

Deep in the Fire of Capitalism.
 Slavery, Colonialism and Cheap Nature.
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A reflection on body, flesh, and energy should include, I want to suggest, a return to the creation of the racialized enslaved body, on her/his flesh as a space on which to inscribe servitude with glowing iron, and on her/his energy to fuel primitive accumulation, on racialized chattel slaves as the capital that made capitalism, whose work fed European taste and limitless need for sugar, coffee, tobacco, and its relation to “cheap nature.”¹ Their presence haunts European modernity, their status embodies *the* exception to its universalism. This has been said many times, and yet, it is often forgotten when we think of the ways in which the environment was transformed by human action. Slave trade and slavery were a turning point in the history of nature as a social relation; they marked a massive and organized transfer on an industrial scale of human beings, plants, knowledge, practices and animals, as *commodities*, connecting continents. The 15 million Africans deported to the European colonies of the Americas, the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, the eight to ten millions more dying on their way to their life in shackles, were the “humus” of capitalism. Their bodies became organic elements enriching the soil of European colonies. The fire of capitalism that ran through the world, licking everything with its flames, was maintained by their work. What I am suggesting here is that a reflection on “*the human as put to a trial by fire*” (as we are invited to do in these contributions) may start with the body as fire, as fuel, intermingling with the Earth. I will do so by a detour through the history of the racialized politics of environment and the role and place of the Black enslaved body. What connection can be made between the Western conception of Nature as “cheap” and the global organization of a “cheap” racialized

¹ On the concept of “cheap nature,” see: Jason MOORE, “The End of Cheap Nature. Or How I learned to Stop Worrying about “The” Environment and the Crisis of Capitalism,”
http://www.jasonwmoore.com/uploads/Moore__The_end_of_cheap_nature__2014.pdf

disposable workforce? What connection can be made between the conception of Nature as constant capital and the fact that “*the organizers of the capitalist world system appropriated Black labor as constant capital.*”² What methodology is needed to write a history of the Earth from the standpoint of a historical inheritance that includes slavery, colonialism, imperialism and racial capitalism, from the standpoint of those who were made into “cheap” objects of commerce, bodies as objects renewable through wars, capture and enslavement, from the standpoint of those who are fabricated as disposable people, whose lives are made into matter? How do we write the history of “Nature” from the archives of those who were made into *objects of nature*? It means starting with the emergence of the Capitalocene, which, for sociologist Jason Moore, began two centuries before the discovery of the steam machine, in the 16th century a date full of historical implications, the “discovery of the New world” into which people were brought through the force of blood, iron and fire, the slave trade, the division of colonies among European powers, the organization on a global scale of a mobile, racialized, gendered and bonded workforce. Nature, climate change, the Earth, or the body are created through social relations, deeply impacted by slavery, the matrix of post-slavery colonialism. Even the climate, as Eyal Weizman has argued, “*can no longer be considered a constant... The current acceleration of climate change is not only an unintentional consequence of industrialization. The climate has always been a project for colonial powers, which have continually acted to engineer it.*”³ If the impacts of slave trade, slavery, colonialism, imperialism on the fabrication of the racialized body as disposable, are too often marginalized, it is, as historian Joachim Randkau has shown that “*the chief problem of colonialism seems to have been not so much its immediate ecological consequences as its long-term impact, the full impact of which became apparent only centuries later, in the era of*

² Cedric ROBINSON, *Black Marxism. The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 1983, p.307

³ <http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/11/climate-colonialism/>

modern technology, and many times only after the colonial states had acquired their independence.”⁴

Thus, nature is seen as a matrix that operates not only outside and inside our bodies but also through our bodies, including our embodied minds. Human history and modern world history in particular –slavery, colonialism, imperialism-, has been produced by non-linear and unequal relations of power and wealth, bundled with, and within, nature as a whole. I experienced the “centuries-later apparent landscape” and the intermingling of nature and body in my own childhood. I grew up in tropical Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean which became a French colony in the 17th century and is today a French department. Growing up in a communist, anticolonial and feminist family, I learned that the environment had been shaped by slavery and colonialism – what was “natural” was what “Man” could not master – the volcano, hurricanes, winds. I acquired a reading of space that gave meaning to where cities were built, where poor people lived, the sources of the large sugar cane fields that had become images for tourism, and the ways in which rivers, mountains, volcano, beaches had been inscribed in the colonial and postcolonial economy. I studied the combined work of the scientist (the botanist, the geographer, the student of diseases, of oceanography, of volcanology...), of the engineer, the soldier and the businessman (the slave trader, the slave owner, the banker, or the multinational CEO) in the fabrication of “Nature” as excess to tame and discipline, as cheap, endlessly renewable for the enjoyment of “Man,” and, with the industry of tourism, as a *thing* to enjoy. I have also felt the need to understand what is at stake in the current negotiations about climate change considering the global counter-revolution that we are witnessing – the eroding of rights, the politics of non-raciality beneath which lurk

⁴ Joachim RANDKAU, *Power and Nature : A Global History of the Environment*. Cambridge University Press, 2008, p.153.

more sinister shadows of the racial everyday, the new forms of colonization, the new politics of dispossession.

