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JODI MELAMED

This contribution to the inaugural volume of the *Critical Ethnic Studies* seeks to strengthen the activist hermeneutic "racial capitalism" to respond to three conditions with which critical ethnic studies must reckon in the present. The first is that so-called primitive accumulation—where capital is accrued through transparently violent means (war, land-grabbing, dispossession, neo/colonialism)—has become everywhere interlinked and continuous with accumulation through expanded reproduction, which we used to think of as requiring only "the silent compulsion of economic relations."[1] With the top 10 percent taking 50 percent of total U.S. income in 2012, and the top 1 percent taking a striking 95 percent of all post-Recession income gains, it has become increasingly plain that accumulation for financial asset owning classes requires violence toward others and seeks to expropriate for capital the entire field of social provision (land, work, education, health).[2] The second condition is the degree to which ideologies of individualism, liberalism, and democracy, shaped by and shaping market economies and capitalist rationality from their mutual inception, monopolize the terms of sociality, despite their increasing hollowness in the face of neoliberalism's predations. The third condition is the emergence of new horizons of activism that challenge the interpretative limits of ethnic studies in that they exceed the antimonies of political/economic activism, bust up old terms and geographies of solidarity, and are often Indigenous-led, requiring a rethinking of activist scholarship in light of the importance of Indigenous activism and critical theory.

Our dominant critical understanding of the term racial capitalism stays close to the usage of its originator, Cedric Robinson, in his seminal *Black Marxism: The Making of a Black Radical Tradition*.[3] Robinson develops the term to correct the developmentalism and racism that led Marx and Engels to believe mistakenly that European bourgeois society would rationalize social relations. Instead, Robinson explains, the obverse occurred:

"The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force . . . racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism. I have used the term 'racial capitalism' to refer . . . to the subsequent structure as a historical agency."[4] Thus the term "racial capitalism" requires its users to recognize that capitalism *is* racial capitalism. Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups—capitalists with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires. Most obviously, it does this by displacing the uneven life chances that are inescapably part of capitalist social relations onto fictions of differing human capacities, historically race. We often associate racial capitalism with the central features of white supremacist capitalist development, including slavery, colonialism, genocide, incarceration regimes, migrant exploitation, and contemporary racial warfare. Yet we also increasingly recognize that contemporary racial capitalism deploys liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion to value and devalue forms of humanity differentially to fit the needs of reigning state-capital orders.

A thread of emergent critical understanding, proceeding from the recognition that procedures of racialization and capitalism are ultimately never separable from each other, seeks to comprehend the complex recursivity between material and epistemic forms of racialized violence, which are executed in and by core capitalist states with seemingly infinite creativity (beyond phenotype and in assemblages). Importantly, this approach understands the state and concomitant rights and freedoms to be fully saturated by racialized violence. Chandan Reddy, for example, demonstrates how the U.S. state in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has exercised its monopoly on legitimate violence both in response to "race"—the nation-state's operational code for that irrationality and threat that freedom must exterminate—and as racial cruelty.[5] The term "racial cruelty" signifies the extreme or surplus violence alongside and within state practices of supposedly rational violence (military, security, and legal), through which the state establishes itself as at once the protector of freedom and an effective, because excessive, counterviolence to the violence of race. Thus political emancipation is fatally coupled to both ordinary and excessively cruel racialized state

violence. We can combine Reddy's insights with David Harvey's description of a "state-finance nexus" to posit a "state-finance-racial violence nexus."[6] Harvey's term refers to the "central nervous system of accumulation," where structures of governance whose relays cannot be separated out as either "political" or "economic" syncopate state management of the circulation of capital and circulate capital in a manner that conditions state functions, which become increasingly monetized, privatized, and commodified.[7] The "state-finance-racial violence nexus" names the inseparable confluence of political/economic governance with racial violence, which enables ongoing accumulation through dispossession by calling forth the specter of race (as threat) to legitimate state counterviolence in the interest of financial asset owning classes that would otherwise appear to violate social rationality, from the police-killing of immigrants and African American youth (in the name of safety for the white and prosperous), to the letting die of the racialized poor, to the social deaths transited through the precedent of Indigenous dispossession for profit.[8]

