



## Introduction to the Symposium

### Parasitism and the Logics of Anti-Indigeneity and Antiblackness

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“Energy is essential to all life. It always has been, and forever must be. That is the principle that will guide this book. [Later] we will trace the flow of energy within and between life forms in detail, showing how together they build complexity. [E]nergy shapes matter to create the forms and behaviors of both the living and non-living things that define our world: stars, storms, volcanos, and the life-styles of the animals around us, including humans.”

*The Twilight of Our Times: The Origins of and Prospects for Human Society – unfinished manuscript of Peter E. Grimes.*

Our comrade Peter Emmet Grimes died on August 24, 2021. Grimes received his PhD in sociology in 1995, under the close direction of Chris Chase-Dunn at Johns Hopkins University, analyzing the effects of economic cycles on the rise and fall of individual countries within the world-system. During his time at Johns Hopkins, he worked with Timmons Roberts to secure a National Science Foundation grant to study the effects of greenhouse gases and global climate change in the world-system. He was fascinated with the planet’s natural and social evolution and constantly sought a deeper understanding of how these complex systems converged. At the time



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of Grimes' passing, he was immersed in his book project. For Grimes, the first completed chapters on the fundamental principles of complexity, formed the theoretical heart of his book. It was an extension of his paper, "Evolution and World-Systems: Complexity, Energy, and Form" (Grimes 2017). According to Grimes, each following chapter in the book was meant to sequentially illustrate and apply aspects of the core theory: the history of the universe; the emergence of life; the development of complex multi-cellular life enabling its movement to land; the networked web of energy and information flows within ecosystems; the contribution of those flows to the evolution of intelligence (including hominids); the growing complexity of human settlements eventuating in kingdoms, empires, and the transition to capitalism; how each of these phases depended on the harnessing of greater energy, and how we have currently hit the energy ceiling imposed by global warming. In an email he forwarded to me, he wrote "unlike certain popular 'Big History' books that narrate these events without any theory, my project is to use my central theory to explain WHY these evolutionary jumps happened. It is about the theory, not the history."<sup>1</sup> All of the authors included here spent significant amounts of time communicating with Grimes about the book and about a myriad of other topics. In Albert Bergesen's paper, he thinks about how we might theorize man's post-earth migration; an astrosociological theory, if you will, that deals with the time when we have reached our rather imminent limit on earth. LePoire picks up the question of "reaching our limits" here on earth from a slightly different, yet synergistic, angle to Grimes' thinking in his paper, *The Horsemen and the Killing Fields: The Final Contradiction of Capitalism* (1999) recommending a Big History framework. He argues that our current energy crisis may be linked to the lag time between technological change and our societal response to that change. Mark Ciotola's paper takes Grimes' theoretical work on dissipative structures and expands on it as he contemplates how reproducing those structures can lead to increased energy but also a decrease in efficiency in the context of non-renewable resources. In my paper below, I pick up where Ciotola leaves off, and take up the question of energy capture and consumption via the parasitic project of modernity's racial capitalism.

### Introduction

In the late 1960s and early 1970s before Immanuel Wallerstein published his groundbreaking *The Modern World-System* (1974b), Ludwig von Bertalanffy was already writing about *systems thinking* and about the possibility of connecting all disciplines, especially physics and chemistry with biology, and even the social sciences. He came up with what is formally known as *general systems theory*, referring to it as a foundational theory "representing the organizational principles of the concrete world" (Bertalanffy 1969: xiii). He also understood it as a new discipline—a new way of organizing knowledge (Bertalanffy 1969: 32). Pointing to the way economics as well as conventional and physical chemistry had successfully applied the concepts of biological equilibria to their disciplines, Bertalanffy proposed going beyond principles of specialized systems to

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<sup>1</sup> Grimes, Peter. Email to Marilyn Grell-Brisk. February 23, 2021.

universal principles that could be applied to systems in general (Bertalanffy 1969: 32). General systems theory, then, was concerned with the problem of “wholeness” or as Bertalanffy put it,

problems of organization, phenomena not resolvable into local events, dynamic interactions manifest in the difference of behavior of parts when isolated or in a higher configuration, etc.; in short, “systems” of various orders not understandable by investigation of their respective parts in isolation. (Von Bertalanffy 1969: 37)

