

# **A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None**

**Kathryn Yusoff**



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Kathryn Yusoff

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The problem was gravity and the answer was gravity

—DIONNE BRAND, *Love Enough*

Thought of the Other is the moral generosity disposing me to accept the principle of alterity, to conceive of the world as not simple and straightforward, with only one truth—mine. But thought of the Other can dwell within me, without making me alter course, without “prizing me open,” without changing me within myself. An ethical principle, it is enough that I not violate it.

The other of Thought is precisely this altering. Then I have to act . . . I change, and I exchange. This is an aesthetics of turbulence whose corresponding ethics is not provided in advance.

—ÉDOUARD GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation*



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## Preface

This work started as a redress to the White Geology of the Anthropocene and found the guts of its mattering in the critical black feminist work of Sadiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* and the alluvial subjectivity of the Martinique poets Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant. Hanging out in the interdisciplinary spaces opened and sustained by these works, many other feminist black scholars have been crucial to the approaches developed in this book. While unable to give this work its full due here, I am particularly grateful for the courageous analytical and politically poetic work of N. K. Jemisin's bringing together of race and geology across the rifts of broken earths, Sylvia Wynter's metamorphosis of a black biopolitics, Tina Campt's quiet futurity of images, Hortense Spillers's grammars of dissent, Katherine McKittrick's commitment to liberatory black geographies, Denise Ferreira da Silva's location of the foundational inscriptions of race in global geography, Tiffany King's ecologies, Michelle Wright's challenge to linear time-space, Elizabeth Povinelli's indigenous analytics that refuse redemption, Angela Last's critical Caribbean geopolitics, Christina Sharpe's atmospheres, and Fred Moten's writing in the blur. Through the completion of this work, it was Dionne Brand's writing that kept me company at 2:00 A.M. Her poetic relation, given without the possibility of resettling, insists that you must stay with and in the displacement. In that poetics, in its most material geographies, I found the new languages and structures of thought that a turn of epoch, the end of the world of Empire, seems to require. If there is what Brand (2001) calls a *Ruttier*—an oral poem that functioned as a map for sailors—recited throughout this text, its diasporic yearnings are listing toward the possibility of a gravity that defies antiblackness (in all its guises, across the black and brown commons forged in the afterlives of invasion, genocide, slavery, and settler colonialism). It is from Brand that I take an understanding of Blackness as a material vector that opens out new geographies of space and time that make fierce departures from the subjugating cuts in geography exorcised by imperial conditions. Blackness is understood as a state of relation (in Glissant's sense of the word) that is assigned to difference through a material colonial inscription, which simultaneously enacted the

cutting of geographical ties to land and attachments to ecologies. These diasporic subjects that are summoned here are the ghosts of geology's epistemic and material modes of categorization and dispossession, which sit "beside the earth's own coiled velocities, its meteoric elegance" (Brand 2006, 100).

Another way to conceive this would be to understand Blackness as a historically constituted and intentionally enacted deformation in the formation of subjectivity, a deformation that presses an inhuman categorization and the inhuman earth into intimacy. This contact point of geographical proximity with the earth was constructed specifically as a node of extraction of properties and personhood. At the same time, this forced intimacy with the inhuman was repurposed for survival and formed into a praxis for remaking other selves that were built in the harshest of conditions. The proximity of black and brown bodies to harm in this intimacy with the inhuman is what I am calling *Black Anthropocenes*. It is an inhuman proximity organized by historical geographies of extraction, grammars of geology, imperial global geographies, and contemporary environmental racism. It is predicated on the presumed absorbent qualities of black and brown bodies to take up the body burdens of exposure to toxicities and to buffer the violence of the earth. Literally stretching black and brown bodies across the seismic fault lines of the earth, Black Anthropocenes subtend White Geology as a material stratum.

While genocide (and ongoing settler colonialism) and slavery (and its afterlives) are by no means historically or culturally assimilate, as they have different critical discourses, not to mention territorial implications, that are put into contact through the legacy of White Geology and its geographical and subjective dispossession. This White Geology continues to propagate imaginaries that organize Blackness as a stratum or seismic barrier to the costs of extraction, across the coal face, the alluvial planes, and the sugarcane fields, and on the slave block, into the black communities that buffer the petrochemical industries and hurricanes to the indigenous reservations that soak up the waste of industrialization and the sociosexual effects of extraction cultures. If the Anthropocene proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities, it does so in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism. The Anthropocene might seem to offer a

dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence. The Anthropocene as a politically infused geology and scientific/popular discourse is just now noticing the extinction it has chosen to continually overlook in the making of its modernity and freedom.

