Futures of BLACK Radicalism

Edited by
Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin

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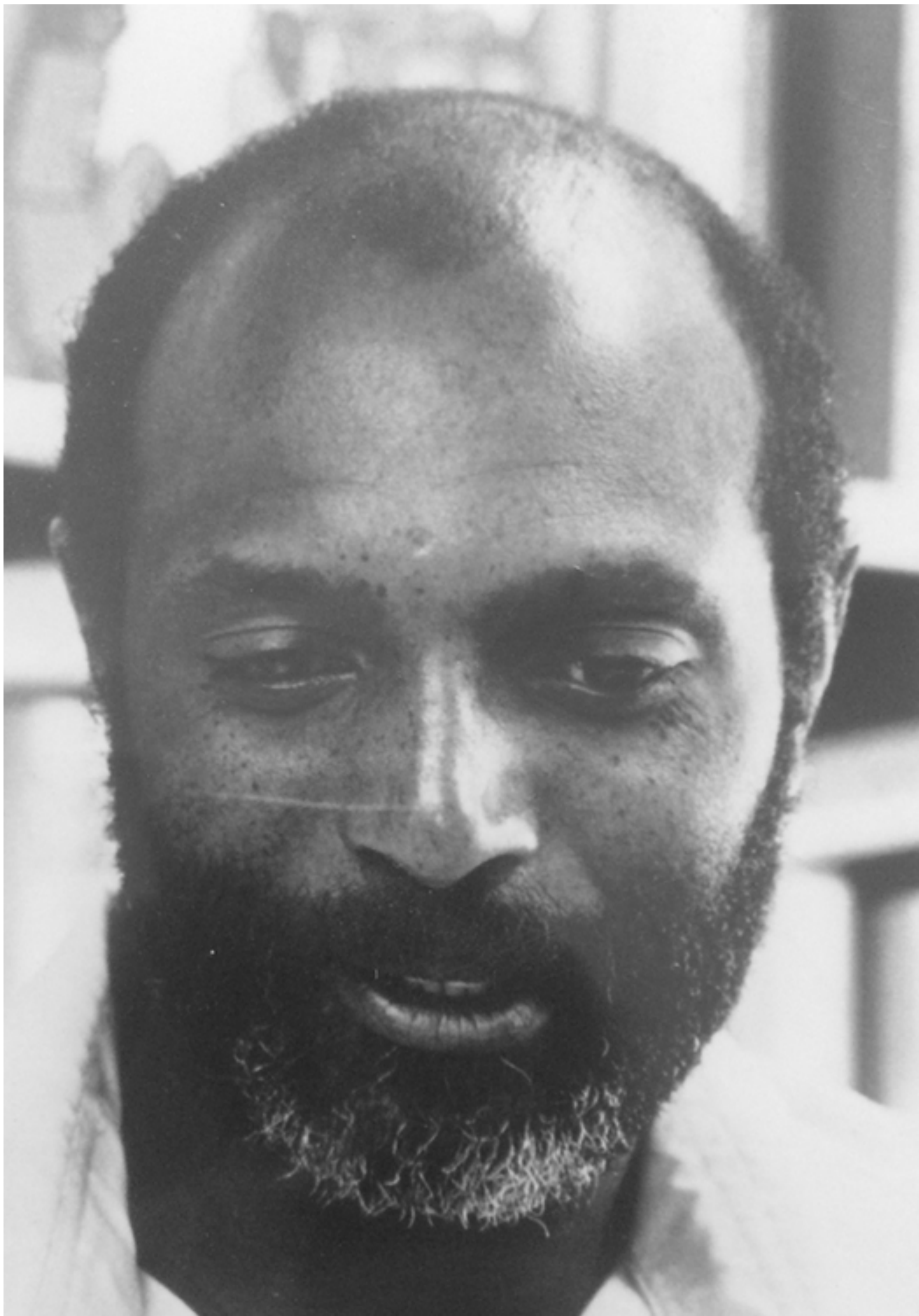

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Preface

Cedric J. Robinson and Elizabeth P. Robinson

When Cedric committed to preparing this preface, he did so on the condition that we do it together, perhaps already aware that his health was failing, but at a rate neither of us anticipated. Alas, his death has left the task in my hands and though we had talked about some possibilities, we wrote not a word together. I would never presume to speak for him despite our fifty years together. Our styles have always been too different, mine more journalistic, sometimes more polemical. His analytic, elegant, meticulously documented. And always going to places I could never anticipate. So I have sat for months trying to figure out how to procede and have finally been delivered thanks to the transcription of a series lectures he gave at UC Irvine in 2012. Thank you, Tiffany Willoughby Herard for organizing the seminar, Kyung Kim for videoing it, and Mohsin Mirza, Yoel Haile, and Marisela Marquez for providing me with the transcription. Much of what you read is literally in Cedric's voice with only minor corrections from me. His contributions, in italics, were unwritten, so they lack his usual copious footnotes and careful construction. And it is impossible to convey the humor, emphasis, et cetera, of the seminar. But I hope that it gives you a sense of Cedric as teacher.

