of intense study spanning decades.[5]

With Marx's writing on both slavery and nature in view, we can thus reaffirm the claim that he was far from unaware of capitalism's background conditions of possibility (to use Fraser's lexicon). And yet, that does not mean that his approach was faultless. As noted above, the often highly gendered work of reproducing labor power is largely absent in this theoretical schema, with such reproductive labor appearing as a kind of "absent presence" throughout most of Marx's corpus (Conroy, 2022a). Moreover, it seems fair to say that Marx did not explicitly engage the notion that capitalism *requires* ongoing (often highly racialized) forms of expropriated work—an idea that has animated many scholars in the 150 years since the publication of volume one of *Capital* (see, for context, Amin, 1972; De Angelis, 2004; Levien, 2011; Luxemburg, 2003); and that, when he did engage such expropriated work, he (at times) did so by way of curiously passive metaphors like "the pedestal," which describe racialized expropriation, albeit not as a fully *active* component in the capitalist world-system—a component that both shapes and is shaped by the condition of waged labor.[6] Finally, and in regard to the problematic of nature, we can now suggest that Marx attended to that hidden abode, but largely failed to situate it in relation to capital's other forms of unwaged and undercapitalized work—namely, racialized and/or gendered work—aside from his brief remarks on England's reliance on the indirect "export" of the "soil of Ireland" to mediate crises of metabolic rift; and on the condition of "coolie labor" on the guano-rich Chincha Islands of Peru for the same purpose (see Clark and Foster, 2009). It is thus with these distinctive limits in mind that we can (re) turn to the work of Fraser on capitalism's foreground/background dialectic.

Fraser's hidden abodes

As noted, Fraser's recent work is perhaps best situated and understood in relation to the promises and pitfalls of Marx's comments on historical capitalism's background conditions of possibility. Indeed, while Fraser largely circumvents a detailed discussion of Marx's engagement with these so-called background conditions (see endnote 2), she does, nonetheless, insist that Marx did not go far enough in sketching out the relationship between exploitation and the hidden abodes of racialized, gendered, and ecological expropriation. For her, the study of capitalism today thus requires "epistemic shifts" as "momentous" as Marx's famous shift to the "hidden abode of production"; it requires that we lay bare—in a way that Marx did not—both the "sublimated coercion" that occurs in the foreground of exploitation and "the even dirtier secret of overt violence and outright theft" that occurs in the background (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 30). And, with a clearer sense of Marx's engagement with capitalism's historic conditions of possibility in view, we might more precisely suggest that Fraser's project extends Marx's understanding of the foreground/background nexus in three closely related ways: (1) by situating racialized, gendered, and ecological expropriation, dispossession, and theft as *ongoing* conditions of possibility for capitalism, across its long history; (2) by explicitly thinking together these various hidden abodes, which Marx only considered in a fairly scattered way, or ignored altogether; and (3) by positing a more active and dialectical understanding of the relationship between the foreground and background of capitalism, as opposed to the unidirectional image (at times) suggested by Marx in his use of metaphors like "the pedestal."

To this end, Fraser individually names and catalogs three distinct spheres that comprise historical capitalism's background conditions of possibility, tracing each individually and in relation to the foreground sphere of exploitation.[7] To begin, we can turn to the gendered sphere of social reproduction. For Fraser, social reproduction is a category that is both integral and unique to capitalist society; the sharp distinction between productive and social reproductive "spheres" was initiated with the emergence of capitalism itself (see Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 82–83, 150). And, according to Fraser, with that distinction came a whole host of (new and re-articulated) gendered forms of subordination, which excluded women from particular kinds of "productive" work and burdened them with the requisite and (often unwaged) labors of (re)producing waged workers. Women,

under this regime, have generally been left responsible for producing and sustaining workers as "embodied, natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings, forming their *habitus* and the socio-ethical substance (*Sittlichkeit*) in which they move" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 31). While this observation is largely in line with a long tradition of socialist-feminist theorization (see, for context, Federici, 2004; Mies, 2014), Fraser distinguishes herself in (at least) two areas. For one, the spatiality of social reproduction that she sketches extends far past the domain of the household—encompassing the terrain of the neighborhood, the city, and beyond (see, for context, Vogel, 2013). And second, social reproduction entails much more than simply the material reproduction of labor power in Fraser's account (see, for context, Bourdieu, 1977); it includes, as suggested above, the (re)making of culture, the formation of solidarities and social meanings, and the creation of the "value horizons in and through which [workers] live and breathe" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 32). Indeed, Fraser argues that this sphere or background abode produces relatively autonomous "ontological grammars" and normativities which challenge any image of capitalist society as evenly colonized by the commodity form (Fraser, 2014; cf. Lukács, 1971 on reification; Sanyal, 2007 on capitalism's production of "non-capitalism").

The second hidden abode, or condition of capitalist possibility, that Fraser identifies is ecological. Following Marx, she argues that capitalism relies upon nature both as a source of cheap expropriated inputs and as a sink to absorb its waste. For Fraser capitalism is constituted in and through the ideological bifurcation of "nature" and "society." Nature is conceived of as both infinite and external to society, and as a "free gift" for ongoing plunder, in this context. And Fraser provocatively suggests that capitalism "perhaps even inaugurates" this sharp distinction between the "natural" and the "social" realm (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 36; see, however, Fraser, 2021 for a more fine-grained approach to the question of "nature"). Regardless of the historical merits of that claim, it is this dynamic that underpins capitalism's tendency toward metabolic rift—its tendency to undermine its own conditions of ecological reproduction. Put otherwise, for Fraser capitalism tends toward crisis not only due to the contradiction between the forces and relations of production but also due to the "contradiction between capitalist production relations and productive forces and *the [ecological] conditions of capitalist production*" (cf. O'Connor, 1998: 158, emphasis added). In making such claims Fraser weaves a thread through a contentious set of debates in ecological Marxism. For example, she largely adopts Jason W. Moore's notion of "historical nature" so as to point out (1) that capitalism's ecological contradiction is not produced in relation to a timeless Cartesian nature, but rather in relation to "the *historically specific form of* nature that supplies its background conditions of possibility *in a given era and a given region*" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 92, emphasis original); and (2) she underscores Moore's claim that crises occur because "cheap nature"—"historical natures that have not yet been 'capitalized' and can be 'appropriated' gratis or well below cost" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 94)—becomes ever more difficult and expensive to procure as more raw material resources enter into the capitalized realm and become commodities. And yet, despite these commonalities, Fraser is also at pains to distance herself from Moore's putative failure to provide an "action theoretical" account of ecological crisis, noting that the movement of the frontier between capitalized and non-capitalized nature is determined not only by the tendencies immanent to the law of value, but also by social action and "boundary struggle" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 95; see also Fraser, 2021, on her relation to Moore's anti-Cartesianism).