In the context of this selective perspectivism, *Black Anthropocenes* marks an interjection or erasure that is a billion missing articulations of geologic events to provide a counterforce or gravity to the historical junctures from 1492 to 1950 (under consideration by the Anthropocene Working Group for the initiation event of the epoch). I want to challenge the racial blindness of the Anthropocene as a willful blindness that permeates its comfortable suppositions and its imaginaries of the planetary—imaginaries that constitute its geographies of concern and attribution. As an erasure that is both performed and obscured in the “point and erase” action of the naming of the Golden Spikes, Blackness is a material index of resistance to the projection of this Anthropocenic New World–Old World globalizing geography. Refusing the neat placing of Anthropocene geosocial “events” in geology and the reverberations of colonization that they represent, I offer an altered thinking in concert with a billion Black Anthropocenes as a change of register. A billion Black Anthropocenes names the all too many *voidings* of experiences that span multiple scales, manifestations, and ongoing extractive economies, in terms of the materiality and grammars that inculcate antiblackness through a material geophysics of race. In this book, the writers of the Caribbean are read as both counteraesthetic and counteranalytic to the carceral geo-logics of white settlers in colonialism and New World slavery. While the book sketches a limited engagement with the diverse histories of black and indigenous studies, it instead tries to stay with these geographies of the Caribbean and Americas as inchoate *within* the settler states of North America and Europe. In the spirit of Brand’s poetics of maroonage and Wynter’s concept of replantation, I have prioritized a patterning of thought and practice in the inscription of geology rather than a more exacting genealogy.<sup>[1]</sup> In the apprehension of geologic acts that underpin the Anthropocene-in-the-making, I recognize geology as a racial formation from the onset and, in its praxis, as an extractive and theoretical discipline.

# Geology, Race, and Matter

Let's start with the end of the world, why don't we?

—N. K. JEMISIN, *The Fifth Season*

Every generation confronts the task of choosing its past. Inheritances are chosen as much as they are passed on. The past depends less on “what happened then” than on the desires and discontents of the present. Strivings and failures shape the stories we tell. What we recall has as much to do with the terrible things we hope to avoid as with the good life for which we yearn. But when does one decide to stop looking to the past and instead conceive of a new order? When is it time to dream of another country or to embrace other strangers as allies or to make an opening, an overture, where there is none? When is it clear that the old life is over, a new one has begun, and there is no looking back? From the holding cell was it possible to see beyond the end of the world and to imagine living and breathing again?

—SAIDIYA HARTMAN, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*

Across the spaces and places of geology, its languages of description and dispossession, the question of the Anthropocene shapeshifts, world making in epochal pronouncements of the “New World” of humanity, world breaking in the formation of the “Ends” of master subjects: Man, History, Civilization. In its brief tenure, the Anthropocene has metamorphosed. It has been taken up in the world, purposed, and put to work as a conceptual grab, materialist history, and cautionary tale of planetary predicament. Equally, this planetary analytic has failed to do the work to properly identify its *own* histories of colonial earth-writing, to name the masters of broken earths, and to redress the legacy of racialized subjects that geology leaves in its wake. It has failed to grapple with the inheritance of violent dispossession of indigenous land under the auspices of a colonial geo-logics or to address the extractive grammars of geology that labor in the instrumentation and

instrumentalization of dominant colonial narratives and their subjective, often subjugating registers that are an ongoing praxis of displacement.

Modern liberalism is forged through colonial violence, and slavery is at least coterminous with its ideas and experiences of freedom, if not with the material root of its historical possibility. Thus the ways in which geology underwrites that continuum—of liberal subjectivity and its historicity—and how geology as a praxis materially carries this relation into the future should matter in an epochal swerve. As the Anthropocene proclaims the language of species life—*anthropos*—through a universalist geologic commons, it neatly erases histories of racism that were incubated through the regulatory structure of geologic relations. The racial categorization of Blackness shares its natality with mining the New World, as does the material impetus for colonialism in the first instance. This means that the idea of Blackness and the displacement and eradication of indigenous peoples get caught and defined in the ontological wake of geology. The human and its subcategory, the inhuman, are historically relational to a discourse of settler-colonial rights and the material practices of extraction, which is to say that the categorization of matter is a spatial execution, of place, land, and person cut from relation through geographic displacement (and relocation through forced settlement and transatlantic slavery). That is, racialization belongs to a material categorization of the division of matter (corporeal and mineralogical) into active and inert. Extractable matter must be both passive (awaiting extraction and possessing of properties) and able to be activated through the mastery of white men. Historically, both slaves and gold have to be material and epistemically made through the recognition and extraction of their inhuman properties. These historic geologic relations and geo-logics span Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia through the movement of people, objects, and racial and material categories. Thus becoming post-racial through Anthropocenic speciation is a foil of the humanist trickster (Yusoff and Thomas 2018)—one that places an injunction on the recognition of historic modes of geopolitical mattering while maintaining unequal relations of power through continued environmental exposures.

In this moment of reinscribing geology as a property of personhood in the Anthropocene (in the strategy of geologizing the social and socializing the geologic), there is a need to think with its former lives of inscription, not just those currently searched for in the strata. Or, to put it another way, what modes of *geologic life*<sup>[1]</sup> (material and psychic) are already imbricated in

geologic practices, often in violent ways? Geology is a mode of accumulation, on one hand, and of dispossession, on the other, depending on which side of the geologic color line you end up on. In this book, I ask how geology is being reelaborated in the Anthropocene and consider what historicity would resist framing this epoch as a “new” condition that forgets its histories of oppression and dispossession. This project seeks to write a prehistory that is sufficient to the radical ambivalence of the *afterlives of geology*—of indigenous dispossession of land and sovereignty in the invasion of the Americas through to the ongoing petropolitics of settler colonialism; of slavery, “breaking rocks on the chain gang” (as Nina Simone sings it), to the current incarnations of antiblackness in mining black gold; and of the racialized impacts of climate change. To redress *how* geology makes property relations and properties a relation of subjugation is to challenge the incompleteness of address in the Anthropocene.