To Bertalanffy, this systems way of thinking could lead to a much-needed integration in science education.<sup>2</sup>

World-systems analysis also contends with issues of “wholeness” with an insistence on the world-system as the primary unit of analysis of social change over time. As a world-systems analyst, an integrated, “whole” systems way of thinking, was appealing to Grimes. In an email in January of 2018, much like Bertalanffy, Grimes expressed his aspirations in linking sociology, evolutionary biology, and physics; this had the “potential to unify science.”<sup>3</sup> For Grimes, the key was to take Marx’s concept of value, and change it into a concept of energy; this was the basis for his unfinished book, *The Twilight of Our Times: The Origins of and Prospects for Human Society*. He regarded energy as a requirement for building complex forms in the natural and animal world, which in turn was required for building complex hierarchical social structures; that is, living dissipative structures<sup>4</sup> (Grimes 2012, 2017) built atop non-living structures, with additional internal networks (Chapter 2, Part V of Unfinished Manuscript). He likened this to the iteration model (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997) wherein increased energy input into the ecosystem, or dissipative structure (Grimes 2012), enables complexity such as division of labor and hierarchical control which in turn replicates itself as energy as information flows expand. This human historical form of the iteration model exemplified, for Grimes, the origins of life and the dynamics of the Cambrian, hence connecting the natural sciences with the social sciences (2017).

Central to Grimes’ thought processes were the First and Second Law of Thermodynamics. The First Law being that energy cannot be created or destroyed; meaning that the total energy in a system, including the universe, remains constant but energy can change form and can deteriorate. The Second Law states that as energy is transferred or transformed, more and more of it is wasted; in other words, the total entropy (energy not available to do work) of a system can only increase or remain constant in a spontaneous process. And in even simpler terms, heat always moves from hotter objects to colder objects unless energy is supplied to reverse the flow of heat.<sup>5</sup> Grimes

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<sup>2</sup> Wallerstein too, have been preoccupied with unifying the sciences, more specifically the social sciences and history culminating in two important texts on the matter, *The End of the World as We Know It: Social Science for the Twenty-first Century* (2001) and *The Uncertainties of Knowledge* (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Grimes, Peter. Email to Marilyn Grell-Brisk. January 10, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Grimes makes the distinction that living dissipative structures seek out new energy sources and reproduce, whereas non-living ones do not.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Ciotola’s paper in this series, explains the importance of entropic energy for human life and our overall energy capture and consumption.

argued that evolutionary time allowed for species specialization in their method of energy capture, particularly solar energy and that the channeling of solar energy across species meant that ecosystems were dissipative structures. In discussing the intimate connections within the ecosystem of living and non-living, human and non-human, he draws on Ilya Prigogine (1996) and Gregoire Nicolis' (1989) work; noting,

all of evolution can be viewed as a series of bifurcations resulting in new and more complex material elaborations of energy acquisition and flows. All changes to a species, including the evolution of new species, can be thought of as bifurcations in a complex dissipative structure. (Grimes 2012: 143)

Furthermore, that energy can flow between organisms, between species, and living and non-living structures (Grimes 2012). Predation allows for the flow of energy between species but more frequently, energy flows occur via parasitism. Grimes notes that it is the various forms of parasitism between organisms of the same species, often subtle in form, that “form the core method of energy transfer between humans” (Grimes 2012: 143). This parasitism between humans is what I want to take up here and connect with the papers presented in this symposium, inspired by Grimes' unfinished manuscript. Within the modern world-system, parasitism is key to energy capture, energy flow, and energy transfer, and the result is asymmetric hierarchies of power, wealth, and influence across the various temporal and spatial nested formulations (Chase-Dunn and Grell-Brisk 2019) of the system.

