

Burnin' Down Massa's House

Notes Toward a Black Radical Ecology

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“The main threat to humankind, the flora and fauna and our entire biosphere, is capitalist imperialism: a totally out of control, predatory, global system of accumulation and oppression that’s on a collision course with the limitations of our planet: daily devouring children, women, people of color, the poor, workers of all stripes, wildlife and the environment in pursuit of profits.”

~ Russell Maroon Shoatz

Within the last two years it has been decided that the planet will not escape environmental crisis unless some “radical” changes to human society are made in the next decade or so. Twelve years, they say, is all we have left before the earth is pushed to the brink of no return in terms of its capacity to sustain our existence and that of other species. But, the details of the mainstream ecological “radicalism” we keep hearing about have nothing to do with changing society from its root. Instead, we are inundated with suggestions that we should use less straws, that we should carpool, or use less water, and a range of other small, incremental, individualist lifestyle shifts. In all this, the powerful, who bear most of the responsibility for ecological hazards, are left unnamed and unchallenged, and no environmental politics focused on a revolutionary movement is put forth by these Western science experts and their politrickster homies.

Now, don’t get me wrong. We are in a serious situation for sure. Sea levels are rising. Parts of the ocean are becoming dead zones. Ice in the Arctic is melting. Carbon levels are getting up there, creating temperatures too high to sustain life on the planet. Massive superstorms are becoming more frequent. Plant and non-human animal species are dying off or being seriously endangered at alarming rates.

The (natural) world as we know it is coming to an end.

This isn’t just a geological rupture either, as there are ramifications for our modern human existential experience too. Our notions of homelands, diasporas, communities, and borders will be unsettled, for example, because of climate risks which have worsened migrant struggles and are displacing more people (rising sea levels, for example, threaten coastal cities, which also happen to be where a disproportionate number of people are concentrated). Melting ice — once thought permanently frozen — brings the risk of visiting long dormant plagues and diseases upon the world. More animals continue to lose habitats — whether it is polar bears up north or fish in

the coral reefs being bleached by overheated oceans — which also intensifies food scarcity and resource access for both non-human and human populations. What I've written here doesn't do it justice, however; for the number of revelations, realizations, and speculations pouring out of environmentalist and scientific spaces paint a scarier picture: one in which life on earth is approaching some sort of apocalypse.

So, now, the world is facing a material and psychic crisis.

But, Afrikan members of this planet have had to exist and persist under a state of existential crisis and environmental death since the dawn of the modern globalized capitalist world. In the present tense, poor Black residents of Flint, Michigan have had to live without safe drinking water, and have still seen no (tenable) redress for this heinous crime by the State (even despite the public attention to the issue that was brought about a few years ago). Poor Black residents of New York City's South Bronx and Brooklyn bear the brunt of living in what environmental racism activists term "asthma alley," (which is only one example of the disproportionately high rates of asthma among US Black populations) because of industry and its concentration of air pollution. In the media we see Libyan migrants traversing the Mediterranean to reach European nations where they may face anti-Blackness, all to escape crumbling politico-economic situations being octified by climate change — a form of migration that has parallels throughout the world now. The Global South bears the brunt of climate-induced disasters like Hurricanes Irma, Maria, Dorian or intense desertification while having pollution and waste and militaristic devastation dumped on our homelands by Westerners. There is talk of fires ravaging the Amazon in Brazil and Bolivia, or raging across the Afrikan continent, and other forms of environmental damage, all of which are buttressed or even stoked by the West and the interests of capital, imperialist/colonial military, or even "conservation" entities that often criminalize indigenous people on our own lands. The vicissitudes of so-called climate change and ecocide are just part of the ongoing struggle for our peoples' liberation and safety. As one would learn from the environmental justice movement, we are constantly on the front lines of ecological struggles.

And yet, Black people are often overlooked or not represented in many environmental organizations and movements. So, while scientists point to climate change and its detrimental effects as evidence that we're suffering in a geological era called "the Anthropocene," none of the critiques of human-centeredness and the environmental destruction that it causes ever really ask a fundamental question: who is this anthropos (human) impacting the earth so terribly? Of the whole handful of proposed and contested "Anthropocene" markers, only about two of them do not correlate to Westernized productive processes and systems of governance. And yet, talks of how "humanity" has destroyed the planet overlook how it is (Western) capitalist civilization occupying the plane of the "human." On those occasions that capitalism is mentioned, such as when David Wallace-Wells in *The Uninhabitable Earth* acknowledges: "... it is the carbon-burning processes that began in 18th-century England that lit the fuse of everything that followed," or when "World Scientist Warnings to Humanity" emphasize the need for "reassess[ing] the role of an economy rooted in growth," they still fail to acknowledge that the Anthropocene and its Industrial-capitalist threshold are entangled in white supremacy, anti-blackness, and imperial-colonialism.

