Introduction

A Geohistory of Coal, Labor, and Mobility

Walking on the summit of *terril* du Gosson in Saint-Nicolas (see fig. I.1), a tenacious hiker will eventually reach the dragonfly installation that dominates the flat top of the coal slag heap (*terril*, in Walloon).[1] The body of the sculpture is built of the same shale stone that for millions of years enfolded the coal deposits earning the region's fortune. The black crag of the half-forested coal slag heap still rims the schist stones, as it did underground for millennia.

To get a sense of the embedded relationship between coal and the environment of Wallonia, one need do nothing further than to take a walk and look around. Slowly moving around the edge of the cliff separating the dragonfly from the promontory, one's gaze encompasses the city of Liège with its manufacturing periphery strewn around the industrialized hub of Seraing, the coal power plants and the rusty blast furnaces of Ougrée, the Ardennes Forest before the bend of the Meuse River and the medieval old town, as well as the forested terrils that alternate with the scattered mining towns of the metropolitan area. There, one sees the extinguished metabolism of coal of modern Wallonia.

As biological metabolism is the chemical process through which living beings exchange matter with the external environment in order to produce energy and sustain themselves, the socioecological metabolism is the ensemble of material, technological, infrastructural, and ecological processes that regulate the functioning of societies. While oxygen is vital to the metabolic processes

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Figure I.1. Terril du Gosson, Saint-Nicolas (Liège), "Libellule," by Daniel Steenhaut. Photograph by Daniele Valisena, 2015.

of numerous animals and humans, coal has been central to human societies since the Industrial Revolution and even earlier, and it still is. Although fossil fuels are not essential to the reproduction of human life per se, the expansion on a planetary scale of industrialization and Global North technological and societal models have rendered fossil fuels the lifeblood of our world. As Victor Seow has written, "We inhabit the world that carbon made."[2]

The metabolism of coal still permeates Wallonia, both materially and culturally.[3] This process is still observable today, even when steel and coal production have almost entirely ceased. The coal-ruled logic that informed Southern Belgium's industrial and urban growth is still dominant in its spatial-ordering predicates, a ghostly presence that resonates through the built and natural environments, connecting them materially, economically, socially, and politically.[4] These now liminal spaces once attracted capital, people, material cultures, and different living species, which all contributed to coproducing ecologies that lived, inhabited, and resisted on the edges of the Belgian industrial metabolism. But what happens when such an all-encompassing—one may go so far as to say "totalitarian"—order of things crumbles?

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While Southern Belgium might look like a ghost, a story from a distant past haunting other deindustrializing countries in the Global North, it is at the same time a postcard from an unspecified future for the factories of today's world, from China to India and much of Southeast Asia, as well as for Turkey, Mexico, and Eastern Europe. The marriage of capital and industry is as strong as it is geographically volatile in the present globalized neoliberal period. Looking at the historical trajectory of Southern Belgium, the lure of progress that national states have used to brand and justify industrial development and the proletarianization of workers appears to be but a veil covering the structural injustice and massive destruction of lives and nature that are ingrained in how capitalism sees the world: a massive reservoir of resources to exploit and a free dumping ground for its toxic discharges. In this book I show that there is no need to refer to more or less distant futures or faraway scenarios to imagine what the world will be like in the wake of capitalist-induced destruction. The end is already here, right now, and people and ecosystems are dealing with it.

The legacy of this social, cultural, and ecologic devastation far surpasses the failure of the economic conjuncture that produced it. As I discuss in the following chapters, the heritage of industrialization is toxic in its physical, political, and cultural remains. While traditional social or economic histories of industrialization end with the dismissal of the factories that sustained those very processes, an ecological analysis further extends the lifespan of industrial capitalism temporally, spatially, and materially. The toxic death span of industrial capitalism still affects the bodies of the workers and the environment of former productive sites and their nonhuman ecologies, as well as the memories and possible futures of those who have immersed their lives in the metabolism of coal. Ultimately, what emerges in this story is that there is no such thing as a postindustrial time in Southern Belgium, or anywhere else.

A New Mobility Regime in Europe

This book tells a story centered in a small region of one of the smallest countries in Europe—namely, Wallonia, the French-speaking region in the southern part of Belgium. Yet this story spans temporally from the Carboniferous period to the present; it traverses Europe and connects Wallonia with Italy, and all the other countries from which tens of thousands of miners came to work in the Belgian mines. Mobility, both as a concept and a practice, is a central element of this research. People move continuously, as does capital, and in relocating they bring together places, cultures, and natures. Migration and the

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environment, society and ecology, culture and nature are always connected, and their interaction is what ultimately constitutes the world we live in. That is why environmental historians prefer to use the term "socio-ecology" than to treat the environment and society as discrete entities. There is no such thing as a pristine, pure natural environment, and paraphrasing what David Harvey famously wrote about New York City, there is nothing unnatural about an environment produced by coal extraction.[5]

This book aims to bridge environmental history and migration studies with movements, circulations, and flows as its guiding themes and lines of inquiry. It is conceived as a contribution to the establishment of environmental humanities as an academic practice and an epistemological standpoint in human sciences. My research constitutes an attempt to further develop what Marco Armiero and Richard Tucker have accomplished in their groundbreaking volume on the environmental history of migration.[6] One of the main goals of the present work is to place mobility *back* at the center of the story and history in general. In fact, I consider human and nonhuman mobility as constitutive parts of "being alive." Boundaries and xenophobic policies on bodily and spatial freedom have historically been produced, reinvented, and even "naturalized" but they do not preexist any sociopolitical reality. As Tim Ingold writes, "The path, not the place, is the primary condition of being, or rather, of becoming."[7] To assert that mobility is the "natural" condition for life—as well as the essence of metabolism—has significant theoretical and political implications, which strongly inform my inquiry and the structure of this research. In a time when new walls are erected in the Americas as in Europe, immigrant detention centers are being built around the world, and when nationalism, racism, religious fundamentalism, and white supremacist politics concur in justifying genocidal and discriminatory politics in Palestine and elsewhere, freedom of movement—or of staying—is still not a given for the majority of humans and nonhumans.

