

# Geology, Race, and Matter

Let's start with the end of the world, why don't we?

—N. K. JEMISIN, *The Fifth Season*

Every generation confronts the task of choosing its past. Inheritances are chosen as much as they are passed on. The past depends less on “what happened then” than on the desires and discontents of the present. Strivings and failures shape the stories we tell. What we recall has as much to do with the terrible things we hope to avoid as with the good life for which we yearn. But when does one decide to stop looking to the past and instead conceive of a new order? When is it time to dream of another country or to embrace other strangers as allies or to make an opening, an overture, where there is none? When is it clear that the old life is over, a new one has begun, and there is no looking back? From the holding cell was it possible to see beyond the end of the world and to imagine living and breathing again?

—SAIDIYA HARTMAN, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*

Across the spaces and places of geology, its languages of description and dispossession, the question of the Anthropocene shapeshifts, world making in epochal pronouncements of the “New World” of humanity, world breaking in the formation of the “Ends” of master subjects: Man, History, Civilization. In its brief tenure, the Anthropocene has metamorphosed. It has been taken up in the world, purposed, and put to work as a conceptual grab, materialist history, and cautionary tale of planetary predicament. Equally, this planetary analytic has failed to do the work to properly identify its *own* histories of colonial earth-writing, to name the masters of broken earths, and to redress the legacy of racialized subjects that geology leaves in its wake. It has failed to grapple with the inheritance of violent dispossession of indigenous land under the auspices of a colonial geo-logics or to address the extractive grammars of geology that labor in the instrumentation and

instrumentalization of dominant colonial narratives and their subjective, often subjugating registers that are an ongoing praxis of displacement.

Modern liberalism is forged through colonial violence, and slavery is at least coterminous with its ideas and experiences of freedom, if not with the material root of its historical possibility. Thus the ways in which geology underwrites that continuum—of liberal subjectivity and its historicity—and how geology as a praxis materially carries this relation into the future should matter in an epochal swerve. As the Anthropocene proclaims the language of species life—*anthropos*—through a universalist geologic commons, it neatly erases histories of racism that were incubated through the regulatory structure of geologic relations. The racial categorization of Blackness shares its natality with mining the New World, as does the material impetus for colonialism in the first instance. This means that the idea of Blackness and the displacement and eradication of indigenous peoples get caught and defined in the ontological wake of geology. The human and its subcategory, the inhuman, are historically relational to a discourse of settler-colonial rights and the material practices of extraction, which is to say that the categorization of matter is a spatial execution, of place, land, and person cut from relation through geographic displacement (and relocation through forced settlement and transatlantic slavery). That is, racialization belongs to a material categorization of the division of matter (corporeal and mineralogical) into active and inert. Extractable matter must be both passive (awaiting extraction and possessing of properties) and able to be activated through the mastery of white men. Historically, both slaves and gold have to be material and epistemically made through the recognition and extraction of their inhuman properties. These historic geologic relations and geo-logics span Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia through the movement of people, objects, and racial and material categories. Thus becoming post-racial through Anthropocenic speciation is a foil of the humanist trickster (Yusoff and Thomas 2018)—one that places an injunction on the recognition of historic modes of geopolitical mattering while maintaining unequal relations of power through continued environmental exposures.

In this moment of reinscribing geology as a property of personhood in the Anthropocene (in the strategy of geologizing the social and socializing the geologic), there is a need to think with its former lives of inscription, not just those currently searched for in the strata. Or, to put it another way, what modes of *geologic life*[\[1\]](#) (material and psychic) are already imbricated in

geologic practices, often in violent ways? Geology is a mode of accumulation, on one hand, and of dispossession, on the other, depending on which side of the geologic color line you end up on. In this book, I ask how geology is being reelaborated in the Anthropocene and consider what historicity would resist framing this epoch as a “new” condition that forgets its histories of oppression and dispossession. This project seeks to write a prehistory that is sufficient to the radical ambivalence of the *afterlives of geology*—of indigenous dispossession of land and sovereignty in the invasion of the Americas through to the ongoing petropolitics of settler colonialism; of slavery, “breaking rocks on the chain gang” (as Nina Simone sings it), to the current incarnations of antiblackness in mining black gold; and of the racialized impacts of climate change. To redress *how* geology makes property relations and properties a relation of subjugation is to challenge the incompleteness of address in the Anthropocene.