Now, to his credit, Wallace-Wells does state that "Anthropocene" implies a Western Christian "dominion" over the earth, and that a fundamental readjustment to "how billions of humans conduct [their] lives" is necessary to stop the earth from becoming inhospitable. And he is not alone within the white world in terms of admitting to something like this. Whether it is being called

veganism or deep ecology of posthumanism/transhumanism, lots more white people truly are advancing movements that point somewhat to a critique of the treatment of more-than-human forms of Matter. But in all of this “new” regard for the planet, the colonial (hu)Man still continues to erase and criminalize Black and Third World environmental voices, and refuses to push for “solutions” that break the hold over Black/Third World people’s bodies and homelands. For this reason, no white environmentalism can be trusted, even the so-called critical, anti-capitalist or feminist ones.

Take, for example, the latest calls for better (access to) “family planning” such as those endorsed by Bernie Sanders. As revolutionaries, we are adamant about the right to reproductive and bodily autonomy, but we should be skeptical when very valid concerns about/needs for this get co-opted into (neo)Malthusian exaggerations about the role of population numbers and birth rates in ecological catastrophe. Especially when these pseudo-feminist/pseudo-environmentalist “pro-choice” proclamations are being directed at the very Black/Third World parents who, as exploited communities, cannot logically be proven to be more responsible than white people/First Worlders for carbon footprints, waste or resource (mis)management, or any of the other oft-cited registers for measuring detrimental human environmental impact. White environmentalism, I said before, never ever cares about us anyway or our issues in their analysis; so why should we think it benign when the only time they bring us up in environmental conversations is when they wanna start discussing how to curb Black/Third World “birth rates”? This is sus, and they know it is. That is why they try and frame it as a reproductive justice thing. And Black radicals should only say one thing about this: **these white “leftists” are ecofascists.**

Ecofascism is a term to describe ideologies that inflect Nazi thought with ecological concern. In an age where white supremacists are waging attacks in El Paso or Christchurch, crying about a fictive “white genocide,” many of the contemporary environmental threats are being framed by white nativism and fascist violence. We see them openly contest “multiculturalism” and blame environmental pressures on the movement or presence of immigrants. Crises in capitalism become understood as the fault of minorities who “drain” resources. Of course, liberals (by which I include fake socialists who actually betray what socialism should be) condemn fascism and anti-immigrant ideas, including their “environmental” cousins – that is, until the population question is raised. Then you find them making the same underlying talking point as the avowed white nationalist. Reminds me that Malcolm was right in calling the American left a fox which smiles in Black people’s faces, compelling us to run right into its mouth by fooling us into thinking they are less vicious than the wolves (the Amerikkkan Right) who openly boast about their pursuit of us.

Indeed, these supposed “radicals” and “progressives” are working hard to convince us that because they don’t use language like “population control” we should not deem them ecofascists and that we should see them as allies in our fights for reproductive justice and other causes. The opposite, however, is true. It is totally valid that we draw a comparison between calls for “family planning” among Third World/Black communities as a climate policy and the history of eugenics, for both are motivated by the same exact Euro-American material and “civilizational” (imperial) interests.

If this were not so, why would so-called “progressives” defend the (neo)Malthusian premise, which draws a link between population numbers and resource scarcity? The population card has never not been a smokescreen to cover over and hide the machinery of kkkapital. It has never not been either anti-revolutionary at best or genocidal at worst. From the outset, in its earliest

