

## **Are We Living in the Racial Capitalocene?: Anthropocene Discourse, Racial Capitalism, and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me***

### **Climate Change, Geological Agency, and Anthropocene Discourse**

As sea levels continue to rise, as catastrophic storms become more frequent and more intense, as we experience another “hottest year on record” year after year, the problems of anthropogenic climate change become increasingly threatening and urgent. In 2002, Nobel Laureate chemist Paul Crutzen and his team of scientists declared that we had entered a new geological epoch because of these shifts in climate, an epoch they deemed the “Anthropocene.” Then, in 2009, postcolonial theorist and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty extended this Anthropocene discourse in his essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” defending the concept on more historical and philosophical grounds. This new epoch is to be understood as the period in which humanity collectively has had a geophysical impact on the Earth, rather than just a series of biological interactions. “Anthropos,” Anthropocene discourse proposes, has become the main geological agent of this new epoch, rivalling the “great forces of Nature” (Steffen 842). Anthropocene discourse has since expanded into mainstream parlance, on the heels of keywords like “climate change” and “sustainability.” This discourse, though, is profoundly problematic, as my analysis will show, in that it presents a teleological, universalist narrative of history that disperses responsibility onto the human abstractly and precludes a critical understanding of climate change that accounts for differential vulnerability to climate shifts.

In “The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives,” Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill provide a historical narrative of what they define as the Anthropocene, attempting to evaluate and promote the concept on scientific terms. The narrative they provide begins millions of years ago with the *Homo sapiens* ancestor species,

*Homo erectus*. According to Steffen et al., the discovery of an ability to manipulate fire and the shift from a vegetarian to an omnivorous diet were “fundamental” changes, leading to an increase in brain size, which they see causally related to the development of “complex civilizations” and an increased “power to manipulate the environment” (846). The historical narrative Steffen et al. construct here reveals that their framework operates with a teleological understanding of history. Their project reconstructs the now of the Anthropocene with causality and linearity, rather than historical contingency. This teleological understanding comes through strongly in the diction they use: learning to manipulate fire was “a crucial breakthrough” that “fundamentally” changed human relations to the natural world, and the shift to an omnivorous diet was similarly “a fundamental shift” that “ultimately” led to an increased ability to manipulate the environment. Such words suggest that humanity has been moving towards the *telos* of the Anthropocene, that rather than being the result of a series of historical contingencies, the “Anthropocene” is simply an inevitable result of human nature, that environmental destruction emanates from “Anthropos.” The beginning of the Anthropocene, though, is placed at the onset of the Industrial Revolution, which saw a dramatic rise in the use of fossil fuels. They claim that “exploiting fossil fuels allowed *humanity* to undertake new activities and vastly expand and accelerate existing activities” and that the increase in this exploitation saw “a significant increase in *the human enterprise* and its imprint on the environment” (848 *emphases mine*). Though it is unclear what exactly is referred to by the phrase “human enterprise,” both of these claims reveal the ideological implications of their Anthropocene narrative: that humanity, universally and entirely as a species, is responsible for climate change.

Dipesh Chakrabarty frames his argument for the Anthropocene in similar terms, though grounded more in philosophy and history. To Chakrabarty, the Anthropocene radically

problematizes both the distinction between what is perceived as “human” and “natural” histories, to the extent that it collapses them and our common conceptions of freedom and modernity, as well as requires what Chakrabarty deems “species thinking.” Most pertinent to my analysis, though, is Chakrabarty’s notion of human geological agency. He writes that humans have, since the Industrial Revolution, attained a geological agency, a profound ability to alter the Earth’s environment collectively. He writes, “now that humans – thanks to our numbers, the burning of fossil fuel, and other related activities – have become a geological agent on the planet, some scientists have proposed that we recognize the beginning of a new geological era, one in which humans act as a main determinant of the environment of the planet” (209). Despite the postcolonial and poststructuralist aversion to universals and despite his own attunement toward histories of capital and colonialism, Chakrabarty disperses responsibility onto the human species as a whole. While the climate change of our contemporary era is undoubtedly anthropogenic in nature, it is the move to a universalization of responsibility that is notable in Chakrabarty’s framework. “Climate change is an unintended consequence of human actions,” Chakrabarty writes, one that “shows...the effects of our actions as a species. Species may indeed be the name of a placeholder for an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of the danger that is climate change” (221). To Chakrabarty, the human species constitutes a totality within the context of climate change, and the “Anthropos” of the name “Anthropocene” is the singular, unified, universal agent acting upon the environment, rather than a complex multitude of cultures and societies. It is the “human,” abstractly and universally, who is acting upon and destroying the biosphere that makes so much of life as we know it possible. Paradoxically, Chakrabarty deploys Walter Benjamin’s language from his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” though such universal claims would be antithetical to a Benjaminian