Accumulation under capitalism is necessarily expropriation of labor, land, and resources. But it is also something else: we need a more apposite language and a better way to think about capital as a system of expropriating violence on collective life itself.[9] To this end, one way to strengthen racial capitalism as an activist hermeneutic is to use it to name and analyze the production of social separateness—the disjoining or deactiving of relations between human beings (and humans and nature)—needed for capitalist expropriation to work. Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggests a similar understanding of racial capitalism as a technology of *antirelationality* (a technology for reducing collective life to the relations that sustain neoliberal democratic capitalism) in her seminal definition of racism. Following Gilmore, "Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, *in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies.*"[10] This last part of Gilmore's definition is seldom quoted, yet crucially it identifies a dialectic in which forms of humanity are separated (made "distinct") so that they may be "interconnected" in terms that feed capital. Gilmore elsewhere names this process "partition" and identifies it as the base algorithm for capitalism, which only exists and develops according to its capacity "to control who can relate and under what terms."[11]

Although at first glance, dense interconnections seem antithetical to amputated social relations, it is capitalism's particular feat to accomplish differentiation as dense networks and nodes of social separateness.[12] Processes

of differentiation and dominant comparative logics create "certainties" of discreteness, distinctness, and discontinuity—of discrete identities, distinct territorializations and sovereignties, and discontinuities between the political and the economic, the internal and the external, and the valued and the devalued.[13] In the drawing of the line that constitutes discrete entities and distinguishes between the valued and the devalued, people and situations are made incommensurable to one another as a disavowed condition of possibility for world-systems of profit and governance. Currently, ideologies of democracy, nationalism, and multiculturalism are key to racial capitalist processes of spatial and social differentiation that truncate relationality for capital accumulation. The first and second differentiate people into individuals and citizens whose collective existence is reduced officially to a narrow domain of the political beset by an economic sovereignty that increasingly restructures the domain of "democratic participation" according to neoliberal logics of privatization, transactability, and profit. The third minoritizes, homogenizes, and constitutes groups as separate through single (or serial) axes of recognition (or oppression), repels accountability to ongoing settler colonialism, and uses identitarianism to obscure shifting differentials of power and unstable social relations. All three impose a forgetting of interconnections, of viable relations, and of performances of collectivity that might nurture greater social wholeness, but are deactivitated for capital accumulation and state management.

Yet the need of racial capitalism to invalidate terms of relationality—to separate forms of humanity so that they may be connected in terms that feed capital—might reveal its weakness as much as its strength; for the acts of racialized violence that would partition people from other senses and practices of social being (noncapitalist, nonstate) are as futile as they are constant. Since its inception, one of the critical tasks of ethnic studies has been to reckon with lived practices and living alternatives to U.S. norms that are collective and that have a "definitional power" over what makes life meaningful.[14] An apposite example is *Black Marxism* itself: in addition to theorizing capitalism as racial capitalism, Robinson's larger concern is to make legible the past, present, and future existence of the Black radical tradition. This begins as the response of African people to being ripped out of webs of Indigenous social relations and denied life-sustaining connectedness in the societies that enslaved and transported them. For Robinson, the Black radical tradition emerges out of the imperative for people of African origins and descent to "re-create their lives" and reassemble social bonds: "From a shared philosophy developed in the African past and transmitted

as culture . . . a revolutionary [Black radical] consciousness was realized and the ideology of struggle formed."[15] At the center of the Black radical tradition is "the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality."[16] In the hundreds of acts of resistance Robinson recounts, from seventeenth-century maroon communities in the Americas to twentieth-century national liberation struggles, collective resistance takes the form of (re)constituting collectives. Defying racial capitalist modes of differentiation that would undermine conditions for peoplehood, the Black radical tradition is antiracist, anticapitalist, and collective-making because it is a name for struggles that arrange social forces for Black survival over and against capital accumulation.

To think about how racial capitalist procedures constantly truncate forms of appearance of the social to disestablish possible relations between people that are not conducive for capital, it is instructive to return to the text of Marx (which we must supplement with the understanding that the capitalism that was his purview was always already racial capitalism). The chapters on "So-Called Primitive Accumulation" in *Capital* yield a particularly rich analysis of the violence of transformative processes that extract people and things from previously sustaining social relations and insert them into the capital-relation (*Kapitalverhaltnis*) that makes accumulation possible. One example is in Marx's rendition of the "nursery tale" bourgeoisie political economists use to explain the origin of capitalist wealth. The tale involves two kinds of people who lived long, long ago: "one the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal elites," who accumulate wealth so their progeny can become capitalists; "the other, lazy rascals" who "spend their sustenance, and more in riotous living," so that the masses of people, who are their heirs, are left with "nothing to sell except their own skins."[17] This story of capitalism's original diversity (versions of which are still told everyday) substitutes for the "notorious fact" that, in acquiring the wealth of European modernity, "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part," not "effort" or "right."[18] The division of humanity into "worthy" and "unworthy" forms is the trace of the violence that forces apart established social bonds and enforces new conditions for expropriative accumulation.

