Iyko Day makes a compelling intervention in discussions of race, capital, and settler colonialism. Her book presents a theorization of the abstract economism of Asian racialization by examining how social differentiation functions as a destructive form of abstraction anchored by settler colonial ideologies of romantic anticapitalism. By engaging with capitalism’s abstraction of differentiated gendered and racialized labor in order to create value, Day’s project diverges from scholarship arguing that capitalism profits from labor via the production, rather than the abstraction, of racialized difference (Lowe 1996; Roediger 2008). Her book engages a rich multimedia archive and uses principal historical instances of Asian North American cultural production as theoretical texts to examine key racial policies since the 19th century: Chinese railroad labor in the 1880s, anti-Asian immigration restrictions; internment of Japanese civilians during World War II, and the neoliberalization of immigration policy in the late 1960s.

She begins her book with the moment when a “Caucasian-looking woman” replaced an Asian woman as scientist on the Canadian one-hundred-dollar bill and she ends with the “Iron Chink,” a moment when a machine replaced 30 Chinese laborers in the Pacific Northwest salmon canneries. While the narrative moment describing the one-hundred-dollar bill highlights the abstraction of Asians as money commodity and the narrative moment discussing the “Iron Chink” highlights the abstraction of Asians as machine commodity, both moments function as racial signifiers. These different signifiers demonstrate the dialectical nature of concrete and abstract labor and also produce Asians as a destructive, abstract form of capital. The replacement, disposability, and rejection of the Asian figure in both of these objects illustrate Day’s argument that the “Asian subject
in North America personifies abstract processes of value formation anchored by labor” (8). The racial, gendered, and qualitatively distinct characteristics of labor become obscured and abstracted as an expression of value. More specifically, Asian North American labor practices are aligned with values of cheapness and efficiency, forms of cultural production that amplify how Asians are perceived as “abstract labor.”

In the introduction, Day provides a helpful overview of romantic anticapitalism through a reading of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism and also maps out a triangulation of Native, alien, and settler positions as a way to articulate settler colonial processes of racialization as constituted by land and labor. Romantic anticapitalism reverses the concrete realm of “dusty workbooks by the door, the reliable pickup truck in the driveway” while casting the abstract realm of “capital accumulation, surplus-value, and money” as a harmful, dominating force of capitalism. This false distinction between capital accumulation and labor as a lived practice demonstrates a misunderstanding that the seemingly abstract nature of value is objectified within the concrete form of the commodity (10). Romantic anticapitalism, as dominant settler colonial ideology, reinforces the triangulation Native, alien, and settler positions through the misperception of capitalism as this opposition between a “concrete natural world and a destructively abstract, value-driven one” (16).

The racial interplay of settler colonial exclusion and elimination undergirds Day’s analysis of Asian North America and the personification of capitalism. In reviewing literature on theories of settler colonialism and Asian racialization, Day categorically constitutes a transnational framework of racialization that is grounded in settler colonial logics and also includes nonwhite migration and involuntary contexts of migration. Her triangulation of Native, alien, and settler places the highly differentiated populations of African slaves and Asian migrants under the category of “alien.” She writes: “For slaves and racialized migrants, the degree of forced or voluntary migration or level of complicity with the settler state is ultimately secondary to their subordination under a settler colonial mode of production driven by the proprietorial logics of whiteness” (24).

In this sense, Day extends the complicity of the “alien” position within the settler colonial regime. While aliens may eventually inherit the settler sense of sovereign territorial rights, they also become subjected to the settler state’s logics of exclusion and elimination that reinforce and protect settler control. Under settler colonialism, Native populations are subjected to logics of elimination in order to ensure settler control over land. In the case of Black slaves, settlers sought to increase the property value of this perceived exclusive labor force and managed slave labor through a violent calculus of containment and exclusion. As migrants, Asians’ primary relationship to settler colonialism was also based on their labor, transforming Indigenous land into white property and capital. Yet, Asians were seen as a disposable, impermanent form of labor that could be both excluded and eliminated from the nation-state through mechanisms such as immigration policies that deterred entry, naturalization, voting, property ownership, etc.

