# Racism and the Anthropocene

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> Fossil fuels require sacrifice zones: they always have. And you can't have a system built on sacrificial places and sacrificial people unless intellectual theories that justify their sacrifice exist and persist: from manifest destiny to terra nullius to orientalism, from backward hillbillies to backward Indians.
>
> Naomi Klein

To what extent has racism contributed to the Anthropocene? Although there have been heated debates on who, what, and where has caused the Anthropocene, there has been relative silence on the question of race. Discussions of liability are difficult under the best of circumstances, and including racism would certainly make them harder. But does that warrant ignoring it? Those parties most culpable for creating a new geologic era have actively sought to erase the power geometries that have produced it. Consequently, much of the Anthropocene discourse, especially emanating from the Global North, portrays it as a global problem that we have *all* contributed to. In response to such framings, Malm and Hornborg have suggested that the term "Anthropocene" is a misnomer, as it obscures the fact that only a relatively small percentage of the global population is actually responsible for and has benefited from the conditions that produced it. On those occasions when such disparities are raised, they typically emphasize the chasm between rich and poor, or "developed" and "developing" countries, as if the geography of wealth and power was somehow nonracial.

Coming from an entirely different perspective, leftists such as Jason Moore (2015) have suggested that the Anthropocene should be called the Capitolocene, attributing the problem to the prevailing economic system rather than individuals or countries. While almost all leftists acknowledge the unevenness of the Anthropocene, regularly citing colonialism, racism, and gender as important factors contributing to differential vulnerability, they usually treat racism as ancillary to capitalism.

While I would dispute that any single structure, event, or process created the Anthropocene, as one of the most profound social relations shaping the modern world, it is difficult to believe that racism has not played a part. Abundant research indicates that not only do many environmental hazards follow along racial lines, but also many of the meta-processes that have contributed to the Anthropocene, such as industrialization, urbanization, and capitalism, are racialized. I argue that the Anthropocene must be seen as a racial process. Certainly it is not solely a racial process—that would be a gross overstatement—but it has played an important role in both producing it and in determining who lives and dies. I examine how racism is embedded in the Anthropocene by focusing on several key issues: the evidence of racially uneven vulnerability and death; the form of racism at work; our general inability to acknowledge it; and the importance of history in coming to terms with the racial dimensions of the Anthropocene. I conclude by arguing that the racially uneven geography of death from the Anthropocene should be understood as a contemporary form of primitive accumulation.

While the Anthropocene is a broad term that denotes diverse forms of human impact on the planet, I pay particular attention to global warming. As the centerpiece of the Anthropocene, it has received by far the most attention and thus is the logical place to analyze how racism is, or is not, understood in the Anthropocene.

## The Evidence: The Geography of Racial Vulnerability

Some might refute the idea that global warming has anything to do with race. After all, climate change is affecting the entire planet. Moreover, the state powers seeking to respond to climate change, such as the Conference of Parties (COPS), include global representation. Yet, when we look at who will pay the greatest cost, in terms of their lives, livelihoods, and well-being, it is overwhelmingly, to borrow a recently revived term from Vijay Prashad (2007), the "darker nations." While some may believe these are random patterns or accidents of geography, climate justice activists understand that they result from deep historical processes. They

recognize that the rich, industrialized countries, which are disproportionately white, will escape with vastly fewer deaths. This is not due to any kind of racial animus but, in addition to historical processes, it is the result of a particular form of widespread contemporary racism, indifference.

It is a truism that we will *all* be impacted by the Anthropocene, but we will experience it differently. As Andrew Ross (2011) notes, there are those who will merely be inconvenienced and there are those who will die . . . with numerous positions between these two extremes. Those experiencing inconvenience will confront higher prices for food, energy, and water, as well as the discomfort of extreme heat as we transport ourselves from one air-conditioned environment to another. Others will have to contend with the loss of their homes, as the land on which they live is swallowed by rising sea levels, forcing them to move elsewhere. Still, others will find that their resource base can no longer sustain them and will have to migrate in search of a different land base or, more likely, a job in an overcrowded city. And then there are those who will simply die. Since 1990 more than 20,000 people have died from heat in India, culminating in May 2015 when over 2,500 died in a single month. In addition to dying from heatstroke and heat exhaustion, people will die from their inability to tolerate migration, hunger, thirst, and disease.

