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White Utopia/Black Inferno: Life on a Geologic Spike

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Too much has been made of origins. All origins are arbitrary. This is not to say that they are not also nurturing, but they are essentially coercive and indifferent
– Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*

The white utopia was a black inferno.
– Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Toward the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation”
– “An Argument,” *The New Centennial Review*

1610

The earliest suggested date in the history of material exchanges is the 1610 thesis, dating the Anthropocene’s start to the European invasion of the Americas, or “New World,” and the so-called exchange in flora and fauna.¹ Authors Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin call this the “Collision of the Old and New Worlds.” Tying the Anthropocene to conquest makes explicit the colonial relation, but how does this rupture of bodies, flesh, and worlds become buried in the notion of exchange and contact? On his second voyage in 1493 to the New World (modern Dominica), Columbus initiates the first transatlantic slave voyage, a shipment of several hundred Taino people sent from Hispaniola to Spain. In 1496, he returns from his second voyage, carrying around thirty Native American slaves. By 1510, there is the start of the systematic transportation of African slaves to the New World. By the time Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* is first performed in 1611 (a year after the proposed start date), the enslaved figures of Caliban and Ariel are familiar subjects in the Old World. The “collision of the Old and New” covers over the friction of a less smooth, more corporeal set of racialized violences. In the language of exchange, it might be assumed that something was given rather than just taken. In that slippage of grammar, I want to shake the innocence of a language of description that assails this dehumanizing logic and masks its operations. The “nonevent” of this geologic corporeality is the very contact zone of geosocial relations that the Anthropocene attempts to speak to, yet it continues to do so in the progressive narrative arc, which is also a narrative of the asymmetries of colonial possession (of subjects, land, resources) and indigenous and black dispossession. This “exchange” is the directed colonial violence of forced eviction from land, enslavement on plantations, in rubber factories and mines, and the indirect violence of pathogens through forced contact and rape.



Hernán Cortés, "Cortés' 1524 Map of Tenochtitlan," in *Præclara Ferdinādi Cortesii de Noua maris Oceani Hyspania narratio* (Nuremberg, Germany: Friedrich Peypus, 1524).

Invasion instigates the disruption of ecological belonging and viable food economies and the introduction of famine and permanent malnutrition. It is the mutilation of land, personhood, spirituality, sexuality, and creativity. “No human contact, but relations of domination and submission.”² It was a process of alienation from geography, self, and the possibility of relation. Yet, “these heads of men, these collections of ears [collected by the barrelful by Count d’Hérissou], these burned houses, these Gothic invasions, this streaming blood, these cities that evaporate at the edge of the sword, are not to be so easily disposed of.”³ Césaire argues that the deliberate destruction and pride in dehumanization that characterized colonial conquest was not just a butchery that was inflicted on the colonized but one that also brutalized the colonizer: “the West has never been further from being able to live a true humanism – a humanism made to the measure of the world.”⁴ The superimposition of colonialism was a shearing of subjects from geography and the reinstantiation of those subjects into a category of geology that recoded them as property, whereby extraordinary possibilities in relation to the earth were wiped out. The arrival of Europeans in the Caribbean in 1492 and the subsequent colonialism of the Americas “led to the largest human population replacement in the past 13,000 years” and to the mixing of previous separate biotas, such as corn, maize, potatoes, sugarcane, wheat, and domesticated animals such as cows, rats, goats, and pigs in new ecological formations and plantation ecologies of the Americas.⁵ As Europeans invaded the Caribbean, deforming and decimating the indigenous “Caribs,” they began to use the islands as an experimental archipelago in terms of both the social organization of categories of human *and* the ecological arrangements of flora and fauna. The invasion of Europeans in the Americas resulted in a massive genocide of the indigenous population, leading to a decline from 54 million people in the Americas in 1492 to approximately 6 million in 1650, a result of murder, enslavement, famine, and disease. This led to a massive reduction in farming and the regeneration of forests and carbon uptake or sequestration by forests, leading to an observed decline in Antarctic ice cores of CO₂ in the atmosphere. This “Orbis spike” of systematic murder marks the instigation of Global-World-Space (an understanding of the world as a global entity that is open to the conquest of the entirety of its spatialized and subjective relations). Here the enslaved are coded in parallel with material extraction under the guise of exchange. “Colonization = thingification,” where

subjectivity becomes fungible as a geographical as well as psychic and property entity.⁶ As a descriptive project in the grammar of geology, this spike naturalizes European colonial relations and their epistemological and ecological transformations. The Anthropocene cannot dust itself clean from the inventory of which it was made: from the cut hands that bled the rubber, the slave children sold by weight of flesh, the sharp blades of sugar, all the lingering dislocation from geography, dusting through diasporic generations. The shift of grammar cannot keep the rawness out.