historical framework. As Benjamin writes in the “Theses,” “historicism rightly culminates in universal history” (262), suggesting that Chakrabarty’s framework would be aligned with Benjamin’s conception of a conservative historicism, rather than his own historical materialism.

Curiously, both of these Anthropocene discourses mark the Industrial Revolution and the onset of a particular way of life, industrialism, as the start of our new geological era. Neither, however, understand particular socioeconomic formations as being the driving force behind climate change and the new geological epoch that we are ostensibly entering. Instead, it is the “human,” abstractly and universally, who has been the agent and catalyst for this new era, suggesting that anthropogenic climate change results from “human nature” and is the natural endpoint, the *telos*, that human history has been inevitably moving towards.

One of the most compelling critiques of Anthropocene discourse comes from Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, Marxist theorists who understand the Anthropocene concept as precluding an understanding of history that is critical of capitalism and its power relations. According to Malm and Hornborg, “capitalists in a small corner of the Western world invested in steam, laying the foundation stone for the fossil economy: at no moment did the species vote for it either with feet or ballots, or march in mechanical unison, or exercise any sort of shared authority over its own destiny and that of the Earth System” (64). As a system, capitalism is undemocratic: the decisions about what wages laborers will receive and about which technologies will be invested in, for instance, are made by capitalists, not by workers. The human species thus cannot be universalized as the cohesive and singular agent of the Anthropocene because of the immense power imbalances that exist under capitalism. To act as an agent implies internal consensus, coherence, or unity, none of which exist within humanity under capitalism. Only a certain group of people, those controlling the means of production, are

making the decisions about the technologies and processes that were implemented and expanded during the last two centuries that catalyzed climate change. Thus, saying that humanity as an entire species is responsible for climate change is logically unsound and obscures one's historical understanding of the relationship between capital, democracy, and the environment. As Malm and Hornborg remind us, a complex arrangement of decisions made by certain people in certain parts of the world propelled us into this new geological epoch. The obscured and teleological understanding of history of Anthropocene discourse precludes our ability to think critically about differential responsibility for climate change and to build progressive coalitions that take these historical systems of subjugation and domination into account when imagining a future.

Interestingly, Chakrabarty suggests that the path to the "Anthropocene" has been through industrialization, making no distinction "between the capitalist and socialist societies we have had so far, for there was never any principled distinction between their use of fossil fuel" (217). I would make the case, though, that capitalism is the preeminent system of our global climate shift era for two reasons. First, it is the system that allowed for the investment in and expansion of fossil fuel-burning technologies, in the Britain of the Industrial Revolution, for instance, and these investment decisions came about in a distinctly undemocratic manner, as Malm and Hornborg emphasize. Also, capitalism propounds a uniquely commodifying, consumptive, and individualistic ideological disposition towards nature, that nature is a cheap, disposable, endless resource. Under capitalism, it is thought that nature exists to be consumed by and for the individual or the corporation, rather than the collective. Further, to say that capitalist and socialist nations have had the same consumptive relation to nature is to ignore that many "socialist" nations, including Russia and China, are widely considered merely state capitalist, operating with capitalist ideology and practices through the public sector (Wolff 4). These

societies' relations to nature is perhaps another undemocratic manifestation of that consumptive, capitalist ideology.