Even as the Anthropocene extends its purview over geology within an explicitly politicalized optic on geomorphic processes, it is a “view from nowhere.” The God’s-eye view is inverted into a lithic-eye view to produce a geologic commons from below (Yusoff 2017b). The unification of its vision across the time and space of geologic practices seemingly offers an undifferentiating and indifferent politic. Apprehending the past in the present colonial mining empires of white settler nations frames White Geology as a historical regime of material power, not a genetic imaginary. In this book, I want to redress how the descriptive qualities of geology’s nomenclature produce what Hartman calls a “cultivated silence” about the normalcy of those extractive modes as deracialized. To address this silence would be to understand geology as a regime for producing both subjects and material worlds, where race is established as an effect of power within the language of geology’s objects. Specifically, the border in the division of materiality (and its subjects) as inhuman and human, and thus as inert or agentic matter, operationalizes race.

White Geology makes legible a set of extractions, from particular subject positions, from black and brown bodies, and from the ecologies of place. The collective functioning of geologic languages coded—inhuman, property, value, possession—as categories moves across territory, relation, and flesh. It is not just that geology is a signifier for extraction but that a transmutation of matter occurs within that signification that renders matter as property, that makes a delineation between agency and inertness, which stabilizes the *cut* of

property and enacts the removal of matter from its constitutive relations as both subject and mineral embedded in sociological and ecological fields. Thus I argue that the semiotics of White Geology creates *atemporal* materiality dislocated from place and time—a mythology of disassociation in the formation of matter independent of its languages of description and the historical constitution of its social relations.

The division between the figures of the human and inhuman and its manifestations in subjective life exhibits one of the most terrible consequences of the division of materiality organized and practiced as a biopolitical tool of governance. The division of matter into nonlife and life pertains not only to matter but to the racial organization of life as foundational to New World geographies. The biopolitical category of nonbeing is established through slaves being exchanged for and as gold. Slavery was a geologic axiom of the inhuman in which nonbeing was made, reproduced, and circulated as flesh. This unmaking of subjects constitutes a warp of dispossession in the progressive narrative of collective accumulation or geologic commons in which “we” all share. The rendering of nonbeings in colonial extractive practices through the designation of inhuman or geologic life, its exchange and circulation, demonstrates what Christina Sharp (2009) calls the “monstrous intimacy” of the subjective powers of geology, where gold shows up as bodies and bodies are the surplus of mineralogical extraction. The inhuman is a call across categories, material and symbolic, corporeal and incorporeal, intimacies cut across life and nonlife in the indifferent register of matter.

Geology (and its fossil objects) have been entwined with questions of origins, processes of racialization through speciation and notions of progress, as well as being a praxis for inscribing racial logics *within* the material politics of extraction that constitutes lived forms of racism (from eugenics to environmental racism). To trace racial matterings across the category of the inhuman, and specifically the traffic between the *inhuman as matter* and the *inhuman as race*, is to examine how the concept of the inhuman is a connective hinge in the twinned discourses of geology and humanism. It is a hinge that establishes an extractive axis in both subjective and geologic (or planetary) life. Race (and the Human) is tied most noticeably to fossil narratives (Yusoff 2013, 2016) and racialized processes of extraction, but it is also resident in modes of racial discourse in relation to ideas of property, possession, and land use. In the categorization of matter as *property* and

*properties*, both spatial dispossession of land (for extraction) and dispossessions of persons in chattel slavery (as another form of spatial extraction) are enacted. The slave in this formulation is rendered as matter, recognized through an inhuman property relation—what Saidiya Hartman calls fungibility—as a commodity with properties, but without subjective will or agency (or “flesh,” as Hortense Spiller has it). Rendering subjects as inhuman matter, not as persons, thereby facilitated and incorporated the historical fact of extraction of personhood as a quality of geology at its inception.