Even as the Anthropocene extends its purview over geology within an explicitly politicalized optic on geomorphic processes, it is a “view from nowhere.” The God’s-eye view is inverted into a lithic-eye view to produce a geologic commons from below (Yusoff 2017b). The unification of its vision across the time and space of geologic practices seemingly offers an undifferentiating and indifferent politic. Apprehending the past in the present colonial mining empires of white settler nations frames White Geology as a historical regime of material power, not a genetic imaginary. In this book, I want to redress how the descriptive qualities of geology’s nomenclature produce what Hartman calls a “cultivated silence” about the normalcy of those extractive modes as deracialized. To address this silence would be to understand geology as a regime for producing both subjects and material worlds, where race is established as an effect of power within the language of geology’s objects. Specifically, the border in the division of materiality (and its subjects) as inhuman and human, and thus as inert or agentic matter, operationalizes race.

White Geology makes legible a set of extractions, from particular subject positions, from black and brown bodies, and from the ecologies of place. The collective functioning of geologic languages coded—inhuman, property, value, possession—as categories moves across territory, relation, and flesh. It is not just that geology is a signifier for extraction but that a transmutation of matter occurs within that signification that renders matter as property, that makes a delineation between agency and inertness, which stabilizes the *cut* of

property and enacts the removal of matter from its constitutive relations as both subject and mineral embedded in sociological and ecological fields. Thus I argue that the semiotics of White Geology creates *atemporal* materiality dislocated from place and time—a mythology of disassociation in the formation of matter independent of its languages of description and the historical constitution of its social relations.

The division between the figures of the human and inhuman and its manifestations in subjective life exhibits one of the most terrible consequences of the division of materiality organized and practiced as a biopolitical tool of governance. The division of matter into nonlife and life pertains not only to matter but to the racial organization of life as foundational to New World geographies. The biopolitical category of nonbeing is established through slaves being exchanged for and as gold. Slavery was a geologic axiom of the inhuman in which nonbeing was made, reproduced, and circulated as flesh. This unmaking of subjects constitutes a warp of dispossession in the progressive narrative of collective accumulation or geologic commons in which “we” all share. The rendering of nonbeings in colonial extractive practices through the designation of inhuman or geologic life, its exchange and circulation, demonstrates what Christina Sharp (2009) calls the “monstrous intimacy” of the subjective powers of geology, where gold shows up as bodies and bodies are the surplus of mineralogical extraction. The inhuman is a call across categories, material and symbolic, corporeal and incorporeal, intimacies cut across life and nonlife in the indifferent register of matter.

Geology (and its fossil objects) have been entwined with questions of origins, processes of racialization through speciation and notions of progress, as well as being a praxis for inscribing racial logics *within* the material politics of extraction that constitutes lived forms of racism (from eugenics to environmental racism). To trace racial matterings across the category of the inhuman, and specifically the traffic between the *inhuman as matter* and the *inhuman as race*, is to examine how the concept of the inhuman is a connective hinge in the twinned discourses of geology and humanism. It is a hinge that establishes an extractive axis in both subjective and geologic (or planetary) life. Race (and the Human) is tied most noticeably to fossil narratives (Yusoff 2013, 2016) and racialized processes of extraction, but it is also resident in modes of racial discourse in relation to ideas of property, possession, and land use. In the categorization of matter as *property* and



*properties*, both spatial dispossession of land (for extraction) and dispossessions of persons in chattel slavery (as another form of spatial extraction) are enacted. The slave in this formulation is rendered as matter, recognized through an inhuman property relation—what Saidiya Hartman calls fungibility—as a commodity with properties, but without subjective will or agency (or “flesh,” as Hortense Spiller has it). Rendering subjects as inhuman matter, not as persons, thereby facilitated and incorporated the historical fact of extraction of personhood as a quality of geology at its inception.

Following the work of Hartman and Spillers, I want to pay attention to the grammars of geology and to think with the modes of objectification that the genre of the Anthropocene both unleashes and maintains. This material language of the inhuman and its production of the subjective category of nonbeing set up historical deformations and present impossibilities for subjective life, specifically in what Hartman (1997) calls the “afterlives of slavery.” The mine and the afterlives of its geomorphic acts constitute the materiality of the Anthropocene and its natal moment, from the transformation of mineralogy of the earth in the extraction of gold, silver, salt, and copper to the massive transformation of ecologies in the movement of people, plants, and animals across territories, coupled with the intensive implantation of monocultures of indigo, sugar, tobacco, cotton, and other “alien” ecologies in the New World. The complex histories of those afterlives of slavery continued in the chain gangs that laid the railroad and worked the coal mines through to the establishment of new forms of energy, in which, Stephanie LeMenager (2014, 5) comments, “oil literally was conceived as a replacement for slave labor.” Approaching race as a geologic proposition (or *geologies of race*) is a way, then, to open up the imbrication of inhuman materials and relations of extraction that go beyond a place-based configuration of environmental racism as a spatial organization of exposure to environmental harm. There is a need to examine the epistemological framings and categorizations that produce the material and discursive world building through geology in both its historical and present forms. Specifically, in the lexicon of geology—as a naming of property and properties—certain extractive modes are configured and deployed to enact dispossession across territorial and subjective registers. Geology is historically situated as a *transactional zone* in which propertied and proprietorial concepts of self are entangled—as the entanglement of slavery

versus freedom and the material forms of social subjective life versus liberal individuation.