The 1610 natal moment does, however, tie the origin of the Anthropocene to the death of 50 million indigenous people (80 to 95 percent of the population), systematic violence, and chattel slavery. This spike of brutality, sadism, and death, coupled with the subsequent dispossession of indigenous peoples from their land and the beginnings of industrial global slavery, enacts a foundational spatial inscription of colonialism (and race) into a monument of global environmental change. Inscribed in this origin of the Anthropocene is what Michael Taussig calls a “space of death.”⁷ The Anthropocene began with the annihilation of the Colonial Other and an epochal redescription of geography as Global-World-Space.⁸ That is, the fungibility of Blackness and geologic resources (as land, minerals, and ores) is coeval, predicated on the ability of the colonizer to both describe and operationalize world-space as a global entity.⁹

In this spike, the colonial Other is displaced, along with existing ecological relations and connections of the colonized to earth. As Global-World-Space is established by the colonizers, the Human and its Others are bifurcated in the production of racial difference to create two worlds of colonizer and colonized – or two different species, as Fanon would have. Coloniality cuts across both flesh and earth in the economies of valuation it established, exacting an “incorporative exclusion from space”¹⁰ for the colonized as subjective agents and agents of geography. Indigenous genocide and removal from land and enslavement are prerequisites for power becoming operationalized in premodernity, a way in which subjects get (what Wynter names) “selected” or “dysselected” from geography and coded into colonial possession through dispossession.

The color line of the colonized was not merely a consequence of these structures of colonial power or a marginal effect of those structures; it was/is a means to operationalize extraction (therefore race should be considered as foundational rather than as periphery to the production of those structures and of global

space). Richard Eden, in the popular 1555 publication *Decades of the New World*, compares the people of the “New World” to a blank piece of “white paper” on which you can “paynte and wryte” whatever you wish. “The Preface to the Reader” describes the people of these lands as inanimate objects, blank slates waiting to be civilized by the Europeans: “these simple gentiles lyvinge only after the lawe of nature, may well bee likened to a smoothe and bare table unpainted, or a white paper unwritten upon, upon the which yow may at the first paynte and wryte what yow lyst.”¹¹ As land is made into tabula rasa for European inscription of its militant maps, so too do Indigenes and Africans become rendered as a writ or ledger of flesh scribed in colonial grammars.

“Black Metamorphosis,” 1452

Wynter suggests that we should in fact consider 1452 as the beginning of the New World, as African slaves are put to work on the first plantations on the Portuguese island of Madeira, initiating the “sugar–slave” complex – a massive replantation of ecologies and forced relocation of people (existing ecologies were not immune to the ravages of the new invaders, from plants and domestic animals to microbiomes and new geomorphic regimes). Wynter argues that the importance of the New World is in its dual processes of the “reduction of Man to Labour and of Nature to Land under the impulsion of the market economy.” Wynter forcefully demonstrates how “Man” appears as the ontological signification of Whiteness and how this rational man is established as the biologically selected being, established first through Cartesian man and then through biologism as an advanced evolutionary subject within concepts of geologic time. Weheliye calls this “dis-identification, wherein whiteness connotes the full humanity only gleaned in relation to the lack of humanity in blackness.”¹² The effect of this doubling of Man/Whiteness in the natal moment of “his” heuristic formation disabuses the idea of humanity as an ontological category that has a nonracialized primacy. Weheliye argues, “In black culture this category becomes a designation that shows its finitudes and exclusions very clearly, thereby denaturalizing the ‘human’ as a universal formation while at the same time laying claim to it.”¹³ In reclaiming humanity as a heuristic operation rather than an ontological formation, Wynter plots the historic formation of Man as a racialized subject that is exclusionary at the point of origin, and precisely because of the history of those murderous origins. Wynter adds to her revolutionary formation of Man (and his overrepresentation) in “Black Metamorphosis,” where she considers the relations between land

and territory in the organization of Colonial Man’s “humanity” and the geographies of erasure that underpin it in this conquest of space.¹⁴

Wynter argues that the invention of the figure of Man in 1492 as the Portuguese travel to the Americas instigates at the same time “a refiguring of humanness” in the idea of race.¹⁵ This refiguring of slaves trafficked to gold mines is borne into the language of the inhuman, whereupon Blackness becomes characterized through its ledger of matter, which in turn populates the idea of race. Extending Wynter’s argument, 1492 marks also the structural inclusion of Man’s Others into the geological lexicon of the inhuman (as matter and energy) and the exclusion from its material wealth, whereby humanness becomes differentiated by the inhuman objectification of indigenous and black subjects. While Wynter argues that this devaluation of Blackness served the specific material purpose of labor and the colonization of Indian land, there is also a prior step in the identification of inhuman objects that generated the context of “needs” for such labor and dispossession. Voiding subjects was also about voiding a relation to earth that was embodied, organized, and intensified by those relations to place; taking place is also taking ways in which people realize themselves through the specific geologies of a land. Colonialism enacted multiple forms of geologic disruption as well as the more obvious forms of extractive dispossessions.