To write a new history of the environment is to refute both the apocalyptic view - humans bring ecological suicide- and the optimistic view – we must trust scientists and engineers- of environmental history. *A Green History of the World*, published by Clive Ponting in 1991 about the Eastern islands is an exemplary apocalyptic narrative, which became an instant success and offered a frightening paradigm for the environmental history of the world. Ponting argued that Eastern islanders had committed ecological suicide. Despite the fact that, as the historian of the environment, Joachim Radkau, has shown, it was murder committed by Peruvian slave traders in the 19th century rather than suicide that explained the environmental destruction of the Eastern islands, the apocalyptic view makes a good story. It rests on a pessimistic view of human nature, tied to the Christian narrative of the Fall, in which power has no place. The optimistic view, on the other hand, is deeply steeped in the tradition of the belief in progress. Both approaches have inspired the current rhetoric of “crisis,” – crisis produced by human nature or by an accidental error in the linear route of progress -, which has become the universal leitmotiv of environmental history. But both have chosen to ignore how nature was made cheap, into “*the bounty—and eventual exhaustion—of extra-human biological systems and geological distributions,*” into an “*historical circumstance created—and later unraveled—by the relations of power, accumulation, and nature specific to the modern world-system.*”⁵ The source of the African enslaved body, defined, in European law, as a piece of furniture that entered into colonial registers alongside mules, ploughs, cupboards..., was seen as endlessly renewable as was nature. Indeed, as historians have

⁵ Jason MOORE, “The End of Cheap Nature. Or How I learned to Stop Worrying about “The” Environment and the Crisis of Capitalism,” http://www.jasonwmoore.com/uploads/Moore__The_end_of_cheap_nature__2014.pdf

shown, the plantation economy rested on a constant supply of African bodies rather than on the local “reproduction” of the workforce. The conception of a boundless nature that was there to serve “European Man” went along with the conception of a boundless source of racialized enslaved bodies.

When this analysis is suggested to rethinking “*not only endurance, but creativity – thus, the conceptual sustainability of what a body, consciousness, or even “the human” can mean must be put to a trial by fire,*” we are invited to rethink how we will change our role as “active participant in the planet's greater metabolic superstructure.”

We can rapidly trace three moments in the recent ideologies about the environment: a transnational networking of conservation work which appeared in the years before World War I; the Western-led boom of environmentalism that appeared around the 1970s and developed rapidly; and finally, the ways in which environmental issues became a global agenda at the end of the Cold War culminating in the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and more recently discussed during the Cop21 in Paris, which opened just after the Paris attacks. The second moment is worth noting. The 1970s witnessed the end of the Age of Decolonization, the first oil crisis, the alliance between the chemical industry and the army (pesticides for war and the Green revolution), the War in Vietnam, the proxy wars in Africa, the dictatorships in South America, the imperialist interventions in the Middle East, and the culmination of international programs on birth control in the Third World. The last point is revealing. In the late 1950s, representatives of the US government had started to lead an offensive and an ideological campaign in which they affirmed that global security and peace were tied to a low birth rate in the Third World. The Congresses on World population, attended by international institutions on work, security and migrations, an ideological opinion became a truth: the

fertility of Third World women was threatening peace and security and was condemning their countries to poverty, underdevelopment and chaos. True, racialized women had to continue to give birth to a future cheap workforce – as they had done during slavery and colonialism— but their fertility had to be controlled by the State or by international institutions so that the source of the global cheap workforce would be secured but they would also be blamed for causing poverty and trouble. Their fertility was a potential source of terrorism. In other words, as the fear for the end of cheap nature became a concern for capitalism, the health of the Earth was tied with non-white women’s fertility. In the early 1970s, along with reinforced programs of birth control, European States and the United States started to issue regulations about clean air, clean water, and the protection of Nature. In 1972, the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* became an international bestseller. The same year in Stockholm, representatives from more than one hundred countries met for the first “United Nations Conference on the Human Environment” and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was created.