If the first stake at redressing political geology is to call for the disruption of the connotative powers of language—the exchangeability between human and thing, subject and matter—then the second is to follow this suspension with an orientation that acknowledges the afterlife of this disruption as an ongoing struggle of reorientation in valuing black life and in concomitant struggles for uncontaminated water, air, and land. Why is it that the language of geology allows for the exchange of a person as a material object of property and properties (a unit of corporeal energy), and how does it bypass established biopolitical registers of critique? What are the psychic figurations of gold and slave in the colonial cartographic imagination that allow this symbolic and material exchange? The resolution of this interchangeability happens in the geologic language of the inhuman and the lexicons of inert and nonagentic matter. My intention is not to reclaim the inhuman as a dialectical position from which to reframe humanist exclusions in relation to their Others (because, as Wynter reminds us, the Human is an occupied category); rather, I want to think with the inhuman as an analytic with which to scrutinize the traffic between relations of race and material economy and to think race as a material economy that itself emerges through the libidinal economy of geology (as the desire for gold, mineralogy, and metallurgy). But what are the relays involved between the classifications of geology and the classifications of race? How does slavery function as an inhuman “category mistake” (Spillers 2003, 20) of geology? Between mineral-as-property and person-as-property, after Spillers, “the question for me remains the concatenation itself—what in the nature of ‘property’ might have provoked a sufficient enough displacement and condensation along a sequence of analogical thinking that would bring it within the scope of ‘human’” (Spillers 2003, 20)?

Addressing the racialization of geology within the context of the new origin stories that are being fashioned in the search for the beginning of the Anthropocene epoch, I think with the historicity that is being structured into these events—what Dionne Brand (2017a) calls the “corpses of the humanist narrative” that constitute the sedimented “nonevent” of those moments. This subjective and subjugating geologic life happens in the fugitive or insurgent space-time of Anthropocenic geology, yet it is the very quotidian practices that constitute it and are constituting of subjects. This is to see the

Anthropocene as a psychopolitical staging of subjectivity as well as a historical rendering of materiality (Yusoff 2015). If this project seems like a counterhistory of geologic relations that is other to current articulation as a linear narrative of accumulation, then mine is certainly an attempt to open an investigation into that history and to the languages that carry the work of geology in the world (as resource, extraction, inhuman, chattel). The birth of a geologic subject in the Anthropocene made without an examination of this history is a deadly erasure, rebirth without responsibility.

The revisiting of origin stories in the Anthropocene also contains a broader question: what are the encroachments on subjective life that take place through geology and its description of materiality? Another way to put this would be to ask, how does the maintenance of structures of materiality (or geologic codes) facilitate and perpetuate antiblackness and its forms of subjugation, as well as ongoing settler colonialism? How is geology an operation of power, as well as a temporal explanation for life on the planet? And what are the intimate contours of its material possessions (as property and extraction)? The exercise of power is not simply explained in terms of how slavery engendered racialized subjects as objects but also within the language of geology itself, which allowed such traversals to be made in the first instance. The language of materiality and its division between life and nonlife, and its alignment with concepts of the human and inhuman, facilitated the divisions between subjects as humans and subjects priced as flesh (or inhuman matter).

While the human and inhuman are so often mapped as binaries onto organic and inorganic matter and its descriptions, as dialectics or defining modes, there is an *inframaterialism* that often slips out of view in the perceived autonomism of these states of matter that are rendered as either biology or geology. Put differently, geology is often assumed to be without a subject (thinglike and inert), whereas biology is secured in the recognition of the organism (bodylike and sentient). Thinking Blackness in terms of the relations of materiality, of coal black, black gold, black metal, and how these are configured in discourses of geology and its lexicons of matter uncovers the transactions between geology and inhumanism as a mode of both production (or extraction) and subjection (or a violent mode of geologic life). How do Blackness and the terminology of geology slip into each other as equivalent substances? How is such an alchemy of slavery and geology possible? How is geology as a discipline and extraction process cooked

together in the crucible of slavery and colonialism? How does this geology (as a colonial and neocolonial strategy) enact territorial extraction (through survey, classification, codification, and annexation)?