A second example is Marx's analysis of "bloody legislation" producing the criminalized status of the "vagabond" in England from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century.[19] During this period of transition from feudalism to capitalism, an emerging capitalist class of aristocrats and bankers deployed every kind of force available (burning villages, imposing taxes) to drive the

agricultural population off the land and to usurp the commons. This dispossessed agricultural population—the majority of people—through the breaking up of the bonds that connected them to their lands, each other, and structures of governance (now in transition), were "dragged from their accustomed way of life" and forcibly made to occupy the role of a proto-proletariat, which "could not possibly be absorbed into the nascent manufactures as fast as it was thrown upon the world."[20] Workless members of the emerging working class were "chastised for their enforced transformation into beggars and paupers" and treated as "'voluntary' criminals," as if "it was entirely within their powers to go on working under the old conditions which in fact no longer existed."[21] First, the racial capitalist work of the "bloody" legislation against vagabonds makes it impermissible to recognize people without work as having (lost) the claim to land and their former social being. Second, it disqualifies them as relational beings in the present because the capital relation that now dominantly binds them to the social also separates them out as useless, immoral, and disposable. Out of the severing of relations necessary for capital accumulations, the vagabond emerges as a racialized status whose members can be blamed for their own past expropriability and present precarity. Marx vividly summarizes the proto-racializing work that vagabondage laws do to mark the body of wageless people as different and criminal, forcing "idlers" to work with whips and chains, branding the forehead or ears with the letter "S" for slave, and "executing" runaways or those who remain idle "without mercy as felons."[22]

Perhaps the best example of manufacturing densely connected social separateness, which is racial capitalism's hallmark, is Marx's discussion of the twinned and symbiotic development of colonialism and the credit system (fledgling finance capitalism). Marx describes this development as a dual system of whitewashing, where the capital gained through expropriation in one system—colonialism or credit-baiting—enters into the other system, appearing neutral, clean, and earned through right. Thus "the treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement, and murder flowed back to the mother-country and were turned into capital there," while "a great deal of [investment] capital, which appears today in the United States without any birth certificate, was yesterday in England, the capitalized blood of children."[23] Capital partitions, divides, and separates groups between political geographies *and* is the dominant relation to flow between and bind them. What is stripped out are other (and other possible) relations to land, resources, activity, community, and other possible social wholes that have been broken up for capital. Where capital

accrual exists, the diminishment of social well-being through partition, dispossession, and appropriation has already happened, thus Marx writes "capital comes into the world dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood."[24]

When we read racial capitalism into Marx's analysis of so-called primitive accumulation and discern his preoccupation with processes that forcibly partition humanity for the expropriation accumulation requires, we can also see consistent efforts throughout his writings to conceive the opposite: how to know and nurture social being in total (which is more than human) through material activity (living). In his early work, "species-being" and "nature [as humankind's] inorganic body" are the key tropes Marx uses to meditate on the capacity for unestranged, noncapitalist labor to bind each person with each other, with nature, and with humanity as collective being (*menschliches Wesen*).[25] In both cases, vital expression—the doing that produces life force (not a wage)—reveals a unified complex of dense interrelations that disprove a meaningful division between the individual and society and humans and nature, with, for example, people "living from nature" so completely, so densely, and so metabolically that "nature is [the human] body." In another vein, Marx in "On the Jewish Question" lambasts the democratic capitalist state as one in which it is not possible for individual activity to be directed toward the material well-being of society as a whole. By partitioning off where people see and act as collective (as abstract citizens of the state) from where they see and act as individuals (in their everyday participation in economic and civil life), capitalist political democracy divides people from their social forces and leads "each man to see in other men not the *realization* but the *limitation* of his own freedom."[26] In *Capital* itself, Marx writes about the alienation of social forces as a done deal: relations among people appear as relations between things (commodity fetishism), and European geopolitical domination imposes the liberal rationality (the division of the individual from society) that capitalism requires. Yet Marx finds value itself to be a *pharmekon*: it is a poison because it is a measure of how much human labor has been estranged and commodified by capital, yet it is also a medicine because it provides a way to grasp individual human efforts as alienated social forces, which revolutionary struggles can turn toward collective ends. Sadly, the desire to have a materialist form of appearance ("value") for social forces as a whole everywhere motivates much of the rationalism, Eurocentrism, reductive materialism, and developmentalism, which limits Marxism's usefulness for decolonizing and antiracist activism—and for critical ethnic studies scholarship.