Wynter contends that the revaluation of black life and the resistance to dehumanization could only be made through the “creation of a counter-culture through the transplantation of their old cultures onto a strange soil, its reinvention in new and alien conditions. It was in this transplantation, this metamorphosis of an old culture into a new, that the blacks made themselves indigenous to their new land.”¹⁶

This also involved the

transplantation of a traditional relationship to nature, a relationship under the inspiration of which the slave, now in exile, both adapted himself to Nature and transformed it. In this type of relationship the *land* (i.e. part of Nature) could not be regarded as a mere commodity in the land-labor-capital-relationship. New world land, like the land in Africa was still seen as the Earth – the communal means of production. This attitude, transferred and perpetuated, was the central grid for many old beliefs which could be retranslated into a new reality.¹⁷

Descriptions of the lives of slaves in Jamaica in the seventeenth century by English clergyman

the Rev. John Taylor stress the “great veneration” which the slaves had for “the Earth.” It may be precisely because land and labor were regarded as private property that the earth became a source of possibility to release the literal stranglehold of that incarceration in a propertied relation. In the struggle against forms of propertied relation with the inhuman, different intimacies developed with the earth. Wynter discusses the importance of the plot accorded to slaves to grow their own food in slave replantation. She says,

The plot was the slave’s area of escape from the plantation, it was an area of experience which reinvented and therefore perpetuated an alternative world view, alternative consciousness to that of the plantation. This world view was *marginalized* by the plantation but never destroyed. In relation to the plot, the slave lived in a society partly created as an adjunct to the market, partly as an end in itself.¹⁸

While growing food was a basic requirement for the reproduction of labor power for the plantation, it also became part of the reproduction of cultural powers in a new land, to establish a less alienated relation to the earth: “Let me be contained between latitude and longitude.”¹⁹ The relation of slave to provision ground was a relation to a contingent earth, a material relation forged in resistance to the dehumanizing of colonialism that opened a carceral geography.

The earth in its symbolic and nonabstracted forms (as a knowledge about survival in maroonage, the quotidian practices of harvesting useful plants and animals, and navigation) was a crucial aspect of slave revolts. Wynter argues, “Black slavery in the Caribbean was synonymous with black revolt against slavery. And these revolts would be crucial to the indigenization process.”²⁰ Maroonage becomes the practice of cultural resistance to slavery. Wild mountain and interior living was also a successful part, Wynter argues, of replantation to the new land and the confrontation with its unfamiliar geographical conditions. She discusses at length the oaths to earth that were sworn before rebellions and how these were oaths to ancestors replanted in a new land – and that such oaths could not be broken despite the horrendous torture of those captured, in a context where “property that had rebelled, thereby affirming its status as human, must be burnt (i.e. tortured) as a ‘terror’ to other ‘property’ who might want to assert their human status.”²¹ Kissing the earth before rebellions was an oath-act that maintained a social contract

with the earth often to the point of death.²² Wynter argues that this “indigenization”²³ was a way of thinking and apprehending the material reality of slavery through a dynamic replanting of roots (or “transplanting” as Wynter calls it) in an alien context: “this is the process of black cultural resistance and response to the Middle Passage and to what lay on the farther side – the alienated reality of a New World, new not only in its geography, but also in its radically different experience.”²⁴ Disrupting the grammar of the inhuman articulated through thirteenth-to nineteenth-century genealogies of race, planting roots through maroonage and cultivation established kinship with the earth, made in the context of natal alienation.

In the path of the totality of alienation, the achievement in Haiti was to put down roots in a “stranger” soil, which “made the soil their own” in ways that were not predicated on the notion of territory under colonialism.²⁵ As Price-Mars said, the planet rather than humanism became the sphere of recognition for the Haiti Revolution;²⁶ “our presence on a spot of that American archipelago which we ‘humanized,’ the breach which we made in the process of historical events to snatch our place among men,” was worthy of study, a particular achievement that could be placed “within the common life of man on the planet.”²⁷ Such a rupture in the fabric of colonialism’s codification of personhood and space was an extraordinary reclamation of both freedom and its geographical expression. Wynter argues that since “needs produce powers just as powers produce needs,” the response to the dehumanizing alienation was “to create the new vocabulary of the new existence.”²⁸ Wynter argues that alienation is an inherently dynamic concept that implies change, “a consciousness of being alienated.” For Price-Mars, the study of the folklore of Haiti was a study of transplantation, where indigeneity becomes fused with the site of the struggle, essentially a geographical, soil-based process of rerooting and of learning new forms of planting oneself in the earth. “Haiti where negritude rose to its feet for the first time and said it believed in its own humanity.”²⁹ Wynter calls this process “cultural metamorphosis,” but it is also a geological metamorphosis tethered to the place, site, and soil of struggle.³⁰