Following these lines of inquiry gives rise to questions about agency and consent, around sentience and inhuman matter, and how material agency with and without subjectivity is thought outside of the structures of cozy humanism and its languages of existence. As Édouard Glissant (2010, xi) makes clear, “I build my language with rocks.” Dionne Brand (1996, 76) similarly writes, “I want to go against the ground, grind it in my teeth, but most I want to plunge my hands in stone.” The history of Blackness by its very negation in the category of nonbeing within economies of Whiteness lives differently in the earth, where “blackness is defined here in terms of social relationality rather than identity” (Hartman 1997, 56)—a relation realized in a different material register as “an aesthetics of disruption and intrusion . . . aesthetics of rupture and connection” (Glissant 1997, 151). In this aesthetics of the earth, Glissant identifies the crux of the problem as the transformation of land into territory: “Territory is the basis for conquest. Territory requires filiation to be planted and legitimated. Territory is defined by its limits, and they must be expanded” (151). In an act of intrusion, I seek to undermine the *givenness* of geology as an innocent or natural description of the world, to see its modes of inscription and circulation as a doubling of the notion of property—property as a description of mineralogy and property as an acquisition (as resource, land, extractive quality of energy or mineral). This geologic lexicon is a practice that enacts colonialism through what Sylvia Wynter called “scientific humanism” that is mobilized as a praxis for dispossession.

The epistemological divisions of geology and biology and their respective analytics of geopolitics and biopolitics divide the world between the skein of biopolitical coercion and territorial arrangements of populations, leaving the interaction between the geopolitical and biopolitical worlds as a problem of how the politics of scale meshes into subjective life. This epistemic division sediments a geo-logic that was necessary for colonial theft, because it allowed slaves to turn into and displace gold and refused to acknowledge indigenous relations with “dead” matter. For example, the Gold Coast as a source of both gold and slaves was itself referred to as “the Mine” (Hartman 2007, 51). These relations found their neocolonial afterlives in the extraction industries of former colonies. (For example, the British platinum mine on the

Bushveld Igneous Complex authorized attacks by police and security services in 2012 on striking miners, leaving thirty-four miners dead.) Geology is a relation of power and continues to constitute racialized relations of power, in its incarnation in the Anthropocene and in its material manifestation in mining, petrochemical sites and corridors, and their toxic legacies—all over a world that resolutely cuts exposure along color lines.

While attention has been paid to the role of scientific epistemes in the modern formation of race through colonization and enslavement stretching across an epoch of imperial world building that is not yet at its end, the historic subject (as European-Human and its Others) is conceived of as a biologic, not a geologic, subject. As Elizabeth Povinelli (2016) comments, the dominant mode of subjectivity of late liberalism is of the biocentric subject. There is an obscurity or opacity accorded to geopolitical affects at the level of the subject formations that exceeds the territorial impositions of biopolitical orderings. By that, I mean that the geophysics of being has been neglected in accounts of colonial violence. The intimacy of this geophysics as an experiential and structural form of (geologic) life enacts sensibilities of matter, time, gravity, mud, and weather as inhabitations that are absent from the geospatial confinements of these geopolitics. Christina Sharpe (2016a, 134) says, “So we are here in the weather, here in the singularity. Here there is disaster and possibility. And while *‘we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to this overwhelming force, we are not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force’*” (quoting Brand, emphasis original). These counterhistories are found elsewhere in the narratives and scenes of subjection, in excess of the complicated matrixes of colonial life, in literature and music—not as expressions of those geopolitics but as a tactical theoretical response that remakes subjectivity through the senses as a concrete analytic. Wynter (n.d., 109) suggests that the axiomatic torque of sensibility is made in provisional ground, “where the mind feels and the senses become theoreticians.” This geophysics of being within the Empire of Geology finds its trace and place in critical black aesthetics.

## Monuments to Geologic Reason and Provisional Ground

Seeking to monumentalize Anthropocene history is an attempt to reclaim an “innocence” around this geohistory. The histories of the Anthropocene unfold a brutal experience for much of the world’s racialized poor and without due attention to the historicity of those events (and their eventfulness); the Anthropocene simply consolidates power via this innocence in the present to effect decisions that are made about the future and its modes of survival. The sleight of hand of the Janus-faced discipline of geology (as extractive economy and deep-time paleontology of life-forms) is to naturalize (and thus neutralize) the theft of extraction through its grammars of extraction. Recast as “development,” the colonial and settler-colonial dispossession of the relation to land and geography was never something chosen without coercion. So, monuments made to these moments of extraction only accrue the extension of value to those colonial forces. To be included in the “we” of the Anthropocene is to be silenced by a claim to universalism that fails to notice its subjugations, taking part in a planetary condition in *which no part* was accorded in terms of subjectivity. The supposed “we” further legitimates and justifies the racialized inequalities that are bound up in social geologies.