Wallonia cannot be understood historically and ecologically without considering the ceaseless movement of workers, energy, commodities, and cultures that have revolved around coal extraction and its transformation and transportation systems. Labor migration has been a key constituent of the metabolism of coal, and Italian migrants have played a central role in the past four decades of this process.

Starting with the 1946 Italian–Belgian bilateral state agreement, over 300,000 Italians moved to Belgium, especially to the coalfields of Wallonia. Italians were the most numerous among the immigrant groups who moved

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to Belgium and from the 1990s they became the classic example of "successful" migration patterns and integration.[8] A similar evolution occurred in France, where Italians started being defined as "invisible," thus fitting into an auto-celebratory narrative that was perfectly identifiable within the French assimilationist integration model.[9] Correspondingly, Italian migrants began being identified as the real heirs of the industrial spirit of Wallonia, a narrative that was heavily shaped around the figure of the working-class heroes of steel and coal production and extraction. Proceeding parallel to this memory and political operation was a partial silencing of the memories of the xenophobic behaviors that the first groups of Italians encountered in Belgium, as well as the poor working conditions and the low social mobility of those "good migrants."[10] Likewise, the celebration of Italians in Belgium accompanied a parallel demonization of non-European and Muslim immigrant communities such as Moroccan, Turkish, Congolese, and Algerian, which conversely did not fit into the "good migrant" narrative built around Italians and other white Southern Europeans.

After World War II, Italians migrated everywhere in the Western world, from France to Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, the UK, and Sweden, and to the US, Canada, Australia, Argentina, and even to the other side of the Iron Curtain into what is now the Czech Republic. By telling the stories of Italian migrants who fled the misery of postwar Italy to contribute to the reconstruction of Europe through their labor, Belgian and Italian scholars enforced the transnational and cosmopolitan process of European identity construction. Italy was the nation that invented fascism and sowed the European political landscape with the seeds of Nazism, Francoism, and the Salazarian dictatorships (not to mention South American homologues). Italy politically emended its past at the price of selling thousands of its fellow citizens to Belgium and other Western European industries and in doing so it won back the approval of Western European nations. Likewise, Italian workers strongly contributed to the European economic boom throughout the 1950s and 1960s and the establishment of the future European Union (EU).[11]

In that respect, it is significant that the juridical basis of what, after the 1991 Maastricht Treaty, became the European space of free movement was instituted by the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). Formed in 1951, the ECSC was the first transnational institution at the European level to foresee the free circulation of specific categories of workers as well as coal and steel within the six founding countries: France, Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Italy. Coal, steel, and the labor force formed

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the material hinges for human and commodity mobilities to enter into postwar Europe's political discourses and policies.

Today, the Schengen Agreement (1985)—which enables all member states' citizens to freely travel, work, and reside anywhere within the EU's territory—is one of the pillars of the Union. Nonetheless, the struggle over granting freedom of movement to EU citizens has been fierce and long. As the Brexit case reminds us, political achievements must be defended and never taken for granted. The process that led first the ECSC and then the European Economic Community (EEC) to allow specific categories of workers to move freely throughout the member states' territories had been anticipated by the Italian–Belgian Agreement of June 23, 1946. All successive bilateral agreements between European states followed the example of Italy and Belgium. The exchange between the Italian labor force and Belgian coal could therefore be considered the original juridical and political grounds on which Europe conceived its future in a brand-new form. Yet the "men in exchange for coal" agreement between Italy and Belgium was not just a milestone for the future European Union; it was the sanctioning of the complete dehumanization of workers' lives and bodies, which were all turned into commodities to be traded by states and major mining conglomerates. The final stage of the proletarianization of workers was therefore accomplished. In this context, economy and ecology overlap and blend, merging into a metabolic process led by and conceived around the extraction, transformation, and circulation of coal. The wasting of lives and territories was the unspoken outcome of such an exchange.

Welcome to the Capitalocene

Wallonia and Belgium are among the most interesting historical examples of the capitalism-informed era that Andreas Malm and Jason Moore have defined as the Capitalocene.[12] This narrative of the Anthropocene stresses the way in which capitalism can inform, transform, exploit, metabolize, consume, and then depart from a certain area of the world, leaving behind health, environmental, and socioeconomic disaster. According to Marco Armiero, in processing various matters and turning them into energy and commodities, industrial capitalism also enacts a wasting process that produces wasted lives and wasted places.[13] To virtually every part of the planet, capitalism as a world ecology extends the same extractivist rationale that fed European colonial enterprises first across the Atlantic and then everywhere else. As Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert has shown in the case of New Spain,[14] mining regimes

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