The third background sphere or hidden abode (behind the abode of exploitation) that Fraser identifies is that of racialized expropriation. At this stage, Fraser's argument should be relatively familiar. She maintains that the expropriation of racialized work is integral to capitalist exploitation, and that it has remained a persistent feature of capitalism under distinct regimes of accumulation—including in those historical moments in which capital simply exacts a "confiscatory premium from *racialized wage workers*, paying them less than 'Whites'—and less than the socially

necessary costs of their reproduction" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 104, emphasis added). And yet, where Fraser advances this relatively widely held position is in her specific analysis of the centrality of politically and institutionally defined status distinctions in the *mediation and re-articulation* of the relationship between these "two exes" (see Fraser, 2018). In her words, "[t]his status differential"—between exploitable and racialized, expropriable subjects—"is forged politically," and produced through social struggle (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 42). It is in the institutional realm and through the practices of states—as well as the supranational political distinction between core and peripheral nations (see Wallerstein, 2011)—that racialized hierarchies are concretized and enforced. With this view, the distinction between those that are considered expropriable, and those not, is thus constantly being re-worked and re-articulated on an ongoing basis. While a number of scholars of race and capitalism have similarly turned toward the state—we might, for instance, point to Cornel West's classic "neo-Gramscian" approach, which links "microinstitutional and macrostructural analyses of oppression" (West, 1988: 23)—Fraser is quite distinct in her understanding of the *fluidity* of regimes of expropriation, and in her presentation of the role of the state in mediating and establishing those regimes and their constitutive forms of racialization (cf. Levien, 2011).

With each of these hidden abodes in view, it is crucial to underscore how Fraser conceives of their relation, and of their relation to the foreground of exploitation. Here, two points are particularly important. For one, these background conditions of possibility *directly* keep production costs low in the foreground. As Fraser puts it: "production costs would soar if [capital] had to pay the full reproduction costs of other inputs, such as energy and raw materials" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 45). Second, they *indirectly* keep production costs low by reducing the cost of labor power. Because workers are able to subsist "on the cheap"—which is made possible by the hidden abodes behind the hidden abode of production—capital is able to reproduce itself. And yet, as Fraser insists—and as is variously alluded to above—this relationship between exploitation and capital's background conditions of possibility is also one marred by contradiction, struggle, and crisis; and this process of reproduction is, therefore, rarely straightforward. Indeed, capital maintains a tendency to destabilize—and undermine—all of the background spheres that enable exploitation; this "relation is potentially contradictory and crisis-prone, because the ceaseless drive toward ever-expanding accumulation destabilizes the background conditions on which the foreground dynamic depends" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 72). And when capital faces such crises—which are, according to Fraser, only actualized when they are "experienced as such," giving rise to a clash of normativities (see Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 68; see also, O'Kane, 2021: 219–220)—boundary struggles invariably emerge. Put otherwise, broad struggles ensue over the re-articulation and reorganization of the foreground/background relation—and across each of the hidden abodes sketched above—with capital, in particular, attempting to reestablish the basis for profitable accumulation. It is precisely this dynamic that has shaped the movement of capitalist history across its four regimes of accumulation (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 64); each regime emerges, according to Fraser, through a period of crisis (which necessarily entails boundary struggle (see O'Kane, 2021)), and each presupposes a new crystallization of the foreground/background relation.[8]

Beyond Fraser

Needless to say, Fraser provides a highly productive theorization of contemporary and historical capitalism. To summarize, she provides a theory that situates dispossession, expropriation, and theft as the conditions of possibility for capitalism; and she develops a theory that cuts across, and conceptually links, gender, ecology, race, and class. Further still, she is able to move beyond Marx's scattered and static understanding of the relationship between capitalism's foreground and background, to develop a dynamic theory of crisis that arises through a reading of Marxist class struggles *and* "quasi-Polanyian" boundary struggles. As Fraser notes, in moments

of "general crisis," all of these struggles and tensions "intertwine and exacerbate one another" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 69). And, once a new regime has "softened" or "finessed" the crisis between the foreground and the background spheres, these dynamics are not resolved once and for all. While these moments of reorganization shift the line between commodification and (racialized, gendered, and ecological) expropriation—and redetermine which kinds of work are expropriable and which are not—we can only wait for that provisional stabilization to unravel given the constitutive crisis tendencies of the system (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 157).

And yet, I want to insist that it is precisely here that Fraser's theory demonstrates some of its most significant limitations. That is, while Fraser has a highly sophisticated sense of the different *locations* within the capitalist social totality that can produce tensions and pressures on ongoing accumulation, it remains largely unclear how capitalist crisis is produced and resolved in space; and, relatedly, how the different background spheres relate to one another (and to the foreground of exploitation) in that (highly geographical) process of crisis production and resolution. Put more concretely, in reading Fraser one learns the following: capitalism disavows its dependence on its various background hidden abodes; it presumes that they can be depleted "*ad infinitum*" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 72); and it undermines its own conditions of (racialized, gendered, and ecological) reproduction precisely "because the ceaseless drive toward ever-expanding accumulation destabilizes [all of] the background conditions on which the foreground dynamic depends" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 72). However, this framework struggles to precisely account for the movement of this deepening process of destabilization—itself a highly ambiguous term (see O'Kane, 2021)—and its momentary resolution in and through space; and it obscures the complex ways in which the foreground and background spheres—the hidden abodes—relate to, and co-constitute, each other.[9]

Importantly, this criticism applies in spite of Fraser's most recent work, which quite explicitly attempts to grapple with these two questions. This was decidedly not the case in her earlier writing on capitalism's foreground/background relation (see Fraser, 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2018), which simply presented each background sphere in isolation, as if it individually (and solely) entered into tension with the foreground of exploitation. In these early articles, one was left with the impression that there were only "'*inter-realm*' contradiction[s] grounded in the fact that capitalism's economy simultaneously needs and destabilizes a 'non-economic' background condition" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 144, emphasis added); and that these inter-realm (and independently constituted) contradictions—between the foreground of exploitation and the backgrounds of reproduction, racialized plunder, and ecological theft—effectively added up to a system-wide crisis. More recently, however, Fraser has insisted on thinking across what might be identified as *intra-realm* relations (cf. Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 140); in developing the claim that "the interactions between [background spheres] are so intimate and mutually constitutive that none of them can be fully understood in isolation from the others" (Fraser, 2021: 104). As Fraser notes, in this context, it is almost impossible to consider something like ecological degradation outside of racial oppression because "the chunks of nature that capital appropriates are virtually always the life-conditions of some [often racialized] human group" (Fraser, 2021: 106). Nor can we consider gendered social reproductive work without contemplating ecology, given that social reproduction "aims to sustain beings who are simultaneously natural and cultural" (Fraser, 2021: 104). Each background sphere is, in such recent revisions, imbricated in all the others.