While slave owners tried to void their subjects as inhuman objects, Wynter argues that black culture was creative because it had to overcome its property status to find other means of revaluation.³¹ As slaves were traded as both property and standard equivalence (for a certain amount of gold ounces), as “Native trade goods – gold, slaves, pepper, ivory, native cloths, hides, cattle and millet – were used as standards.



Portrait of Toussaint Louverture, 1802. Color plate made as part of a series of portraits of generals of the French Revolution.

Some European stables such as iron bars, coppers and cloth were used,” the slave became interned in “metamorphosis from human entity to a market one.”³² Revaluation, then, required a destabilization of the relations of production in the realm of aesthetics and sense:

in other words, the oath-taking ceremonies and subsequent revolts were at one and the same time a form of praxis and an abstract theoretical activity. Neither could be separated from the other. The theory only existed in praxis; praxis was inseparable from theory.³³

The embodied experience of power located in the earth was the basis of knowledge and the affirmation of a more exorbitant world or planetarity. The articulation of resistance is not a romantic appeal but a structural reorientation to the rifts of colonialism and its geosocial formations, made through the interarticulation of the inhuman in the breaks of propertied forms.³⁴ This revaluation or reconstruction of value deuniversalizes the effect of the language of the inhuman. In the savage New World, the exchange was of terror, slavery, and subjugation, of barbarous executions, disfigurement, and sadistic pleasures. That is, there was no exchange; there was replantation and resistance in the praxis of the human through a relation with the earth.

1800

The natal moment of the 1800 Industrial Revolution, first suggested by Crutzen and favored by social scientists, locates Anthropocene origination in capitalist modes of economic and ecological production, specifically its labor forms and technological innovations.³⁵ This is the tale of entrepreneurship of a few white men transforming the world with their ingenuous creations or of a political economy that is aggressively sutured to the earth’s processes via the lifeblood of fossil fuels. So the explorer as hero (Columbus) is replaced by the inventor as hero (Watt and his engine) in the progress narrative of Man as the agentic center and authority of power, cut with some European genius myth to rarefying the white male subject and his imperial intellectualism. Unsurprisingly, the Capitalocene, as it was quickly redubbed, became the site of numerous investigations into the “new” metabolisms of technology and matter enabled by the combination of fossil fuels, new engines, and the world as market. It relocated the Anthropocene back to Europe, to Britain, and claimed the history of the planet from this origination point. The revolutionary character of industrialization, as a transformative one-way street in the production of the commodity form

and rising concentrations of CO₂ in the atmosphere, solidified in narratives as the new “sire” of geologic force. What the proliferation of Anthropocene discourse around industrialization, which I am not going to address in any detail here, does indicate is that the Anthropocene is not reducible to anthropogenic climate change or to a carbon or capitalist imaginary (or capitalism as a carbon imaginary). As Povinelli warns us, the carbon imaginary sutures us to a very particular rendering of life and death in late liberalism, one based on the governance of life through splicing the difference between geological and biological existence.³⁶ The racialization of epistemologies of life and nonlife is important to note here, particularly how this biocentrism (as per Wynter) prioritizes a white biopolitics. As Povinelli argues, carbon imaginaries are a site of social reproduction in the politics of knowledge – a politics that actively constructs indigenous peoples on the outside of its paradigmatic purview.

While capitalist commodity forms and their propertied relations undoubtedly transformed the atmosphere with the production of greenhouse gases (GHGs) through the burning vast quantities of coal, the creation of another kind of weather had already established its salient forms in the mine and on the plantation. Paying attention to the prehistory of capital and its bodily labor, both within coal cultures and on plantations that literally put “sugar in the bowl” (as Nina Simone sings), in those laboring workers forging the material conversions of the revolution, the muscular energy of slavery and capitalism become conglomerated. The new modes of material accumulation and production in the Industrial Revolution are relational to and dependent on their *preproductive* forms in slavery and its organization of human property as extractable energy properties. Wynter argues that the racism inherent in the construction of Europe was a complex part of the apparatus by which Western capitalism (and, ipso facto, Western civilization) fulfilled its extractive imperative and that global capitalism cannot be understood apart from large-scale black slavery out of Africa. Rather than slavery predating capitalist forms of labor, Wynter argues that the interrelation of slave labor power and free labor power in sugar production meant that the

plantation was an intrinsic and functional part of a capitalist system which consisted of a mode of production based on free wage labor coexisting and dependent on a mode of production based on slave labor. . . . The plantation mode of production was not, therefore, an anomaly within the capitalist system, it was intrinsic to the system.³⁷

