

Nicholas Mirzoeff

Below the Water: Black Lives Matter and Revolutionary Time

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The Clock of the World

Legendary Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs used to begin every meeting with her now famous question: “What time is it on the clock of the world?” We rarely try to answer that question in terms of time, instead preferring to say what we think is the most important thing going on right now. But Grace, along with her husband Jimmy Boggs, was very aware of the temporal dynamic of revolution. When Detroit automakers disposed of human labor in favor of what was then called cybernetics, Grace and Jimmy understood that the time-work relation created by industrial capitalism as a structure for human life was ending. The violent suppression of the 1967 Detroit Uprising led them to update the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution as their model for change. Faced with the beginnings of deindustrialization in Detroit, Jimmy Boggs declared that “a job ain’t the answer” to systemic crisis, meaning a forty-hour work week contract. In her later thinking, Grace Lee Boggs took the situation in Detroit as an opportunity to shape the future: “we had been granted an opportunity to begin a new chapter in the evolution of the human race, a chapter that global warming and corporate globalization had made increasingly necessary. In its dying, Detroit could also be the birthplace for a new kind of city.”¹ Detroiters call it {r}evolution. It is a relation of human and nonhuman life, considered in relation to planetary time. This time is nonlinear and open, offering a means to rethink our relation to the world. Out of the ruins, whether of Detroit or the Anthropocene, it becomes possible to see how revolutionary time has always been there and what it might become now.

Black Lives Matter is a theoretical proposition. Here I want to explore the contradictions within the phrase “black life” in terms of the current crisis in the earth system. Denise Ferreira da Silva opens her study on the global idea of race with a reflection on “that moment ... between the release of the trigger and the fall of another black body, of another brown body, and another ... [which] haunts this book”²; we might say that the same moment haunts Black Lives Matter. That is, “life” in the phrase “Black Lives Matter” is defined as that which can be killed or which dies. It is also a measure of time, for however long we are alive is a life. Many human lives have been and are considered disposable, surplus, or without value, so the movement speaks of each life as mattering. When black life matters, time itself is altered, creating revolutionary time. These temporalities have become entangled with the crisis of earth-system time known as the Anthropocene. That time, known to geologists as “deep time,” is in crisis. And it’s a good thing too, because out of that crisis has reemerged the possibility of



A section cut of Fordite, a paint sediment collected from the Ford factories of Detroit. Photo: Flickr/Agatehill



Timothy H. O'Sullivan, [*Slaves, J. J. Smith's Plantation, near Beaufort, South Carolina*], 1862. Albumen silver print. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

revolutionary time. No one has been more aware of this dynamic than the anti-black reactionary right. To be for revolutionary time, whatever one's own personal history, is to be for anti-anti-blackness as the condition of transformative possibility.

Critical work has for a long time now not been interested in time. In 1967 – a time that will keep recurring in this piece – Michel Foucault declared that “the present epoch will be perhaps above all the epoch of space.” Here he was mixing temporal and spatial vocabularies. For his interest in space was a challenge not to time but to the teleology of Western concepts of History, whether that of the Great Man, the triumph of capital, or the revolution. He added a caveat: “it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space.”³ That intersection today is twofold. In the first intersection, we see that white supremacy writes about race in terms of time. White races are “advanced” or “civilized,” while nonwhite races have been designated as “backward” or “barbaric.” Nineteenth-century typologies like that of John Nott organized this as a timeline extending from the chimpanzee, via the Negro, to the Apollo Belvedere. They did not understand this as an evolution but rather as a hierarchy of separate species. The fact that no living being could sufficiently instantiate whiteness was an irony that passed them by.

This hierarchy within the human is entirely active today, as Alexander Weheliye has pointed out: “blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot.”⁴ To be “white” only makes sense within a system of white supremacy that creates and sustains hierarchies, in which to be white is to benefit. In the American universal, as Ta-Nehisi Coates has put it, “white supremacy is not merely the work of hotheaded demagogues, or a matter of false consciousness, but a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it.”⁵ To make America great again is, then, to make it “white again,” a temporal action in which the future becomes more like the past and less like the present.