Further, in her most recent work, Fraser has even attempted to elaborate on her theorization of crisis and to establish the spatialities that are immanent to it. Here, she has argued that capital's tendency toward "socio-ecological impasse" (which arises due to the above-sketched destabilizing tendencies and the normative struggles that they provoke) is systematically resolved through (racialized) plunder in the periphery—including the "periphery within the core" (Fraser, 2021: 121). She has attempted to establish a reading of crisis which hinges on an understanding that

capitalism tends to undermine its various "hidden" conditions of possibility; and has further called attention to the fact that this tendency produces "impasses" which find their momentary resolution through the plunder of racialized geographies. In Fraser's words (2021: 121), the "trajectory looks roughly like this":

> a socio-ecological impasse originating in the core prompts a round of plunder in the periphery (including the periphery within the core), which targets the natural wealth of populations deprived of the political means of self-defence…The result is an evolving core-periphery geography, in which the boundary between these two co-constituted spaces shifts periodically, as does the boundary between economy and nature. (see also, for a tightly linked account, Clark and Foster, 2009)

Both of the above-sketched moves are, to be sure, a productive step forward. And yet, even in light of these revisions, the problems identified remain. For example, we might simply raise the following questions: Is capitalist crisis really best conceived—as Fraser continues to suggest—solely in relation to capital's (parallel) tendency toward the destabilization and depletion of racialized, gendered, and ecological inputs? (In relation, that is, to the problem of destabilization and (relative) scarcity, and the normative crises that it gives rise to?) Is the spatiality that attends to crisis formation and resolution best understood simply through the binary lexicon of "core" and "periphery"—and through the observation that peripheral "plunder" increases in the face of inter-realm over-expropriation? And finally, is the relation between Fraser's various spheres best captured with the observation(s) that these spheres are imbricated; that "socio-ecological impasses" periodically facilitate the unidirectional shift of ecological burdens onto racialized subjects; and/or that systemic crises appear when all of these inter-realm dynamics "add up" to something more? Indeed, it seems that Fraser's account (still) obscures as much as it reveals, not least regarding (1) the precise mechanisms that propel capitalist crisis in and through space—no small fact, given that it is increasingly well established that we cannot fully account for capitalist crisis *without* attending to these spatial dynamics (see Harvey, 1984; cf. Sayer, 1985); and (2) regarding the relationship between and among her foreground and background spheres. Of course, on this latter point, there is a certain irony. After all, one of Fraser's primary innovations—vis-à-vis Marx—is her insistence on a dynamic and dialectical understanding of the foreground/background relationship. And yet, I am suggesting here, among other things, that Fraser's account must not only be clarified and spatialized—it must be made more dialectical still. It must attempt to conceive of the ways in which capitalist crisis is produced and resolved in space, and attend to the ways in which the various foreground and background spheres are mutually constituted and re-articulated in and through that process.[10]

One way in which we might begin to address these concerns is with a (re)turn to the work of geographer Jason W. Moore. Fraser, as noted, makes considerable use of Moore's work. She adopts (elements of) his conceptualization of capitalist crisis, primarily in relation to her ecological background sphere, following his contention that capitalism relies on the existence and expropriation of "cheap nature" as an input in the production process. And Fraser accepts Moore's understanding that as historical nature is progressively enclosed, capitalized, and exhausted—across regimes of accumulation—the so-called "ecological surplus" is diminished, and capital is forced to seek out new non-capitalized ecological inputs (see Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 94). In endorsing this claim, Fraser provides a fairly clear articulation of the pathway of crisis production and resolution as it appears in one background sphere. And yet, in developing this reading of Moore, Fraser also quite significantly circumscribes key insights integral to his framework—to the determent, ultimately, of her own. For one, Fraser obscures the fact that Moore's framework is more than simply a theory of ecological underproduction. Indeed, Moore begins from the notion that capital tends toward both overproduction *and* underproduction—and from the contention that we must identify the historically specific ways in which those two tendencies hang together in, what

Moore calls, a dialectic of tendency and countertendency (Moore, 2011: 127). Drawing on Marx's "general law of underproduction," he recalls that capital's "tendency toward mechanization (a rising share of fixed constant capital) finds its counter-tendency in rising raw material costs (a rising share of circulating constant capital)" (Moore, 2017: 606). In any given historical conjuncture one of those tendencies might be dominant, but the "counter-tendencies are not exogenous to the law's operation" (Moore, 2011: 127). Another way of putting this is to say that Moore begins with a concern for the variegated and endemic ways in which crises of overaccumulation—crises of "declining returns to capital" (Moore, 2011: 126)—emerge; and with the logics that drive them.[11]

And yet, Moore's account goes further still, highlighting "much more than the overproduction of machinery and the underproduction of inputs," even if this general dynamic points to where all cycles of accumulation end up: "overcapacity and rising raw materials prices" (Moore, 2015: 100). He argues, that is, that Marx's "general law" helps us to identify additional, and arguably more generalizable, observations:

> The first is how the 'normal' accumulation of capital drives the rising costs of production through the progressive exhaustion of the natures within both the circuit of capital (exploitation) and in the orbit of capitalist power (appropriation). The second is how underproduction fetters—or threatens to fetter—accumulation, and how it has been resolved through great waves of geographical restructuring. (Moore, 2015: 100)