Following the work of Hartman and Spillers, I want to pay attention to the grammars of geology and to think with the modes of objectification that the genre of the Anthropocene both unleashes and maintains. This material language of the inhuman and its production of the subjective category of nonbeing set up historical deformations and present impossibilities for subjective life, specifically in what Hartman (1997) calls the “afterlives of slavery.” The mine and the afterlives of its geomorphic acts constitute the materiality of the Anthropocene and its natal moment, from the transformation of mineralogy of the earth in the extraction of gold, silver, salt, and copper to the massive transformation of ecologies in the movement of people, plants, and animals across territories, coupled with the intensive implantation of monocultures of indigo, sugar, tobacco, cotton, and other “alien” ecologies in the New World. The complex histories of those afterlives of slavery continued in the chain gangs that laid the railroad and worked the coal mines through to the establishment of new forms of energy, in which, Stephanie LeMenager (2014, 5) comments, “oil literally was conceived as a replacement for slave labor.” Approaching race as a geologic proposition (or *geologies of race*) is a way, then, to open up the imbrication of inhuman materials and relations of extraction that go beyond a place-based configuration of environmental racism as a spatial organization of exposure to environmental harm. There is a need to examine the epistemological framings and categorizations that produce the material and discursive world building through geology in both its historical and present forms. Specifically, in the lexicon of geology—as a naming of property and properties—certain extractive modes are configured and deployed to enact dispossession across territorial and subjective registers. Geology is historically situated as a *transactional zone* in which propertied and proprietorial concepts of self are entangled—as the entanglement of slavery

versus freedom and the material forms of social subjective life versus liberal individuation.

If the first stake at redressing political geology is to call for the disruption of the connotative powers of language—the exchangeability between human and thing, subject and matter—then the second is to follow this suspension with an orientation that acknowledges the afterlife of this disruption as an ongoing struggle of reorientation in valuing black life and in concomitant struggles for uncontaminated water, air, and land. Why is it that the language of geology allows for the exchange of a person as a material object of property and properties (a unit of corporeal energy), and how does it bypass established biopolitical registers of critique? What are the psychic figurations of gold and slave in the colonial cartographic imagination that allow this symbolic and material exchange? The resolution of this interchangeability happens in the geologic language of the inhuman and the lexicons of inert and nonagentic matter. My intention is not to reclaim the inhuman as a dialectical position from which to reframe humanist exclusions in relation to their Others (because, as Wynter reminds us, the Human is an occupied category); rather, I want to think with the inhuman as an analytic with which to scrutinize the traffic between relations of race and material economy and to think race as a material economy that itself emerges through the libidinal economy of geology (as the desire for gold, mineralogy, and metallurgy). But what are the relays involved between the classifications of geology and the classifications of race? How does slavery function as an inhuman “category mistake” (Spillers 2003, 20) of geology? Between mineral-as-property and person-as-property, after Spillers, “the question for me remains the concatenation itself—what in the nature of ‘property’ might have provoked a sufficient enough displacement and condensation along a sequence of analogical thinking that would bring it within the scope of ‘human’” (Spillers 2003, 20)?

Addressing the racialization of geology within the context of the new origin stories that are being fashioned in the search for the beginning of the Anthropocene epoch, I think with the historicity that is being structured into these events—what Dionne Brand (2017a) calls the “corpses of the humanist narrative” that constitute the sedimented “nonevent” of those moments. This subjective and subjugating geologic life happens in the fugitive or insurgent space-time of Anthropocenic geology, yet it is the very quotidian practices that constitute it and are constituting of subjects. This is to see the

Anthropocene as a psychopolitical staging of subjectivity as well as a historical rendering of materiality (Yusoff 2015). If this project seems like a counterhistory of geologic relations that is other to current articulation as a linear narrative of accumulation, then mine is certainly an attempt to open an investigation into that history and to the languages that carry the work of geology in the world (as resource, extraction, inhuman, chattel). The birth of a geologic subject in the Anthropocene made without an examination of this history is a deadly erasure, rebirth without responsibility.

The revisiting of origin stories in the Anthropocene also contains a broader question: what are the encroachments on subjective life that take place through geology and its description of materiality? Another way to put this would be to ask, how does the maintenance of structures of materiality (or geologic codes) facilitate and perpetuate antiblackness and its forms of subjugation, as well as ongoing settler colonialism? How is geology an operation of power, as well as a temporal explanation for life on the planet? And what are the intimate contours of its material possessions (as property and extraction)? The exercise of power is not simply explained in terms of how slavery engendered racialized subjects as objects but also within the language of geology itself, which allowed such traversals to be made in the first instance. The language of materiality and its division between life and nonlife, and its alignment with concepts of the human and inhuman, facilitated the divisions between subjects as humans and subjects priced as flesh (or inhuman matter).