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As C. L. R. James argues in *Black Jacobins*,³⁸ the immense wealth from the slave trade and the Haitian sugar plantations enriched the bourgeoisie to such an extent that they were powerful enough to set in motion the French Revolution:

In other words both the hegemony of the Western bourgeoisie and of capitalism were in their origin based mainly on New World land, the forced labor of the Indian, and the conversion of man – the black man – into a commodity. The latter large-scale de-humanization of the European proletariat, followed on and *did not precede* the total negation of the black as human. Capitalism as a system therefore required the negation of the black as human. Far from being an anomaly in the rational: system of capitalism, black slavery was rationally central to capitalism as a system.³⁹

At a material level, Catherine Hall's project *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership* makes visible the complicity in terms of structures of slavery and industrialization that organized in advance the categories of dispossession that are already in play and historically constitute the terms of racialized encounter of the Anthropocene. In 1833, Parliament finally abolished slavery in the British Caribbean, and the taxpayer payout of £20 million in "compensation" built the material, geophysical (railways, mines, factories), and imperial infrastructures of Britain and its colonial enterprises and empire. As the project empirically demonstrates, these legacies of colonial slavery continue to shape contemporary Britain. A significant proportion of funds were invested in the railway system connecting London and Birmingham (home of cotton production and gun manufacturing for plantations), Cambridge and Oxford, and Wales and the Midlands (for coal). Insurance companies flourished and investments were made in the Great Western Cotton Company, for example, and in cotton brokers, as well as in big colonial land companies in Canada (Canada Land Company) and Australia (Van Diemen's Land Company) and a number of colonial brokers. Investments were made in the development of metal and mineralogical technologies: Tyne Iron Co. Iron Works; Llynvi Iron Works; Dalnotter Iron Co.; New Shotts Iron Co.; Ynyscedwyn Iron Co.; J. J. Cordes; the Smithfield Company; Bristol Brass Wire and Copper Co.; Pendleton Colliery; Thomas Whitby & Co. coal, iron, and marble company; Castles and Rudgeway coal company; Arigna Iron and Coal Mining Co.; Company for the Working of

Mines, Minerals and Metals; Port Philip and Colonial Gold Mining Co.; Potosi La Paz and Peruvian Mining Association; Annotto Bay Mining Association; Alpujarras Lead Co.; and Trinidad Petroleum Co. Other funds were reinvested into Plantations Caribbean, sugar brokers and refiners, tobacco brokers, West Indian merchants, and Dominica merchants. As a ledger, the financial benefits of ending slavery reshaped the world to provide the material preconditions for the Industrial Revolution and the metamorphosis of capitalist forms. As the *Legacies* project evidences and Silva argues, if we pay attention to the refiguring of the commodity in the consideration of colonial expropriation, "against the conventional view that places slavery in the prehistory of capital," a case can be made in this instance for how the total value produced by slave labor continues to sustain global capital through accumulation and legacy.⁴⁰ In this ledger of investment and the materialization of industrialization and empire sits an unseen, unrecorded history withdrawn from view in the syntax of slavery that foreshadows and reinscribes across all these relations of the globalization of capital.

The slave-sugar-coal nexus both substantially enriched Britain and made it possible for it to transition into a colonial industrialized power (triggering a massive spike in Britain's population that maps directly onto its sugar and coal production). As Marx caustically observed, "the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population . . . the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production."⁴¹ The slave trade, he argued, was part of the primitive accumulation of capital that preceded and fashioned the economic conditions (and institutions, such as the insurance and finance industries) for industrialization. Slavery and industrialization were tied by the various afterlives of slavery in the form of indentured and carceral labor that continued to enrich new emergent industrial powers from both the Caribbean plantations and the antebellum South. Enslaved "free" African Americans predominately mined coal in the corporate use of black power or the new "industrial slavery," as Blackman terms it.⁴² The Alabama Iron Ore and Tennessee Coal and Iron companies were the largest convict labor companies and fed the coal mines of the US Steel Corporation, which built the country. Blackman argues that most enslaved mine labor in the United States occurred after the abolition of slavery in 1865 and primarily fed the industrialization of America. The labor of the coffee – the carceral

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penance of the rock pile, “breaking rocks out here and keeping on the chain gang” (Nina Simone, *Work Song*, 1966), laying iron on the railroads – is the carceral future mobilized at plantation’s end (or the “nonevent” of emancipation). As Marx puts it, “the veiled slavery of the wage-workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world. . . . Capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.”⁴³ Arguably, the racial circumscription of slavery predates and prepares the material ground for Europe and the Americas in terms of both nation and empire building – and continues to sustain it.