More simply, Moore suggests—with Marx in view—that valorization relies not only on the "organization of production and markets through the cash nexus" (accumulation by capitalization), but on the *even greater* process of accumulation by extra-economic appropriation (Moore, 2017: 606). "When capitalists can set in motion *small* amounts of capital and appropriate *large* volumes of unpaid work/energy, the costs of production fall and the profit rate rises" (Moore, 2015: 101, emphasis original). And yet, this dialectic of appropriation and capitalization is, again, marred by contradiction: (1) "the share of unpaid work/energy tends to fall relative to the mass of capital" (Moore, 2015: 104); (2) capitalization trends to rachet up in order to "squeeze more work/energy out of older, appropriated zones" (Moore, 2015: 118); and (3) recurrent waves of appropriation necessarily reappear, in such contexts, in order to keep that dynamic in check. Of course, this account is absolutely critical against the backdrop of Fraser's theorization insofar as it productively clarifies the mechanisms *that drive capitalist crises, and the ways in which those crises are integrally and necessarily produced and resolved in space*. Indeed, against Fraser's ambiguous notion of parallel inter-realm crises of destabilization and depletion —which ostensibly add up to a systemic crisis, and which are resolved by redrawing the boundaries between capital's hidden abodes—Moore suggests a different tact. He traces a dialectic of appropriation and capitalization—which, despite countervailing tendencies, ultimately resolves in a fall in the world-ecological surplus and crises of overaccumulation—and argues that "the revival of world accumulation" is dependent upon the reorganization of the geography of capitalist (re)production (Moore, 2017: 606).[12]

This revival generally entails, as Moore points out, the "extra-economic movements of empire, science and culture," which "seek to control and dominate—*but not commodify directly or wholly —relations of human and extra-human work*" (ibid., emphasis added). And this is precisely because the relation between capitalization and appropriation in the capitalist web of life "*is asymmetrical*. Rising labour productivity in commodity production implies an even greater augmentation of the volume of energy and raw materials (circulating capital) for every unit of labour-time" (Moore, 2015: 107, emphasis original). Capitalist crisis, in other words, must find a *spatial vent* to enable ongoing accumulation, one which allows, *inter alia*, for new sites of surplus capital investment (given that overaccumulation crises involve the accumulation of

surplus capital which cannot be reinvested profitably), and the recalibration of the relation between the value form and its non-commodified socio-ecological value relations. Of course, what this also means is that capitalist geography is certainly not reducible to the language of core/periphery movement, even if the core/periphery distinction has historically functioned as a critical means of maintaining world-ecological surplus (for context, Amin, 1977; Araghi, 2003; Beckert, 2014; Gunder Frank, 1966; Wallerstein, 2011). Capital's crisis-driven moments of restructuring are, rather, wholesale efforts to put surpluses to productive use and/or to secure new non-commodified or undercapitalized inputs. (The precise nature of such moments of restructuring would seem to depend on whether or not overproduction or underproduction is dominant.) These moments invariably involve the reorganization and production of new landscapes for accumulation, as well as the devaluation—and, in fact, abandonment—of those geographies previously constructed for that purpose (i.e., urban spaces, infrastructural configurations, and so on) (see Harvey, 1984; Smith, 2008).

Finally, we should here underscore that while Fraser largely deploys and develops Moore's theorization in the context of her ecological background sphere, the above theorization is fundamentally concerned with the foreground/background dialectic, more broadly. Indeed, as Maria Mies noted three decades ago (Mies, 2014), social reproductive work and racialized expropriation generally function as key determinants in maintaining the cheap inputs upon which accumulation depends; and, as such, they are part and parcel of the dialectic of tendency and countertendency established above. In Moore's words (Moore, 2015: 106, emphasis original):

> the rate of exploitation under the law of value is determined not only by the class struggle within commodity production (between capitalist and the direct producers), and not only by the organization and value composition of commodity production. *It is also determined by the contribution of unpaid work*, performed by human and extra-human natures alike.

In this sense it is little coincidence that the violent, ruling abstractions of "nature" and "society" have historically placed (albeit in complex and historically specific ways) the work and lives of women and nonwhite people outside of the domain of "society" and "civilization," proper (see Conroy, 2022c). The expropriation of racialized and gendered work—much like the expropriation of non-human nature—has historically been critical to the extraction of surplus value, and it continues to be today; such abstractions secure and cement the distinction between exploitable and expropriable inputs across the human/non-human divide. Moreover, and as Moore's crisis theory would want to suggest, these forms of distinction only become more important in the face of a falling ecological surplus; the moment of underproduction typically arises due to the underproduction of expropriated racialized, gendered, and ecological work (see Moore, 2015). For that reason, the spatial fix often brings with it not only new geographies of accumulation—and new sites for the investment of surplus—but new imperialisms, new forms of racist brutality, and new modes and scales of gendered social reproductive work (Conroy, forthcoming, 2022a, 2022b; Moore, 2015).

In drawing out these insights from Moore my intention, however, is not to suggest that his theorization provides a replacement for Fraser's. If anything, I would submit that these insights allow us to *clarify and extend* Fraser's theorization of capitalism's foreground/background dialectic, rather than reject it outright. Indeed, with a clearer sense of the general mechanisms that drive capitalist crisis and its resolution in and through space, we can reintroduce Fraser's language of the background spheres, so as to more fully grasp the relational constitution of her various hidden abodes—a core agenda established at the outset of this article. As noted, in Moore's account the tendency of the ecological surplus to fall is a result of the appropriation/capitalization dialectic; it emerges, in so many words, as a result of capital's tendency toward the underproduction of inputs from, not least, (formerly) expropriable work—which he identifies, rather uniformly, as the work of "women, nature, and colonies" (see Mies, 2014; Moore, 2015). Fraser *adds* to this

approach, I maintain, with the language of boundary struggle, and in her invocation of relatively distinctive yet mutually constitutive and overlapping background spheres. That is to say, if we take Fraser seriously, we come to see that the "moment" of underproduction should not be understood as arising due to the underproduction of work from a homogenous configuration that falls under the unified banner of "women, nature, and colonies"; nor should we place too much emphasis on the rising capitalization of capital's background conditions, per se, when considering how underproduction crises emerge. Rather, that moment must be slightly disaggregated, to identify the fact that the relative underproduction of expropriated work proceeds *unevenly across the background spheres* as a result of patterns of capitalization, over-expropriation, and boundary struggle within each of those relatively autonomous "abodes." Indeed, we might even suggest (somewhat speculatively) that it is only when opportunities for expropriation have been exhausted across all of these *relatively* autonomous background spheres that we can identify a true crisis of a falling ecological surplus and overaccumulation—which is, of course, typically followed by the kinds of dramatic re-territorialization established above.

