

FALSEWORK SCHOOL

MAKING AMERICA YET AGAIN: STUDY & THE CONSTANT STRUGGLE THAT IS FREEDOM

5 NOVEMBER 2020

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Let America Be America Again

Langston Hughes

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—
Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers!
I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,

Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,

That even yet its mighty daring sings
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
That's made America the land it has become.

O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas
In search of what I meant to be my home—
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held

And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay—
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's,
ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!

"'But American racism!'

'So What? European racism in the colonies has inured us to it!'

And there we are, ready to run the great Yankee risk. So, once again, be careful! American domination -- the only domination from which one never recovers. I mean from which one never recovers unscarred." Aline Cesaire,

Discourse on Colonialism

This day of community study works with texts and artifacts that might allow us to grapple with the current ambience of everyday life and politics in the Berkshires and how its tenor and affect communicate with national and global discourses and trends.

MICHAEL BROWN

0

How can we survive genocide? We can only address this question by studying how we have survived genocide. In the interest of imagining what exists, there is an image of Michael Brown we must refuse in favor of another image we don't have. One is a lie, the other unavailable. If we refuse to show the image of a lonely body, of the outline of the space that body simultaneously took and left, we do so in order to imagine jurisgenerative black social life walking down the middle of the street—for a minute, but only for a minute, unpoliced, another city gathers, dancing. We know it's there, and here, and real; we know what we can't have happens all the time. Imagining what exists requires and allows analysis.

1

When my brother fell
I picked up his weapons.
I didn't question
whether I could aim
or be as precise as he.
A needle and thread
were not among
his things

I found.

—Essex Hemphill, "When My Brother Fell"

When we walk down the street

We don't care who we see or who we meet

Don't need to run, don't need to hide

'cause we got something burning inside

we've got love power

it's the greatest power of them all

we've got love power

and together we can't fall.

—Luther Vandross, "Power of Love/Love Power"

At times, this land will shake your understanding of the world

and confusion will eat away at your sense of humanity

but at least you will feel normal.

—Vernon Ah Kee, from *Whitefellanormal*³

These passages bear an analytic of the lost and found, of fallenness and ascension, that comes burning to mind in and as the name of Michael Brown. First, that there is a social erotics of the lost and found in fallenness's refusal of standing. We fall so we can fall again, which is what ascension really means to us. To fall is to lose one's place, to lose the place that makes one, to relinquish the locus of being, which is to say of being single. This radical homelessness—its kinetic indigeneity, its irreducible queerness—is the essence of blackness. This refusal to take place is given in what it is to occur. Michael Brown is the latest name of the ongoing event of resistance to, and resistance before, socioecological disaster. Modernity's constitution in the transatlantic

slave trade, settler colonialism and capital's emergence in and with the state, is The Socioecological Disaster. Michael Brown gives us occasion once again to consider what it is to endure the disaster, to survive (in) genocide, to navigate unmappable differences as a range of localities that, in the end—either all the way to the end or as our ongoing refusal of beginnings and ends—will always refuse to have been taken.

The fall is anacatastrophic refusal of the case and, therefore, of the world, which is the earth's capture insofar as it was always a picture frozen and extracted from imaginal movement. At stake is the power of love, which is given, in walking down the street, as defiance to the (racial capitalist, settler colonial) state and its seizures, especially its seizure of the capacity to make (and break) law. Against the grain of the state's monopolization of ceremony, ceremonies are small and profligate; if they weren't everywhere and all the time we'd be dead. The ruins, which are small rituals, aren't absent but surreptitious, a range of songful scarring, when people give a sign, shake a hand. But what if together we can fall, because we're fallen, because we need to fall again, to continue in our common fallenness, remembering that falling is in apposition to rising, their combination given in lingering, as the giving of pause, recess, vestibular remain, custodial remand, hold, holding in the interest of rub, dap's reflex and reflection of maternal touch, a maternal ecology of laid hands, of being handled, handed, handed down, nurture's natural dispersion, its endless refusal of standing. Hemphill emphatically announces the sociality that Luther shelters. Fallen, risen, mo(u)rnful survival. When black men die, it's usually because we love each other, whether we run, or fight, or surrender. Consider Michael Brown's generative occurrence and recurrence as refusal of the case, as refusal of standing. You can do this but only if you wish to insert yourself, and now I must abuse a phrase of Ah Kee's, into black

worldlessness. Our homelessness. Our selflessness. None of which are or can be ours.

2

The state can't live with us and it can't live without us. Its violence is a reaction to that condition. The state is nothing other than a war against its own condition. The state is at war against its own (re)sources, in violent reaction to its own condition of im/possibility, which is life itself, which is the earth itself, which blackness doesn't so much stand in for as name, as a name among others that is not just another name among others. That we survive is beauty and testament; it is neither to be dismissed nor overlooked nor devalued by or within whatever ascription of value; that we survive is invaluable. It is, at the same time, insufficient. We have to recognize that a state—the racial capitalist/settler colonial state—of war has long existed. Its brutalities and militarizations, its regulative mundanities, are continually updated and revised, but they are not new. If anything, we need to think more strategically about our own innovations, recognizing that the state of war is a reactive state, a machine for regulating and capitalizing upon our innovations in/for survival.

This is why what's most disturbing about Michael Brown (aka Eric Garner, aka Renisha McBride, aka Trayvon Martin, aka Eleanor Bumpurs, aka Emmitt Till, aka an endless stream of names and absent names) is our reaction to him, our misunderstanding of him, and the sources of that misunderstanding that manifest and reify a desire for standing, for stasis, within the state war machine which, contrary to popular belief, doesn't confer citizenship upon its subjects at birth but, rather, at death, which is the proper name for entrance into its properly political confines. The prosecution of Michael Brown, which is the proper technical name for the grand jury investigation of Darren Wilson, the drone, is what our day in court looks like and always has. The prone, exposed, unburied body—the body that is given, in death, its status as body precisely through and by way of the

withholding of fleshly ceremony—is what political standing looks like. That's the form it takes and keeps. This is a Sophoclean formulation. The law of the state is what Ida B. Wells rightly calls lynch law. And we extend it in our appeals to it. We need to stop worrying so much about how it kills, regulates, and accumulates us, and worry more about how we kill, deregulate, and disperse it. We have to love and revere our survival, which is (in) our resistance. We have to love our refusal of what has been refused. But insofar as this refusal has begun to stand, insofar as it has begun to seek standing, it stands in need of renewal, now, even as the sources and conditions of that renewal become more and more obscure, more and more entangled with the regulatory apparatuses that are deployed in order to suppress them. At moments like this we have to tell the truth with a kind of viciousness and, even, a kind of cruelty. Black lives don't matter, which is an empirical statement not only about black lives in this state of war but also about lives. This is to say that lives don't matter; nor should they. It's the metaphysics of the individual life in all its immateriality that's got us in this situation in the first place. Michael Brown lived and moved within a deep and evolving understanding of this: if i leave this earth today at least you'll know i care about others more then i cared about my damn self. . .

But we have to consider how, and what it means that, his testament is transformed into an expression of mourning and outrage such as this upon the nonoccasion of the nonindictment:

Go on call me "demon" but I WILL love my damn self. I suffer with but also through this expression of our suffering. For this expression of our disavowal of the demonic—however brutally the police and/or the polis, in their soullessness, ascribe it to or inscribe it upon us—is erstwhile respectability's voluntary laying down of arms, its elective demobilization of jurisgenerative force. Meanwhile, Michael Brown is like another fall and rise through man—come and

gone, as irruption and rupture, to remind us not that black lives matter but that black life matters; that the absolute and undeniable blackness of life matters. The innovation of our survival is given in embrace of this daimonic, richly internally differentiated choreography, its lumpen improvisation of contact, which is obscured when class struggle in black studies threatens to suppress black study as class struggle.

How much has black studies, as a bourgeois institutionalization of black study, determined the way we understand and fight the state of war within which we try to live? How has it determined how we understand the complex nonsingularity that we know now as Michael Brown? It would be wrong to say that Michael Brown has become, in death, more than himself. He already was that, as he said himself, in echo of so much more than himself. He was already more than that in being less than that, in being the least of these. To reduce Michael Brown to a cypher for our unfulfilled desire to be more than that, for our serially unachieved and constitutionally unachievable citizenship, is to do a kind of counterrevolutionary violence; it is to partake in the ghoulish, vampiric consumption of his body, of the body that became his, though it did not become him, in death, in the reductive stasis to which his flesh was subjected. Michael Brown's flesh is our flesh; he is flesh of our flesh of flames.

On August 9, like every day, like any other day, black life, in its irreducible sociality, having consented not to be single, got caught walking—with jurisgenerative fecundity—down the middle of the street. Michael Brown and his boys: black life breaking and making law, against and underneath the state, surrounding it. They had foregone the melancholic appeal, to which we now reduce them, for citizenship, and subjectivity, and humanness. That they had done so is the source of Darren Wilson's genocidal instrumentalization in the state's defense. They were in a state of war and they knew it.

Moreover, they were warriors in insurgent, if imperfect, beauty.