This differential vulnerability in terms of the haves and the have-nots is acknowledged by many, but the role of racism is generally overlooked. However, even a cursory glance indicates that it is overwhelmingly places occupied primarily by nonwhite peoples that will pay the highest price for global warming: death. The evidence for the uneven and unfair distribution of death is overwhelming. Figure 7 presents two different maps that highlight the uneven geographies of death from global warming. The top map depicts carbon emissions by country. What stands out is the bloated nature of the United States and Western Europe, and the contracted size of Africa. The bottom map shows estimated deaths produced by four likely health consequences associated with global warming: malaria, malnutrition, diarrhea, and inland flood-related fatalities. In this map we see the opposite: the Global North is greatly shrunk, while both Africa and parts of Asia explode.

Even within the wealthy parts of the world, the spatial distribution of risk, vulnerability, and death follows along pre-existing lines of racial inequality. In the United States, for example, researchers have found that the urban poor, which are overwhelmingly nonwhite, will die at the highest rates because of a lack of air conditioning. In places like California, which are leading the way in terms of climate mitigation, researchers have found that the "Cap and Trade" program, which encourages industries and firms to reduce carbon emissions over time via an emis-

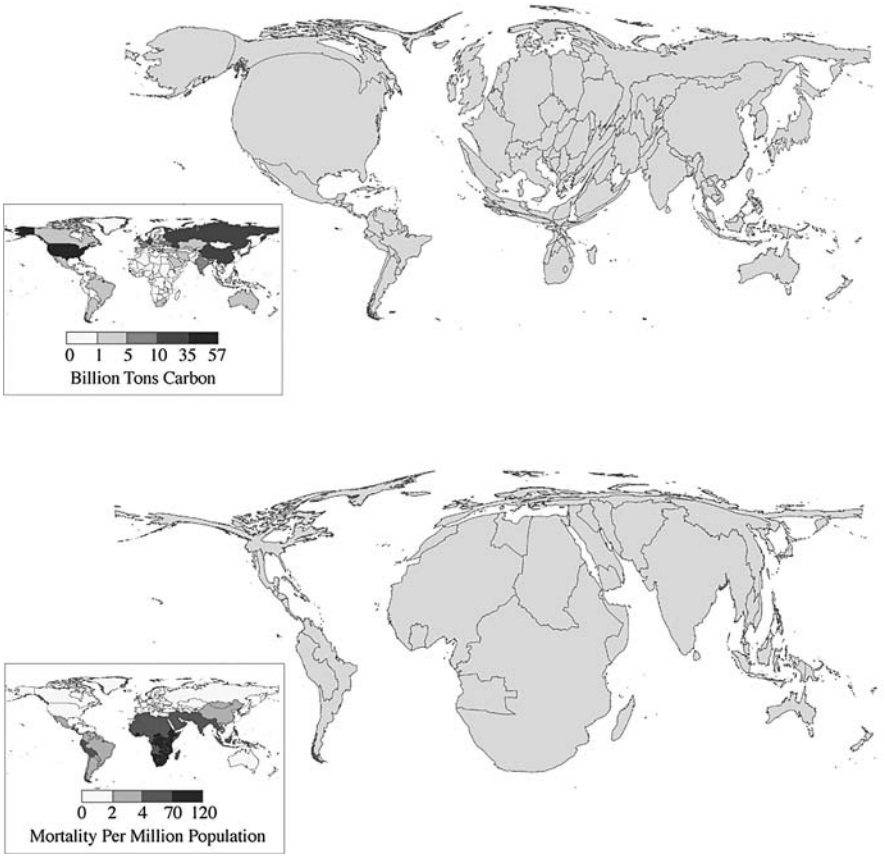


Figure 7. Comparison of global carbon emissions and mortality from global warming. Jonathan A. Patz, H. K. Gibbs, J. A. Foley, J. V. Rogers, and K. R. Smith, "Climate Change and Global Health: Quantifying a Growing Ethical Crisis," *EcoHealth* 4 (2007): 397–405.

sions market, has resulted in greater concentrations of air toxins for communities of color, thereby intensifying the environmental racism that already shapes California cities (Cushing et. al. 2016). Seen another way, Latinas/os and African Americans are subsidizing California's efforts to reduce global warming with their lives.