This has crucial implications for how we conceive of the dialectical co-constitution of the hidden abodes of capitalism. Here, we might begin by recalling the fairly well understood claim that the rising organic composition of capital ("the ratio of constant capital, *c*, to *all* living labor, *l*, embodied in the commodity") incentivizes the intensification of exploitation within the wage nexus (see Ortiz, 2020: 234; see also, Harvey, 1984: 120); that the intensification of exploitation is not uncommon in the face of a falling rate of profit as capital seeks to "lower costs and stay in business" (Shaikh, 1978: 237). We can now add to that claim by noting that as pressures of underproduction mount *within a specific background sphere*—either as a result of boundary struggle, over-expropriation (and the rising cost of depletion and waste), or for any other (politically mediated) reason—capital often undertakes strategies to intensify production in those (overlapping and mutually constituted) spheres *where that remains a political-economic possibility*. This might manifest in any number of ways—and we would do well to avoid crude oversimplification. In some cases, this might mean that the underproduction of one of the background spheres leads to the intensification of capitalization in another: the underproduction of racialized expropriation might be compensated through the intensification of capitalization in the ecological abode in order to rachet up metabolic throughput, for example—an admittedly short term solution that will almost certainly lead to an increase in the value composition of capital (see Moore, 2015). And yet, this broad dynamic might also produce conjunctures in which we see the intensification of expropriation and forced underconsumption in one sphere to compensate for the underproduction of another (see, for context, Araghi, 2003). Whatever the specific pathway, what is crucial is that Fraser's account itself—when read together with Moore's more fleshed-out theorization of the mechanisms of capitalist crisis and their production and resolution in space—allows us to see that the underproduction of cheap inputs within one of the background spheres (or a portion thereof) sets off a complex ricochet effect in the other background spheres, as well as the foreground of exploitation. And, in many cases, this dynamic encourages a practice of (what might be called) "expropriative shift": the displacement of the violence of expropriation from one sphere onto another sphere, as a short-term strategy of crisis mitigation (cf. Foster et al., 2010, ch. 2). Needless to say, this re-conceptualization allows us to more properly make sense of the manifold tensions that arise *across* capitalism's (foreground and background) hidden abodes—and their mutual co-constitution, as capital seeks to keep production costs low.

To say as much is not, crucially, to establish any sort of "general law" regarding the dynamics of capitalist crisis, nor the relational constitution of capitalism's hidden abodes. It is rather, and more modestly, to point out that in the face of capital's tendency toward a falling rate of profit—and as it becomes ever-more difficult to secure cheap inputs from any one of the various spheres of capitalist society—capital may pursue (spatially complex) strategies to retain profitability, including, *inter*

alia, the deepening of capitalization, the intensification of exploitation (within capitalism's foreground), and/or the escalation of expropriation and forced underconsumption *in those spheres where it remains (politically) feasible.* And further still, it is to point out that these precise dynamics can lead to conjunctures in which the putative "gains" of one sphere (won, perhaps, through boundary struggle) are offset by greater exploitation, expropriation, and/or forced underconsumption in the others, as capital seeks to maintain its world-ecological surplus and keep costs off the books —with stark implications for the kinds of solidaristic politics that any socialist movement requires (a point that will be further elaborated in this article's conclusion). For example, a rise in ecological background costs—food and fuel, for example—might lead to an intensification in the labors requisite for social reproduction, and/or induce unevenly distributed practices of forced underconsumption in the reproductive sphere[13]; and, the rapid depletion of social reproductive work might facilitate the emergence of new forms of racialized expropriation—or so-called "mitigation strategies" that actually "push [social reproductive depletion] further down the [racialized] care chain," exposing "differences in the effects of [social reproductive depletion] not only between the North and South but also between different classes, races and regions within particular national contexts" (see Rai et al., 2014: 99; see also, Hochschild, 2014; Madden, 2020).

Of course, as this latter example suggests, the various abodes identified by Fraser are not only reciprocally constituted, but often—practically speaking—overlapping. It is often nearly impossible, in other words, to neatly disaggregate the domains of racialized, gendered, and social reproductive work (as Fraser herself notes); and the shifting of the burdens of capitalist reproduction might well happen *both within and across* Fraser's various spheres. This model is, therefore, just that: an abstract model that seeks to highlight a set of core dynamics structuring the relational constitution of the foreground/background relationship, and one that is necessarily complicated in the light of history. Taken together, however, this theorization—and this synthesis of Fraser and Moore—does allow us to pinpoint key generative dynamics that structure not only the production and resolution of capitalist crisis in and through space, but the dialectical co-constitution of capitalism's foreground and background abodes as well. It allows us to make the following general claims with a high degree of confidence:

1. Capital accumulation is structured by a dialectic of overproduction and (often highly racialized, gendered, and ecological) underproduction; while either one of these tendencies might be dominant in a particular conjuncture—depending on the availability of "cheap nature"—this dual tendency leads periodically and systematically to a falling ecological surplus, overaccumulation, and developmental crises (see, again, endnote 11).
2. The "moment" of underproduction does not emerge due to the uniform underproduction of racialized, gendered, and ecological work all at once. Rather, this is a highly uneven process, depending on, *inter alia*, rates of capitalization, expropriation, and boundary struggle *across* the historically constituted abodes mapped by Fraser.
3. Following (1) and (2), we can now see that the rising cost of certain key inputs is often offset or displaced (in the short term) through the intensification of capitalization, exploitation, expropriation, and/or underconsumption in other available "spheres," sectors, and/or segments of the labor market. This observation gives some theoretical support to Fraser's claim that "expropriation becomes especially appealing in periods of crisis" (Fraser, 2018: 5). And it significantly extends that observation, establishing the relational constitution of the various abodes of capitalist society in the process.
4. Capitalist crises are ultimately resolved through spatial fixes, which are far more complex than the language of the core/periphery might suggest. Indeed, the spatial fix—as conceived here—typically involves the restructuring and deepening of geographies of both capitalization and extra-economic theft. Such moments of re-territorialization generally seek to ensure the

reproduction of capitalist society by both securing new outlets for surplus capital investment and by identifying, codifying, and reproducing new "historical natures" for expropriation. New forms of racialization, new gendered hierarchies, new normativities, new socio-ecological imaginaries, and new combinations of free and unfree work—to say nothing of new fixed capital investments and urban landscapes (see Brenner, 2019)—therefore emerge in this context in order to reestablish profitability (see, for further elaboration, Conroy, forthcoming, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d.)[14]