Elizabeth P. Robinson

Joshua Fit De Battle …

This story in some places might exaggerate possible actual events, but if the truth is here, it can be found. The theme is segregation.

Joshua Cole, a negro of sixty or more years, was sitting on the old broken steps of his shack on his side of town, thinking of the sun and how hot it was, when his musing was interrupted by someone calling his name, "Joshua, Josh' Cole," the excited voice cried, "Josh' yo' Freddy is dead!"

Suddenly realizing what was being said, Joshua rose quickly then fell back onto the wall of the building, more weight on his shoulders than even his age could account for.

The facts were made known to him, one by one. One of his neighbors, Zeke, had found the body of ten-year-old Freddy near the old tracks in the bushes. His neck was broken, not from a rope but a mighty blow …

… Going inside his shack, Joshua confronted Zeke who rapidly told Joshua in his eighty-year-plus-voice what he had seen. Zeke had done more than find the body, he had been sleeping in the nearby brush when Tom Caspine had chased Freddy after the boy had called Tom "white trash." Caspine had turned red with rage and had struck the boy with a vicious sweep of his fist. Caspine had left the boy lying in a peculiar position, not noticing the sightless eyes of the peculiarly positioned head …

… His last words before his blood flowed like wine, were "Lord, ain't you nevah goin' to give the world to the meek?"

Cedric Robinson
Jan. 8, 1957, English V

The last line in the essay quoted above was penned in the pall of the lynching of Emmett Till, as well as the promise of the mid-twentieth-century Civil Rights movement. The story was about a brutal murder of a Black child and the denial of justice in the aftermath. In looking for the antecedents of Black radicalism, we should consider our individual moments of awakening. Was this one? Or maybe listening to an old man's stories of courage and valor as his grandson helped him mop floors in government buildings. We might consider the little girl in Detroit who found something like the life of Sojourner Truth to read every day over breakfast. Maybe a young Arab woman's discovery that the movie *Exodus* told a particular and peculiar history of Palestine and that race and racism

were entirely mutable. Or maybe being scolded for addressing a Black man as "Sir." Surely the affronts that are experienced because we've had the audacity to be somewhere we don't belong, the racial taunts and aggressions experienced repeatedly must be factored in to the formation of our racial identities. But the critical moment comes when we realize the political, historical, and social connectedness of those experiences and move from the personal, however important it might be, to the necessity of engagement, to the Black radical tradition. Also, to remember that this is not only about pain, but also about shared knowledge, joy, and humor that are integral to those experiences.

In compiling this collection of essays, the editors and authors invite or insist that we project a tradition, Black Radicalism, into the future. It is certainly our intention to celebrate that and suggest some ways in which we can find inspiration in our histories for our present moment. In the latter, we are confronted daily with police lethality and other abuse, mass incarceration, and a politics of greed. It is difficult to keep feelings of depression and defeat at bay, but our histories, perceived in all their dynamism, their resistance and resilience, can give us heart and direction. Our pasts are not dead; why else are there repeated attempts to bury them, to erase or forget them? Why does generation after generation have to rediscover W. E. B. Du Bois, Pauline Hopkins, Oliver Cox, and so many others? How is it that the indigenous people at Standing Rock, North Dakota, are telling us about massacres we've never heard of? Why don't we know about Black and white workers who made common cause for mutual benefit? Beyond US borders, why is it not common parlance that peoples' movements from Vietnam, Algeria, Iran, Lebanon, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Chile, Guatemala, to name but a few, were undermined or simply destroyed by Western capitalist greed and militarism? Perhaps it is simply too painful to remember these assaults; but burying them also buries the rich histories of resistance. While slavery and emancipation are part of our official histories, maroons and marronage, Palmares, quilombos, and the Great Dismal Swamp are unknown or little known when they should be the bedrock of contemporary struggles.

I had argued in Black Marxism *that Black Radicalism critically emerges from African culture, languages, and beliefs, and enslavement. What*

emerged from that conjunction were powerful impulses to escape enslavement.

At some point when I was writing Black Marxism, *I came across the notion of the "runaway." Most historians talk about runaways, write about runaways. But I became convinced that that language contained and persisted in the notion that slave agency was childlike. Children run away, but what these people were doing was achieving fugitive status. So I began to use the term "fugitive" instead of the term "runaway." But you have to use the term runaway sometimes because, when you're looking at archival material, it is the term that is in fact being employed. The first impulse of these Africans was to remove themselves from the slave system. Rather than going after slavery, they wanted to recreate their African homelands. Rather than confront the system as the system, they removed themselves from it. They created maroon communities which in some instances became so massive and so powerful that, as in Palmares in seventeenth-century Brazil, they became republics themselves. Palmares persisted for ninety years or so. And there were similar kinds of adventures (you might call them) in the West Indies, in Jamaica, and elsewhere. In the North American colonial situation, one area that became famous for marronage was the Great Dismal Swamp. And indeed, in 1857 or so, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote her second anti-slavery novel,* Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp. *Meaning, in effect, that she understood, as many did, that there in the swamp were to be found fugitives from not only slavery, but Native American fugitives, and poor white fugitives. And Stowe was suggesting in* Dred *that her earlier proposal for a muscular Christianity had to be replaced. And so she invented a son for Nat Turner in her novel. In that sense, she was of course engaging in the Black Radical Tradition as well.*