My aim in this book is to make a narrative that refuses this account of the earth and its subjects as units of economic extraction, while launching a conversation about how political geology might look otherwise. The attachment to writing with and against a social geology is not to “humanize” geology so much as it is to understand how the languages that already reside within it are mobilized as relations of power—and how a different economy of description might give rise to a more exacting understanding of geologic materiality that is less deadly (by refusing the routine brutalities of economies of extraction and the legacy of colonial asset-making practices through geology). Thinking of the Anthropocene as a set of material practices of duration and arrival that brought this world into being, alongside the fact that for a certain proportion of the world, the entire dismantling of this colonial apparatus is a desired state, launches a call for a different kind of world making. As the science fiction writer N. K. Jemisin and Hartman point out in the epigraphs at the beginning of this chapter, the end of this world has already happened for some subjects, and it is the prerequisite for the

possibility of imagining “living and breathing again” for others. If the Anthropocene is delivering a new geochemical earth through the excess of colonial practices, then it is not just the geophysical processes that need attention but the whole history of world making as a geophysics of being—a world making that was for the few and firmly committed to the enlightenment project of liberal individualism and its exclusions. The social life of geology, then, is not a biographical account of geology but a praxis, a world making in the present, in light of the inheritances of past geosocial formations. In the blocked horizon of the Anthropocene in which geology emerges as an end-game negotiation with the planet and late liberalism, geology can finally be recognized as a regime for producing subjects and regulating subjective lives—a place where the properties of belonging are negotiated.

Anthropocene monumentality is a way to unpack the language that geology carries and a way to push a conversation that admonishes the idea of the neutrality of geology as a language of the rocks and deep time, which is immune or innocent of its current deadly configurations. What often becomes “political” in geologic relations is infrastructure—mine, pipeline, coal field, water rights, land dispossession, namely, material political economy. And these infrastructures are embedded in important fights, which show up a network of power relations and subordinations (such as the Dakota Access Pipeline), but there is also a prior economy of power, a historical geography of the discipline and its functioning (as academic formation and applied material economy) that is preconfigured through a racialized geosocial matrix. If we abandon the absurd notion that geology is somehow immune from the violence and dispossession enacted through extraction of mineral resources, then geology in its fully geosocial registers comes to the fore as a force of transformation.[2]

What I am proposing is that geology is a racialized optic razed on the earth. While the connection between geology and life is being recognized at all manner of biological, chemical and geomorphic scales under the rubric of the Anthropocene, the intimate contours of geologic life as a force and power with subjective life remain decisively mute (Yusoff 2016, 2017b). Naming can also be a covering over. The Anthropocene is a retooling of geology, from a discipline of extractive and originary science to a philosophical material formation. If the Anthropocene is retooling geology, there is a need to retool the Anthropocene precisely because of how these territorial histories

are tethered to racializing matter. To move to substantiate the geomateriality of race is to attempt to locate a disposition and position in the Anthropocene that negates the invisible work of social reproduction in material relations, which is the antiblack directionality of extraction and ongoing settler colonialism.

It might be easier to contend that race is not a “problem” of geology but a problem of humanism and *its* exclusions; blame the master, not the tools. But geology is more than a tool; it is a technology of matter, its formulation and the desire that shapes its incarnation. Initiating the Atlantic slave trade in the protocapitalist moment of 1441, the first slaves sold in Lisbon, Portugal, were conceived of as slaves within the “problem” of mining in Brazil: the perceived difficulties of indigenous labor (given that 90 percent of the population was wiped out due to violence and disease) and the properties that were imagined to reside in black flesh on the Gold Coast. This act establishes the first color line of White Geology. The solution of race becomes enfolded in geology as a material technology of extraction, and the semiotics of race become inscribed in geological modes of classification *as* a matter relation. Often the analysis for slavery begins with the question of labor, which makes sense, up until a point, but there is a desire that launches that point into existence, that prompts the question, of labor for what? At this point, we arrive at the explanation of the plantations, the sugar in the bowl, and the cotton that needed picking, but before these precapitalist economies there was the gold, silver, and copper mining that mobilized the *hunger* for the slavery, and later, the sugar, that fueled the English working classes of the Industrial Revolution in their extraction of coal (see Mintz 1985). As Césaire ([1956] 1969, 61) writes, “we are walking compost hideously promising tender cane and silky cotton.” In the nonconsensual collaboration with inhuman materiality as both a property of energy and in concert with other energy sources (sugar, coal, mineral), slavery weaponized the redistribution of energy around the globe through the flesh of black bodies.

As the largest forced migration of people in the world, the profits accrued from the enslaved during the transatlantic slave trade laid the economic foundation for Western Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas. As text in the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC, in Washington, D.C.) bids us remember about the intimacies of these material relations, “the human cost was the immense physical and psychological toll on the enslaved. Their lives were embedded in every coin that changed



hands, each spoonful of sugar stirred into a cup of tea, each puff of a pipe, and every bite of rice.” That the massive increase in sugar consumption in 1850 maps directly onto the massive increase in coal use is perhaps not surprising, as sugar was the conversion of inhumane slave energy into fuel, then back into human energy, plus inhuman energy, to produce industrialization. Coal was the inhuman corollary of those dehumanized black bodies. Coal black. Yet, histories of the Anthropocene ubiquitously begin with meditations on the great white men of industry and innovation to reinforce imperial genealogies. For example, “global warming is the unintended by-product par excellence. A cotton manufacturer of early nineteenth-century Lancashire who decided to forgo his old waterwheel and invest in a steam engine, erect a chimney and order coal from a nearby pit did not, in all likelihood, entertain the possibility that this act could have any kind of relationship to the extent of Arctic sea ice, the salinity of Nile Delta soil, the altitude of the Maldives, the frequency of droughts on the Horn of Africa” (Malm 2015, 1). But why did the manufacturer not pause, if not to consider global warming, then to consider the other “unintended by-products” of cotton manufacturing? Why did the author not even take the presence of cotton in the second line of his introduction to the book to be alerted to the clamor and rattling of chains? In the cast of white men who shaped the world, why did cotton not even “signal” another geography to this narrative of white bibliography? Why did he locate his project in the imperial–colonial narrative tropes of character, place, and agency? Isn’t this overwriting of the nonbeing or excess of the inhuman and inhumanity the very issue that is at stake in the “unintended by-product”? As James Baldwin and Margaret Mead (1971, 177) suggest, “what we call history is perhaps a way of avoiding responsibility for what has happened, is happening, in time.”