formations by a man named Thomas Malthus, Malthusianism proper was the idea that population would always, “naturally” put a strain on food sources because of a (supposed) mathematical difference between how they each grow and expand respectively. The only solution, then, was to allow war, famine, and disease to persist, in order to keep a balance by regulating the poor—who bred too much. Later, Malthus’ ideas found a new life in so-called social Darwinism, which took up evolutionary theory to naturalize and justify capitalist/imperialist violence under the idea of “survival of the fittest.” Then came Nazism, which is the most abhorrently obvious example of why (neo)Malthusianism is vile. Today, when it creeps back up in conversation and the media, it is more sophisticated and attuned to critiques and how triggering the Nazi/eugenic dogwhistle is, so contemporary (neo)Malthusianism might focus on preventing a “cumulative” addition to greenhouse gases on due to the births of extra individual (usually poor) population members. Or they might admit that since the Global North outpaces the rest of the world’s consumption levels, this means we would more easily solve ecological problems if we halt any additions to the world population at all whatsoever. These new discursive directions sneakily shift the focus off the Global North’s greed and take it as a given, as an unchangeable reality to which everyone else must be accountable.

As revolutionaries we know that Global North vampirism can and should be abolished. We also know that roughly 3/4ths of greenhouse gas emissions is caused by only 100 companies. We know that the US military is the world’s single most polluting institution. We know that the State fails to address climate catastrophe and ecocide, and will greenlight and partner with capitalists, all for profit. We know that since capitalism reduces the “natural” to a constant pursuit of profits, it will always extend and expand ecocidal devastation, and can never actually be sustainable. We know that it structures inequality and therefore allows overuse of resources and exorbitant amounts of waste (even in the production process) by some, while others are shut out of access to even the most basic resources and forced to live with the pollution and toxins that the privileged irresponsibly and violently discard. So we know that environmental catastrophes always have more to do with the technological and politico-economic/social machinery of capital than with the population numbers or consumption levels/habits of the working class and Third World.

Furthermore, as far as birth rates go, the idea that Black and Third World communities are just uniformly outpacing white ones, especially when framed through the notion that this is due to fewer “women’s rights” in our communities than in the white ones, whose colonial ideologies and forces are the ones doing harm to gender/sexual liberation worldwide — that this idea is not proven. Not only can we not accurately portray Black and Third World communities writ large as “behind” the West and First World with regards to reproductive autonomy (unless we are foregrounding the role of European colonialism and neocolonialism in working against self-determination over reproductive justice movements). We cannot even speak of birth rates in these communities without a great deal of nuance that accounts for other factors like urbanization and the pressures of work, among others. There is, therefore, research that gives a more complicated picture of global population trends than the (neo)Malthusians would have us believe.

None of these considerations—about the politico-economic anchors of large-scale ecological devastation, or the demonization of our communities as at the forefront of encroachment on reproductive autonomy (when in actuality the West takes the lead on such violence), or the obscurantism around research on birth rates—none of these are brought up by the people who wax poetic about population. This same myopic, limited framing, that bypasses many factors that are more significant to the phenomenon in question in order to put emphasis on one of

the factors—is used when talk about the use of straws or “carnism” or “poaching in Africa” get brought up. In each instance, the wretched of the earth always find ourselves getting the most backlash or ire or being scapegoated as the face of the problem in the white media. None of this is accidental, or just a case of good intentions gone wrong. It is dangerous and inimical to our safety, and we must identify these trends as the firstfruits of the ecofascistic tendencies which will endanger disabled and queer Black/Third World people the world over. And then act accordingly.

Part of acting accordingly means always exposing the root of modern environmental catastrophe. We need an ecological science, then, that is revolutionary and anti-colonial. This science is one that reveals how the ecological problem is not an apocalypse but is about the need for Massa’s house to burn. Such Black Radical Ecology already exists in our movements, in our responses to media narratives, and in our theoretical contributions. As the contradiction between the dark and earth-colored “spirits” (us) and those “angels” of pallid “enlightenment” (them) becomes clearer and more pronounced, we must join our communities’ revolutionary activities together more intentionally, and that will mean making our Black Radical Ecologies more explicit and developed. If there is any way we are to ensure that we can save the earth and ourselves, we must continue to remember that the ecocidal nature of the “Anthropocene” is one that “over-represents” (as Sylvia Wynter said) the white/colonial definition of “Man”—and that we as Black people do not have to perish as the kkkolonial world goes down in flames. No, we who have been thingified, mistreated and abused and exploited like the dirt, are tasked with a militancy and vigilance in going to fetch what’s before us (the future of our kinship with this planet) from the kkkapitalist’s increasingly untenable hold. As Alice Walker once said, “while the Earth is enslaved, none of us is free.”

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