To return to this question of sovereignty, Palmares, in Brazil, had to be destroyed, and several armies were sent to destroy it in the seventeenth century. In a similar sense, Haiti at the beginning of the nineteenth century had a similar trajectory. Haiti was not only an instance of an extraordinary achievement—slaves having created a republic—but it was a constant threat to the slave-owning planter class in North America. What becomes of the notion of Haiti, what becomes of the notion of Black sovereignty in the nineteenth century? One of the maneuvers to deal with Haiti was to extract from the Black population in North America its freed Black population on the presumption that the free Black population could only contaminate the

slave population. Black radicalism led to a particular maneuver which created Liberia. Liberia was supposed to function to siphon off the free Black population, and that maneuver was a fairly successful one in many ways. But the plague of Black sovereignty continued to be a part of American consciousness and that plague resurfaced at the end of the nineteenth century, and the beginning of the twentieth century. At the end of the nineteenth century the plague was in part carried by the Black soldiers who entered the Philippines. We have some sense of how they saw this war from 1899 on because they wrote letters which were published in Black newspapers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Willard Gatewood allowed those letters to resurface in his study called "Smoked Yankees." One of the stories that was revealed there was the defection of Black troops from the American military to the Philippine independent national soldiers. One particular Black trooper, David Fagan, became so well known that the US military put out a reward not for his capture but for his being killed and beheaded. He became a commandante in the Philippine army and was killed in two or three years' time. But again, his was a kind of expression of Black radicalism, as well as a notion of Black sovereignty.

These narratives are found in popular media as well as in the hallowed halls of universities. And those media constructions span far more than 100 years and remain a contemporary practice, not just a historical one. Consider the 2012 film, *Lincoln:* how was it possible to make a film about the post–Civil War United States with barely a presence of Black people as *agents* in the events at hand? Perhaps, given some particularly mean moments in US politics, the filmmaker thought we needed an "uplift" film with a great man at the helm. But like most "great men" versions of history, it is at best a partial truth, at worst, a persistent lie. Of course, these predilections are rife and can be found in old as well as new forms. Just as Spielberg told a convenient story, so too did Eugene O'Neill, and each would argue a sensitivity to, even an affinity for, Black people. *Now let me offer you a reading of some of the language that O'Neill thought was useful and necessary in constructing this Black figure* [Emperor Jones]. *And this is the speech in the original play which eventually becomes the architecture around which Dubose Hayward produces the first two-thirds of the film. He is talking to his Cockney collaborator, a merchant who has been cheating*

the islanders for years and selling them goods. In Emperor Jones's final moments of rule, he threatens the Cockney in this way.

> *Maybe I goes to jail for getting in an argument with razors over a crap game. Maybe I gets 20 years when that colored man dies, maybe I gets in another argument with the prison guard who oversee us when we are working the road, maybe he hits me with a whip and I splits his head with a shovel and runs away 'n files the chain and gets away safe. Maybe I does all that and maybe I don't. It's a story I tells you so you know I used to be the kind a man that if you ever repeat one word of it, I end your stealing on this earth mighty damn quick.*

I can't read it the way Charles Gilpin or Paul Robeson read it, because it's difficult. It's that invented Black speech that we find both in film and on stage during the 1920s and 1930s.

Now Charles Gilpin has maintained that he created the Emperor Jones, that Eugene O'Neill had merely written it. Part of that claim to authority by Charles Gilpin was that, after performing it several hundred times over the years, Gilpin had begun to change the play. He changed it in this way, one of the ways in which we know that he changed it. In a one-act play, there are fifty or sixty occasions in which the Emperor Jones uses the word "nigger." Gilpin started changing that language, and O'Neill was very upset with him and eventually maintained that he was going to beat Gilpin up if he continued to change his play. Eventually, O'Neill would replace Gilpin with Paul Robeson. Robeson, of course, would perform it not only on stage but also when it became a film. The film went back to the original play, so all those "niggers" reappear in the film the way O'Neill had written them originally in the one-act play. Alright, so of Gilpin's performance as Emperor Jones, we have no historical archive. Of Gilpin's other work, we know he made one silent film in about 1927 or so. But what we are told is that Gilpin's performance as Emperor Jones was awesome because of the nature of his voice, the power of his voice, but we'll have to take his contemporaries' word for it.

To be sure, Gilpin's subversion of O'Neill's written words seems to have represented a refusal to accede to the lie that Black people were brutes, incapable of mastering the English language.