The movement of energy between enslaved bodies in plantations, plants, long-dead fossilized plants, and industrialized labor is a geochemical equation of extraction in the conversion of surplus. But this racialized equation of energy is located in a larger field of production and semiotics of extraction. Slavery is not a by-product of this process; rather, slavery is driven by an indifferent extractive geo-logic that is motivated by the desire for inhuman properties. Indigenous genocide and settler colonialism are also part of these extractive geo-logics. In this sense, slavery can be seen not as a confusion of subject–object in relation to inhuman categorization but as a total submission to the principle of extraction that was exacted through

inhuman differentiation—“transformed from the *human subject* of his own culture into the *inhuman object* of the European culture” (Wynter, n.d., 10, emphasis original). The energy regimes that structure material extraction were forced into black material and psychic life—of being energy for others, of putting sugar in the bowl, and in the muscles of white labor; as an “object” of geochemical energy and the rationalization of the black body; as energetic pleasure in all its myriad forms that render the “open and absolute vulnerability” (Sexton 2010, 44) of black and brown bodies to white extraction regimes. This intervention is the beginning of asking about the process by which such exchanges become possible.

## Note on Erasure

The tense of this work and the impetus for its writing came out of a repeated positioning within the white spaces of Anthropocene academic events and as a response to the lack of recognition of race within those places. The “extreme discretion of the scholarly community” (Hartman 2002, 771) in its decision not to engage with race and settler colonialism most clearly refuted the critical claims being made about the Anthropocene. More than the ubiquitous social typology of dominant white men in the academy, it was the question of the very Whiteness of geology itself as a material practice that snagged for me. The development of an analytic of White Geology is important for how the Anthropocene is conceived, in terms of its origin stories and an environmental relation to come (beyond liberal individuation). The persistent discomfort with comfortable exclusions meant that this work started as a redress, writing toward a darker Anthropocene—the underbelly of White Geology—but this seemed to leave the institutional structures of the “event” of geology (and the language that it carried) firmly intact. Understanding Blackness not as metaphor but as materiality (that has a symbolic, territorial, and psychic life), the second part of the book expands and undercuts the “events” of settler colonialism and anti-Blackness that are being monumentalized in *Golden Spikes*. Hartman reminds the reader at the onset of her seminal book *Scenes of Subjection* of the all-too-familiar and reproducible “spectacular character of black suffering” (3), and it is my intention here, at the caution of many black studies scholars, not to reproduce the genre of black (social) death through geologic means. I do want to acknowledge, however, how the praxis of geology was used as an instrument of deformation in the possibilities of collective subjective and ecological life for black and brown communities.

It would be straightforward, perhaps, to “fill out” the Anthropocene through the dark context of its origin stories, but that would not repudiate the structures of thought and material arrangements that brought the Anthropocene into being in the first place. Work in black and indigenous studies[3] is critical in this context precisely because it articulates intimate confinements and ongoing containments of humanist thought, while simultaneously calling for a reconfiguring of possibilities of subjective experience. Furthermore, the exclusion of black and brown subjects from the

humanist master-subject and its ties to geographical dispossession (in genocide, natal alienation, and ongoing environmental racism) has forged a rearrangement of the structures and sounds of materiality in black and indigenous experience. If the Anthropocene is viewed as a resurrection of the impulse to reestablish humanism in all its exclusionary terms of universality, then any critical theory that does not work with and alongside black and indigenous studies (rather than in an extractive or supplementary mode) will fail to deliver any epochal shift at all. It would be in Césaire's words in the epigraph to the book, to think the "thought of the other" without the "other of thought."

The hope for this work is to orient toward a less coercive geology through the critique and expansion of its grammars. The problem of race has been posed precisely as the problem of the human (that is, the figure of humanism). But if we were to start with the prefiguration of the human, in its inception within the technologies of the inhuman, a different model of extraction would emerge. To put it another way, if the human is but one of the problems of redress in colonialism, which, regardless of attempts at negotiation, will remain an exclusive subjectivity in terms of both its designation of rights (Wynter 2015; Bogue 2006) and the possibility of empathy or reciprocity (Hartman 2007; Wilderston 2008), then starting with the category of the inhuman liberates the possibility of a redescription of relation that can "take place and have a place" (McKittrick 2011). In a corollary to geology's inhuman/inhumane modes of description, black poetics is epoch making in its redirection of the racial logics of extraction through new energetic modes and understandings of relation, desedimenting the forms of inhuman historicity that are established through colonialism. Hartman comments that these practices and poetics forged in the terror of slavery were necessarily subterranean: "For this opacity, the subterranean and veiled character of slave song must be considered in relation to the dominant imposition of transparency and the degrading hypervisibility of the enslaved, and therefore, by the same token, such concealment should be considered a form of resistance" (Hartman 2007, 36). In the forced alliances with the inhuman, a different mode of subjective relation is forged, where Blackness is a name for nonnormative subjectivity (Moten 2003, 2016) or, in Césaire's ([1972] 2000, 55) words, a "communistic materialism."