What's left for us to consider is the difference between the way of Michael Brown's dance, his fall and rise—the way they refuse to take place when he takes to the streets, the way Ferguson takes to the streets—and the way we seek to take, but don't seem to take to, the streets: in protest, as mere petitioners, fruitlessly seeking energy in the pitiful, minimal, temporary shutdown of this or that freeway, as if mere occupation were something other than retrenchment (in reverse) of the demand for recognition that actually constitutes business as usual. Rather than dissipate our preoccupation with how we live and breathe, we need to defend our ways in our persistent practice of them. It's not about taking the streets; it's about how, and about what, we should take to the streets. What would it be and what would it mean for us jurisgeneratively to take to the streets, to live in the streets, to gather together another city right here, right now?

3

Meanwhile, against the dead citizenship that was imposed upon him, the body the state tried to make him be, and in lieu of the images we refuse and can't have, here is an image of our imagination.

This is Michael Brown, his descent, his ascension, his ceremony, his flesh, his animation in and of the maternal ecology—Michael Brown's innovation, as contact, in improvisation. Contact improvisation is how we survive genocide.

we didn't get here by ourselves. black takes like black took. we were already beside our selves, evidently. eventually, we were upside ourselves in this wombed scar, this womblike scarring open scream tuned open, sister, can you move my form? took, had, give. because he wasn't by himself he's gone in us. how we got over that we didn't get here is wanting more than that in the way we carry ourselves, how we carry over our selves into we're gone in the

remainder. here, not here, bought, unbought, we brought ourselves with us so we could give ourselves away, which is more than they can take away, even when its more than we can take

--Stefano Harney and Fred Moten

From FREEDOM IS A CONSTANT STRUGGLE: CLOSURES AND CONTINUITIES

They say that freedom is a constant struggle. They say that freedom is a constant struggle. They say that freedom is a constant struggle, O Lord, we've struggled so long we must be free. [...]

So the title of my talk is drawn from a freedom song, which was repeatedly sung in the southern United States during the twentieth century freedom movement. The other verses of that song evoke crying, sorrow, mourning, dying—they say freedom is a constant dying, we've died so long we must be free.

And I like the irony of the last line of each of the verses: we've struggled so long, we've cried so long, we've sorrowed so long, we've moaned so long, we've died so long, we must be free, we must be free. And of course there's simultaneously resignation and promise in that line, there is critique and inspiration: we must be free, we must be free but are we really free?

[...]

I've been asked to speak about the meaning of freedom in the sesquicentennial year of the US emancipation proclamation and during the fiftieth anniversary year of pivotal events in the twentieth century black freedom struggle in the United States.

So let me begin by evoking some of the fiftieth anniversary events. This is the fiftieth anniversary of Dr Martin Luther King's letter from a Birmingham jail, in which he defended his decision to organize in Birmingham where he was accused of being an outside agitator in

this way: 'I am cognizant', he wrote, 'of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.'

And you are probably familiar with that quote. 'We are caught', he wrote, 'in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.'

And then he proceeds to evoke history:

For more than two centuries our forebears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation—and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail.

We're also observing the fiftieth anniversary year of the Birmingham children's crusade. It may not be so widely known that the success of the Birmingham campaign was possible because vast numbers of school children—girls and boys—at the beginning of May in 1963 faced police dogs and high-power hoses. Their televised demonstrations—and incidentally, television was quite young and it was really the first time that people outside of the South had the opportunity to witness these demonstrations—revealed to the world the determination with which black people continued to struggle for freedom.

Nineteen sixty-three was also the year of the March on Washington, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which was attended by some 250,000 people. At that time it was the largest ever human assembly in Washington.

This past August, there were two marches in Washington, one of which was addressed by Presidents Obama and Clinton, and the other by figures who represent

themselves as current civil rights leaders; I won't go into their names.

And there were series of events that marked the fiftieth anniversary. Many people did not know which march to attend (I think one was on the 24th and one was on the 28th). But last month in September a number of events took place in Birmingham, Alabama, which as you heard is where I was born and where I grew up.

These events observe the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church and the killing of four young black girls. The height of the observances was the bestowal of the highest civilian honor, the Congressional Gold Medal, on the families of the four girls killed in the bombing; although the sister of one of the girls, Sarah Collins (sister of Addie Mae Collins), she did not die but she lost an eye and was severely injured and to this day she has received no official assistance with her medical bills.

What I fear about many of these observances is that they tend to enact historical closures. They are represented as historical high points on a road to an ultimately triumphant democracy; one which can be displayed as a model for the world; one which perhaps can serve as justification for military incursions, including the increased use of drones in the so-called war on terror, which has resulted in the killing of vast numbers of people, especially in Pakistan.

While criticizing the Obama administration for the increased use of drones, I must at the same time acknowledge his speech on the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington for its attempt to represent freedom struggles as unfinished and for at least attempting to focus on continuities rather than closures. But invoking the old adage, I must say actions really do speak louder than words.

No one can deny that global popular culture is saturated with references to the twentieth century Black Freedom Movement. We know that Dr Martin Luther King Jr is one of the most widely known historical figures in

the world. Inside the US there are more than 900 streets named after Dr King in 40 states, Washington DC and Puerto Rico. But as has been suggested by geographers who have studied these naming practices, they've been used to deflect attention from persisting social problems—the lack of education, housing, jobs, and the use of carceral strategies to conceal the continued presence of these problems.

There are more than 900 streets named after Dr. King but there're also some 2.5 million people in US jails, prisons, youth facilities, military prisons and jails in Indian country. The population of those facilities constitute 25% of the world's incarcerated population as compared to 5% of the planets population at large. Twenty-five percent of the world's population serves as fodder for a vast prison industrial complex with global dimensions that profits from strategies designed to hide social problems that have remained unaddressed since the era of slavery.

Moreover, police violence and racist vigilante violence is at its height. The Trayvon Martin case in the US recalls the Stephen Lawrence case here. But also Islamophobic violence is nurtured by histories of anti-black racist violence. There is simultaneously a saturated geographical presence of the culture of the Black Freedom Movement and a lack of anything more than abstract knowledge about that movement.

I would dare say that most people who are familiar with Dr Martin Luther King—and the vast majority of people in the world are familiar with him I think—they know little more than the fact that he had a dream. And of course all of us have had dreams. And as a matter of fact the 'I have a dream' speech is the most widely circulated of all of his orations.

Relatively few people are aware of the Riverside Church speech on Vietnam and the way he came to recognize the intersections and interconnections of the Black Liberation Movement and the campaign to end the war in Vietnam. Therefore understandings of the twentieth century freedom movement that

help us cultivate more complicated ideas of the geographies and temporalities of freedom are suppressed.

Dominant representations of the Black Freedom Movement are a discreet series of historical moments largely produced by the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott. And somehow, although Martin Luther King Jr himself began to emerge to prominence as a consequence of that boycott, he is seen as always already the orator and leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

[...]

And I wonder will we ever truly recognize the collective subject of history that was itself produced by radical organizing—early on during the 1930s/1940s, and I am referring, for example, to an organization which was known as the Southern Negro Youth Congress, which has largely been excised from the official historical record because some of its key leaders were communist.

As Carole Boyce Davies has pointed out in her wonderful book on Claudia Jones, *Left of Karl Marx*, Claudia Jones was one of the leaders of the Negro Youth Congress (the American Negro Youth Congress and the Southern Youth Congress). And I mention Jones both because of her important work in the US and because she became a pivotal figure in the organizing of Caribbean communities here in Britain after she was arrested for the work she did in the US and eventually deported.

How can we counteract the representation of historical agents as powerful individuals, powerful male individuals, in order to reveal the part played, for example, by black women domestic workers in the Black Freedom Movement?

Regimes of racial segregation were not disestablished because of the work of leaders and presidents and legislators but rather because of the fact that ordinary people adopted a critical stance in the way in which they perceived their relationship to reality. Social realities that may have appeared inalterable, impenetrable, came to be viewed

as malleable and transformable; and people learned how to imagine what it might mean to live in a world that was not so exclusively governed by the principle of white supremacy. This collective consciousness emerged within the context of social struggles.

Orlando Patterson has argued that the very concept of freedom—which is held so dear throughout the West, which has inspired so many world historical revolutions—that very concept of freedom must have been first imagined by slaves. During the era of the twentieth century Black Freedom Movement, the human beings whose predicament most approximated that of slaves, that of the slaves from whom they were descended, were black women domestic workers. We're referring to women who cleaned house, who cooked, who were laundry women.

As a matter of fact during the 1950s some 90% of all black women were domestic workers. And given the fact that the majority of people who rode buses in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 were black domestic workers, why is it so difficult to imagine and acknowledge what must have been, among these black women domestic workers, this amazing collective imagination of a future world without racial and gender and economic oppression.

Even though we may not know the names of all of those women who refused to ride the bus from poor black communities to affluent white communities in Montgomery, Alabama, it seems that we should at least acknowledge their collective accomplishment. That boycott would not have been successful without their refusals, without their critical refusals. And thus a figure like Dr Martin Luther King Jr might never have emerged into prominence.