It is easy for us to presume that Blacks have always existed in this country since the occasion of the African Slave Trade. But understand the contest that was taking place in the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. That is, the kind of savages—how would you put it? —

well, let me put it simply in the terms we addressed earlier. The "Negro" was in place; that is, his docility, ignorance, bestiality, child-like inferiority, that was in place. But a strata was emerging in conflict with that, to contest it. Some of the strata contested it by in effect competing with the standard for becoming white, Anglo-Saxons. Others turned in the direction of W. E. B. Du Bois, who wrote The Negro *in 1915. Understand when Du Bois writes* The Negro *in 1915, there is no history of Black people published!* [Cedric pounds his fist into his hand as he makes this point.] *This is the first, that is, Du Bois is a part of the invention or reinvention of Blackness, which a small part of his class has undertaken*.

They will write a history of Blackness in the place of a vacuum of such material, and they're saying that in effect all of these people who have in some sense an immediate origin in Africa are ***one*** *people. This is an entirely new idea, because what they are adding to it, codifying with it, is in effect a sense of a historical people. Not simply of origins, but a historical people. A people who achieved civilization, who have achieved cultures, who have left a mark on the world. Gathering all that material together, Du Bois's excerise in 1915,* The Negro, *is a massive propaganda ploy: we are a people, it doesn't matter whether we're in Brazil, on the African Continent, in Mexico, doesn't matter where we are, we are the same people, and these are the things we can accredit to ourselves. Consequently, we have had a past, we can have a future … Black Sovereignty!*

Of course, Du Bois was not alone or the first and hardly the last who would reject the degradation of Black people. Others too would reimagine, resurrect narratives which were/are repeatedly buried. We might not find all of them compelling, some even odious, but they were all rejections of a fundamental, willful error in the imagined Black people that demanded correction. Many of the proponents were a part of the elite, but not all. Many were Black, but not all.

[Pauline] Hopkins was not a member of that strata. Hopkins comes out of the arti-sanal class in Massachusetts. She was apparently a genius: eighteen years old, she writes a musical which is preformed in San Francisco, as well as in other places, about the Underground Railroad. She is eighteen years of age—1879! By 1899, twenty years later, she is such a powerful alternative locus that Booker T. Washington proceeds to try and

deliberately destroy her, and he succeeds. How many have heard of Pauline Hopkins? [Cedric scans the room for raised hands. Few appear.]

He vanquished her. She constructed a publishing cooperative in Boston, published her own magazine, The Colored American. *She edited, wrote biographies for it, wrote studies for it, wrote four novels, if not five, and in each of her novels she proceeded to interrogate a way out. Assimilation?* Hagar's Daughter *proves that that is unacceptable, it is a way towards collective tragedy. She pursues Pan Africanism in another of her novels,* Contending Forces, *and earlier she pursues in effect some resolution to the exploitation of black women. So this is an extraordinary individual, pushed to the side, pushed to the margins, pushed into obscurity, never to resurface until almost sixty or seventy years after her death in 1930. But she was part of that legion of people that were moving toward a recovery of a kind of Blackness which had nobility and had a past. One of the weaknesses of Black radicalism in most of its forms is that it lacks the promise of a certain future. Unlike Marxism [where] victory is inevitable eventually, in Black radicalism it is not. Only when that radicalism is costumed or achieves an envelope in Black Christianity is there a certainty to it. Otherwise it is about a kind of resistance that does not promise triumph or victory at the end, only liberation. No nice package at the end, only that you would be free. It comes, as I said at the beginning, out of the insult to African identities that slavery represents. This was unacceptable.* ***This was unacceptable***.

And I guess the most poetic representation of that I've ever seen is when Eula tells her story in Daughters of the Dust *of why Ibo Landing has its name. Do you remember the story in* Daughters of the Dust? *The Ibo were brought here in chains, and in chains they were marched from the big boats and conveyed in smaller boats to the shore. They looked at this land and they saw what their future was, and they turned around … and walked back into the ocean.*

Only the promise of liberation, only the promise of liberation!

If we are to move the Black Radical Tradition forward, it is imperative that we understand that it is not utopian. Rather it is about questing for freedom. It is about the necessity of recognizing the importance of struggle regardless of outcomes. Nor does it begin and end intellectually. We must look beyond

the straightjackets of race to understand common histories in order to make common cause.

Some of you are interested in why I pursued the Irish in Black Marxism *as well as in the latest work,* Forgeries of Memory and Meaning. *In part, I'm trying to give a great deal of our audience a purchase point. There's no possibility of really telling a Black story without telling other peoples' stories. I can tell it in the nationalist trope. And the nationalist trope, in effect, will be guilty of repeating the artificialities that I'm trying to oppose, those kinds of boundaries. The Irish and the Irish Americans are, to a certain degree, opportunistic subjects. Opportunistic in the sense that a lot of their history is coincident with Blackness ... Coincident with Blackness. But also because I want you to understand that the Irish were negatively racialized, even before the Africans, in the European imagination. We were simply a lob to occupy a category already established. And given the irony that is history, it became the impression that the category had always been ours, always been ours, exclusively. That simply isn't how human affairs have been conducted*.