### ***Between the World and Me, History, and Racial Capitalism***

While Malm and Hornborg's framework centers around a critique of capitalism, not engaging much with race or gender, it moves Anthropocene discourse into a direction that is distinctly more critical of historical power relations and systems of domination. Ta-Nehisi Coates' memoir *Between the World and Me*, with its critique of white supremacy, racialized labor relations, and environmental destruction, offers a fruitful extension of the "Capitalocene" framework, the memoir being critically attuned to how race, capitalism, slavery, and climate change are bound up with one another. Released in 2015 to acclaim, criticism, and controversy, *Between the World and Me* is Ta-Nehisi Coates' epistolary memoir to his son about the complexities and difficulties of growing up as a black man in the United States, among other things. Coates tells his son about both historical structural racism and contemporary racial violence, emphasizing the differential vulnerability that his son's racialized body is subject to. Towards its conclusion, the memoir briefly alludes to climate change and the possibility of climate catastrophe, making it an interesting text to place in conversation with Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse, especially because of its particular conception of history and portrayal of the racialized body in our climate shift era. Ecocritic Stephanie LeMenager calls *Between the World and Me* an exemplary work in climate fiction and a display of the "everyday Anthropocene" mode, a literary mode that details the everyday, mundane experience of living in an era of drastic climate shift and climate vulnerability. While the memoir does fall in line with LeMenager's mode of the "everyday Anthropocene" as she defines it, it is my contention that Coates presents an understanding of our climate shift era that is radically different from the

conception that dominates Anthropocene discourse. When placed in conversation with this discourse, *Between the World and Me* demands an understanding of our epoch not as the “Anthropocene,” but as “Racial Capitalocene,” an era in which race, capitalism, slavery, and climate change should all be seen as inextricably linked.

Coates’ understanding of history in *Between the World and Me* is fundamentally different from the hegemonic historical narrative that so many discourses, including Anthropocene discourse, present, specifically about modernity, capitalism, racism, and climate change. To Coates, American modernity is fundamentally built upon the exploitation, enslavement, and destruction of black bodies. Coates describes that “in America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage” (103 *emphasis not added*). The use of this word “heritage” is notable because it suggests a fundamental quality to this destruction, that this destruction of racialized bodies is engrained in the very fabric of the country. Racism is a part of the nation’s origin story, and a history of the United States without the racial hierarchies and subjugation that it was founded upon is essentially distorting. But, Coates explains, this is exactly the dominant historical narrative that is told in schools, that Dreamers tell themselves. The Dream, a thematic that Coates develops throughout the book, is the illusory American ideology that asserts the United States as a place of egalitarianism and exceptionalism, but is actually tied intimately to the logic of white supremacy. The Dreamers, to Coates, are those who believe the United States to be a land of equal opportunity, a shining city on the hill, failing to understand that the country was built upon the free labor and destruction of black bodies. The Dream continues to persist through these obscured, nationalistic, and white supremacist understandings of American history, modes of historical narration that allow for the forgetting of slavery and oppression. “To awaken [the Dreamers] is to reveal that they are an empire of humans and, like all empires of humans,

are built on the destruction of the body” (143), Coates writes. To Coates, the United States is “a country lost in the Dream” (12), a country which collectively fails to understand that it was founded upon the plunder of racialized bodies by telling itself a historical narrative that erases that history in the name of an illusory ideal of Progress.

Cedric J. Robinson’s theory of “racial capitalism” is especially helpful in elucidating the alternative American history that Coates’ memoir presents. Robinson, who begins his study of racial capitalism in Europe itself, investigates the racialization that existed there while capitalism was expanding. In the study, Robinson shows that racialism and racial stratification were fundamental components of capitalist expansion, as Europe was stratified along ethnic and racial lines throughout the centuries that the bourgeois and proletarian classes arose. Robinson writes, “the bourgeoisie that led the development of capitalism were drawn from particular ethnic and cultural groups; the European proletariats and the mercenaries of the leading states from others; its peasants from still other cultures; and its slaves from entirely different worlds. The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones” (26). This racial stratification of different groups had profound impacts on labor relations, as one’s economic position was often contingent upon society’s racialization of them. Differences constructed as racial thus became the justification for economic exploitation. These histories of racialized labor allow Robinson to conclude that “racialism and its permutations persisted, rooted not in a particular era but in the civilization itself” (28). Capitalism, within Robinson’s framework, is thus fundamentally and inextricably tied to racialization.