Fanny Lou Hamer—some of you may have studied the history of the US Civil Rights Movement, the US freedom movement—she was a share cropper and a domestic worker. She was a timekeeper on a cotton plantation in the 1960s. And she emerged as a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

(SNCC) and as a leader of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. She said, 'all my life, I have been sick and tired. Now I am sick and tired of being sick and tired.'

In 1964, she achieved national prominence when she demanded that members of her Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which was a racially integrated party, be seated at the national Democratic Party convention at the expense of seats that were given to the all-white Democratic Party delegation. In many ways, she paved the way for Barack Obama. But that's another story.

This is not only a year of fiftieth anniversary celebrations, but it is also the sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. Interestingly, unfortunately, we have not been called upon to participate in any nationwide anniversary event. I remembered when you here at least had the bicentennial of the abolition of slavery and, of course I think your figure is Wilberforce, so you had to also question the fact that a figure like Wilberforce would be symbolic of the abolition of slavery here.

But we haven't even been really asked to participate in any major celebrations. Perhaps the closest we've come to that was the popular film *Lincoln*, which actually focuses on the effort to pass the 13th amendment. The sesquicentennial of that passage will be coming up in two years, in 1865. The historical significance of the Proclamation is not so much that it enacted the emancipation of people of African descent; on the contrary, it was a military strategy. But if we examine the meaning of this historical moment we might better be able to grasp the failures as well as the successes of emancipation.

I have thought that perhaps we were not asked to reflect on the significance of the Emancipation Proclamation because we might realize that we were never really emancipated. But anyway, at least we may be able to understand the dialectics of emancipation; because we still live the popular myth that Lincoln freed the slaves and that this continues

to be perpetuated in popular culture, even by the film *Lincoln*. Lincoln did not free the slaves.

We also live with the myth that the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights Movement freed the second-class citizens. Civil rights, of course, constitute an essential element of the freedom that was demanded at that time, but it was not the whole story, but maybe we'll get to that later. Eric Foner, in his book called *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*, wrote that, and I am quoting:

The Emancipation Proclamation is perhaps the most misunderstood of the documents that have shaped American history. Contrary to legend, Lincoln did not free the nearly four million slaves with a stroke of his pen. It had no bearing on slaves in the four border states, since they were not in rebellion. It also exempted certain parts of the Confederacy occupied by the Union. All told, it left perhaps 750,000 slaves in bondage.

And of course popular narratives about the end of slavery produced by the pronouncing of this emancipation document by Abraham Lincoln erase the agency of black people themselves. But, there is something for which Lincoln should be applauded, I believe. And it is that he was shrewd enough to know that the only hope of winning the Civil War resided in creating the opportunity to fight for their own freedom, and that was the significance of the Emancipation Proclamation.

And as matter of fact ... do you remember one of the first scenes, which consists of a conversation with two black soldiers? I think that perhaps is the most important scene in the film, so people who arrived late missed the most important moment in the film.

And in this connection I'd like to evoke W. E. B. Du Bois and chapter four of *Black Reconstruction*, which defined the consequence of the Emancipation Proclamation as a general strike. He uses the vocabulary of the labor movement. And as a matter of fact, chapter four 'The General Strike' is described in the following manner:

How the Civil War meant emancipation and how the black worker won the war by a general strike which transferred his labor from the Confederate planter to the Northern invader, in whose army lines workers began to be organized as a new labor force.

And so Du Bois argues that it was the withdrawal and bestowal of labor by slaves that won the war. And what he calls 'this army of striking labor' eventually provided the 200,000 soldiers, quote: 'whose evident ability to fight decided the war'. And these soldiers included women like Harriet Tubman, who was a soldier and a spy and had to fight for many years in order to be granted later on a soldier's pension.

In the aftermath of the war, we find one of the most hidden eras of US history; and that is the period of radical reconstruction. It certainly remains the most radical era in the entire history of the United States of America. And this is an era that is rarely acknowledged in historical texts. We had black elected officials, the development of public education (as a matter of fact, former slaves fought for the right of public education, that is to say, education that did not cost money as your education here costs ... I'll say parenthetically! ... The fight was for non-commodified education and as a matter of fact white children in the south, poor white children who had not had education gained access to education as a direct result of the struggles of former slaves). There were progressive laws passed challenging male supremacy. This is an era that is rarely acknowledged.

During that era of course we had the creation of what we now call historically black colleges and universities and there was economic development. This period didn't last very long. From the aftermath of the abolition of slavery, we might take 1865 as that day until 1877 when a radical reconstruction was overturned—and not only was it overturned but it was erased from the historical record—and so in the 1960s we confronted issues that

should have been resolved in the 1860s. One hundred years later.

As a matter of fact, the Klu Klux Klan and the racial segregation that was so dramatically challenged during the mid-twentieth century freedom movement was produced not during slavery but rather in an attempt to manage free black people who would have been far more successful in pushing forward democracy for all.

And so we see this dialectical development of the black liberation movement. There is this freedom movement and then there is an attempt to narrow the freedom movement so that it fits into a much smaller frame, the frame of civil rights. Not that civil rights is not immensely important, but freedom is more expansive than civil rights.

And as that movement grew and developed it was inspired by and in turn inspired liberation struggles in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Australia. It was not only a question of acquiring the formal rights to fully participate in society, but rather it was also about substantive rights—it was about jobs, free education, free health care, affordable housing, and also about ending the racist police occupation of black communities.

And so in the 1960s organizations like the Black Panther Party were created. And I should say that the Black Panther Party was founded in 1966, which means there should be a fiftieth anniversary celebration coming up!

And so I wonder how are we going to address, for example, the ten-point program of the Black Panther Party and I'll just summarize the ten-point program and you might get an idea why there are not efforts underway to guarantee a large fiftieth anniversary celebration for the Black Panther Party.

Number *one* was we want freedom.

Two, full employment.

Three, an end to the robbery by the capitalists of our black and oppressed communities — it was anti-capitalist!

Number *four*, we want decent housing, fit for the shelter of human beings.

Number *five*, we want decent education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in present day society.

And number *six*—which is especially significant in relation to the right-wing effort to undo the very small efforts made by the Obama administration to produce health care for poor people in the US—we want completely free health care for all black and oppressed people.

Number *seven*, we want an immediate end to police brutality and the murder of black people, other people of color, and all oppressed people inside the United States.

Number *eight*, we want an immediate end to all wars of aggression—you see how current this still sounds.

Number *nine*: we want freedom for all black and oppressed people now held in US Federal state, county, city, and military prisons and jails. We want trials by a jury of peers for all persons charged with so-called crimes under the laws of this country.

And finally, number *ten*: we want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, peace and people's community control of modern technology.

What is so interesting about this manifesto is that it recapitulates nineteenth century abolitionist agendas and of course the most advanced abolitionists in the nineteenth century recognized that slavery could not be ended by simply negatively abolishing slavery but rather that institutions had to be produced that would incorporate former slaves into a new and developing democracy.

[...]

Acknowledging continuities between nineteenth century anti-slavery struggles, twentieth century civil rights struggles, twenty-first century abolitionist struggles—and when I say abolitionist struggles I'm referring to the abolition of imprisonment as the dominant mode of punishment, the abolition of the prison industrial complex—acknowledging

these continuities requires a challenge to the closures that isolate the freedom movement of the twentieth century from the century preceding and the century following.

It is incumbent upon us not only to recognize these temporal continuities but also to recognize the horizontal continuities, links with a whole range of movements and struggles today. And I want very specifically to mention the ongoing sovereignty struggles in Palestine. In Palestine where not too long ago, Palestinian freedom riders set out to contest the apartheid practices of the state of Israel.

[...]

All around the world people are saying that we want to struggle to continue as global communities, to create a world free of xenophobia and racism, a world from which poverty has been expunged, and the availability of food is not subject to the demands of capitalist profit. I would say a world where a corporation like Monsanto would be deemed criminal. Where homophobia and transphobia can truly be called historical relics along with the punishment of incarceration and institutions of confinement for disabled people; and where everyone learns how to respect the environment and all of the creatures, human and non-human alike, with whom we cohabit our worlds.

-- Angela Davis

From RADICAL MULTICULTURALISM

[...]

I propose that we bring the terms “democracy” and “freedom” into the frame of our discussion of multiculturalism. As we question and criticize the official meanings of these three principles, we will do so in the hopes of discovering more nuanced, more substantive, more expansive understandings of freedom, democracy, and multiculturalism.

[...]

Why, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, have we allowed our government to pursue unilateral policies and practices of global war? Why have the official meanings of freedom and democracy and multiculturalism become increasingly restrictive? Why have they become so restrictive that it is difficult to disentangle their official meanings from the meaning of capitalism? If I had the time I would read for you two of George W. Bush’s recent speeches—the State of the Union and the Inaugural address—systematically replacing the words “freedom” and “democracy” with the word “capitalism,” I can guarantee you that this exercise will prove enlightening with respect to current U.S. foreign policy. Increasingly, freedom and democracy are envisioned by the government as exportable commodities, commodities that can be sold or imposed upon entire populations whose resistances are aggressively suppressed by the military.

[...]