Disproportionate vulnerability can also be seen in indigenous communities, which are increasingly being called "frontline communities." Because they are land-based people, their livelihoods and way of life are extremely vulnerable to the Anthropocene, including species loss and change, flooding, and drought. Scholars such as Kyle Powys Whyte (2017) have argued that indigenous people are *already* living in dystopia, if one considers the ecological and social devastation of

colonization, and that global warming is a continuation of a centuries-long apocalypse. Indeed, the ongoing nature of settler colonialism is evident in the fossil-fuel industry, which, assisted by states, continues to target these lands for extractive activities. Building on centuries of dispossession, these lands are often treated as "available" for taking by white settlers. Likewise, polluters and their fossil-fuel allies have long assumed that native peoples are weak and lack the political capacity to challenge them in a meaningful way. As a result, indigenous communities and their allies are engaged in intense battles across the Américas, from Canada to Peru. These communities not only wish to protect their lands, some of which are sacred, but also realize that continuing to extract and transport fossil fuels will place their communities and the entire planet in a more precarious position.

## Evasion and Indifference

As previously noted, global leaders are well aware of the racial geography of the Anthropocene and have chosen not to act. Naomi Klein (2014), the only pundit who regularly discusses climate change as racial, recalls when the racist dimensions of our global strategy became painfully obvious. At the close of the United Nations climate summit in Copenhagen in December 2009, governments agreed to a global temperature increase of two degree Celsius. It was thought that two degrees would prevent global catastrophe. However, it was fully understood that two degrees would eliminate some island states and be absolutely disastrous for much of Africa. This is key: *knowingly* allowing large swaths of nonwhite, mostly poor people to die. Could we have decided to do otherwise? Yes. But as a global community we have declined to prevent this massive die-off. In response, a group of African delegates expressed their outrage, protesting: "We will not die quietly," "Two degrees is suicide," "1.5 to Survive," and "Death sentence for Africa." The delegates were not about to go quietly and wanted to ensure that everyone was aware of the import of their actions. This moment illuminated the racial geography of global warming, our lack of political will, our disregard for nonwhite and poor lives, and the deeply immoral nature of the Anthropocene. Since then, we have failed to even meet the goal of two degrees and are on target for four to six degrees Celsius temperature rise.

Given that our global leaders have condemned millions of people to death, we have to ask "why?" How are we able to make such a decision? Many would argue that the rich countries simply do not want to pay the additional costs of protecting and/or helping vulnerable countries. Certainly this is true. Few rich countries

want their wealth siphoned off elsewhere, especially to nonwhite, poor places. This would result in fewer funds for domestic spending and the potential wrath of voters. It is uncertain how much political and moral capital it would generate in the global arena. As morally reprehensible as this may be, it is understandable. It's about money and power. We live in a capitalist world economy that places a premium on economic self-interest. But sentencing millions to die requires more explanation than simply economic self-interest. Such a powerful act requires an equally powerful ideology, as noted in the epigraph. And that is racism.

The global landscape of racism is vast and varied. The practice of racism and our understanding of it evolves over time and at any given moment multiple forms of racism are operating. The racism that undergird slavery and colonization is not the same as the racism that results in contemporary police shootings of Black people in the United States or the indifference we evince toward those who will die from the Anthropocene. During the conquest of the Américas, Europeans questioned whether Native Americans had souls, while Africans were considered to be a lower form of humanity. Over the centuries, through decolonization, the dismantling of slavery and apartheid, the development of human rights, civil rights movements, and other forms of antiracist struggle, racism has changed. Overt violence, legalized racial subordination, and racial animus have largely, although not entirely, been replaced by seemingly less intense, deliberate, and overt forms of racism.

Far more significant today is the *indifference* that characterizes the attitudes, practices, and policy positions of much of the Global North toward those destined to die. This indifference is a form of racism, because not only does it serve to reproduce racial inequality, but also this inequality enables the well-being of those destined to live. Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as the "exploitation of group differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies" (2007, 28). Given this definition, while more than indifference was needed to create the conditions that produced such racially differentiated vulnerability, it is maintained by indifference. Like all other racisms, indifference is based on a devaluation of nonwhite lives and an overvaluation of white ones. We must recall that racism is first and foremost a relationship of power between two groups; it is not unidirectional. Thus, many in the Global North might assume the current valuation of white lives is the norm. But, as Lisa Cacho (2012) insists, racism is fundamentally a differential valuation. The devaluation of one group is predicated on the overvaluation of the other. While on the one hand, this may be obvious, on the other, many are hesitant to accept this basic truth. This general reticence can be seen in the slogan "Black Lives Matter" in which activists feel the need to proclaim the value of Black lives because they

are so routinely devalued. Even the Gates Foundation, hardly a bastion of radical antiracist struggle, claims as part of its mission statement, "All lives have equal value." Again, they are responding to the general devaluation by the Global North of the lives of the Global South, where the foundation does much of its work. It is understandably difficult to accept the fact that we value lives differently—as this is contrary to contemporary human rights values, as well as the idea of racial progress. As a result, one of the primary responses to this contradiction is evasion, as we consistently seek to avoid addressing race.