So the Irish and their history are our teachers as well as our compatriots. Likewise, we must look beyond the writers to our colleagues such as Otis F. Madison, Mary Agnes Lewis, and Travis Tatum (to name too few) who have steeped thousands of students in the Black Radical Tradition without writing about it and sent them out into the world to carry on. We must look to the activists, actors, and athletes who insist on using their bully pulpits to call attention to realities that corporate media chronically neglect. And we must look to our families, our children, for their particular wisdom. Like the eleven-year-old who tearfully and angrily shouts at her mother, who has insisted to her daughter that she read a text one more time if she didn't understand it, 'But, Mom, it doesn't make sense because it says that after slavery, the slaves couldn't take care of themselves. But they'd been the ones taking care of everything!" Ah hah! We must know that the truth will win out and most likely be buried yet again.

Only the promise of liberation, only the promise of liberation!

Chapter 4

Racial Capitalocene

Françoise Vergès

In the debates on the "Anthropocene," global warming, and climate change, voices of the South and of minorities—the prime victims of these phenomena's consequences—have developed an analysis that brings together race, capitalism, imperialism, and gender. This analysis rests on past struggles, such as the organization of farmworkers led by Cesar Chavez in California in the early 1960s for workplace rights, including protection from toxic pesticides, and of African American students in 1967 to oppose a city dump and in 1979 to oppose a landfill in Houston. Environmental racism became a site of struggle. The publication in 1987 of *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*, a report by the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ, was a turning point.[1] It showed that race was the single most important factor in determining where toxic waste facilities were sited in the United States and that the siting of these facilities in communities of color was the intentional result of local, state, and federal land-use policies. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration's practice of cutting the budgets of federal environmental agencies had aggravated racist decisions. The report demonstrated that "three out of every five Black and Hispanic Americans lived in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites."[2] Twenty years later, the United Church of Christ published another report confirming that "people of color make up the majority of those living in host neighborhoods within 3 km of the nation's hazardous waste facilities. Racial and ethnic disparities are prevalent throughout the country."[3]

Between the two reports a global movement for environmental justice had emerged. In October 1991, the Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit drafted and adopted the

"Principles of Environmental Justice," which became a defining document for the growing grassroots movement for environmental justice. The preamble read:

> WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples.[4]

The authors of the 2007 report warned that "for many industries, it is a 'race to the bottom,' where land, labor and lives are cheap."[5] Similar studies in India, South Asia, South America, Africa, and Europe demonstrated a global pattern of environmental racism and the ways in which states and multinationals have been avoiding environmental justice.

In this chapter, I try to answer the following question: Though minorities and peoples of the South have shown that they are the victims of racialized environmental politics—toxic waste, polluted water and rivers, pesticides, polluted food—have studies on the emergence of the "Anthropocene" addressed the role of race in its making? In other words, is the Anthropocene racial? Scholars have studied race as a central element of destructive environmental policies, but what connection can be made between the Western conception of nature as "cheap" and the global organization of a "cheap," racialized, disposable workforce, given the conception of nature as constant capital and the fact that "the organizers of the capitalist world system appropriated Black labor power as *constant* capital"[6]? What methodology is needed to write a history of the environment that includes slavery, colonialism, imperialism and racial capitalism, from the standpoint of those who were made into "cheap" objects of commerce, their bodies as objects renewable through wars, capture, and enslavement, fabricated as disposable people, whose lives do not matter?

What does this have to do with Cedric Robinson? In *Black Marxism*, Robinson writes that "for the realization of theory we require new history." He adds, "Black radical theory was not made by choice but dictated by

historical inheritance.”[7] In the spirit of Robinson’s advice, I will try in this chapter to suggest ways of writing a history of environment that takes into account the history of racial capitalism. My interest in the history of racialized environmental politics is partly biographical: I come from Réunion Island in the Indian Ocean, which became a French colony in the seventeenth century and is today a French department. Growing up in a communist, anticolonial, and feminist family, I learned early that the environment had been shaped by slavery and colonialism—a reading of space that gave meaning to where cities were built, where poor people lived, and how the large sugarcane fields, rivers, mountains, volcano, and beaches had been inscribed in the colonial and postcolonial economy. I studied the combined work of scientists (first botanists, then biologists, oceanographers, and volcanologists), engineers, soldiers, and business executives (whether slave traders, slave owners, bankers, or multinational CEOs), which fabricated “nature” as excess that needed to be tamed and disciplined and, through the tourism industry, enjoyed. I observed how the Cold War and studied the nature of the “green revolution” continued to transform nature in the Indian Ocean and the alliance between the military, the engineering company, the multinational, and the scientist. More recently, understanding what is at stake in the negotiations about “climate change” means considering the place of these stakeholders in the context of a global counterrevolution—the erosion of rights, the politics of nonraciality beneath which, as David Theo Goldberg has argued, lurk more sinister shadows of the racial everyday and persistent institutional and structural racisms—and racial capitalism. Global warming and its consequences for the peoples of the South is a political question and must be understood outside of the limits of “climate change” and in the context of the inequalities produced by racial capital.