Imperialist war militates against freedom and democracy, yet freedom and democracy are repeatedly invoked by the purveyors of global war. Precisely those forces that presume to make the world safe for freedom and democracy are now spreading war and torture and capitalist exploitation around the globe. The Bush government represents its project as a global offensive against terrorism, but the conduct of this offensive has generated practices of state violence and state terrorism in comparison to which its targets pale.

Since the period of Black Reconstruction, black Americans and their allies have waged an ongoing battle for the right to vote. In the course of that struggle countless numbers of people have lost their lives to racist terror—including James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner during the 1960s voter registration campaign in the state of Mississippi. This long history of struggle has emphasized the importance of voting rights to the overall workings of democracy. This is why we claim that the last two presidential

elections were far from democratic. Not only did the massive disenfranchisement of black men who had previously served time play a decisive role in the outcomes, but beyond felony disenfranchisement, there was also massive voter fraud. In Ohio, for example, polling booths were abundant in affluent communities, but they were so rare in poor black communities that many people gave up and went home after waiting in line for three to four hours. This is an illustration of the structural racism that continues to lurk behind public assertions that we now inhabit a multicultural democracy.

However, as crucial as voting rights may be, we have long recognized that the right to vote by itself does not guarantee democracy. It is not and cannot by itself be the paramount evidence of a democratic order. It matters whether candidates are freely selected or whether money determines who runs and who does not. Elections can be subordinated to the power of money, as we in this country have learned during the recent period. It matters whether the voting process unfolds against the backdrop of other political rights and social justice. It matters greatly if human rights are violated for the purpose of producing an election. It certainly matters if death and devastation, generated on such a colossal scale, including indiscriminate assaults on an entire culture, helped to stage the U.S.-sponsored elections in Iraq. If democracy in Iraq is to be meaningful at all, it must be disengaged from the state violence deployed by the United States in the putative service of democracy.

[...]

In other words, the price of inclusion in a multicultural democracy, at a time when the political climate was reminiscent of McCarthyism, was explicit assent to Islamophobia, militarism, and state violence.

[...]

In the aftermath of 9/11, the nation was the only type of community offered to people during that period of collective tragedy. During this period, the new multicultural nation took

shape, an imagined nation that hailed not only white citizens, but also black, Latina/o, Asian American, and possibly also Native American citizens. However, the closure of the circle of nationalism enacted important exclusions. If some communities historically targeted by racism were brought into the circle of the nation, others were more pertinaciously expelled. These others were Muslim, or people suspected of practicing Islam, Arabs—or people profiled as Arabs—people from the Middle East, from Central Asia, and from South Asia. As this process unfolded, we witnessed a massive buildup of the military-industrial complex. At a time when the collapse of the Socialist community of nations should have led to further disarmament and to a diminishing role for the Pentagon in the life of this country and of the planet, the Axis of Evil was bellicosely proclaimed, providing justification for many more billions of dollars directed toward the production of weapons. Multiculturalism by itself does not mark the defeat of racism. That the rise of multiculturalism is proof of the decline of racism is one of those mistaken assumptions that appears to capture the self-evident meaning of multiculturalism. In popular discourse, what this assumption does not acknowledge is the extent to which the terrain of racism has been fundamentally reconfigured. Today, the subterranean, structural dimensions of racism are as influential as ever, even though most people are smart enough to avoid uttering racist statements in public—although this does continue to happen. Moreover, this new terrain of racism is now hugely inflected by ideologies of terrorism. As we have seen, conventional multiculturalism is perfectly compatible with Islamophobia, torture, and violence. A strong multiculturalism, on the other hand, combined with scholarly and popular understandings of racism within the United States and transnationally, addresses the extent to which anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racisms have been incorporated into new structures of repression and punishment.

A colossal punishment industry has already claimed the lives of millions of people, overwhelmingly people of color—those who are forced to or have been forced to live inside the country's state prisons, federal prisons, county jails, Indian country jails, immigrant detention centers, as well as the military prisons. In the last few years, racism directed against Muslim and Arab people has been rapidly assimilated into political and legal structures: The PATRIOT Act, initially represented as a legislative appendage to the current war against terror, will lead to permanent changes in the ways citizens and non-citizens alike have access to rights and liberties. Moreover, with the creation of the office of Homeland Security, we have seen an unstoppable proliferation of detention centers for immigrants, which are clearly major ingredients of the prison-industrial complex. Had anyone warned you five years ago that we would be living today under the reign of a Department of Homeland Security, you would have probably accused your interlocuter of projecting ideas from the fascist past of Europe onto the future of the United States.

[...]
I want to conclude by evoking in broad outlines the social justice movements that are developing around the world. The opposition to U.S. militarism in the context of anti-globalization campaigns is accompanied by an awareness of the interrelatedness of war and profit. These movements are offering us important alternatives to superficial notions of multiculturalism. At the recent World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil”
“organizers, labor activists, students, cultural workers and concerned people proclaimed that they are not afraid to dream about the possibility of a better world. They do not engage race and gender in isolation from issues of economic democracy and social justice. They say that a non-exploitative, non-racist, democratic economic order is possible. They say that new social relations are possible, ones that link human beings around the planet not by the commodities some produce and

others consume, but rather by equality and solidarity and cooperation and respect. This, in my opinion, would help to define a radical multiculturalism, as opposed to a superficial multiculturalism that simply calls for diversity in the service of exploitation and war. Another world is possible, and despite the hegemony of forces that promote inequality, hierarchy, possessive individualism, and contempt for humanity, I believe that together we can work to create the conditions for radical social transformation.

--Angela Davis

From THE SOULS OF WHITE FOLK

It is curious to see America, the United States, looking on herself, first, as a sort of natural peacemaker, then as a moral protagonist in this terrible time. No nation is less fitted for this role. For two or more centuries America has marched proudly in the van of human hatred,—making bonfires of human flesh and laughing at them hideously, and making the insulting of millions more than a matter of dislike,—rather a great religion, a world war-cry: Up white, down black; to your tents, O white folk, and world war with black and parti-colored mongrel beasts!

Instead of standing as a great example of the success of democracy and the possibility of human brotherhood America has taken her place as an awful example of its pitfalls and failures, so far as black and brown and yellow peoples are concerned. And this, too, in spite of the fact that there has been no actual failure; the Indian is not dying out, the Japanese and Chinese have not menaced the land, and the experiment of Negro suffrage has resulted in the uplift of twelve million people at a rate probably unparalleled in history. But what of this? America, Land of Democracy, wanted to believe in the failure of democracy so far as

darker peoples were concerned. Absolutely without excuse she established a caste system, rushed into preparation for war, and conquered tropical colonies. She stands today shoulder to shoulder with Europe in Europe's worst sin against civilization. She aspires to sit among the great nations who arbitrate the fate of "lesser breeds without the law" and she is at times heartily ashamed even of the large number of "new" white people whom her democracy has admitted to place and power. Against this surging forward of Irish and German, of Russian Jew, Slav and "dago" her social bars have not availed, but against Negroes she can and does take her unflinching and immovable stand, backed by this new public policy of Europe. She trains her immigrants to this despising of "n*****" from the day of their landing, and they carry and send the news back to the submerged classes in the fatherlands.

All this I see and hear up in my tower, above the thunder of the seven seas. From my narrowed windows I stare into the night that looms beneath the cloud-swept stars. Eastward and westward storms are breaking,—great, ugly whirlwinds of hatred and blood and cruelty. I will not believe them inevitable. I will not believe that all that was must be, that all the shameful drama of the past must be done again today before the sunlight sweeps the silver seas.

If I cry amid this roar of elemental forces, must my cry be in vain, because it is but a cry,—a small and human cry amid Promethean gloom?

Back beyond the world and swept by these wild, white faces of the awful dead, why will this Soul of White Folk,—this modern Prometheus,—hang bound by his own binding, tethered by a fable of the past? I hear his mighty cry reverberating through the world, "I am white!" Well and good, O Prometheus, divine thief! Is not the world wide enough for two colors, for many little shininings of the sun? Why, then, devour your own vitals if I answer even as proudly, "I am black!"—W.E.B. Du Bois

From, "WHITENESS JUST AIN'T WORTH WHAT IT USED TO BE': a conversation between Francis Wade and Paul Gilroy about racial tensions on both sides of the Atlantic, nationalism, and why inequality might be the key to understanding our current crisis.

[...]

PG: *Against Race* book was really written as a warning about the enduring significance of the fascist revolution of the 20th century. It tried to alert people to the idea that its legacy was alive and waiting to be accessed. I would like to think that some of what's happened in the intervening two decades indicates its prescience. There was an opportunity—I think it was an opportunity to disaggregate the terms and the order of racial politics. In the US, one might say that something of that flowered briefly, inadequately and insubstantially, in Barack Obama.

[...]

This is complex. In the United Kingdom, we have had the most right-wing government probably since the 1920s, yet it is entirely populated by and habituated to the presence of diversity. There are Black and brown people who have extreme far-right politics who are part of this particular moment. That might be thought of as a slightly complicating factor in identifying the modern-day political geography of anxieties, fears, and resentments. If we look back a few years to the Brexit vote and the breakdown of the Leave vote by ethnicity, or whatever you want to call it, of course there was a white majority who voted to leave, but I think I'm right in saying that a quarter of Black people, or people classified as Black, in the UK voted to leave the EU; mixed people about a third, I think; those classified as South Asian about a third; and Chinese about a third.