This failure in the text of Marx brings us to the present importance of Indigenous activism and Indigenous critical theory for the task of strengthening terms of relationality that defend collective existence from racial capitalism's systematic expropriation. Neoliberalism has given us an interesting conjuncture: its rapacity for natural resources—for oil, gas, minerals, water, agricultural commodities, lumber—has required the current structure of domination to bring indigeneity into representation, because so much of the natural resources that still exist in the world are to be found on lands traditionally occupied, owned, belonging with, or stewarded by Indigenous people (up to 50 percent according to the International Forum on Globalization).[27] This, in turn, has given Indigenous worldings a rupturous potential. Especially since the implementation of austerity regimes in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, the dispossessions of Indigenous people have become visible as the means of transit (the origin, exemplification, and medium) for accelerated primitive accumulation for everyone. Using the imperative to pay off public debt as a rationale to govern ever more in the interest of financial capitalism, new seizures of lands and waters in settler colonial democracies of the United States and Canada have violated Indigenous treaty rights and environmental protection laws alike; corporate entities are given the "right" to exploit Indigenous lands, public lands and private smallholdings; in order to accelerate such dispossessions, new strategies have to undermine the health and capacities of Indigenous people and *all* people who get in the way.

With liberal rights and concepts of democratic participation increasingly being structured by economic rationalities and thus offering little resistance to the damages of financialization, Indigenous decolonization movements have come to be seen as capacitating multiple struggles against dispossession. In the United States and Canada, modern decolonization movements offer compelling frameworks of difference, based in rapport with land, collective responsibility, and countersovereignty, which have been strengthened by decades of resistance to liberal multicultural terms of inclusion, increasing their oppositional force. A prominent movement is Idle No More, which began in 2012 as a show of resistance to Canada's Bill C-45, which derogates treaty rights by removing almost all waterways and more than thirty thousand lakes from treaty protection transparently in order to build controversial pipelines and dams. Crucially, Idle No More organizes diverse social forces around a thinking of land and relating to land that lies outside the permissible rationality of racial capitalist settler coloniality. It draws on a generalized North American inscription of responsibility to land as a nonhuman

being and part of collective existence. Moreover, it nurtures thinking and acting according to the conceptual framework of "all my relations," a praxis-organizing intention to work for the well-being of the widest conceivable collective (including nonhuman beings in addition to land) interconnected through nonlinear time and space. We might conceive of this as a principle completely antagonistic to, and capable of superseding, the differentiations racial capitalism requires between people, of territories, and in value. The new affinities coalescing around Idle No More necessitate caution from the point of view of Indigenous decolonization, for resistance to racial capitalism can shore up settler colonialism despite the fact that both rely on the violences of primitive accumulation. Yet the merging of interests may point to something emergent and unifying, a generalized interest in the integrative potential of Indigenous worldings to point the way to new relations for nurturing total social being (which is more than human) through the material activities of living.

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NOTES

1. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 899.

2. Annie Lowrey, "The Rich Get Richer Through the Recovery," *New York Times*, September 10, 2013, http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/10/the-rich-get-richer-through-the-recovery/.

3. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

4. Ibid., 2.

5. Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the U.S. State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

6. David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

7. Ibid., 54.

8. See Lisa Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), and Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

9. I thank Chandan Reddy for this formulation.

10. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Race and Globalization," in *Geographies of Global Change: Remapping the World*, ed. R. J. Johnston et al. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 261.

11. Ruth Wilson Gilmore "Partition," keynote presented at "Decolonize the City! Decoloniale Perspektiven auf die Neoliberal Stadt," Berlin, September 21–23, 2012.

12. I thank Macarena Gómez-Barris for this formulation.

13. My formulation here is inspired by the call for the symposium, *assemblages & affinities: reimagining interdisciplinarity* held on September 23, 2013, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. It is no doubt the brainchild of the symposium's esteemed organizers: Jodi Byrd, Lisa Marie Cacho, Karen Flynn, Isabel Molina, and Siobhan Sommerville.

14. Cathy Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1, no. 1 (2004): 30.

15. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 308.

16. Ibid., 171.

17. Marx, *Capital*, 873.

18. Ibid., 874.

19. Ibid., 896–904.

20. Ibid., 896.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 897.

23. Ibid., 918.

24. Ibid., 926.

25. Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, ed. Quentin Hoare (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 328.

26. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, ed. Quentin Hoare (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 230.

27. Jerry Mander and Victoria Tauli-Coruz, eds., *Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Globalization* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 3.