The second fatal intersection with time is the Anthropocene. In August 2016, the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Stratigraphic Society proposed that the mid-twentieth century marked the beginning of the new epoch, indexed by the presence of plutonium fallout following atomic tests. Its symptoms include climate change, sea-level rise, the sixth mass extinction of life, the presence of plastic throughout the earth system, altered nitrogen levels due to fertilizer use, the acidification of the oceans, and so on. Setting

aside for now all the controversy over its name and dating, the Anthropocene is a geological marker in time of a shift in the earth system. In this account, time is now specific and local, and points to ends of all kinds. The disruption of what scientists have come to call “uniformitarian time” – the sense that the past was as the present and predicts the future – creates a new temporality in which time is now subject to human agency. As the eco-critic Andreas Malm has it, “Now is a singularly bad time for declaring the demise of time.”⁶

However, this “break” in time is too neat. On the one hand, it fails to account for the complex history of earth-system time. While present-day scientists see a continuity back to eighteenth-century natural history in the formation of what is known as “deep time,” many important discoveries were made by people operating in what they thought of as “catastrophic” time. Rather than unfolding evenly, this model imagines time as a series of catastrophes breaking into separate spaces, analogous to the separate species of human that such thinkers imagined. This is not altogether wrong, as the asteroid extinction of the dinosaurs indicates, but it uses this framework to create and sustain an imagined racial hierarchy. Catastrophism was a reaction to the declaration of revolutionary time, in which the calendar began again, in order to indicate a new era after slavery.

On the other hand, time continues to intersect. All secular modalities of time interact with sacred times. For Protestant colonists, this time is linear and indexical. For indigenous peoples in the Americas and many Central African people brought to the Americas by force, time and space coexist in a circular cosmology. In the space available here, I will offer a taxonomy of modern time(s) as indexed by the Anthropocene and examine the intersections of time and revolution in Haiti, where black life mattered first.

What, to begin with, is time? Surely, you will say, time is a constant. Not according to the physicists. Richard Feynman, for example, suggests that time is a direction through space. There is a probability of what that direction might be but it is not given. At certain levels, time acts otherwise. According to Stephen Hawking, who should know, “the universe has every single possible history, each with its own probability.”⁷ Take the production of light. Niels Bohr famously demonstrated that electrons exist in fixed orbits around the nucleus of an atom. In the words of the Nobel committee: “When jumping from one orbit to another with lower energy, a light quantum is emitted.” So far, so good. Science-studies theorist Karen Barad finds a certain queer performativity at work here: “the

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electron is initially at one energy level and then it is at another *without having been anywhere in between.*" Light results from the electron getting "where it was going before it left."⁸

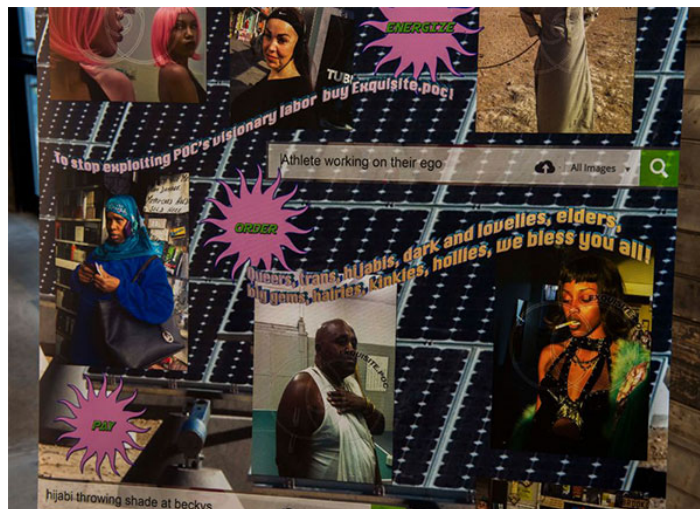
In terms of visual materials, we might take a certain poetic license to say that, far from being a slice of past time, as has so often been assumed, photographs come from the future. Light is "fixed" into a pattern by the camera before it has left. Certain photographs seem to be specifically intended as messages to the future. During what W. E. B. Du Bois called the "general strike" against slavery, those enslaved human beings who gained "something akin to freedom" (to appropriate a phrase from Mary Prince's narrative of enslavement) by crossing into Union territory lined up to be photographed by the young Timothy O'Sullivan in just this way. Still technically "contrabands" (people who had "stolen" themselves) and subject to the Fugitive Slave Law, the people assembled for the group photograph made a statement of intent and a desire to be witnessed by the future. These messages exist in nonlinear time, containing elements of different temporalities. That is to say, screen-based images always blend time, legible in different ways to different readers. While a film begins and ends, and a photograph is exposed in a specific moment, the resulting images do work in and as (a) people's memories. If human lives are not lived like quarks, there is nonetheless a queer temporality at work in which a present that is not yet queer, not yet common, not yet free can experience the possibility of the abolitions that would be needed to make it so.⁹ What times mingle in these frames?