Those sorts of numbers, and the numbers of Black and brown people not only inside the Conservative Party but who vote Conservative, suggests that there have been

some fundamental realignments taking place. People who look at what's happening in Britain and want to impose some sort of dualistic analytic which sees uniformly oppressed Black people victimized by the uniform power of whiteness have to go back to do a bit more thinking about what's actually happening here.

FW: This realignment seems to confound many people. What then are Black and brown voters voting for when they support a party like the Conservatives, whose leadership—one that repeatedly expresses Islamophobic and racist tendencies—appears unwilling to ensure their security and equal place in British society?

PG: Their commitment to the Conservative electoral option, and the neofascist common sense that is now entangled with it, cannot be dismissed as a passing result of the lies and distortions that follow from carefully targeted psychographic interventions. There are forms of vernacular neoliberalism alive in our Black cultures. They've been there for ages, largely unchallenged. The bootstrapping, self-reliance and something-for-nothing mythologies might even appear, in a certain light, to offer an answer to how people manage the impact of racism in their lives.

Think back 40 years to the old Conservative election poster that said: "Labour say he's Black, Conservatives say he's British." Four decades later, the compost from that intervention has fostered new right-wing life. The hyper-individuation of neoliberal life might resonate with the idea that racism never lets Blacks be individuals.

FW: You've claimed that race as a regressive organizing principle can be renounced without entailing a loss of pride, even for communities who cleave tightly to a racial identity amid an onslaught of majoritarian prejudices. How might that be possible?

PG: It all depends on what is coming in the other direction. If you ask people to renounce their investments in whiteness, for example, what do they get in exchange for that renunciation? And what is the geography of that whiteness they invest in? Some would say it's a way of anchoring themselves amid the turbulence of austerity; that they return to a space of certainty, guaranteed by a notion of racial attachment. So we should look at what's available once that renunciation is made. It could be a local identity, for example.

Look at this pandemic, which has revealed with an appalling clarity the nature of the inequalities that are routinely lived in Britain. If you're in one of those places in the north of England which at the moment are characterized by explosions of disease, maybe there are ways of managing Covid-19 that would blur the lines of identitarian thinking. In these scenarios—or, even, look at the many Sikhs, Muslims, Christians and so on who did the work the government should have been doing in the aftermath of the Grenfell fire [in London in 2017]—you will find an alternative: a complex politics where people don't simply roll over and conform to the identity categories that existed before; where they'll be able to hear the call of suffering and respond to it.

There will always be another story you can tell if you want to tell it. You do not have to be content with the Manichaean bullshit that streams out of our computers as generic racial commentary. In the political emergency we inhabit, there are lots of inducements to renounce that kind of facile thinking. It's catastrophic because it is complicit with the great harm that's being done.

FW: Thatcherism served as a key period in solidifying a rather white conception of "Englishness" and birthing the kind of culturally oriented nationalistic racism you've examined so closely.

PG: Yes, there are areas of Britain where people have a relationship with themselves, culturally speaking, that allows a political identity and a civic identity to mesh. I think of parts of Wales or Scotland or Ireland that have languages and identities that they are attached to. Of course, there is racism there and neo-fascists in those parts of Britain too, but the English pathology of racism is quite specific. There's a peculiar deficit that the English suffer from—they don't know, culturally speaking, who they are, and that makes them very anxious. It gives rise to the idea that if you can purify your polity and get rid of all those contaminating alien bits that come in from the outside and that don't really belong, you'll be okay.

There's a hidden tradition of these things in England, from the early years of the 20th century through to, and beyond, Winston Churchill and the Conservative Party's debate in the post-1945 phase over whether to use the slogan "Keep Britain White" as part of their election pitch. This has accelerated during my life, and Thatcherism represented its self-conscious political expression. It has a particularly vicious edge to it in England, that idea of purging all that has intruded, but this is also found in other places in Europe where fascist movements are reborn and resurgent.

FW: Has that conception of "Englishness" ever really left us? You explored its shape and character more than 20 years ago in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, and in the intervening time you've seen how similar racially oriented nationalisms manifest themselves—in the US, for example, where you taught for several years.

PG: I came back from the United States to live in Europe because I wanted to be part of the making of a new Europe. I have no illusions about the EU and the racism that has been rising in every other country. I like to think I don't have any illusions about racism in Britain. Do I think that what happened to the so-called Windrush generation is about to

happen to the EU residents here as we move towards a Brexit Britain in which the idea that "the wogs begin at Calais" is commonplace? Yes, I do. Do I think that the Labour Party has been as implicated as the Conservatives in creating this situation? Yes, I do. These people have for generations thought that they could play with this symbolism; make it mean anything they want it to mean. Well, what's going on in the north of this country, in the mill towns and in the "Red Wall" areas where not just the "alt-right" but a real neo-Nazi right is working very hard to build a violent movement that people aren't even noticing is happening—these are the things that concern me.

If my work says anything useful about Britain, it's in insisting that there is a close relationship between nationalism and racism. They couldn't really be separated out and allocated to different disciplines of research. If we really wanted to understand what racism did to the UK, we had to see how closely racism was entwined with nationalism, and how much, in enunciating one, there was an enunciation of the other. That connection corresponds to this notion of a cultural deficit, that there is a real crisis over what it is to be English. That anxiety comes through in the appetite for shiny, hypermodern American culture that is imported here. In terms of race politics, those imports offer people the comfort of what I call generic racial attachments: generic whiteness, generic Blackness. The cultural deficit, the lack of cultural comfort in knowing who you are and where you're headed, that English people suffer from so painfully can summon and generate swift and intense violence. A large part of what's now at stake in Brexit is the idea that American culture will be embraced here again so that it provides an alternative filling or content which mediates the gnawing pain of cultural emptiness or anaesthetizes the anxieties arising from cultural disorientation.

FW: You've said this cultural deficit in Britain has deepened in your lifetime and has likely

accelerated even more so in the past few years. This aligns with a continued “melancholic” view of multiculturalism, as you’ve put it. What psychosocial drivers are at work here?

PG: I think it corresponds in many ways to the departure of organized socialism and other forms of politics that correspond to improving the lives of workers; the decline of the Labour Party, and so on. There are a number of elements that have been connected to the transformation of the political culture. The impact of immigration is another factor that gets exaggerated.

Let’s think about this. People might be a little less inclined to be fervently nationalistic if they actually owned something, and if the levels of inequality in our country hadn’t accelerated and deepened. They wouldn’t feel so impelled to be violent towards those who they imagine place their interests in jeopardy if they had a sense of their land or opportunities and education. The answer to your question really arises from the peculiarly damaging hold that the oligarchs of Britain now maintain on the life of this polity.

It might help to have a state like every other kind of ideal bourgeois social democratic state where citizenship means something and there’s a constitution and we don’t have pantomime Etonian elites telling us what to do. How many shelves of books are needed to tell you that this is the ailment that cramps and paralyzes this country?

FW: Du Bois wrote of the “psychological wages” that sustain the sense of privilege and opportunity felt by white people even when subjected to the same level of exploitation as the minorities they live and work alongside. But you’ve written eloquently of the way that racialogical thinking actually harms those whom it “privileges”—the estrangement they suffer, the “amputation of a common humanity.”

PG: The problem is really to do with our inability to find a language of humanity adequate to the task. There’s a poverty of imagination compounded by anxiety and depression. Let’s face it, whiteness isn’t worth what it used to be worth. Its value is falling globally. Chinese and other workers in remote parts of the world are coming up to meet our declining socioeconomic order as it plummets downwards. Whiteness just ain’t worth what it used to be.

-- Paul Gilroy with Francis Wade

THE URBAN INTENSIONS OF GEONTOPOWER

Where is Brussels?