Coates employs a similar framework of racial capitalism throughout his text, suggesting racism to be a fundamental part of American capitalism and American “modernity.” For Coates,

the enslavement of black bodies that went on for two and a half centuries ties American capitalism and modernity as a whole to racism and white supremacy in a fundamental way. Coates' conception of American capitalism as racial capitalism comes through clearest in the following passage: "At the onset of the Civil War, our stolen bodies were worth four billion dollars, more than all of American industry...and the prime product rendered by our stolen bodies—cotton—was America's primary export. The richest men in America lived in the Mississippi River Valley, and they made their riches off our stolen bodies" (101). The direct connection that Coates here draws between slavery and capitalist expansion, between the pool of free labor that white capitalists exploited as the United States came into existence and the economic prosperity and growth of the nation, suggests an inextricable linkage between racism and American capitalism. That is, just as European capitalism was dependent on racialization to create cheap labor pools to be profitably exploited, so to was capitalism in the United States.

If American capitalism is to be understood as racial capitalism within Coates' framework, how, then, should we understand Coates' brief allusions to anthropogenic climate change? How might Coates' understanding of history problematize Anthropocene discourse? Towards the end of the text, Coates makes his most overt invocations of climate change and the possibility of climate catastrophe, writing that "the Dream is the same habit that endangers the planet, the same habit that sees our bodies stowed away in prisons and ghettos" (Coates 151). "Plunder," a major motif throughout the work, happens not only to black bodies, but also to "the body of the Earth itself" (150). The connection here between the destruction of black bodies and environmental degradation suggests that "the Dream" is an ideological framework that constructs both racialized bodies and nature as objects, cheap, disposable, and renewable. The ideology of white supremacy and the ideology of environmental destruction are intimately linked. It is this very

linkage that leads Coates to describe that black bodies have been regarded in the United States as “a natural resource of incomparable value” (Coates 132), as “fuel for the American machine” (70). In her article entitled “Racial Capitalocene,” Françoise Vergès draws a similar connection, noting how “nature was transformed into a cheap resource, as endlessly renewable as the bonded workforce” (77). Not only is there a resonance between the manner in which both racialized bodies and nature are commodified, objectified, and in term, deemed disposable, though. These systems of domination and destruction actually reinforce and function through one another. The plunder of enslaved bodies allowed for the growth and expansion of American modernity, augmenting the plunder of the natural environment. Thus, enslaved bodies are described as “fuel” for American modernity: enslaved bodies become disposable commodities *and* are exploited to expand American modernity, wherein further environmental degradation will occur.

The historical framework in *Between the World and Me* thus suggests an understanding of our climate change era more in line with Malm and Hornborg’s “Capitalocene” framework, rather than Steffen’s and Chakrabarty’s “Anthropocene.” As has been shown above, Coates is critical throughout his text of the dominant labor relations that American “modernity” has been founded upon, most importantly slavery. The text never explicitly uses the term “Anthropocene” or “Capitalocene,” but it lends itself to readings of the former because it is keyed into the distinctly undemocratic nature of slavery and racial capitalism. The centuries since the Industrial Revolution have not been egalitarian, and the investment in and expansion of industrial technologies and industrial ways of life have not come about democratically. As Coates shows, hegemonic understandings of American history obscure the existence of slavery and how American capitalism is racialized, thus revealing a history antithetical to American claims of democracy and egalitarianism. Anthropocene discourse, because it claims the “human” to be

unified and coherent geological agent in climate change, presupposes a human species without conflict, carrying out its actions of environmental degradation in unity. Clearly, though, this notion of unified human agency obscures historical and contemporary systems of oppression and distorts our ability to understand differential responsibility for the climate changes we are facing.