1. Sacred/Cosmological Time

In Protestant theology, sacred time decentered the human in relation to the divine, even as its colonial version in Britain aspired to a certain precision. In 1650, Archbishop James Ussher of Ireland calculated that God created the world on October 22, 4004 BCE, around 9:30 pm. Here Ussher framed time as Protestant, ordered by God to culminate in the British Empire, just as US manifest destiny and Israel's messianic state draw authority today from the divine. Against these linear temporalities, indigenous and African peoples in the Americas thought of time and space as circular, meaning that life was lived in the visible world but also in the spirit world. Any human – whether a person, a spirit, or an animal – passed through both of these worlds over the course of time. Christian missionaries to the Americas were perennially frustrated by the "inconstancy" of the indigenous, who would accept Christian divinity but include it in their existing cosmology. By the same token, slavers were infuriated by the recurring suicides among

their human property, not realizing that, in a cosmological worldview, to pass from one life in the world to the spirit world was the means to ultimately return to Africa. The water marked the dividing line between these worlds. It was not that life did not matter but that it did not end in death (or the afterlife), but continued otherwise. When the protestors at Standing Rock say "water is life," they are not being New Age-y or even environmentalist. It is a different perspective on what life actually is, not measured as a span but as a set of relations. When Black Lives Matter, for example.

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Installation view from the exhibition Mami at the Knockdown Center (2016) featuring Exquisite.Poc by Malaxa. Photo: Kearra Gopee

2. Deep/Capitalist Time

Deep time was one of the most vital modern inventions, coming just a year after James Watt patented a workable version of the steam engine that opened the road to fossil-fuel-created climate change. Deriving his insight from the strata of rocks, British natural historian James Hutton reimagined time in 1785 as having "no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end." Hutton's colleague John Playfair commented that "the mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far into the abyss of time." This metaphor gave rise to the recent geological imagery of "deep time," a time unaffected by human action in which our presence is the slightest of details. That *mise-en-abyme* (the dizziness of the abyss) has now ended. Hutton's framework of time as an unending continuum served as a form of raw material for what the historian E. P. Thompson called "work-discipline" in industrial capitalism.¹⁰ He noted how clocks and watches were more available around 1800 and how the rhythms of agricultural life became subjected to the relentless pattern of industrial time. Thompson's 1967 essay was very much of its time, written from the white side of labor,

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imagining a leisure-directed future brought about by automation that would enable the then-decolonizing world to live very different lives. Deep time frames labor, life, and capital as accumulation without beginning or end. For Hutton, this was a “scientific” (his term) way to see what could not be physically seen.