5. This process of re-territorialization is a highly violent—indeed ruthless—process of creative destruction. As such, it inevitably leaves landscapes, ecologies, territories, and populations of devalorization in its wake (see, for context, Davis, 2004; Nilsen, 2021); it entails, by definition, a moment of abandonment, under which—for example—"whole areas of the built environment undergo a rapid and wide-reaching devaluation" (Smith, 2008: 168).
6. Finally, given the persistent sociospatial churn of these broad processes, capitalist crisis formation and resolution emerges through a palimpsestic geography fundamentally shaped by previous rounds of accumulation and "the legacies of inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles" (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 351). Crisis formation and resolution are, in other words, overdetermined within particular sites by the sedimented histories and "layerings and relayerings of spatial practice" (Brenner, 2019: 68).

While this theorization—particularly this approach to the geography of crisis and the relational constitution of capitalism's hidden abodes—is a novel one, the historical evidence available to support it is not particularly difficult to find (albeit with the understanding, stated above, that the concrete material of history is far more complex than these abstractions might suggest). Indeed, one needs to simply turn to the recent history of US capitalism to find support for our argument regarding the relational constitution of Fraser's various abodes, particularly in the face of a falling ecological surplus. Take, for example, the history of the US cotton belt in the middle of the 20th century. As the recent work of historical geographer Brian Williams demonstrates (Williams, 2018, 2021), in that context we find the intensification of investment (and capitalization) in the ecological background sphere as an attempt to mitigate against boundary struggle—and rising costs—in the hidden abode of racialized expropriation. The story goes something like this. Beginning in the interwar moment in the Mississippi Delta, (white) plantation capitalists faced the growing threat of resistance from overexploited/expropriated black workers (see, again, Fraser, 2018). Black outmigration to northern cities, and widespread struggle against the norms of the plantation economy, clearly "presented threats to plantation profits—as these profits depended on the exploitation of low-wage labor and monopolization of land" (Williams, 2018: 251). However, with this rising trend of (black) labor militancy, so too rose the mechanization of agriculture and the intensification of pesticide use. Williams (2018: 254) puts it as follows:

> In the twentieth century, toxic pesticides were increasingly used to protect cotton from pests, while a racialized labor regime and racist disregard for Black lives conditioned uneven exposure to chemicals. But pesticides were not only shaped by plantation racism. As racist political structures were threatened by Black mobilizations for economic and political democracy, pesticides represented a central technology for pursuing racial politics by supposedly-technical means.

By the mid-1960s the use of pesticides as a strategy for mitigating the effects of underproduction in the racialized background sphere—as a strategy, that is, to minimize the impacts of social struggle in that domain—was quite plain. This was a moment of both electoral challenge in the Delta—in the form of Fannie Lou Hamer's congressional bid with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964—as well as "direct challenges to the very reproduction of the plantation as a regime" based

on racialized exploitation and expropriation (Williams, 2018: 255). It was a moment in which, for example, the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union (MFLU) was advocating for improved working conditions on the region's plantations, and mobilizing hundreds of workers in support of those causes. The turn to greater capitalization in the ecological sphere—and the intensification of pesticide use in particular—was thus far from incidental. Black struggle increasingly "threatened the reproduction of a plantation regime dependent upon a surplus of low-waged labor" and "herbicides were used *instead* of accepting demands for better wages and working conditions" (Williams, 2018: 256, emphasis original). The number of cotton acres treated with herbicides in the United States grew from 7% in 1958 to 52% in 1966 (ibid.). And, as Williams points out, the most rapid increase in their use in this period was in the mid-1960s—1964 though 1966—precisely during the MFLU's intense period of strike mobilization against the plantation regime (Williams, 2018: 257). By 1966 almost all of the cotton in the Delta was grown with the help of herbicides, whereas only 52% of the cotton grown nationally was. In short, the intensification of capitalization in the ecological background sphere was "designed to *replace* [black] workers [and] *protect* cotton" (Williams, 2018: 247, emphasis original).[15]

But of course, this particular pathway—and this relation between the ecological and racialized background spheres—is not the only way in which capitalism's hidden abodes are related; nor are the above-sketched dynamics of relational co-constitution only traceable at the scale of a regional economy, like the US cotton belt. As stated above, other political-economic conjunctures lead toward other pathways of relational co-constitution in the face of crisis, some of which are clearly observable at the world scale. Indeed, as Moore himself has recently been at pains to point out, global capitalism since the 1970s has been characterized by widespread crisis, driven (to no small extent) by the underproduction of ecological inputs, and the rising tide of ecological "negative value" (Moore, 2021). This has led, in part, to the overaccumulation of capital: as of 2019 there were "17 *trillion* dollars in government bonds with 'below-zero yields,'" and investment in global real estate had ballooned to 9.8 trillion (Moore, 2021: 23, emphasis original). And most crucially for our purposes, this global crisis has also had several knock-on effects, on capital's other hidden abodes. Not only has it placed downward pressure on wages in the foreground of exploitation and given rise to a growing population of "surplus humanity" (see, for context, Benanav, 2019; Clover, 2019; Sanyal, 2007); according to Mezzadri (2022: 384) and Valiani (2012), it has also led to new forms of "unequal reproductive exchange," which have *intensified the reproductive burdens* of women in the Global South.[16] Cheap reproductive work increasingly flows from South to North precisely in order to meet the needs of those populations "experiencing declining wages" in the North (see Mezzadri, 2022: 383). Meanwhile, in the South—and in social reproductive labor-exporting countries in particular (see Valiani, 2012)—this has produced a marked depletion in the availability of social reproductive work and the intensification, therefore, of reproductive burdens (Mezzadri, 2022: 384). Put otherwise, we are currently witnessing new and highly complex forms of expropriative shift in which a falling ecological surplus and declining wages (particularly in the Global North) have produced new burdens where it remains a (political) possibility.