Both evasion and indifference are visible in the objects and essays assembled in the Cabinet of Curiosities. While numerous essays acknowledge the uneven geography of the Anthropocene, there is little systematic analysis of racism. Several essays appearing in this volume readily acknowledge the historical significance of colonization, including Julianne Lutz Warren's "Huia Echoes," Trisha Carroll and Mandy Martin's *Davies Creek Road*, and Josh Wodak's "Artificial Coral Reef." Others gesture to the environmental injustice that Mexican farm workers experience with pesticides, but only one essay, Bethany Wiggin's analysis of the "Germantown Calico Quilt," seriously analyzes colonization and slavery. This is one out of fifteen essays. In contrast, a more common theme is to show how we *all* contribute to the Anthropocene, as seen, for example, in the wonderful story of concretes, or in essays in which the agent is never fully articulated. It is not my intent to critique the various authors, but rather to underscore the extent to which they reflect the larger dynamic of avoiding a serious engagement with racism. I appreciate the need and desire to highlight the fact that we are all active participants in the Anthropocene, but the lack of deep interrogation of one of the key inequalities shaping the geography of the Anthropocene must be pointed out. While some may argue that introducing racism into the discussion may create more problems than it solves—and it *would* create problems—it is essential that we account for *all* the processes that have contributed to the Anthropocene. Ideally, this volume would contain a healthy tension between the universalizing aspects of the Anthropocene, as seen by the concrete play, and by the specific dynamics responsible for the map presented in figure 7.

Besides our general desire to avoid acknowledging racism, there are genuine challenges to "seeing" race in the Anthropocene. One of the most important is the fact that over the last several decades a growing number of the "darker nations" have become major carbon emitters. The clearest example of this is China, which is currently the biggest emitter of carbon in the world. India is the third-largest emitter, largely due to its sheer population size. However, the emissions of both of these countries are relatively recent, exploding since 2000, and their per capita

emissions are relatively low. For example, according to World Bank data, India's per capita carbon emissions is 1.7 metric tons, while Luxembourg's is 20.9. Such facts preclude drawing any clear racial lines in terms of emitters and victims. Yet, there are undeniable patterns in which the most vulnerable countries are overwhelmingly nonwhite.

Another challenge to seeing racism in the Anthropocene is the fact that in much of the world conceptions of racism have been constricted in order to minimize its perceived impact. Diverse strategies are employed to deny that racism is still a force in shaping the contemporary world, but what they all have in common is that they are predicated on decoupling race and larger material relations. This disconnection, Jodi Melamed (2011) argues, has facilitated restructuring conceptions of racism to fit particular political needs. It is the refusal to connect racially uneven outcomes with dominant attitudes, beliefs, practices, and structures that allows us to deny any possible connection between racism and the Anthropocene. Indeed, some ridicule the idea. For instance, the right-wing Breitbart News found it laughable that the *Guardian* sought to make a connection between racism and climate change (Williams 2016):

> The "reasoning" behind the outlandish hypothesis runs something like this. Begin with the unprovable premise that "Britain is the biggest contributor per capita to global temperature change." Next, assume that Britain "is also one of the least vulnerable to the effects of climate change," whatever that means. Finally, declare that "seven of the 10 countries most vulnerable to climate change are in sub-Saharan Africa." Climate change has just become a racial issue, wrought by selfish white people on unsuspecting blacks.

This quote invokes several mainstream strategies to delegitimize any effort to see the Anthropocene in racial terms. First, implicit is the assumption that racism is a conscious, hostile act. The author contracts the conception of racism so that other widely acknowledged forms of racism, such as white privilege or indifference, are irrelevant. Second, at work is a deeply ahistorical understanding of racism and, indeed, the world. Those who wish to avoid grappling with the legacies of previous racial formations, especially those based on more overt forms of white supremacy and violence, are deeply invested in ahistoricism. Countries like the United States, for instance, have developed numerous ideologies to defend the current social arrangement precisely in order to avoid acknowledging the racist past and its reverberations. Available ideologies include meritocracy, color blindness, multiculturalism, and postracialism, what Melamed has collectively called

"state anti-racisms." Their power, she insists, lies in their ability to convince the general population that meaningful racial progress is being made, while simultaneously masking the violence of the contemporary racial order—which is precisely what is happening in the Anthropocene.