3. Revolutionary Time

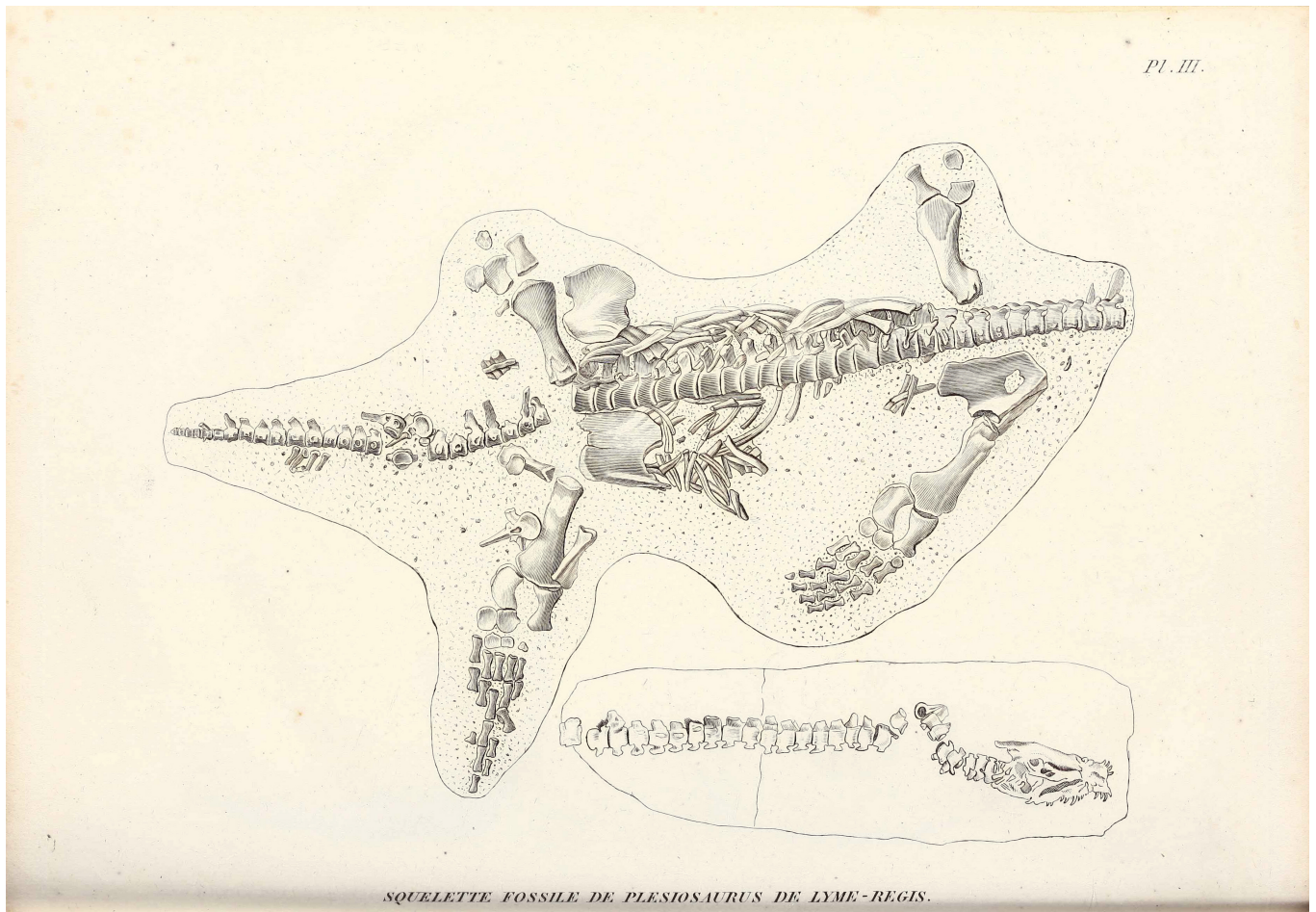
Revolutionary time allows for the unexpunged potential of a moment to be reanimated. A dialectical image catches such potential and contains it, waiting for the moment in which it can again be seen for what it is. Revolutionary time has never left the place of possibility, rather than trying to contain it in norms and hierarchies. In revolutionary time, actors experience the future in real time because the intensity of their contact with others takes place so quickly that it is to experience in days what otherwise might take months or years. Revolutionary time is more like cosmological time than it is like capitalist time. In thinking about Reconstruction in the United States after the abolition of slavery, David Roediger defines revolutionary time as “a cyclical time of liberation, of abolition, and of mechanisms of redress.”¹¹ The cycle does not complete until wrongs have been righted, which in this case means reparations for the “social death” of slavery.¹² That is not to say that enslaved human being had no life or no social life but that the social codes of law and governance excluded them absolutely from participation. In 1865, the demand was for forty acres and a mule. In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. went to Washington to “cash a check,” meaning the unpaid reparations of a century prior. In 1967, with that repair still owed, he began the Poor People’s Campaign with his vision of a basic income, affordable housing, and social health care for all. In 2016, the Movement for Black Lives set out a “Vision for Black Lives” in which reparations was the first heading after the demand to end the war on black people.¹³ Reparations are a spiritual as well as an economic demand, a repairing of life.