ANTHROPOCENE OR RACIAL CAPITALOCENE?

The term “Anthropocene” to describe the “human dominance of biological, chemical and geological processes on Earth” was first introduced in 2000 in an article jointly written by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer. They dated its emergence to the latter part of the eighteenth century, admitting that

> alternative proposals can be made (some may even want to include the entire Holocene). However, we choose this date because, during the past two centuries, the global effects of human activities have become clearly noticeable. This is the period when data retrieved from glacial ice

> cores show the beginning of a growth in the atmospheric concentrations of several ‘‘greenhouse gases,’’ in particular CO_2 and CH_4. Such a starting date also coincides with James Watt’s invention of the steam engine in 1784.[8]

When and why the Anthropocene had occurred, its dangers, and what could stop them were widely debated in scientific journals and conferences. The narrative centered on the threat to human beings as an undifferentiated whole and was summarized thus: humanity would not survive if it did not slow down the emission of CO_2. Films and advertisements began to highlight the dangers of climate change, accentuating the loss of animal species and the idea of Earth as a common good. These media did not, however, take into account the asymmetry of power and instead marginalized what had been demonstrated in the 1980s: the role of racialized policies of public health and toxic waste disposal, weapons and pollution, land grabs and deforestation, the importance of the Cold War with its alliance between the chemical industry and the military, laws of commerce and monopolies. It was remarkable that these studies did not seek to locate points of intersection with emerging studies on imperialism and environment.[9] When Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote “The Climate of History: Four Theses” in 2009, the hope was that a dialogue was finally starting between scientists and postcolonial thinkers.[10] By focusing on the immediacy of climate change as a crisis, Chakrabarty framed the Anthropocene as a current transformation. This presentism ignored a deeper history and created the illusion of an organic and undifferentiated universal humanity. In his 2012 essay “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” Chakrabarty referred again to the abstract figure of “the human in the age of the Anthropocene,” but, moving away from his 2009 conclusion somewhat, stated: “There is no corresponding ‘humanity’ that in its oneness can act as a political agent. A place thus remains for struggles around questions on intrahuman justice regarding the uneven impacts of climate change.”[11] In answering his critics especially about “the rich always having lifeboats and therefore being able to buy their way out of all calamities including a Great Extinction,” he asked, “Would not their survival also constitute a survival of the species (even if the survivors quickly differentiated themselves into, as seems to be the human wont, dominant and subordinate groups)?”[12] Chakrabarty defends a notion of the Anthropocene that, according to Aaron Vansintjan, infers a “blanket

humanity, a blanket history, a blanket geological record"[13] which relies on "apolitical and colonialist assumptions" and "highlights the danger of using one framework (geology and climatology) to make universal claims about the world—it helps make only one world possible."[14]

But the Anthropocene is a catchy term that

> makes for an easy story. Easy, because it does not challenge the naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity's strategic relations of power and production. It is an easy story to tell because it does not ask us to think about these relations *at all*.[15]

The notion "sweeps up within it the diverse, dynamic, and even contradictory discourse of peoples throughout the globe contending with catastrophic environmental change"[16] and maintains the nature/society division dear to Western thought, masking the fact that relations between humans are themselves produced by nature. The notion of the Anthropocene is "de-historicizing, universalizing, eternalizing, naturalizing a mode of production specific to a certain time and place," a strategy of ideological legitimation that blocks off any prospect of change.[17] Student of anthropology Elizabeth Reddy has coined the expression "charismatic mega-category"[18] to describe the temporality and spatiality produced by the notion of the Anthropocene. Sociologist Jason Moore has suggested the notion of a Capitalocene[19] which brings back capitalism "as a world-ecology, joining the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co-production of nature in dialectical unity."[20] As Moore puts it, scholarship that posits

> the exploitation of nature as an external relation to the exploitation of labor power does two things. First, it confuses matters, because nature and labor are not comparable entities. Nature is the field within which human activity unfolds, and is also the object, and precondition of, human activity. Second, it confuses matters yet further by establishing an arbitrary discontinuity between human environment-making—the exploitation of nature—and environment-making by other forms of life.[21]

Moore dates the beginning of the Capitalocene to the sixteenth century, which also witnessed the "discovery of the New World" into which people were brought through the force of "blood and fire,"[22] the slave trade, the division of colonies among European powers, and the organization on a global scale of a mobile, racialized, gendered, and bonded workforce. Slavery and colonialism had a deep impact on the world-ecology.