## Historicizing Racism and Primitive Accumulation

While the Anthropocene is generally viewed as a potential catastrophe, one silver lining is that it forces us to reckon with history. This, in turn, provides an opportunity to reconsider the role of racism in shaping the present. Scientists have spent years deliberating when, if at all, the Anthropocene era should begin. In August 2016 the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Geological Congress announced its support for the formal recognition of the Anthropocene. While the Working Group proposed 1950 as one possible date when the era should begin, the question itself has launched a multitude of research initiatives to determine the appropriate marker, also known as the "golden spike." This is a deeply historical exercise. Regardless of what event or year is adopted as a marker, it is the deliberations themselves that are crucial as they offer an opportunity to revisit and reinterpret our collective past, and to hopefully come to a more honest accounting of how it is that we have created both the Anthropocene and its racial geography. As Gary Kroll notes in this volume, "the Anthropocene is less a geological epoch than it is a story."

Various dates and events have been suggested as a starting point, including the invention of the steam engine, human manipulation of fire, the Industrial Revolution, the plutonium fallout of the nuclear age, and the Great Acceleration of the 1950s. Each of these events offers a window into a whole series of racial dynamics that must be analyzed in order to ascertain the role of racism. In "Defining the Anthropocene," Lewis and Maslin (2015) offer two possible dates, 1610 and 1964. I would like to briefly explore 1610 because it allows us to confront the racist dimensions of the Anthropocene as seen through colonization, conquest, and primitive accumulation.

The authors chose 1610 because it marks European conquest and colonization of the Américas, one of the most singular events in human history. They cite two profound changes associated with 1610: transcontinental range expansion and a decline in carbon emissions. Transcontinental range expansion is evident in the spread of American species, namely corn, into Eurasia and Africa, as well as the transport of "Old World" species, such as bananas, to the Américas. This range

expansion, while seemingly benign, both produced and was produced by a profound set of biologic, ecologic, and social changes.

The second major event associated with 1610 is a drop in atmospheric carbon dioxide. This was due to massive death in the Américas. Between 1492, when Columbus set sail, and 1650, it is estimated that approximately 50,000,000 people died in the Américas. This unprecedented die-off of humans resulted in a major decrease in farming, including a reduction in the use of fire for habitat modification. As a result, carbon was *not* released into the atmosphere through farming and other soil disruptions, ultimately resulting in a decrease in carbon emissions.

The "Columbian Encounter," as some euphemistically call it, is one of the most significant events in human history and led to vast economic, social, political, and ecological changes, including the previously mentioned dystopia for indigenous peoples. Lewis and Maslin's analysis, while certainly not intended to be political, illustrates that there is no escaping the political and power dynamics that have contributed to the Anthropocene. And though they never mention it, racism is a crucial feature of the events of 1610. One may wish to debate the merits of conquest and colonization, but there is little doubt that they relied on lethal force, state capacity, and a racial ideology of white supremacy. Despite whatever rosy stories we may tell ourselves, conquest was a bloody, violent affair. As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz reminds us, "people do not hand over their land, resources, children and futures without a fight" (2014, 8). The fact that most people died from disease rather than gunshot does not erase the racist dimensions of colonization. Indeed, colonists continued to wage war and genocide even after 90 percent of the population had been decimated. Nor can we lose sight of why Europeans were there in the first place—to conquer and claim the Américas, employing such self-serving legal justifications as papal bulls and the Doctrine of Discovery.

Contemporary Indigenous studies scholars, such as Jodi Byrd (2011), have pointed out that there are important distinctions between colonization and racism. For example, most antiracist activists desire inclusion, while decolonial activists desire autonomy and decolonization. Despite these distinctions, there is no escaping the fact that racism informs colonization. To claim another people's land as your own upon arrival; to kidnap people and force them into slavery or peonage and build an elaborate supporting apparatus; to eradicate another people's way of life; to steal the wealth and resources of another nation—these are breathtaking acts that require a powerful ideology to justify them. Such a sense of entitlement ultimately rests on a deep sense of superiority.