The revolutionary cycle is one of cosmological life. In 1793 the French revolutionary Fabre d’Eglantine proposed to recommence the calendar with the Year Zero: “We can no longer count the years in which kings oppressed us as a time in which we have lived.”¹⁴ In other words, before the revolution, the people were suffering a form of social death. A few months later, by extension, colonial slavery was abolished. Earlier, at the 1791 ceremony at Bwa Kayiman that began the Haitian Revolution, the warrior spirit Ezili Danto inspired the Haitian priest Cécile Fatiman, and the revolutionary Dutty Boukman called on the enslaved to “listen

to the voice for liberty that speaks in all our hearts.” Boukman challenged any concept of social death by locating liberty not in Enlightenment thought or the French Revolution but as an ethical demand from within the one body part that cannot be “owned.” The Haitian Revolution was a multiple victory over death – over the nonlife of living under kings and the presumed social death of slavery that made the very possibility of such an event unthinkable (by persons calling themselves white). Perhaps by way of recognition, Haiti created both a revolutionary calendar, beginning from zero in 1804, and continued to use the Christian calendar. The 1804 Constitution, promulgated on “the first day of the independence of Haiti,” expressed this complexity in its opening statement: “Slavery is forever abolished.” That imperative mixes past, present, and future to end (social) death. In this situation, white mastery becomes future impossibility. Thus in Article 12 it is decreed: “No whiteman of whatever nation he may be, shall put his foot on this territory with the title of master or proprietor, neither shall he in future acquire any property therein.” This clause undid colonialism, and sought to foreclose any future possibility of white supremacy, neocolonialism, or segregation. The constitution insisted, against the racialized hierarchy created by slavery, that all persons living in Haiti were to “be known only by the generic appellation of Blacks,” using the term *Noir* rather than the colonial *Nègre*. To simply be present – in the present – in decolonial space was to be black (*noir*), regardless of past personal histories, rewriting blackness as revolutionary affiliation and as abolition democracy. As life. As where black life matters.

4. Catastrophic Time

For many white persons, these revolutions were thus catastrophic, not to say unthinkable. In Baron Georges Cuvier’s *On the Revolutionary Upheavals in the Surface of the Globe* (1807), catastrophic geological time was committed to the suppression of human revolutionary time.¹⁵ Cuvier later notoriously defined native Africans as “the most degraded of human races, whose form approaches that of the beast and whose intelligence is nowhere great enough to arrive at regular government.”¹⁶ He wrote just after the creation of a revolutionary government by the majority African population in Haiti, a revolution of which Cuvier could not possibly have been ignorant. For Cuvier, one cannot even make the phrase “black lives matter” make sense. Black life for him was a variety of animal life, whose outcomes might be the subject of curiosity but not moral engagement. It was this same Cuvier



An illustration from Georges Cuvier's 1826 book *Discours sur les Révolutions de la Surface du Globe: et sur les Changements qu'elles ont Produits dans le Règne Animal* [Discourse on the Revolutions of the Surface of the Globe, and on the Changes They Produced in the Animal Kingdom].

who engaged in the dissection of the deceased Sara Baartman, a Khoisan woman (from present-day South Africa), and preserved her genitalia for the collection of the French National Museum of Natural History. Her remains were only repatriated to South Africa with the arrival of majority government in 1994. Catastrophic time seeks to explain geological and (white) human disaster. It imagines the end of time as a solution to present-day crisis. While the science of the Anthropocene is very different, it is animated by the catastrophic structure of feeling.

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Beyoncé's take on the goddess Mami Wata shows her floating on top of a police car in a post-Hurricane Katrina scenario, as featured in the music video for the song "Formation" (2016).

5. Revolutionary Time Below the Water

In the fall of 2016, Hurricane Matthew spun through the Caribbean, delivering another devastating blow to Haiti. A Category 4 hurricane when it hit, it deposited forty inches of rain in some areas, with a storm surge of ten feet (enough to flood Manhattan, by way of comparison). Between five hundred and fifteen hundred people were killed, while 1.4 million were in need of humanitarian assistance and \$1.89 billion of damage was done. The United States gave about \$37 million. After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, there was much discussion about the fact that hurricanes seem to follow the same route taken by the slave ships. It was said that spirits from the Middle Passage (like the Haitian *lwa* Simbi) had destroyed the city in their anger over slavery. Why would the spirits destroy African-American homes over slavery, rather than those of slavers? They are nonhuman and think differently. They want to take their human counterparts "back to Africa." In Kreyol, that connection is called *anba dlo* (beneath the water). Since Katrina, an annual Anba Dlo ceremony has been held in New Orleans. Vodou came to New Orleans in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution, when slavers fled the liberated island, bringing enslaved Africans with them. Organized by Vodou *mambo* (priest) Sallie-Anne Glassman at the New