Reflecting on W.E.B Du Bois’s inner state as he walked along Brussels’s great park and palace at Tervuren in 1936, David Levering Lewis wrote, “vividly reminded [Du Bois] that Tervuren was Leopold’s Versailles as a museum, twenty cavernous hallways gorged with mineral, fauna, and flora his agents scooped up, shot down, and cut out of the heart of Africa at the probable cost of ten million black lives.”¹ One can hear Du Bois’s heels clicking against the polished paving stones and see, as he saw, the copper architectural adornments of elite Belgian institutions as he absorbed the full monstrosity of colonialism. Here was Brussels, a model for a new modern Europe where flaneurs strolled taking in wonders of new urban life like the “arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury... glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises.”²

It wasn’t merely the glass-vaulted shopping centers that enraptured the young urban class, but the unseen infrastructures of electricity, water, and sanitation. The Senne River was a catchment for stormwater and wastewater, “a visual and medical blight on the Brussels city

center, a source of flooding, and an embarrassment to the new government.”³ The “Builder King” Leopold II and the Brussels municipal government began covering the Senne from 1867 to 1877, making a sewer invisible to sight, but pulsing within the belly of a new gleaming metropole. These water infrastructures were built from industrial trade that had a mediated relationship to colonial worlds. By 1878, having failed to acquire the Philippines from the Spanish Crown, Leopold II seized the so-called Congo Free State. Under the auspices of scientific inquiry and civilizational uplift, Leopold II would extract the countless fortunes that built Brussels into a wonder of the world and later the capital of Europe, on the backs of ravaged Congolese people and lands.⁴

How easy it must have been for city-dwellers to relegate the monstrosities of colonial capitalism to places far away, or to encase their excremental flows in materials ripped from elsewhere. How estranged and enraged Du Bois must have felt witnessing the obliviousness of those who walked along these benighted streets, who sipped tea rich in sugar within the houses that lined them, who thought they lived in Belgium and who thought that Belgium was within Europe, and who thought that Europe was outside Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific; who thought, if they thought about this at all, that they were—and deserved to be—the center of a fabulously unfolding dialectic of the spirit. What Du Bois saw in the urbane politics of loitering was equally, if not more nightmarish than the atrocities that led to more than eight million African men, women, and children dead in the Congolese basin. The arcade may be “a city, a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need,” but it existed in inverse proportion to worlds stripped of every material condition of human and nonhuman existence. What but demons could so thoroughly disavow the sickening conditions of their good life?

Some theorists attempted to pull the mask off this illusion after World War II. Hannah Arendt would insist that the origins of the Holocaust were in European imperialism, but in the process would distinguish between colonial and imperial worlds in ways that iterated the European account of indigenous peoples in Australia and the Americas as “two continents that, without a culture and a history of their own, had fallen into the hands of Europeans.”⁵ Aimé Césaire would make no such distinction. Colonialism pulsed through imperialism. And “colonialization works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism... [E]ach time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a center of infection begins to spread.”⁶ The decay just looked differently when viewed from the sacred landscapes of colonial Congo than when viewed from the top of Brussels’s Royal Museum of Central Africa. As Césaire’s student, Frantz Fanon noted that the colonial world is not only where colonizers go. It is a system that encloses city and suburb, rural and wasteland, and the roads and waterways that provide or are carved to provide transport. All roads lead to Rome, because no matter how far from Rome they are built and toward what unknown territory, they are built to move anything of value in only one direction.

The great cities of Europe are technological condensations and displacements of countless despoiled and depopulated spaces—what have become the rural and wasteland areas along and beyond their peripheries. The minerals dug out of Congo, South Africa, Australia, and Canada went somewhere. In other words, they are not merely accumulation of an abstraction (surplus value) or a double

abstraction (surplus value of surplus value), but a material redistribution and transformation: the shapes of European cities that were taken from colonized landscapes and the tailings of toxins, the rivers of poison, and the mountains of mudslides engulfing entire communities that came with them. As Europeans crossed and recrossed the globe pulling out what they needed and leaving what was superfluous to them behind, it created a new hegemonic order of things: an emergent and exploitative western classification of existence, or in other words, what was what and how each related to each other. The hegemonic force of this order of things was secreted in the emerging routes such that things could be used and moved only if they appeared as one kind of thing. These different logics of use and abuse certainly included what was grievable, what was killable, and what could be destroyed in order to enhance someone else somewhere else. If you are the subject of capitalist extraction (which everyone is but not qualitatively or quantitatively equally) and you wish to eke out an existence, then the everyday ethical, social, and political hierarchies and differences of things have to be treated as if their materialities do not matter.

At this point in time, the dynamic of colonial and postcolonial accumulation seems much messier than promised by the crisp dialectics of Hegel and Marx and out of which Césaire and Fanon originally built their critique. Accumulation has less the look of a precisely rendered logic and more of a harvesting machine worthy of science fiction: a massive earth-destroying Death Star ripping and gutting a million worlds and then returning to re-ravage them as many times as it can find new forms of extracting profit from existence (or in the language of capitalist disavowal, “creative destruction”). The wheels of the machine do not go forward, they go backward, side-to-side, and around-and-around. Capitalism as such emerged from a mad circle of primitive accumulation: scraping value out of the bodies of enslaved west Africans, pulling

nutrients from Caribbean soil, and casting gunpowder recipes from Chinese knowledge.⁷ But this primitive accumulation, Glen Coulthard has argued, depended on an originary accumulation of Native American lands—a Caribbean rid of Caribs, an American South without the Caddo, Seminole, Catawba, Cherokee, Shawnee and hundreds of others. Coulthard insist that David Harvey’s understanding of capitalism as accumulation by dispossession depended on an initial dispossession.⁸ Forward into visions of semio techno-capitalist solutions and industrial climate toxicity: as TJ Demos, Bron Szerszynsky, and others have discussed, numerous such liberal, neoliberal, and libertarian geo-engineering projects figure the anthropos “as ultimate self-creator, for whom no challenge—climate change, agricultural failure, artificial intelligence, planetary hunger, even death and extinction—will be beyond technological overcoming, especially when matched to Silicon Valley capital.”⁹ Lifted up, lifted out, anthropos was claimed to be different from and superior to all other forms of existence. But this anthropos is not Man. It is a toxic imaginary brewed out of specific colonial and capitalist sociality.

Great cities rose from the smolder; and within these cities new topologies of glistening paving stones and stinking alleyways. As human and nonhuman worlds were ripped from one place to produce wealth in another, the great harvester would return, digging deeper into previously ravaged spaces, this time with imperial and corporate armies to reorganize “free” African labor for mines, plantations, and the construction of new megalopolises in the global south. The interior contours of these new cities have been understood and documented ever since Engels’s *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, continuing on through Mike Davis’s *The Planet of Slums*. Likewise, countless studies have detailed the dynamics that drain human and nonhuman materials and values from outside the city, accelerating the process by which urban centers grow and rural areas become vast

reservoirs of toxicity. This is what Du Bois saw: material and social space being bent to distortedly sculpt routes and worlds, including the means of connecting by differentiating between the urban and rural and the city and its slum. Human and nonhuman existence was forced into specific forms as the condition for movement (what roads demanded; oceanways allowed; undersea cables provided; low-earth, mid-earth, and geostationary space satellite networks oversaw). The conditions of existence in one place stretched way beyond its location, but in ways that seemed disfigured only to some. (Rising rents in renewed American cities condemn the precariat to lives lived on buses commuting to low wage work from new suburban ghettos.) But this idea that toxicity could be kept at a distance was always a fantasy. This fantasy has now been punctured. The toxic waterways they sealed far away from their view or right below their own feet are now overflowing.

Critical indigenous theory has long argued that colonialism did not merely destroy people and their lands, but attempted to destroy myriad non-Western understandings of the irreducible entanglement of human and nonhuman existences that challenge the toxic imaginary of colonial and capitalist extraction. In colonial conditions, the bargain between colonial invaders and indigenous peoples was never for either your goods *or* your life, but was always both your modes of life *and* your goods. Thus, at the heart of Coulthard's analysis of originary dispossession is this aspect of the harvesting machine:

If we base our understanding of originary dispossession from an indigenous standpoint, it's the theft not only of the material of land itself, but also a destruction of the social relationships that existed prior to capitalism violently sedimenting itself on indigenous territories. And those social relations are often not only based on principles of egalitarianism but also deep reciprocity between people and with the other-than-human world.¹⁰

Countless deeply reflexive practices of how one belongs across and in existence were

disrupted, dug up, and run over as Europeans went southward and westward to make their cities, neighborhoods, and livelihoods. Coulthard is not arguing that settler colonialism burnt these worlds down to their root, nor that the effect of this destruction flowed in only one direction. Rather, the harm had different forms and temporalities. The gangrene took root in colonizers as soon as they began treating the Americas as something to be conquered, but the gangrene was slow-acting. They could postpone the effects of the poisons they were creating by moving away from or exporting the poisons they wrought. At some point there would be no further, no behind, no over there. Today may be that day. Peer down into the gutters, follow the flows of water, of metals, and the pollutants they carry and disperse.

2. What is Geontopower?

At the heart of the colonial ordering of things is geontopower: not a division of things as they are in and of themselves, but a governance of other regions of existence and their meanings, imports, and uses. And at geontopower's core is the carbon imaginary; an intersection, not a correspondence, between western sciences of life and death and western philosophies of the event and finitude. These sciences and philosophies stage the drama, ethics, and singularity of Life against the horror of the inert, inanimate, and insensate. Life is situated against a cold grayness of an original lifeless space, whether eyes are trained to witness this lifelessness in the sublime granite expanse of the American Rockies, the ancient craters of Earth's moon, or winds of intergalactic space. In geontologic imaginaries, the Desert is Life's nemesis, and controlling the pathways of potable water its prerequisite.