Not only does Coates' narrative suggest an understanding of our current era in line with the "Capitalocene" narrative, but it also emphasizes the profoundly racialized quality of the labor that has been exploited to make the Capitalocene. Discussing the Industrial Revolution, which is often marked as the beginning of the epoch in Anthropocene discourse, Coates writes, "It was the cotton that passed through our chained hands that inaugurated this age" (151). This sentence, which simultaneously alludes to practices of enslavement, capitalist expansion, and the emergence of a new, climate change "age," succinctly captures why Coates should be seen as advocating for calling our era the "Racial Capitalocene." To Coates, the exploitation and destruction of racialized bodies under slavery and racial capitalism have an inextricable relationship to the environmental degradation of our climate change era. One cannot be thought without the other in American history, since the expansion of American industrial society (and European industrial society, too) was contingent upon a vast pool of racialized free labor that was ruthlessly exploited and destroyed. Quoting Cedric Robinson's work on racial capitalism, Françoise Vergès seeks to find "what connection can be made between the Western conception of nature as 'cheap' and the global organization of a 'cheap,' racialized, disposable workforce, given the conception of nature as constant capital and the fact that 'the organizers of the capitalist world system appropriated Black labor power as constant capital'" (73). Vergès too makes the connection between the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of slavery and colonialism, writing that these two practices "had a deep impact on world-ecology" (77). These

are precisely the connections that Coates draws in his memoir when he describes the plunder of black bodies and the plunder of the Earth as coming from the same “Dream,” or that black bodies were the “fuel” (70) for American modernity. The choice to describe slave labor as the “fuel” (70) for American modernity is especially interesting, given that word’s connotation of combustion and its association with the carbon dioxide in our air that is warming the planet. If the new climate change era is a result of immense fuel combustion, and Coates positions the exploitation of slave labor as resonant with the combustion of fossil fuels, then the climate change era, the “Capitalocene,” must also be seen as fundamentally racial. Within Coates’ understanding of history, capitalism and racism are positioned as the catalyzing forces behind climate change, revealing climate change to be sociogenic, or resulting from a particular social and economic structure, rather than anthropogenic, or emanating from the “human,” as such. A name such as “Racial Capitalocene,” though it perhaps does not contain the same rhetorical flourish and ease as the term “Anthropocene,” would invoke those socioeconomic power structures rhetorically, therefore centralizing them as the driving forces of climate change and allowing for a critical understanding of history and a politics that centralizes differential responsibility and vulnerability.

### **Climate Fiction, the “Everyday Anthropocene,” and Literature in the Racial Capitalocene**

For all of the theoretical and political urgency of the text, *Between the World and Me* is first and foremost a literary work, a first-person, epistolary memoir (in the tradition of James Baldwin) that uses highly rhetorical language to narrate Coates’ experience in the world. The fact of the book’s *literariness*, then, in combination with its radical politics, begs a few questions: “What is the place of literature in the Racial Capitalocene?” or, more specifically, “How can literary narrative and life writing be employed to inspire critical consciousness and

awareness of the climate shift moment we are living in?” Stephanie LeMenager attempts to address some of these questions in her essay “Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre,” where she discusses climate fiction, which she calls a new “novelistic mode” (221) of our climate shift era, and its attendant “neoliberal feeling-state,” the “everyday Anthropocene” (223). Spanning a wide range of different media, climate fiction is, generally speaking, artistic practice that is attempting to grapple with our recently understood reality of climate shift in some capacity. The “everyday Anthropocene,” meanwhile, is a motif of climate fiction that documents the everyday, particular experience of our climate change era. The everyday Anthropocene is about “the present tense, lived time of the Anthropocene,” about “what it means to live, day by day, through climate shift and the economic and sociological injuries that underwrite it” (225). For LeMenager, it exists in distinction from the tendency of erasure and forgetting that goes along with deep, epochal thinking. The everyday Anthropocene gives voice to those unheard in the new geological era, to those who are differentially vulnerable to the violence of climate shift. Coates’ narrative, which LeMenager lifts as a key example of everyday Anthropocene literature, is compatible with this mode for LeMenager because of its granular and particular narration of experience in the anthropogenic climate change era. But, because of his historical framework, I would propose that Coates’ memoir highlights the tension attendant in the term “everyday Anthropocene,” since it refutes the very basis of the “Anthropocene” as a concept, its universalism, as shown above. Instead, Coates’ memoir offers a “Phenomenology of the Body” (as James B. Haile terms it) in the Racial Capitalocene. It is a book that presents an artistic mediation and representation of the experience of differential vulnerability (racialized and climatic) in our new geological era and offers a productive model of the critical work that literature can do in these times.