1950s

While the biostratigraphic signal from colonizing the Americas remains incompletely documented according to the AWG, the favored stratigraphic marker by many authors, owing to its widespread and globally synchronous signal, is the nuclear radioisotope’s from the fallout from weapons testing. According to the AWG, the geochemical residue from the Trinity atomic device at Alamogordo, New Mexico, detonated on July 16, 1945, is the start of the Global Standard Stratigraphic Age.⁴⁴ Plutonium (**239,240Pu**) is suggested as a good trace due to its ability to absorb into clays and organic compounds within marine sediments and because of its mostly artificial radionuclide suite, with a half-life of 24,110 years, that will be detectable in sedimentary deposits for some 100,000 years into the future.⁴⁵ But as Elizabeth DeLoughrey reminds us, it is not just the environment that bears the trace of these “tests”; “the body of every human on the planet now contains strontium90, a man-made by-product of nuclear detonations and forensic scientists use the traces of militarized radioactive carbon in our teeth to date human remains (as before or after the 1954 *Bravo* shot).”⁴⁶ The nuclear stratigraphic trace would mark the more geologically dispersed events of the “Great Acceleration” of the 1950s, with its material conversions of fossil fuels; dissemination of black carbon, inorganic and spherical carbonaceous particles, worldwide; new geochemical compounds of polyaromatic hydrocarbons, polychlorinated biphenyls, and pesticide residues; doubling of soil nitrogen and phosphorus due to the Haber Bosch process of artificially producing nitrogen fertilizer; and dispersals of new materials, such as aluminum, concrete, plastics, and synthetic fibers. This array of material transformations and new mineral evolutions has both transformed the balance of geochemical materials on the earth’s surface and introduced new geological substances and forces into the planetary mix.

Japanese artist Isao Hashimoto’s 2053⁴⁷

records a time-lapse map in a series of blips and flashes of the nuclear explosions that have taken place between 1945 and 1998, signaling that the test does not hold exclusive rights to any one domain; it overflows, accumulates, and seemingly disappears, all the while reorganizing exposures. These blips and flashes do, however, have a black and indigenous intensification. Nuclear testing marks the displacement and exposure of indigenous peoples in the Pacific Islands and the radiation of Native American and Aboriginal peoples in North America and Australia. Many islanders in the Pacific were moved and removed during US nuclear tests. Bikini Atoll, for example, was subjected to thirty years of nuclear explosions, during which time islanders were moved to a range of islands (to Rongerik, then to Kwajalein). Islanders in the Atolls were both proximate to the nuclear fallout, where they were exposed to radioactive ash, and moved to uninhabitable islands, where islanders “sucked stones” to keep hunger at bay and starvation was common. Many returned to Bikini Island, despite the contamination of its water sources and foodstuffs, because the uninhabited islands to which they were moved were uninhabited for a reason. Islanders on Rongelap and Utrok exposed by the Bravo detonation (six islands were vaporized and fourteen left uninhabitable) were subject to immediate radiation from the blasts and suffered visible burns, causing both immediate and lasting epidemiological legacies and toxic intimacies with leukemia, neoplasms, and thyroid cancers. The white powder of irradiated coral dust that fell throughout the Atolls was dangerously radioactive. Not recognizing this new material substance, children played in it. As Maori poet Hone Tuwhare’s 1964 poem goes, this was “No Ordinary Sun.” The fallout coated Marshallese bodies, ground, trees, breadfruit, coconuts, crabs, fish, and water. This nuclear colonialism fused thermonuclear sand and poisoned air, water, and soil, dispersing radioactive elements of strontium, cesium, and iodine across strata and into bone in brown bodies. After Bravo, the US military waited seventy-two hours to pick up those exposed and transport them to Kwajalein Atoll (the location of the US base) for medical examination. The 236 Marshallese were stripped naked and sprayed down before boarding the vessel. At the army base, they were treated as test subjects for the effects of radiation. The Bravo detonation instigated the human experiments in Project 4.1, a secret US Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) study, which was planned for and then authorized while Marshallese were being treated on Kwajalein and continued for years to monitor the effects of radiation on a human population.⁴⁸ Marshallese