In the global north geontopower might appear to be a formation of power succeeding biopower. There we hear the sounds of a growing realization, in the natural and philosophical sciences, that not only is the division between Nonlife and Life an artificial and superficial understanding of the

interdependencies of all forms of existence, but also, in the wake of climate toxicity, downright dangerous. But geontopower is not a new formation of power. This division, and the hierarchical relations it creates, has long operated "in the open" in settler colonialism. It allowed colonialism and capitalism to sever and then to relate a hierarchy of things, rights, and values—the rock and mineral, the indigenous and black, the white and his glorious future. All these divisions were knotted and reknotted in ways that sought to maintain the purpose of the colonial order of things: the contouring and channeling of all and anything toward a European surplus. In other words, the geontological division of Life and Nonlife is not merely a division but an opportunity for a set of further divisions as maneuver: the civilized and primitive, the white race and others, *Dasein* as the world's rich standing up and apart from the world poor with no world at all. Indeed, the world's rich were promised so much if they agree to these divisions and hierarchies: the rock, the native, the black, the white. The divisions and hierarchies of Life and Nonlife, the animate and inert, the fossil and the rock, functioned as a framework within which colonizers made sense of and justified their minor and major atrocities. The ravagement of lands? The dominion of life over the lifeless; man over nature. The extermination of people? The divisions of life as it unfolds into greater civilizational complexity, humans over the animal world, Europeans over everyone else. Thus as Christina Sharpe has noted, this division allowed other difference and relations, such as the colonial dynamics of that pitted Native Americans and Africans against each other.¹¹ Little wonder then that the U.S. lined up police equipped with "more than \$600,000 worth of body armor, tactical equipment and crowd control devices" to rip through and run over the originary politics of Standing Rock.¹² Capitalism depends on creating by destroying and then erasing the connections between the material wastes it leaves behind

and the glimmering oasis of privilege this waste affords.

[...]

As against dominant western understandings, there is not reason to conflate creativity with a violent interruption of the past, or with an inauguration of a new future. Pre- and anti-colonial worlds need not rip time in order to create, nor did they need to refuse time in order to remain the same. A constant attentiveness to the adjustments and innovations necessary to keep human and nonhuman forms in a co-constituting relation was a creative core to the *ancestral present*. This ancestral present is something always being kept in place. The viciousness of settler and other forms of colonialism made this ongoing task critical.

[...]

As I noted above, for worlds struggling to maintain their resilience in wave after wave of displacement and dispossession, from 1492 through to the present, the question was not merely, or even primarily, the same as the one Foucault outlines. If the question within the European diaspora was how to be governed differently, then the question for others doubled back on and reformed this question. It was how not to be governed by you as we creatively keep our forms of existence in existence, as we experience the major and minor strains and deformations of settler colonialism, of extractive capitalism, of late liberalism. The question was not simply “to show that things are not as self-evident as we believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such,” but how to remain in existence in the existence we understand as true against geontopower as a form increasingly determining everything.

In other words, geontopower is not a concept that aspires to level the differentials of power, but to make these differentials appear across the territories in which the divisions of Nonlife and Life act as massive shearing teeth in its great harvesting machines. It seeks to make visible those who claim that the West’s material wealth—its modern cityscapes,

wealth accumulation, and health—need not take into account actions in one place and reactions in another; that one could assume all harms would wash away in the long run, at the frontier, in the end. Against these claims are those who know that this glorious future has always been careening in a toxic cloud toward all of us which, no matter that it will kill all in the long run, always kills differentially in the short run.

3. What can be done?

What would Du Bois make of global cities in the north today—their submerged waterways bursting; their infrastructures, built from the bodies and lands of colonized worlds, crumbling and corroding? If the modern age invented Man within the problematic of finitude (Man understood as/at his limit, as exposed by Foucault in *The Order of Things*), then from the perspective of the colonized this invention did not grow out of the mind of Western self-reflection but out of the actual conditions of its possibilities. The West ripped itself out of one form of tutelage by placing others within another sort. As the Movement for Black Lives argues, the violence against black persons is not merely visible when police kill African Americans, and largely with impunity, more than other kinds of US citizens, but when white Americans refuse to acknowledge how their intact bodies are internally tied to what Christine Sharpe calls “zones of black killability.” The estimate relationship between struggles of African Americans living in Flint and elsewhere must be put in conversation with the refusals of indigenous peoples such as the Oceti Šakowin Sioux of Standing Rock, and not as a struggle between them or as a struggle over which form of dispossession and killability should characterize both of their struggles. Let’s agree that there are no cities and rural wastelands or suburban enclaves and ghettos but a set of infrastructural relays whose legitimization of violent redistribution is ultimately grounded in geontopower. And let’s say that we continually fail to experience these interconnections

because of the way geontopower has separated forms of existence—Nonlife and Life, forms of Nonlife (toxic and nontoxic) and forms of Life (western, non-western, civilized, noble savage, barbarian, terrorist)—and then to relate these now separate forms through a hierarchy of time, creativity, and history.

What would a politics that aspires to press against these separations look like? A host of activists and scholars have pointed the way.¹⁶ Alongside these games of toxic hot potato are what Nikhil Anand calls a global game of “hydraulic citizenship.”¹⁷ In the US, the most recent public example of hydraulic citizenship is the predominantly African-American city of Flint, Michigan.¹⁸ The history of the crisis has been narrated.¹⁹ Flint had been placed under emergency management from 2002–2004, and then again starting in 2011, initially framed as part of necessary austerity measures. Austerity for some, that is, and not for others. City managers were paid between \$132,000–\$250,000 and had the power to “overrule local elected officials, dictate decisions about finances and public safety, terminate or modify contracts and sell off public assets.”²⁰ On April 6, 2013, looking to cut costs, the city’s new Emergency Manager, Ed Kurtz informed the state treasurer, Andy Dillon, that Flint was leaving the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department and would build its own pipeline to connect to the Karegnondi Water Authority. Until the pipeline was built, Flint would rely on water from the Flint River, which was widely known to contain high levels of pollution. Instead of immediately treating the water before pumping it into homes, officials decided to take a “wait-and-see” approach. (The head of the state’s health department and four other officials were later charged with involuntary manslaughter.)²¹ Residents immediately complained. Officials told residents to boil their water, effectively holding individuals responsible for purifying their water supply. The city then pumped increased levels of chlorine into the water system, levels so corrosive that General Motors stopped using

Flint waters because of the damage to its metal parts. And before the racialized austerity of water flowed into Flint, other toxins wafted their way.²²

Even after the Michigan pediatrician, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, and Virginia Tech professor of civil engineering, Marc Edwards, sent their analyses of lead and pollutant levels in Flint's water to network news outlets, it arguably took the vibrant force and analytics of Black Lives Matter to puncture the mainstream news cycle. In other words, the systematic differential of toxicity was made a general problematic. Here, William James's understanding of the social location and energetics of concepts is crucial. Black Lives Matter is a concept in this rich sense of the term: it forces a new field of arrangement and emits all sorts of discursive tailings as the potential prefigurative signs for new concepts. Denounced as another form and instance of state violence against black bodies, on December 14, 2015, Mayor Karen Weaver declared a State of Emergency, announcing that "Water filters, bottled water and at-home water test kits are being provided to Flint residents free of charge at Water Resource Centers located around the city."²³ The entire city remains under the threat of emergency management as the state struggles to find funds to replace the rotted infrastructure in order to return the city to a clean future.

Let us pause to understand the troubling implications of the liberal responses to the myriad forms of water crises taking place globally.²⁴ The call to remove toxins, to replace the spoiled area with clean material so as to return people and areas to our common future, points not to a common future but a present refusal. Those who have long benefited by an entangled arrangement, organized through the divisions and relations of geontopower, refuse to become strained or dissipated by a new one. The three steps of remove, replace, and restore shift attention away from the areas which will be gutted in order to create this restoration project and

toward those made by turning others into its dump.

Rather than a common and differentiated present, the liberal response to its own distributed toxicity is symptomatic and diagnostic of its blocked and disavowed networks. On the one hand, it is widely axiomatic that some regions are built up and sustained by ripping apart and disemboweling others while, in the process, leaving behind the chemicals needed to separate metals and ores, the fungi that thrive in machine-friendly fields, and the winds and waters that flow differently when the trees have been uprooted. Water crises are, in other words, part of a series of small and large events, intensities and intensifications that keep in place a specific entangled terrain of wealth and power. For some bodies to remain in a purified form, other bodies must drink the effluvia—money must be deducted from someone so that it can be added elsewhere; materials to build the infrastructures of health must be pulled out from somewhere. On the other hand, those who benefit from this uprooting act as if their lives were not obligated to these ravaged spaces—that what happens to them is only related to what is happening to me by some spectral connection.

Rather than "spooky action at a distance," they disavow their relationship to devastation; to the entanglements between their healthy food, clean water, and fresh air and the toxic dumps elsewhere. The answer from white heteronormative households when (once again) forced to acknowledge that there is nothing ghostly at all about the circuits and transpositions connecting the "common" body in one region of the world to another region is that adequate infrastructure should be built for those who have none. In other words, the common body is still not acknowledged to be common. The rich cities and suburbs dig their psyches deeper into disavowal. They refuse to acknowledge that new infrastructure would need to be built from materials found far away from their own neighborhoods, ripped from someone else's land, manufactured in such a

way that still another set of lands and peoples become contaminated. What they will never do is allow others to move into their suburbs, or agree that some of the shiny lead-free pipes be ripped up and exchanged with others. And this too is true of nation-states signing climate change treaties. The very action of signing, or not, disavows that they could not be what they are without the surface and subterranean passages ravaging one area for the benefit of another. As Césaire, Arendt, and Mbembe all argue, the sewers will start overflowing at some point, and then there will be nothing left to consume but one's own spoiled self. Someone has to eat the outcome. Wouldn't it be ethically sensible for those who produced and benefited from the distribution of commodity and waste to be the first in line to begin spooning it up?