## Origin Stories for a New Epoch

The first part of this book, “Golden Spikes and Dubious Origins,” concentrates on the origin stories of the Anthropocene, the so-called Golden Spikes of geology, where a ubiquitous planetary mark in the strata consecrates the epochal shift. In this political stratigraphy, I trace the historiography of Colonial Man to Anthropocene Man to frame the so-called Geology of Mankind as a privileged subjective space. Then, by looking at the originary stories of the Anthropocene—1610 Columbian “exchange”; 1800s industrialization; 1950s Great Acceleration—I argue how coloniality and anti-Blackness are materially inscribed into the Anthropocene. Material stories are origin stories—stories that reproduce not just arrangements of matter but subjects through divisions of matter. This formation of geologic origination is important to consider in the construction of the Anthropocene in both narrative and material domains precisely because of the power of stories to designate scenes of agency and accountability. Colonial strategies of occupation have long concentrated on genealogy to identify (and thus coerce) existing political authority and to identify an anthropology of “Otherness” that marks the colonized through a divisive cut of difference (which in turn justified theft of territory and persons).[4] And, beyond this recognition of the power of origin stories and their hold on the present, there is a need to register the aesthetic–symbolic qualities of oppression as a mode of categorization that is already implicated in the organization of subjective lives through geology.

The subsequent chapter, “The Inhumanities,” locates the historic work of geology in the racialization of matter through slavery and histories of geologic surveying in the establishing settler colonialism. Starting with Charles Lyell’s speculations on geology and slavery in his 1845 *Travels in North America*, I discuss these entwined scenes to show how the organization and categorization of matter enact racialization. This enactment is productive of both *a racial logics* that extends through and beyond mineralogy and a *deterritorialization* that accompanies extraction. Geology provides the geologies to elide those attachments through its classification system of value and resource, while slavery leaves subjects marooned and captured in the indices of the inhuman. This chapter addresses how the social formation of geology through modes of classification, ordering, and representation is a

matter of grid of colonialism or a taxonomy of race. I suggest that there is a tight material rapport between the designation and organization of the inhuman as mineralogy/geology and the inhumane that is established via an attachment to liberal humanism (and its reincarnation in Anthropocene discourses).

The next chapter, “Insurgent Geology: A Billion Black Anthropocenes Now,” opens up questions about the flesh of the Anthropocene that were raised in the previous chapters through its origin stories and (in)humanist frames. It seeks to take apart the construction of the “event” of geology by staging an engagement with slavery and subjugation, and rather than overwriting nonbeing (again), I follow Caribbean and diaspora writers into the wake, weather, and alluvial mud of colonial dissipation to explore the silenced archives of geologic acts. Specifically, this chapter engages with Sylvia Wynter’s unpublished manuscript “Black Metamorphosis,” in which she attends to the “metamorphosis by which the multi-tribal African became the native of that area of experience that we term the New World” or the process of *transplantation* (as she terms it) (Wynter, n.d., 2). Finally, I follow recent critical moves in black aesthetics to question how starting with the “End of the World” might release a more exacting critique of this geologic epoch and its material registers of being, liberated from liberal subjectivity into an alternate geophysics of being by a reworking of gravity.

In moving toward the idea of a billion Black Anthropocenes, I am not advocating that indigenous and colonized peoples’ knowledge practices be mobilized as an experimental outside or supplement to Western scientific knowledge practices. Rather, I want to suggest that race, following Silva (2007), might be considered as foundational to the production of Global-World-Space and geologic regimes of governance that become manifest in the practices of White Geology (or the Anthropocene). Bearing in mind Toni Morrison’s (1992, x) caution against the “metaphoric shortcuts” in relation to Blackness, in which she urges a recognition of “language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive ‘othering’ of people and language,” addressing origin stories is not just about making an alternative or alt-anthro-scene. Rather, it is to be attentive to what histories of the earth provide a break in analysis and narratives of material relations and languages of description that have colonized it, and to begin to make histories that launch a praxis for an insurgent geology into being—an insurgent geology that is, to paraphrase

Brand, flooded with the world. This is where materiality is used to establish the presentness of Blackness as an obligation to the present, to counter its erasure through a poetry that cuts into coloniality as counteraesthetic (Brand 2017b). To this end, I write not toward White Geology but toward the “nonevent” of a billion Black Anthropocenes.

*I must begin.*

*Begin what?*

*The only thing in the world that's worth beginning:*

*The End of the World, no less (Césaire [1956] 1969, 39)*