were subjected to unconsented medical testing, and a “cross section of happy, amenable savages” (as the scientist in the AEC promotional film informs us) were brought to Chicago for examination as specimens for experimentation in a human zoo dressed up in suits “that they had to return to the US government in Hawaii.”⁴⁹ Spillers suggests (on the practice of medical experimentation on sick Negroes and the profitable “atomizing” of diseased body parts) that “the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory.”⁵⁰ Women gave birth to what they called “jellyfish babies” because of their translucent skin and soft or absent bones. There were many congenital disorders and miscarriages. “Marshallese cancers” were some of the highest recorded in the world. The AEC film *Operation Castle* narrates, “These islands, functioning as s, gave us our first real clues to the vast area affected by contamination from a high yield surface burst.”⁵¹ Islanders were returned when it was known that the island was heavily contaminated to study them as fallout “collectors” of nuclear bombs. As Spillers elucidates, the grammar of containment in Blackness was a category mobilized to obscure and subjugate the human in these human experiments:

The anatomical specifications of rupture, of altered human tissue, take on the objective description of laboratory prose. . . . These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color.⁵²

This nuclear colonialism in the Pacific and Marshall islands used a brown strata of bodies to mitigate and absorb its geochemical shocks.

The geographies of colonial territories were key sites and subjects for the performance of militarization and scientific development (but there is no such thing as a nuclear “test”). As DeLoughrey argues,

Western colonizers had long configured tropical islands into the contained spaces of a laboratory, which is to say a suppression of island history and indigenous presence. This generation of AEC ecologists embraced nuclear testing as creating a novel opportunity to study a complete ecosystem through the trace of radiation. . . . An American empire of tropical islands, circling the globe from the Pacific to the Caribbean, became a

strategic space for military experimentation and the production of new scientific epistemologies like ecosystem theory.⁵³

For example, Britain exploded seven nuclear tests and seven hundred subtests⁵⁴ on the Aboriginal land of Maralinga Tjaruta in southern Australia, home of the Pitjantjara and Yankunytjatjara peoples, in 1956 and 1963. Many were forcibly resettled at Yalata, but attempts to curtail access to the Maralinga site were often unsuccessful due to strong ties to country, leading to exposure to nuclear contamination. The first French test, Gerboise Bleue, was conducted in February 1960, in the context of the Algerian War (1954–62). From 1960 to 1996, France carried out 210 nuclear tests, 17 in the Algerian Sahara and 193 in French Polynesia in the South Pacific, causing vast swaths radioactive fallout across Polynesia. In the Anthropocene backloop, these very islands in Polynesia and the Marshall Islands are now subjected to rising sea levels from climate change. The Anthropocene fossil of the waste repository in the Marshall Islands, the nuclear, forty-six-centimeter-thick “Runit” dome of Portland cement that covers the radioactive material from Bikini and other islands (there were forty-two tests in total on Enewetak Atoll alone from 1948), is leaching radioactive material, causing radionuclide migration into the marine environment.

Rising sea levels and the intensification of storm events threaten to take the islands and their nuclear-fused strata into the sea. The nuclear marker both commemorates a certain period of militarization and its global dissemination and distances the impacts and responsibility for those acts, tethering them to the Cold War and its “past” geopolitical concerns. The dialogic relation of this Golden Spike to the politics of the event is truncated, as it is lodged in the event of the atomic bomb and its technological achievements rather than the effects on the peoples and ecologies of the Pacific and the more widespread nuclear colonialism and its ongoing presents in nuclear waste. Canada and Australia, for example, as settler-colonial states, are the biggest extraterritorial mining countries and are involved in the disposal and location nuclear waste on indigenous land, often in conflict with native title claims and predating on economic impoverishment. The disposal of wastes mobilizes a new frontierism in the designation of sacrifice zones within and beyond national borders that aggregates environmental harms with anti-Blackness.

x

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1
Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," *Nature* 519 (2015), 171--180.

2
Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, (1972) 2000), 42.

3
Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 41.

4
Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 73.

5
Lewis and Maslin.

6
Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 42.

7
Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (University of Chicago Press, 1986), 4.

8
Kathryn Yusoff, "Epochal Aesthetics: Affectual Infrastructures of the Anthropocene," *e-flux architecture*, March 29, 2017, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/accumulation/121847/epochal-aesthetics-affectual-infrastructures-of-the-anthropocene/>.

9
See: Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

10
Fred Moten, *A Poetics of the Undercommons* (Sputnik and Fizzle, 2016), 12.

11
Richard Eden, "The Preface to the Reader" in *Decades of the New World*.

12
Alexander Weheliye, "Freenin' Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," *Social Text* vol. 20, no. 2 (2002), 27.