-- Elizabeth Povinelli, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/liquid-utility/259667/the-urban-intensions-of-geontopower/>

ON INSURGENT HISTORIES AND ABOLITIONIST IMAGINARY

Five centuries of white supremacist terror: not just a past to which we are ineluctably fastened, but a present which produces us, albeit in differing orders of magnitude and vulnerability. The United States has long maintained the fiction that this country had molted its foundational violence, and yet, just as your skin sheds daily only to live dispersed atop your furniture and knick-knacks, so too does the grime of history make up the loam in which a person is destined to flourish, struggle, or wither. The work of Saidiya Hartman has charted a path in and through the social arrangements produced by the sedimented forces of accumulation and dispossession. Her writing, in numerous essays, and in such books

as *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (1997), *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) has not only reshaped the contours of scholarly inquiry, but has given form to what she has called “the as-yet-incomplete project of freedom.” Below, Hartman speaks about the continuity of the Black radical tradition, the insurrectionary qualities of Black life, and the “wild exercise of imagination” required to challenge the reigning order.

WHAT CONSTITUTES RADICAL THOUGHT?

How do we bring into view the constancy of Black radical practice—a practice that has overwhelmingly fallen from view—and a certain lexicon of what constitutes the political, or the radical political, or an anarchist tradition, or a history of anti-fascism? In looking at the lives of young women, gender nonconforming and queer folk in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019), one thing was absolutely clear: the practices of refusal—shirking, idleness, and strike—a critique of the state and what it could afford; and an understanding that the state is present primarily as a punishing force, a force for the brutal containment and violation and regulation and eradication of Black life. In *Wayward Lives*, I discuss the “jump warrant,” which enabled police to enter apartments at will. We know that Breonna Taylor was murdered in the contemporary equivalent of that jump warrant, which is the “no knock” warrant. The police just enter a place and do as they will.

Because the “wayward” are largely acting in and conceiving of the world in a way that exceeds the boundaries of the norm—the legitimate, the respectable—traditional political actors and thinkers have failed to understand their actions as animated and inflected by the spirit of radical refusal. But to me, that was utterly clear. I would like to think of waywardness as prefigurative of today’s

protests and insurgency and also as a sustained practice. In Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage, My Freedom*, he describes the plantation as a nation within the nation, as a space of exception outside the embrace of democracy, as an enclosure. Black people have been abandoned by the law, positioned outside the nation, and excluded from the terms of the social contract—and this recognition is in fact hundreds of years old. *Wayward Lives* gives young Black women credit for understanding this, for their acute understanding of relations of power, and the book attends to the ways they tried to live and sustain themselves, never forgetting the structure of enclosure that surrounded them, and the forces intent on conscripting them to servitude.

My work tries to think about the question, the open question—the almost impossible question—of Black life in this context, and the ways to best convey the rich texture of existence in these circumstances: to render visible the brutal and abstract relations of power that make violent domination and premature death defining characteristics of Black life. How does one push against particular plots or impositions of the subject? Defy the script of managed and regulated life? Persist under the threat of death? One of the things that I love about W.E.B Du Bois—and my work is in dialogue with and indebted to his—is his imaginative capacity and commitment to experimentation. To understand the epistemic revolution that takes place in *Black Reconstruction* (1935) is to understand the abolition of slavery and Reconstruction as the making of American democracy, and to conceive the radical and insurgent political practice of enslaved actors. Even C.L.R. James marvels at Du Bois’s ability to conjure that revolutionary consciousness and reflects on his own shortcomings, in comparison, in *Lectures on The Black Jacobins* (1971).

There is always an open question of form: How does one bring a minor revolution into view? Most often we want to maintain a fiction that desire exists on one hand and violence and coercion on the other, and that these are radically distinct and opposed. We might instead think of sexual violence as a normative condition, not the exception. Under heteropatriarchy, violence and rape are the terms of order, the norm; they are to be expected. So how does one lust after or relate to or want or love another? How does one claim the capacity to touch when touch is, in so many instances, the modality of violence? As I say repeatedly, *Wayward Lives* is not a text of sexual liberation. But I really wanted to think about sensory experience and inhabiting the body in a way that is not exhausted by the condition of vulnerability and abuse. What does it mean—for those persons whose bodies are most often subjected to the will, desire, and violence of others—to imagine embodiment in a way that’s not yoked to servitude or to violence? For me, this was essential to thinking about radical politics: What does it mean to love that body? To love the flesh in a world where it is not loved or regarded? To love Black female flesh. Breonna Taylor’s murderers have still not been charged.

The possessive investment in whiteness can’t be rectified by learning “how to be more antiracist.” It requires a radical divestment in the project of whiteness and a redistribution of wealth and resources. It requires abolition, the abolition of the carceral world, the abolition of capitalism.

Incredible vulnerability to violence and to abuse is so definitive of the lives of Black femmes. And so, what does it mean to want to imagine and to experience something else? It can’t but be political—simply to want to free one’s body from its conscription to servitude, to no longer be made a servant in the reproductive project of the world—all of this is part of an abolitionist imaginary. We have been assigned a place in the racial capitalist order which is the bottom rung; the bottom

ring is the place of the “essential” worker, the place where all the onerous reproductive labor occurs. Not just reproductive labor in the terms of maintaining and aiding white families so that they might survive and thrive, but the reproductive work that nurtures and supports the psychic life of whiteness: that shores up the inviolability, security, happiness and sovereignty of that master subject, of man. In large measure, this world is maintained by the disposability and the fungibility of Black and brown female lives. Intimacy is a critical feature of this coerced labor and of care. Black intimacy has been shaped by the anomalous social formation produced by slavery, by involuntary servitude, by capitalist extraction, and by antiblackness and yet exceeds these conditions. The intimate realm is an extension of the social world—it is inseparable from the social world—so to create other networks of love and affiliation, to nurture a promiscuous sociality vast enough to embrace strangers, is to be involved in the work of challenging and remaking the terms of sociality.

What we see now is a translation of Black suffering into white pedagogy. In this extreme moment, the casual violence that can result in a loss of life—a police officer literally killing a Black man with the weight of his knees on the other’s neck—becomes a flash point for a certain kind of white liberal conscience, like: “Oh my god! We’re living in a racist order! How can I find out more about this?” That question is a symptom of the structure that produces Floyd’s death. Then there’s the other set of demands: “Educate me about the order in which we live.” And it’s like: “Oh, but you’ve been living in this order. Your security, your wealth, your good life, has depended on it.” So,

it’s crazy-making. The largest loss of Black property since the Great Depression was a consequence of the subprime mortgage crisis, and proliferating acts of racist state violence occurred under a Black president. The largest incarcerated population in the world; the election of 2016 and the publicly avowed embrace of white supremacy by 45—all of these things we know, right? We know the racially exclusive character of white neighborhoods; how in urban centers upper-class people monopolize public resources to ensure their futures and their children’s futures over and against other children. I’m a New Yorker—the city has the most racially segregated school system in the country. The Obama and Clinton voters are invested in a school system that disadvantages Black and brown children and they resist even the smallest efforts to make it more equitable. The possessive investment in whiteness can’t be rectified by learning “how to be more antiracist.” It requires a radical divestment in the project of whiteness and a redistribution of wealth and resources. It requires abolition, the abolition of the carceral world, the abolition of capitalism. What is required is a remaking of the social order, and nothing short of that is going to make a difference.

Everyone has issued a statement—every elite racist university and cultural institution, every predatory banking and investment company—has issued a statement about being down with Black Lives Matter. It’s beyond hypocrisy. It’s utter cynicism. These institutions feel required to take part in this kind of performance and this kind of speech only because of the radically capacious demands of those in the street, those who are

demanding abolition, and who have said: “We are not a part of the social contract, we will riot, we will loot.” These are legitimate political acts. These are ways of addressing the violence of that order at the level of the order—the police precinct, the bank, the retailer, the corporate headquarters.

There’s a great disparity between what’s being articulated by this radical feminist queer trans Black movement and the language of party politics, and the electoral choices, which are so incredibly impoverished they’re not choices at all. The demand to defund the police was taken up because there’s been a movement unfolding for decades, an analysis that has been in place—building on the work of Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, The Combahee River Collective, Marsha P. Johnson, Audre Lorde, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza, Michelle Alexander, Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor. It’s not a surprise that so many of the people in the street are young. They’re in the streets with these powerful critical and conceptual tools, and they’re not satisfied with reform. They understand reform to be a modality of reproducing the machine, reproducing the order—sustaining it. I do feel that there is a clarity of vision that won’t be lost. That’s what has been so inspiring about these protests and uprisings—the clarity and the capaciousness of the vision.

— by Saidiya Hartman, as told to Catherine Damman
<https://www.artforum.com/interviews/saidiya-hartman-83579>