To understand how racism was harnessed for colonization, and subsequently capitalism, I draw on Cedric Robinson's concept of racial capitalism. Increasing

numbers of critical ethnic studies scholars have begun challenging conventional Marxian analysis, which treats racism as incidental or, at the most, as an ideology to keep workers divided. Instead, Robinson (2000) argues that racism has been a constituent force of capitalism from the very beginning. Lisa Lowe, building on Robinson, explains, "the term racial capitalism captures the sense that actually existing capitalism exploits through culturally and socially constructed differences such as race, gender, region, and nationality, and is lived through those uneven formations; it refutes the idea of a 'pure' capitalism external to or extrinsic from, the racial formation of collectivities and populations" (2015, 150).

Seen in this way, racism informs contemporary capitalism and its antecedents, including primitive accumulation. For Marx, primitive accumulation was an early, violent stage of dispossession that was required in order to move into higher forms of human development. Marx observed, "The discovery of gold and silver in the Americas, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of blackskins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production." Not only are scholars challenging traditional ideas regarding the relationship between racism and capitalism, but they are also challenging when capitalism is thought to have begun. While Marx himself saw primitive accumulation as distinct from capitalism, its predecessor, if you will, this is being forcefully challenged by the burgeoning literature on the history of capitalism. Is it accurate and meaningful to segregate capitalism from the relations that gave rise to it? Capitalism emerged, Marx continues, "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt." Severing such violence and racism from capitalism is not only part of a larger ahistoricism, but it also serves to validate capitalism, as it is seen as less violent than its predecessor. However, primitive accumulation was essential to creating the initial surplus that subsequently allowed for the development of industrial capitalism. What is important for our purposes is that proto-capitalists, colonists, and Christians all drew on white supremacy as they went about the business of severing indigenous peoples from their land and labor.

It is important to recall that racism is not static. Europeans began with a particular conception of white supremacy but it was elaborated and enhanced as they went about their business of domination and exploitation. Though some dismiss primitive accumulation as irrelevant and/or ancient history, it is anything but. Decades ago Eric Williams documented how Caribbean slavery helped finance England's early industrial and financial development. Only now are greater numbers of scholars beginning to explore the economic and political implications of primitive accumulation. For example, Dunbar-Ortiz reminds us that in addition

to the fact that the United States was built on stolen territory, as it took native land, it was placed in the public domain, sold, and generated funds to pay for an expanding military. This, in turn, supported overseas expansion, conquest, and empire. Recent books by Edward Baptist and Walter Johnson have also demonstrated how the profits of slavery contributed to contemporary US capitalism.

This is hardly the ancient past. These are the relations that birthed the modern world and which continue to shape it. As Marita Sturken reminds us, forgetting is a powerful form of memory. And we have put enormous energy into forgetting this history. It is only by re-engaging with it that we can appreciate the connection between the past and the present. Jack Forbes clarifies this relationship, noting that living persons are not responsible for what their ancestors did, but they are responsible for the society they live in, which is a product of the past.

While primitive accumulation helps explain the role of the past in producing the racial map of the Anthropocene, it is relevant for another reason. While many relegate primitive accumulation to the annals of history, the truth is that it is back with a vengeance. While one could argue that primitive accumulation never ended in the Global South, it has reappeared in the Global North. David Harvey argues that primitive accumulation has become a dominant form of accumulation in the contemporary period because the rates of profit have fallen so markedly. In response, capitalists have innovated and found new ways of producing profits and power across the world. Primitive accumulation, some argue, can be seen in the massive displacement from gentrification in many parts of the world, the 2008 housing collapse, and in the poisoning of Flint, Michigan's water. These contemporary forms of accumulation are violent forms of taking, as people lose their lands, lives, and livelihoods. Both old and new forms of primitive accumulation require enabling ideologies. And though there have been important changes, racism, especially indifference, remains an important one. Allowing millions to die ensures the wealth, prosperity, and convenience of rich countries, as well as powerful industries and firms. By not intervening in the processes that will produce massive death, they avoid burdensome regulations; they bypass a disruptive, rapid shift away from fossil fuels. Instead, they carry on as usual, working to maintain their profit levels despite the fact that the physical environment is shifting beneath their feet.

In the face of such dire circumstances, how has the global community responded? We craft global accords, such as the Paris Climate Agreement, which not only rely on voluntary reductions, since countries refused to adhere to the mandatory reductions of the Kyoto Protocol, but largely ignore the historical contributions of cumulative carbon emissions. A negotiator for the Seychelles reported, "The idea of even discussing loss and damage now or in the future was

off limits. The Americans told us it would kill the COP." While the global community congratulates itself on achieving what is politically possible, we cannot overlook the anemic nature of the agreement considering the magnitude of the problem. It will not avoid the death of millions—because they simply do not matter.

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