13
Alexander Weheliye, "Freenin' Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," 27.

14
Sylvia Wynter reminds us that the "larger issue is, then, the incorporation of all forms of human being into a single homogenized descriptive statement that is based on the figure of the West's liberal monohumanist Man. And this conception of being, because ostensibly natural-scientific, is biocentric." Sylvia Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Duke

University Press, 2015), 23. Thus this Man is restricted in its biopolitical horizon to a liberal form of subjectivity that denies the ecologies and geophysics of existence. Furthermore, as Katherine McKittrick argues: "the human is tied to epistemological histories that presently value a genre of the human that reifies Western bourgeois tenets; the human is therefore wrought with physiological and narrative matters that systematically excise the world's most marginalized." Quoted in Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?," 9.

15
Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Before Man: Sylvia Wynter's Rewriting of the Modern Episteme," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, 93.

16
Sylvia Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World," Institute of the Black World Records, MG 502, Box 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 46-47.

17
Sylvia Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 47.

18
Sylvia Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 53.

19
Aimé Césaire, *Return to My Native Land* (Archipelago Books, (1956) 1969), 28.

20
Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 71.

21
Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 79.

22
Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 81-83.

23
Wynter's claim on indigenization and learning new forms of planting subjectivity in the earth is a means to claim back a stolen subjective-geographic relation and should not be confused with a claim of indigeneity. Within the context of settler colonialism, indigeneity rightly makes specific material claims about sovereignty and territory that are different from the claims that Wynter is making for black slaves. I believe Wynter is arguing for us to notice the creation of new material grammar outside of plantation geologies that humanize inhuman conditions through a relation to the earth that is planetary, not territorial.

24
Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 7.

25
Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 17.

26
Price-Mars quoted in Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis."

27
Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 17.

28
Price-Mars quoted in Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 18.

29
Aimé Césaire, *Return to My Native Land*, 29.

30
Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis."

31
Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis."

32
Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 32-33.

33
Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 139.

34
See: Carole B. Davies, "From Masquerade to *Maskerade*: Caribbean Cultural Resistance and Rehumanizing Project," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*.

35
Paul Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind - the Anthropocene," *Nature* 415 (2002), 23.

36
Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geonotologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2016). See also: Kathryn Yusoff, "The Anthropocene and Geographies of Geopower," in *Geographies of Power* eds. M. Coleman and J. Agnew (Edward Elgar, 2018).

37
Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 106.

38
C. L. R. James, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Random House, (1938) 1989).

39
Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis," 45-46 (emphasis in original).

40
Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," *The Black Scholar* vol. 44, no. 2 (2014), 2.

41
Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* (1867) (Progress, 1961, 760).

42
Douglas Blackman, *Slavery by Another Name* (Anchor Books, 2008).

43
Marx, *Capital*, 759-60.

44
Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin N. Waters, Mark Williams, et al., "When Did the Anthropocene

Begin? A Mid-Twentieth Century Boundary Level is Stratigraphically Optimal," *Quaternary International* vol. 383, no. 5 (2015), 196- 203.

45
Colin N. Waters, Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin Summerhayes, Anthony D. Barnosky, Clément Poirier, Agnieszka Gatuszka, Alejandro Cearreta, et al., "The Anthropocene Is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene," *Science* vol. 351, no. 6269 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aad2622>.

46
Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "The Myth of Isolates: Ecosystem Ecologies in the Nuclear Pacific," *Cultural Geographies* 20 (2013), 179.

47
"A Time-Lapse Map of Every Nuclear Explosion Since 1945 - by Isao Hashimoto," *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLCF7vPanrY>.

48
"Project 4.1 Biomedical Studies: Studies of Response of Human Beings Exposed to Significant Beta and Gamma Radiation due to Fall-Out from High Yield Weapons": "The purposes of (Project 4.1) were to (1) evaluate the severity of radiation injury to the human beings exposed, (2) provide for all necessary medical care, and (3) conduct a scientific study of radiation injuries to human beings." Edwin J. Martin, and Richard H. Rowland, *Castle Series, 1951*, Defense Nuclear Agency Report DNA 6035F, April 1, 1982, http://worf.eh.doe.gov/data/ihp1c/0858_a.pdf.

49
The use and return of the suits indicate a certain performative quality in the US military's subjection of the Marshallese citizens, not unlike the rented clothing that slave dealers used on the slave blocks.

50
Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White and in Colour*. (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 208.

51
Quoted in Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "The Myth of Isolates," 171.

52
Spillers, *Black, White and in Colour*, 207.

53
Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "The Myth of Isolates," 172.

54
The subtests involving plutonium, uranium, and beryllium and were code-named "Kittens," "Rats," and "Vixen," which ironically are representative of the feral ecologies that accompanied settlers and had such a devastating effect on the unique

12/13

e-flux journal #97 — february 2019 Kathryn Yusoff
White Utopia/Black Inferno: Life on a Geologic Spike