Throughout *Between the World and Me*, Coates emphasizes corporeality and differential bodily vulnerability to violence as fundamental to the experience of racism. Towards the beginning of the book, he describes to his son that “all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth” (10). By using such intense, cacophonous diction as “dislodges,” “rips,” and “cracks” in this sentence, Coates literalizes the violence of racism into his poetics, emphasizing the immense corporeality that racism manifests with in the everyday. This practice of drawing attention to racism’s corporeal immediacy prevents the habit of erasure that the “Dream” is predicated upon. Speaking of the injustice of his friend Prince Jones’ death, of how the country attempted to erase that death, Coates writes, “The forgetting is habit, is yet another component of the Dream... They have forgotten, because to remember would tumble them out of the beautiful Dream and force them to live down here with us” (143). Coates’ powerful diction that centralizes this bodily immediacy of racism works against the tendency of forgetting, both historically and in the lived now.

In “Ta-Nehisi Coates’ Phenomenology of the Body,” James B. Haile argues that this characterization of black corporeality in *Between the World and Me* is in fact phenomenological, in line with the tradition of black phenomenology and thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter. Black phenomenology, Haile writes, “understands phenomenology in terms not of merely the synergic body but also the historical body, carved out within *historicity* and does not assume or presume a normative subject” (Haile 496 *emphasis not added*). Within black phenomenology, the black body is understood as historically constructed by systems of racial subjugation and violence, with black subjects residually experiencing historical systems of

oppression in the lived now in a manner that white subjects do not. The afterlives of slavery are felt and lived in profound ways, even centuries after the practice was ended. As Coates describes, it is American “heritage” (103) to destroy the black body – a heritage which his son must be aware of as he goes about his daily life. This heritage destroyed Prince Jones and constantly threatens to destroy the black subjects that populate the book. This heritage is, as Coates describes, why the boys on the corner in Baltimore act “hard” in their dress and their body language. Their performance arises out of fear, out of a desire to protect their bodies against the destructive force of white supremacy that black subjects have been vulnerable to historically. But, though these bodies experience this acute historicity, Coates’ materialist framework suggests an embrace of “terrestriality over transcendence,” or “the ‘here’ over and against the ‘beyond’” (Haile 494). He is neither caught up in the past nor disillusioned by the future. The book is first and foremost a letter to his son, concerned with the task of helping his son live free, in his body, in the here and now: “this is your country, this is your body, and you must find some way to live within all of it” (Coates 12).

Though “Racial Capitalocene” narrative may present what appears on the surface a universal history, Coates’ phenomenological framework does not propose a universal subject, but instead proposes an understanding of our climate shift era through the particular. As Malm and Coates both show, environmental degradation is varied across time and space. Certain people (capitalists, slave-owners, colonialists) are responsible for the investment in and expansion of fossil fuel technologies. Others (middle and upper class consumers in industrial societies) are responsible for the continual use of them, some more than others. Hence, the notion of an individualized carbon footprint exists. There is not and cannot be a universal carbon footprint, as such. Responsibility is always differential among individuals, contingent on

numerous historical factors. “We,” that is, humans, cannot experience geological force because there is no singular and coherent human geological force across time and space. That is, we cannot phenomenologically experience the Anthropocene because the Anthropocene is a falsely universalizing conception of our era, and we can never experience being a universal subject.

LeMenager’s idea of an “everyday Anthropocene,” then, must be fallacious. It at once attempts to bring together the particular and the universal, being about the “everyday” while also presupposing “Anthropos” as a universal agent. In its everydayness, this mode of storytelling is granular and particular, but the notion of Anthropocene itself that LeMenager’s mode presupposes is about the universal, suggesting a clear tension in the idea itself. *Between the World and Me* reveals some of that tension. Through his attention to the embodied now, Coates is narrating the particular and granular everyday reality of living in the climate shift era, at first in line with LeMenager’s mode of “everyday Anthropocene.” But, Coates’ understanding of history and his implication of our era as the “Racial Capitalocene” refutes the universalism of Anthropocene discourse. His is a narrative of the particular, in contradistinction to Chakrabarty’s universal geological agency or species being. Since Coates’ phenomenology does not presuppose a transcendental and normative subject, but a particular body “carved out within historicity” (Haile 496), Coates’ implication of our era as “Racial Capitalocene” does not do that either. Rather, it proposes that we can come into greater understanding of systems of domination and destructive power relations through the linguistically mediated *particular* experience of our era.