To the historian Joachim Radkau, "the chief problem of colonialism seems to have been not so much its immediate ecological consequences as its long-term impact, the full extent of which became apparent only centuries later, in the era of modern technology, and many times only after the colonial states had acquired their independence."[23] We must, in our narrative of the racial Capitalocene, integrate this long memory of colonialism's impact and the fact that destruction in the colonial era becomes visible in the postcolonial era. In other words, we must add to the United Church of Christ's 1987 study of racialized policies of the environment in the twentieth century a history of racial Capitalocene, with an analysis of capital, imperialism, gender, class, and race and a conception of nature and of being human that opposes the Western approach. In the 1991 "Principles of Environmental Justice," the first principle stated that "Environmental Justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction." The principle posits a new understanding of what it is to be human and challenges the international dialogue on climate change that focused on a strategy of adaptation. Adaptation through technology or the development of green capitalism has indeed been presented as a good strategy. Yet it does not thoroughly address the long history and memory of environmental destruction about which Radkau has written, nor the asymmetry of power.

In the reconfiguration of the world that followed the colonization of the Americas and the Caribbean, nature was transformed into a cheap resource, as endlessly renewable as the bonded workforce. It is human praxis as labor and the global use of a color line in the division of labor that must be studied, and not a "human" death drive. When Andreas Malm argues that "there is also a different kind of violence, not rapid but slow motion, not instantaneous but incremental, not body-to-body but playing out over vast stretches of time through the medium of ecosystems," he raises the question of the narratives that would bring to light this kind of violence. Indeed, if we find and read "stories and essays on the slow violence of the Bhopal disaster, oil exploitation in the Arabian Gulf and the Niger Delta, mega-dams in Indian, depleted uranium in Iraq"—to which we can add Katrina in New Orleans, the moving tide of toxic iron-ore residue in Brazil, polluting the water supply of hundreds of thousands of residents as it makes its way to the ocean, the consequences of nuclear tests in French Polynesia, the

polluted water in Flint, Michigan, and the negative impact of agro-business—there are none "on climate change as such," as if "the capacity to imagine violence seems to have reached its limits."[24] We have to renew the ways that violence is narrated.

APOCALYPTIC/OPTIMISTIC VIEWS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Two views about climate change and the environment have been dominating the media and politics shaping the public debate: apocalyptic (humans are responsible for ecological destruction) and optimistic (scientists and engineers will find solutions). In 1991, Clive Ponting's book *A Green History of the World* offered a wide view of human and ecological history that covered the globe and centuries. Though Ponting discussed slavery, colonialism, and the creation of the Third World, "Man" was his main culprit. But it was his narrative of the ecological suicide of Easter Islanders that became the exemplary apocalyptic narrative. In his opening paragraph, Ponting wrote:

> Easter Island is one of the most remote, inhabited places on earth. Only some 150 square miles in area, it lies in the Pacific Ocean, 2,000 miles off the west coast of South America … At its peak the population was only about 7,000. Yet, despite its superficial insignificance, the history of Easter Island is a grim warning to the world.[25]

Ponting's analysis blamed the disappearance of Eastern Islanders on a human predisposition for destruction. His book was an instant success, offering a paradigm for the whole environmental history of the world that both frightened and pacified: if there was nothing to do, there was nothing to do. The book inspired, and continues to inspire, movies and novels. A whole genre of popular cinema has blossomed that offers a narrative of human hubris in which a white American male saves first "his" family and then "his" community. Individual mad scientists or cynical politicians are the villains; nothing is said of an economic system that privileges profit and fabricates racialized, disposable beings. The success of Ponting's book shows why the apocalyptic narrative is an ideological strategy that blames out-of-control forces rather than structures of power. But Easter Islanders did not commit suicide; they were the victims of systematic murder committed by Peruvian slave traders in the nineteenth century. The apocalyptic view rests on a pessimistic view of human nature. The

optimistic view, on the other hand, is deeply steeped in the tradition of belief in progress. Ferdinand Braudel, whose work has been vital to historians of the environment, embodies that tradition. To him, climate is a longterm, mostly stable element which changes more slowly than historical time (though Braudel sometimes portrays nature—the sea, the mountains, rice, maize—as the main actor of history). Yet, as Eyal Weizman has written,

> the climate can no longer be considered a constant … The current acceleration of climate change is not only an unintentional consequence of industrialization. The climate has always been a project for colonial powers, which have continually acted to engineer it.[26]

Apocalyptic and optimistic approaches have inspired the current rhetoric of a "crisis" produced by human nature or by an error in progress, evident in three recent moments in politics of the environment. The first moment is the emergence of a Western-led transnational network of conservation work which appeared in the years before World War I. The second is the Western-led boom of environmentalism that appeared around 1970 and developed rapidly in response to decolonization, the first oil crisis, the alliance between the chemical industry and the army (pesticides for war and the green revolution), the culmination of international programs on birth control in the Third World,[27] the War in Vietnam, the proxy wars in Africa, revolutionary social movements, the dictatorships in South America, the interventions in the Middle East. Indeed, Starting in the early 1970s, European States as well as the United States started to issue regulations about clean air, clean water, and the protection of nature. In 1972, *The Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome became an international best seller; that year in Stockholm, representatives from more than 100 countries met for the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was created. The third moment is the upswing of environmental issues all over the globe at the end of the Cold War, culminating in the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. In December 2015, not long after the Paris attacks, the Cop21 opened. The rhetoric on the relationship between political opposition to climate change and world security, and the "war on terror," has opened a new chapter in the development of the racial Capitalocene.