And yet, what is perhaps most perverse about the above-sketched conjuncture is not simply that the exhaustion of "cheap nature" and a decline in wages is being partly compensated in the North through the intensification of racialized and social reproductive plunder in the South. It is, rather, that this dynamic of expropriative shift—which is part and parcel of the relational co-constitution of capitalism's various hidden abodes—quite clearly facilitates an investment, even *on the part of the working class in the North*, in practices of unequal exchange; or, in those practices that help to stabilize and reproduce the so-called "imperial mode of living" in the face of mounting crisis (see Brand and Wissen, 2021). Indeed, following Camp et al.'s reading of WEB Du Bois, we might say that "the working class [in] western imperialist countries"—to say nothing of the increasingly squeezed middle class—comes to "imag[ine] themselves as 'small shareholders' in a global imperialist project" in precisely this context (Camp et al., 2019: n.p.; Du Bois, 1915). They come to have a

structural investment in the intensification of unequal exchange—in this case, unequal reproductive exchange—precisely because it helps to prop up the imperial mode of living, at least for the moment (see, for context, Ajl, 2021; Amin, 1977; Araghi, 2003; Bhambra, 2022).

Conclusions

This article has set out to make a set of closely linked theoretical arguments regarding Nancy Fraser's recent work on capitalism's foreground/background relation. It began by taking stock of Fraser's project itself, suggesting that she effectively extends Marx's theorization of capitalism's foreground/background dynamic, establishing the relationship between (racialized, gendered, and ecological) expropriation and waged exploitation as a dynamic and dialectical one, which has endured across capitalist history in the *longue durée.* Then, it developed a sympathetic and immanent critique of Fraser's conceptualization, based on two key arguments: (1) that Fraser's expanded conception of capitalism fails to adequately theorize how capitalist crisis is produced and resolved in space; and (2) that Fraser obscures the relational-dialectical constitution of her own hidden abodes —in spite of her productive dialectical elaborations on Marx's approach. Finally, this article developed an alternative theoretical approach to the foreground/background problematic, constructing a synthetic reading of Fraser's framework and the work of geographer Jason W. Moore. In so doing, I have, unsurprisingly, paid particular attention to the mechanisms driving capitalist crisis formation and resolution in and through space, and the various ways in which crises emerge *across* capitalism's hidden abodes as a result of capital's tendency toward a falling ecological surplus. (For an overview of my synthetic theorization, see bullet points 1–6 above.)

Before concluding it is imperative, however, to briefly reflect on the political stakes at play in this critique of Fraser. After all, Fraser's project is more than "merely" academic: central to it is an attempt to flesh out a socialist politics for the 21st century; to establish a diagnosis of the political conjuncture (with a focus on the United States) as well as a path forward for the socialist Left. As she puts it, one of the primary political problems, at present, is that the space of the political Left has been largely evacuated, and filled by those that have embraced a move from (social-democracy's) "two-against-one alliance of marketization and social protection against emancipation" toward, broadly speaking, an "alliance of marketization and emancipation against social protection" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 200). The result is the "progressive neoliberalism" that has become so familiar since the 1990s; a form of putatively Left politics in which "emancipatory movements (such as feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights) became allied … with neoliberal forces aiming to financialize the capitalist economy, especially the most dynamic, forward-looking, and globalized sectors of capital" (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 200–201). And as such, Fraser's intellectual conceptualization of the hidden abodes of capitalist production is tightly linked to a political project that is at pains to both demonstrate and address the fact that racism, sexism, and environmental destruction are immanent and integral to historical capital accumulation; and that these concerns (as well as a more "orthodox" politics of class) must be addressed together through a capacious anti-capitalist program, which moves (well) beyond progressive neoliberalism and superficial moralism.

This is a political project that I am highly sympathetic to and, for the most part, endorse. Nevertheless, insofar as Fraser's account seems to strongly imply that the solution to this problem is to be found, at least in part, through the simple act of "lifting the veil"—of making visible the largely *parallel* material interests of workers, anti-racists, environmentalists, and feminists (cf. Fraser, 2021)—it obscures a crucial point, demonstrated in the critique developed above. Namely, it fails to fully take stock of the fact that—while these groups certainly do have a shared, *long-term* material interest vis-à-vis capital—it is not at all uncommon for their *short-term* interests to enter into tension at particular scales, precisely because of capital's tendency to move the burdens of expropriation and exploitation around in order to stave off crisis. Put differently,

because Fraser fails to fully grasp the mechanisms that propel the movement and resolution of capitalist crisis in and through space, and the relational constitution of her own hidden abodes in that context, she also obscures the fundamental tensions that might emerge between those situated at different locations in her foreground/background nexus. Capital's proclivity to mediate the underproduction of one sphere by simply shifting its violence onto another *makes solidaristic politics and the construction of an anti-capitalist counterhegemonic alliance structurally difficult to develop*. This is clear enough when we consider the above-sketched structural investment of the working classes in the Global North in ongoing racialized and social reproductive plunder in the South. Not only does capital rely on that form of expropriative shift in the face of mounting ecological crisis and economic stagnation, but such a shift also effectively helps to maintain the imperial mode of living for a certain segment of the population in the North.

Of course, the existence of such structural barriers to solidarity certainly does not mean that we should give up on the prospect of building a counterhegemonic alliance—nor does it (in any sense) negate the imperative of striving toward a socialist horizon. The point is simply that we must be sharply attuned to the barriers that will emerge to certain forms of solidarity in the face of capitalist crisis—particularly at a world scale; and, further still, aware of the fact that particular short-term gains in the realm of ecology, racial justice, gender equity, and/or worker's rights—won, perhaps, through various forms of boundary struggle—*might* lead to an intensification of expropriation or exploitation in other spheres and/or geographies. Demonstrating a shared—putatively parallel—condition of exploitation and/or expropriation is thus not enough for an (internationalist) eco-socialism.[17] This is a world, after all, in which contemporary "green capitalism" effectively addresses the ecological crisis through novel forms of rare earth extraction, plantation economies, and land grabbing in the Global South (see, for context, Ajl and Wallace, 2021; Stone, 2021; Táíwò, 2019). We must therefore move beyond what Kohei Saito has identified as Fraser's own version of "Left Arithmetic," and attend to the specific logics that organize "the multi-stranded spheres in the capitalist mode of production" (2017a: 284; see also, endnote 10). We must be clear-eyed to win the world that we need.