Each chapter explores the negative abstraction of Asians under the settler colonial ideology of romantic anticapitalism. In the first chapter, Day begins her discussion of racialized labor as money with a caricature sketch of a Chinese laborer on the back of telegram. She subsequently engages Richard Fung’s documentary Dirty Laundry: A History of Heroes alongside Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir China Men to look at recurring themes of substitutions that expose racial, sexual, and gender differences as degraded supplements within white settler colonialism. For example, Kingston’s text presents a moment at a ceremony where a white man drives in the final, commemorative spike after Chinese workers complete the railroad and Fung’s film uses character substitutions to comment on the Chinese body as an abstract object where racial and
sexual discourse become projected. By experimenting with nonlinear, or “perverse”
temporalities (58) through acts of substitution, these cultural texts in the first chapter (the
documentary and memoir) offer a response to the telegram, demonstrating how the
abstraction of Asian alien labor becomes established through transgressions against
time’s normalizing functions.

Her second chapter looks at landscape photography by artists Jin-me Yoon and Tseng
Kwong Chi, exposing how romantic anticapitalism thrived during the peak of anti-Asian
immigration restrictions by projecting settler identification with personified, Indigenous
landscapes and rendering Native-ness as a biologized expression of concrete value. Here,
she makes an interesting observation of landscape as symbols of national identity (ex:
Canada’s Banff National Park evokes Canada’s nationalist identity with the North) and
how eugenic ideology created analogies between wilderness protection and white racial
preservation. For example, Tseng Kwong Chi’s staged photos feature himself in racialized
excess, in “Chinese drag,” and his alien body degrades and intrudes upon the ‘natural’
landscape.

Following her argument on how abstract capital becomes racialized as Asian, her third
chapter focuses on the resignification of Japanese labor as ideal, efficient, and compliant
during the period of internment. Day contextualizes the exclusion, internment, and
relocation of Japanese Americans and Canadians by discussing the abstraction of
Japanese agriculture and fishing labor as a dehumanizing symbol of technological
modernization. The association of Japanese labor with excessive industry fed a
misperception of their control over the creation of relative surplus-value, the unnatural
“value produced above and beyond surplus value” (130). Yet, the process of land
dispossession and coerced labor under internment associated Japanese labor with a
“romanticized noneconomism” of Indigeneity, which transformed Japanese labor into a
dependent surplus labor force (123; 149). In addressing the idealization of Indigeneity as
seemingly outside of capitalism, alongside settler colonialism’s trajectory of colonial
elimination through assimilation, Day uses Joy Kogawa’s novel Obasan and Rea Tajiri’s
video History and Memory to discuss this labor resignification—the mutation of Japanese
labor into an ideal labor force—as a way to understand the logics of and relationship
between settler colonialism and romantic anticapitalism. Finally, her fourth chapter looks
at multimedia artist Ken Lum’s work and Karen Tei Yamashita’s novel Tropic of Orange
to examine the aesthetics of reconﬁguring borders as an apparatus of neoliberal
multiculturalism (Melamed 2006), a logic of inclusion that deploys multiculturalism as a
response to economic imperatives (167). Using cultural diversity and border-crossing as a
means to facilitate investment and trade, the neoliberalization of borders substitutes
economic class for race and continues to preserve racialized abstractions that surround
multiple tiers of classed labor, while also bifurcating the economism of Asian racialization
into high-tech, ﬂexible labor, and working-class labor (155). Settler colonial capitalism
becomes fulﬁlled through the migrant labor system (189).

Of her project, Day writes that she strives to construct a ﬂexible, rather than ethnically
determined model, that can be expanded and adapted to different historical
circumstances of Asian populations that are not extensively covered in her book (35). As
her work invites new conversations about the entwinements of Asian racialization, settler
colonialism, and racial capitalism, I would also be interested in future work across
different ﬁelds that take up Day’s category of “alien” positions and theory of abstract
economism to more fully and carefully engage the differentiated legal, historical, social,
and political contexts between the many and varied populations rendered “alien” in Day’s
account. For example, how might other scholars take up this work to more capaciously
engage with Blackness as well as with migration from Latin America? Additionally, how
might one apply Day's theoretical intervention to empirical fields and methods of research and scholarship?

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