To unpack the different levels of racialized environment we need to go back the long sixteenth century, the era of Western "discoveries," of the first

colonial empires, of genocides, of the slave trade and slavery, the modern world mobilized the work of commodified human beings and uncommodified extra-human nature in order to advance labor productivity within commodity production. Racialized chattel were the capital that made capitalism. Africa was forced to share its social product—human beings—with the Atlantic slave system. But the slave trade consisted of not only the organized deportation of millions of Africans to continents and islands, but also a massive transfer of plants, animals, diseases, soil, techniques, and manufactured goods from Europe. Capitalism relied for growth on an endless access to nature as excess, as a "bounty of extra-human biological systems and geological distribution: plants, silver, gold, iron, coal."[28]

RADICAL AGENDA

A history of the racialized Capitalocene à la Cedric Robinson will help us understand that climate change is not about human hubris, but the result of the long history of colonialism and racial capitalism and its Promethean thinking—the idea that "Man" can invent a mechanical, technical solution to any problem. To develop a theory from a renewed history of the racial Capitalocene is to study the matrix constructed by the army/science/engineers/business/state alliance. On January 8, 2016, a court in Oregon fined the Biotech firm ArborGen $53.5 million in compensation and punitive damages for using "trickery and deceit" to defraud workers. ArborGen is a US-based company, a leader in research and development for genetically engineered trees. It presents itself as a "leading global provider of conventional and next generation plantation trees."[29] The company develops mostly eucalyptus, which is the second-most-popular tree for the paper industry (pine is the first). On its website appear the following questions and their answers: "What Makes a Profitable Forest? Advanced Technology, Incomparable Value"; "What Makes a Valuable Tree? Superior Growth, Maximum Value"; "What Makes a Superior Seed? Exceptional Breeding, Outstanding Results." It is the vocabulary of profit for profit. ArborGen has a rival: the Israeli biotech company Futuragene, which has developed a unique technology that accelerates tree growth, again mostly eucalyptus. It is now a branch of the Brazilian plantation group Suzano, which grows 500,000 hectares of eucalyptus trees a year and has partners in China, Thailand, and South Africa. ArborGen and Suzano compete in an

industry (forestry and paper) which generates $400 billion annually. The eucalyptus is known for being invasive and contributing to the depletion of water, desertification of soils, and loss of biodiversity. Once they are engineered, these effects are multiplied. Further, the paper industry always hides the waste it produces. Yet, waste embodies, more than ever before, the new era of the Capitalocene. Capitalist production is waste production. According to a 2000 study carried out by five major European and US research centers, one-half to three-quarters of annual resource inputs to industrial economies are returned to the environment within a year as waste. It must be said, however, that there is a huge gap between the amount of waste produced by multinationals and countries of the North and the amount of waste produced by populations of the South.[30]

Green capitalism and the biotech industry hold the optimistic discourse, offering seductive solutions: a green and sustainable future created by engineers and scientists, with the help of drones, satellites, and the new international laws of property and trade. Philosopher Isabelle Stengers has argued that we are witnessing an authoritarian management of societies based on Margaret Thatcher's "There Is No Alternative." Stengers argues for a "skepticism of the probable" in order to take a stand with the "possible" and commit to the multiple and always precarious attempts which bet on the possibility of a world which does not answer the probabilities offered by green capitalism. Building counterpowers means exposing the dangers of bioengineering to human health, biodiversity, and the lives and well-being of minorities, indigenous communities, and poor peasants, the majority of whom are women. It also means developing a radical curriculum based on a decolonization of knowledge production and institutions and a de-nationalization of knowledge. Knowledge production must take place with an awareness of diverse living realities and multiple publics without imposing the distance, disregard, or disdain of privilege. World citizenship and humanism must be brought in as decolonializing alternatives. A curriculum of radical pedagogy for the politics of the possible will challenges all forms of dehumanized work in favor of shared, life-affirmative labor practices, resisting the economy of speed for efficiency and acknowledging that time is needed to nourish knowledge. The politics of the possible also rest on the imagination—on the freedom to dream other pasts and imagine other futures than those suggested by the racial Capitalocene. Afrofuturism, for example, offers a way of looking at

possible futures or alternate realities through a Black cultural lens, blending the future, the past, and the present. “Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it,” Frantz Fanon wrote in 1961. We are at a critical juncture, a historical moment that sends us into our inheritances to find sources and references for the struggle ahead.