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Notes

1. Fraser tends to reserve the term "expropriation" for contexts of racialized and/or imperial theft. Here, however, I am using the term more capaciously (as Fraser is at times herself prone to do); and I will

continue to do so, for the sake of fluidity, throughout this essay. After all, in Fraser's own words (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 40, emphasis added), "[e]xpropriation is accumulation by other means. Whereas exploitation transfers value to capital under the guise of a free contractual exchange, expropriation dispenses with all such niceties in favor of brute confiscation—of labor, to be sure, *but also of land, animals, tools, mineral and energy deposits, and even of human beings, their sexual and reproductive capacities, their children and bodily organs*." As such, it seems quite sensible to speak, where necessary, of racialized, gendered, and/or ecological expropriation.

2. It bears noting here that while I am interested in framing Fraser's project in relation to Marx's comments on capitalism's background conditions of possibility, she generally takes up a different tact, framing her project strictly in relation to Marx's theorization of capitalism's "foreground," as it is developed in the first volume of *Capital.*
3. I generally follow Harvey and Mezzadri in this respect, despite recent—and quite fascinating—attempts to recuperate Marx as a kind of social reproduction theorist *avant la lettre* (see, for context, Cammack, 2020; Farris, 2022).
4. Jairus Banaji's work, which traces its lineage to the hotly contested debates of the 1970s and 1980s on the nature and meaning of the "capitalist mode of production" (see, for context, Mintz, 1978; Ruccio and Simon, 1986; Wolpe, 1972), is particularly relevant on these themes. As he reminds us, while Marx's use of the concept of mode of production is at times contradictory, modern slave plantations were for him generally understood as sites in which "the capitalist mode of production exists"; they were, for Marx, geographies in which business was conducted "by *capitalists*" (quoted in Banaji, 2012: 229, emphasis original).
5. John Bellamy Foster's *Marx's Ecology* (2000) is arguably the most important citation on Marx's writing on nature. While Foster stresses, perhaps more than I do here, the continuities in Marx's writing in that regard—from his earliest reflections on Epicurean materialism, through to his engagement with "Feuerbachian naturalism" and the "Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood" (1842)—the sketch provided here should not be taken as a departure from the intellectual history provided in that account.
6. Foster et al. (2020: n.p.) read the metaphor of the pedestal quite differently. For them, by "relegating" slavery to the figure of the pedestal "Marx was emphasizing that slavery constituted the material form upon which the industrial proletariat itself had emerged, and that the legacy of slavery would persist through a long era of reconstruction and class struggle."
7. Fraser names a fourth background condition of capitalist society as well: state power. However, unlike the other background spheres that concern us here, this one is hardly *subject to* expropriation, dispossession, and theft, and will thus not be dealt with directly. Rather, the political sphere operates to "establish and enforce" capitalism's "constitutive norms," in the *longue durée* (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 38). Indeed, as Fraser points out, capitalism is almost inconceivable without the force of public power. Legal frameworks, for example, are critical in "underpinning private enterprise and market exchange" (Fraser, 2014: 64)—in guaranteeing property rights, contracts, and mediating disputes—as well as in determining which kinds of (racialized, ecological, and gendered) work will be subject to expropriation, dispossession, and theft under a given regime of accumulation.
8. Fraser, it is worth noting, also provides a typology of boundary struggles, identifying "defensive," "offensive," "affirmative," and "transformative" struggles (see, for further discussion, O'Kane, 2021: 220).
9. In raising these issues, I am simply bracketing several other problems with Fraser's theory that will have to be dealt with elsewhere. One of the most pertinent is the question of what is necessary and what is contingent in the context of capitalist society. For example, while Fraser has at times suggested that *capitalism is necessarily racialized*, this hardly seems defensible, even if the necessary distinction between exploitation and expropriation has, at the scale of the world-ecology, long been instantiated through the global color line (see, for context, Conroy, forthcoming, 2022b; Fraser, 2019; and yet, for more sophisticated reflection, see also Fraser, 2022; Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 110–111).
10. Saito (2017a: 284) identifies several of the core concerns identified here. He suggests that Fraser only juxtaposes capitalism's foreground and background spheres "without explaining how they actually relate to each other and how they constitute a totality under capitalism in a multi-stranded manner. Fraser simply

adds new objects of analysis to critical theory without contributing to an understanding of their co-production within capitalism. Fraser's 'additive' critique—we may name it 'Left Arithmetic'—cannot explain the specific logic of organizing the multi-stranded spheres in the capitalist mode of production." Unfortunately, after provocatively raising these concerns, he does not address them directly.

11. Here, it is useful to clarify our terms. Overproduction crises are those moments in which there are "too few customers for too many commodities"; underproduction crises are "characterized by the insufficient flow of cheap food, fuel, labor, and energy to the productive circuit of capital"; and overaccumulation crises are those moments in which "too much capital [is] seeking too few investment opportunities" (Moore, 2011: 111, 128).
12. The "ecological surplus is the ratio of the system-wide mass of capital to the system-wide appropriation of unpaid work/energy" (Moore, 2015: 101).
13. Henry Bernstein's classic work on peasant economies and the "simple reproduction squeeze" can, in part, be read as a potent crystallization of this insight, and of how it functions at the scale of a household. In that work, he notes that the "low level of development of the productive forces in peasant agriculture means that the household is extremely vulnerable to failure in any of its material elements of production. The vagaries of climate; the deterioration in soils which are not easily substitutable because of competition for land or the costs of clearing new land"—among many other ecological factors—can lead to a depression in levels of consumption within poor peasant households (Bernstein, 1977: 65).
14. Crucially, these re-territorializations—which tend to involve the opening up of new "commodity frontiers"—should not be conflated with the so-called "global countryside" (cf. Beckert et al., 2021). They involve the restructuring of capitalist space from top to bottom, including within "heartlands of commodification" (Moore, 2015: 144).
15. For a structurally comparable case study in the same geography—the Lower Mississippi Valley—we might also turn to the efforts among antebellum slaveholders to create "'ecological' plantations and clos[e] the cotton cycle by forcing slaves to eat cottonseed oil" (Ajl and Wallace, 2021: n.p.; see also Johnson, 2013). In that case a certain "ecological sensibility" lead to the intensification of racialized expropriation and racist brutality.
16. Fraser has, of course, engaged with the crisis of neoliberalism and the problematic of global care chains. She does so, however, in a way that differs from the approach developed here (see, for context, Fraser, 2016a).
17. In spite of their stark differences from the theorization established here, it is perhaps worth noting that Federici (2004) and Mies (2014) similarly draw attention to the structural barriers to solidarity that emerge in the context of global capital accumulation.

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