Orleans Healing Center, Anba Dlo brings together discussions on science and engineering with a ceremony addressed to La Sirène, also known as Mami Wata, the syncretic water deity of the African diaspora. Glassman calls on her in order "to apologize for what we've done to the water, but also to bring us guidance to fix the damage and live more in harmony with the planet."¹⁷ Mami Wata/La Sirène is not easy to placate. She is proud of her beauty, cold, concerned with material wealth, and yet able to bring about healing for her followers. Beyoncé evoked her presence in the video for her song "Formation," and in 2016 an exhibit at the Knockdown Center in Queens explored her legacy.¹⁸

The connections make sense: capitalism was fueled by slavery, as recent studies have shown, updating and endorsing the path that Caribbean activist-scholars C. L. R. James – later a close friend and comrade of Grace Lee Boggs – and Eric Williams had forged in 1938 and 1944 respectively.¹⁹ As Cedric Robinson taught us, there is no capitalism that is not racial capitalism. And there is no capitalist accumulation that is not destructive to the natural habitat. Medieval historian Lynn White has dated the human domination of habitat to the ninth century CE. In thirteenth century Italy, early forms of merchant trading led to widespread deforestation. As early as 1281, landowners in Sienna were required to plant ten trees a year, while in 1333 deforestation caused a devastating flood in Florence. The sugar-fueled economy accelerated both sides of the equation. Barbados generated more wealth than anywhere else in the seventeenth-century British Empire and was deforested by 1666. Present-day capitalism has followed suit. In the "great acceleration" since 1980, rapidly increasing fossil-fuel emissions have warmed the planet and melted the ice sheets, leading to a rise in sea levels. A feedback loop has been created: warmer water gives more energy to storms, while warmer air retains more moisture and sea-level rise means there is more water to surge. Slavery engendered capitalism, which has caused earth-system crisis that produces warmer water, making hurricanes more powerful. Or in a phrase: Mami Wata did it.

By contrast, the *New York Times* produced an online photo essay about Hurricane Matthew under the sensationalist headline "Haitians, Battered By Hurricane, Huddle In Caves: 'This Is The Only Shelter We Have.'" Wide-angle high-resolution color-saturated photographs by Meridith Kohut framed human figures as insignificant against the drama of nature. Although the caves could be seen, little else could be derived from the picture. Journalist Azam Ahmed opined, "For much of the world,

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Haiti is known more as a crisis than a country.”²⁰ Many media accounts of the hurricane stressed the deforestation of the island. Not mentioned was the fact that deforestation began with slave-labor camps of the colonial period.²¹ That is the result of two centuries of casting Haiti as “black beyond redemption,” to quote the nineteenth-century historian and arch-reactionary Thomas Carlyle, whose idea of the Great Man is once again in vogue among Trump followers. For Carlyle, Haiti, far from being the site of freedom, must be depicted as permanent, irredeemable crisis, forever lost for having dared to revolt.

The idea that black life matters is a new one for settler colonies – too new to have been fully accepted. Rather than modify behavior or change energy consumption, making America white again involves using as much fossil fuel as you can and building the next generation of luxury hotels on stilts so the flood water goes underneath, as is now standard practice in Miami. Call it migrant labor luxury hotel capitalism – the actually existing format of fully automated luxury communism. Its follies include aluminum museums being built in the desert, space tourism, cryogenic preservation, and other practices of zombification. What about the people below the water? For now, white supremacy considers them – us – defeated. Instead, we’re just figuring this out. Water is life. The land owns us. Respect the ancestors, respect the spirits. Those on the ground, understanding that black life matters, are making revolutionary time. The future is now, right alongside the reactionary zombie capitalism of the past. But the prophets got one thing wrong: not the fire next time, but the flood.

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