While the human and inhuman are so often mapped as binaries onto organic and inorganic matter and its descriptions, as dialectics or defining modes, there is an *inframaterialism* that often slips out of view in the perceived autonomism of these states of matter that are rendered as either biology or geology. Put differently, geology is often assumed to be without a subject (thinglike and inert), whereas biology is secured in the recognition of the organism (bodylike and sentient). Thinking Blackness in terms of the relations of materiality, of coal black, black gold, black metal, and how these are configured in discourses of geology and its lexicons of matter uncovers the transactions between geology and inhumanism as a mode of both production (or extraction) and subjection (or a violent mode of geologic life). How do Blackness and the terminology of geology slip into each other as equivalent substances? How is such an alchemy of slavery and geology possible? How is geology as a discipline and extraction process cooked

together in the crucible of slavery and colonialism? How does this geology (as a colonial and neocolonial strategy) enact territorial extraction (through survey, classification, codification, and annexation)?

Following these lines of inquiry gives rise to questions about agency and consent, around sentience and inhuman matter, and how material agency with and without subjectivity is thought outside of the structures of cozy humanism and its languages of existence. As Édouard Glissant (2010, xi) makes clear, “I build my language with rocks.” Dionne Brand (1996, 76) similarly writes, “I want to go against the ground, grind it in my teeth, but most I want to plunge my hands in stone.” The history of Blackness by its very negation in the category of nonbeing within economies of Whiteness lives differently in the earth, where “blackness is defined here in terms of social relationality rather than identity” (Hartman 1997, 56)—a relation realized in a different material register as “an aesthetics of disruption and intrusion . . . aesthetics of rupture and connection” (Glissant 1997, 151). In this aesthetics of the earth, Glissant identifies the crux of the problem as the transformation of land into territory: “Territory is the basis for conquest. Territory requires filiation to be planted and legitimated. Territory is defined by its limits, and they must be expanded” (151). In an act of intrusion, I seek to undermine the *givenness* of geology as an innocent or natural description of the world, to see its modes of inscription and circulation as a doubling of the notion of property—property as a description of mineralogy and property as an acquisition (as resource, land, extractive quality of energy or mineral). This geologic lexicon is a practice that enacts colonialism through what Sylvia Wynter called “scientific humanism” that is mobilized as a praxis for dispossession.

The epistemological divisions of geology and biology and their respective analytics of geopolitics and biopolitics divide the world between the skein of biopolitical coercion and territorial arrangements of populations, leaving the interaction between the geopolitical and biopolitical worlds as a problem of how the politics of scale meshes into subjective life. This epistemic division sediments a geo-logic that was necessary for colonial theft, because it allowed slaves to turn into and displace gold and refused to acknowledge indigenous relations with “dead” matter. For example, the Gold Coast as a source of both gold and slaves was itself referred to as “the Mine” (Hartman 2007, 51). These relations found their neocolonial afterlives in the extraction industries of former colonies. (For example, the British platinum mine on the



Bushveld Igneous Complex authorized attacks by police and security services in 2012 on striking miners, leaving thirty-four miners dead.) Geology is a relation of power and continues to constitute racialized relations of power, in its incarnation in the Anthropocene and in its material manifestation in mining, petrochemical sites and corridors, and their toxic legacies—all over a world that resolutely cuts exposure along color lines.

While attention has been paid to the role of scientific epistemes in the modern formation of race through colonization and enslavement stretching across an epoch of imperial world building that is not yet at its end, the historic subject (as European-Human and its Others) is conceived of as a biologic, not a geologic, subject. As Elizabeth Povinelli (2016) comments, the dominant mode of subjectivity of late liberalism is of the biocentric subject. There is an obscurity or opacity accorded to geopolitical affects at the level of the subject formations that exceeds the territorial impositions of biopolitical orderings. By that, I mean that the geophysics of being has been neglected in accounts of colonial violence. The intimacy of this geophysics as an experiential and structural form of (geologic) life enacts sensibilities of matter, time, gravity, mud, and weather as inhabitations that are absent from the geospatial confinements of these geopolitics. Christina Sharpe (2016a, 134) says, “So we are here in the weather, here in the singularity. Here there is disaster and possibility. And while ‘*we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to this overwhelming force, we are not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force*’” (quoting Brand, emphasis original). These counterhistories are found elsewhere in the narratives and scenes of subjection, in excess of the complicated matrixes of colonial life, in literature and music—not as expressions of those geopolitics but as a tactical theoretical response that remakes subjectivity through the senses as a concrete analytic. Wynter (n.d., 109) suggests that the axiomatic torque of sensibility is made in provisional ground, “where the mind feels and the senses become theoreticians.” This geophysics of being within the Empire of Geology finds its trace and place in critical black aesthetics.