What is new is that the perceived end of “cheap nature” has led multinationals with the help of scientists and engineers to turn to engineered nature. What does this mean for the relation between cheap nature and cheap workforce? Let me look at the example of genetically engineered trees. On January 8th 2016, reading that a Court in Oregon had fined the Biotech firm ArborGen 53,5 million US\$ in compensation and punitive damages for using “trickery and deceit” to defraud workers, I looked at what Arborgen was doing. A US based company, Arborgen is a leader in research and development for genetically engineered trees. It presents itself as a “*leading global provider of conventional and next generation plantation trees.*“ Its engineers develop eucalyptus and pine, both indispensable for the paper industry. On Arborgen online page, the three following questions appear with their answers: “*What Makes a Forest profitable? Advanced Technology, Incomparable Value*”; “*What Makes a Valuable Tree?*

Superior Growth, Maximum Value”; “*What Makes a Superior Seed? Exceptional Breeding, Outstanding Results.*”⁶ It is the vocabulary of reproduction for profit. ArborGen has a rival, the Israeli biotech company Futuragene, which has developed a unique technology that accelerates tree growth, again of eucalyptus. Now a branch of the Brazilian plantation group Suzano, Futuragene grows 500 000 hectares of eucalyptus trees a year and has partners in China, Thailand, and South Africa. These two firms compete in an industry (forestry and paper) which generates US\$ 400 billion annually. The eucalyptus is known for being invasive, to contribute to the depletion of water, the desertification of soils and loss of biodiversity, and once they are engineered, these effects are multiplied. Pine plantations cover million of acres and research tree genetics have for goal the making of even more productive global timberland.

With this discourse, green capitalism and the biotech industry are offering very seductive solutions, they do not hold an apocalyptic discourse or a the discourse of crisis, but a green and sustainable future created by engineers and scientists, with the help of drones, satellites, and new international laws of property and trade. What does this have to do with cheap labor? If, as Jason Moore has argued, the “end of cheap nature” shows that capitalism has exhausted its cheap nature strategy, its “*process of getting extra-human natures—and humans too—to work for very low expenditures of money and energy.*”⁷ The “*capitalism’s long waves of accumulation*” are challenged. But the perceived end of cheap nature has required the turn to bio-technology and bio-engineering for the fabrication of a new kind of cheap nature by engineers and scientists, cheap human workforce is seen as still available without any recourse to bio-engineering, the invention of non-human work notwithstanding. There seems no end to it. The end of the ways unpaid work of nature was conceived has required

⁶ <http://www.arborgen.com/>

⁷ Jason MOORE, “The End of Cheap Nature. Or How I learned to Stop Worrying about “The” Environment and the Crisis of Capitalism,” http://www.jasonwmoore.com/uploads/Moore__The_end_of_cheap_nature__2014.pdf

technological answers. The connection between the appropriation of nature and labor, which was the indispensable condition for capital accumulation - from Dutch hegemony in the seventeenth century to the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s⁸- and the crucial fact that work was unpaid, can become the terrain of counter-power. The fabrication by power of precarious, fragile and racialized lives has brought to light, along with the multiplication of walls, camps and entrenched fortresses of wealth has brought to light the growing gap between the Promethean ideal –the belief in (masculine) capacity to overpower obstacles set down by nature or by human resistance through technology and force that serve to reinforce control and surveillance and the difficulties facing social organizations as they have been conceived by European modernity to answer the basic needs of human society. But movements from below and the increasing multiplicity of counter-hegemonic narratives are challenging power.

Philosopher Isabelle Stengers has written that we are witnessing –in light of Cop21 and the the continuing state of emergency in France- a permanent state of emergency, an authoritarian management of the peoples, based on the Thatcherian motto, “There Is No Alternative.” Yet, Stengers criticizes the politics of despair and the idea that nothing can be done. She warns though that “ethical science” or “responsible science” is not the answer because it protects scientists from confronting difficult questions, especially of power. She suggests that we must expose ourselves to the “*skepticism of the probable,*” that we must take a stand *with the possible*. This is not a bet on what could save us at the last minute (the promise of geo-engineering), but a commitment for the multiple and always precarious attempts which bet on the possibility of a world which does not answer the probabilities offered by green capitalism.

⁸ Jason MOORE, 2010; 2012.

To ponder the “conceptual sustainability of what a body, consciousness, or even “the human” can mean must be put to a trial by fire,” is to dive deep in the fire of Capitalism and to find what has been buried under the economy of cheap nature and racialized and gendered cheap workforce, the possibility of skepticism of the probable.