Since the “Dream” that has led to so much racial violence is also the same “Dream” leading to the destruction of the environment, *Between the World and Me* is a documentation of the experience of simultaneous bodily vulnerability to racial violence and climate change. One image in particular illustrates this simultaneous experience: describing a street corner near his

childhood home, Coates writes that “North and Pulaski was not an intersection but a hurricane, leaving only splinters and shards in its wake” (22). This image comes within discussion of how him and his peers were endlessly trying to protect their bodies, to prove their bodies inviolable against systems of domination and destruction. He lived in “the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body” (24). This centering of the corporeal experience of racism evokes that phenomenological notion of embodied historicity, that the black subject’s body is historically constructed as racialized and that this racialization is experienced phenomenologically in the lived now. This construction as racialized then imposes the urgent imperative of black subject’s needing to protect their body. Interestingly, the image connects the system that constructs that racialized body to climate change through the metaphor of the “hurricane.” As anthropogenic climate change continues, its storms will increase in both frequency and intensity. The effects of those historical modes of destruction, white supremacy and environmental degradation, in our current moment overlap within this description of his phenomenological experience of his body’s vulnerability. In other words, vulnerability to racial violence accentuates vulnerability to climatic shift, and vice versa, as was devastatingly seen in the events of Hurricane Katrina. Coates’ memoir is thus a phenomenology of the Racial Capitalocene, a narrative in which Coates, through literary language, mediates his bodily experiences of historical racialization and differential vulnerability to both racial violence and climate catastrophe

If we understand our era as the Racial Capitalocene, then *Between the World and Me* is exactly the type of literature that is needed in our era of climate change. While Anthropocene discourse distorts our understandings of history towards universality, Coates reveals that in our climate shift era, we do not need narratives that aspire toward universality. We must turn to other

modes of consciousness raising, modes that are attuned to the particular experience of overlapping systems of domination and destruction. The Racial Capitalocene demands modes of narration that are aware and critical of its sometimes slow, epochal violence *and* its sometimes fast, catastrophic violence. The content of LeMenager's "everyday Anthropocene," the granular and the particular, is promising, though the presupposition of an "Anthropocene" may be fundamentally misleading and problematic. As Françoise Vergès shows, we need modes of narration that can "write a history of environmentalism that includes slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and racial capitalism, from the standpoint of those who were made into 'cheap' objects of commerce, their bodies as objects renewable through wars, capture, and enslavement, fabricated as disposable people, whose lives do not matter" (73). I would argue that Coates' memoir, in its particularity, its critique of hegemonic narratives of history, its evocation of simultaneously embodied historicity and now-ness, its phenomenological narration of the Racial Capitalocene, does exactly this. As Coates' memoir shows, one never experiences racial capitalism or the Racial Capitalocene as a whole, and many experiences of the Racial Capitalocene are radically different, dependent on one's social and economic positionality. Literature, though, can be a site of mediating the particular experience of systems of domination and destruction so as to raise consciousness within the reader and facilitate political action.

Facing imminent catastrophe, literature can and must destabilize our notions of how it is that we arrived here and who it is that is responsible, while also portraying experiences of that here and now in a way that catalyzes critical reflection and action in the reader. It must strive towards that critical methodology that Vergès calls for, attendant to historical systems of oppression and their inextricable relation to one another and to contemporary environmental violence. By narrating the intricate intersection between systems of domination and powerfully

mediating the particular experience of those systems, *Between the World and Me* displays the radical need for critical literature in our climate shift era. *Between the World and Me* is also, first and foremost, a memoir of consciousness raising, an ambition which represents the political potentiality of this type of life writing as a whole. It can, first off, be liberatory: “the pursuit of knowing was freedom,” Coates writes of his time spent in the libraries of Howard University, a time that led him “toward the total possession of his body” (48). Life writing can also, if it critically engages both history and the present, be an image that “flashes up” (Benjamin 255) and charges “the time of the now” (261), to circle back to that Benjaminian language that Dipesh Chakrabarty employs, with revolutionary fervor and a drive for action, for struggle.

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