In an email in November 2017<sup>6</sup>, Grimes notes that he considered parasitism to be the equivalent of unequal exchange, in the same way world-systems analysts understand and use the term<sup>7</sup>. In general, parasitism means that one person/group/species gains benefits that come at the expense of the host member. In biology, parasitism is often described as symbiotic; that is, engaged in close and long-term interactions. There are various types of cross species parasitism from obligate (the parasite is completely dependent on the host in order to complete its life cycle), to facultative (the parasite does not need the host to complete its life cycle and only periodically engages in parasitic activities). parasitic relationships might also be necrotrophic (eating away at the host until the host dies from the loss of tissue or nutrient loss), or biotrophic (does not do enough damage to kill the host as the host is necessary for the parasite's own survival). Parasitism occurs quite frequently between non-human species, such as insects parasitizing plants, plants parasitizing fungi, organisms parasitizing fish which then parasitize humans. Of course, many organisms parasitize humans, sometimes resulting in infectious diseases, even death. The parasitism that operates between humans can be lethal too. Using the language of energy flow,

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<sup>6</sup> Grimes, Peter. Email to Marilyn Grell-Brisk. November 3, 2017

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein's use of unequal exchange draws on the work of Arghiri Emmanuel's *Unequal Exchange* (1972). One of his early works where he discusses unequal exchange is “Dependence in an Interdependent World: Limited Possibilities of Transformation Within the Capitalist World Economy” (1974a). In *Semiperipheral States in the World-Economy*, Giovanni Arrighi provides a careful discussion of unequal exchange in his chapter, “Developmentalist Illusion” (1990).

humans who are parasitized lose energy, which can eventually lead to their death. Grimes' description of parasitic energy flow in the preindustrial period feels naturalized, almost inevitable: "energy flows from the plants to the farmers, thence via social layers to the most powerful" (Grimes 2017: 722) and the hierarchical structures, the social pyramid that emerge as polities become more complex, "is ultimately rooted in the laws of thermodynamics" (Grimes 2012: 145). But this inevitability in the flow of energy is a bit misleading in that social relations can be constructed such that the flow of energy is directed differently. Human beings have the capacity to redirect energy flows as Grimes points out, but again, his example is limited to the pre-industrial world.

### **The Logics of Parasitism and Anti-Indigeneity**

Keeping in mind that dissipative structures "are dissipative because the energy they release is equal to that received but less able to do work" and that "while dissipating that energy they spontaneously self-organize into structures that are unlikely and can only exist far from equilibrium"<sup>8</sup>(Grimes 2012: 142), Mark Ciotola explains that the ability to reproduce dissipative structures can lead to exponential growth, but that doing so on a limited, nonrenewable source will eventually lead to a bubble—rise-then-fall progression on nonrenewable source. In one of his historical examples, Ciotola presents the San Juan mountains mining region in Colorado, noting that the region produced gold and silver from hundreds of mines. Although the initial energy capture from mining was great, once you have extracted the material from the ground, there is no more. There is no way to magically refill the mined material because it typically takes millions of years for the material to form and accumulate. By increasing the total number and size of mines it was possible to mimic an exponential growth in profits through a seeming exponential growth in mining itself. What does not get factored explicitly into the equation of exponential growth and profits here, is the level of parasitism at the human to human level, let alone the predation involved in energy capture between man and the natural environment that occurred for both factors (increased total and size of mines) to be true.

Placer deposits of gold were found in the San Juans as early as 1765 while the region was still owned by Spain. Colorado was ceded to the United States with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) following the Mexican-American War, and ten years later, an aggressive search for gold began. This led to a gold rush by white settler colonialists who trespassed on Ute Indian territory. The rush for gold in Colorado in 1858–1859<sup>9</sup> was primarily in the Pikes Peak region but it was not

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<sup>8</sup> When dissipative structures lose all their energy, they return to equilibrium, which is death.

<sup>9</sup> What is fascinating here is that sources document a Gold Rush to Pikes Peak between 1858–1859, but the 1906 report by Waldemar Lindgren and Frederick Leslie Ransome for the U.S. Geological Survey note, "the historic rush of prospectors to Pikes Peak in 1859 resulted in no important discoveries and is significant rather as the first determined attack upon the wilderness than from any direct connection with the history of Cripple Creek" (1906: 130). In effect, they are arguing that the gold rush was more about the wish to conquer nature and render it subjugated rather than about gold.

until 1870 that the first gold ore was mined in the San Juans (Koschmann and Bergendahl 1968). At the time, the land was part of the Ute Indian Reservation. In effect, white settler colonialists invaded Ute territory in search of gold. Koschmann and Bergendahl note in their U.S. Geological Survey report of 1968 that the main rush to the San Juans began after 1874 when the Ute Indian peoples signed a treaty with the United States, allowing the region to be opened to white settlers (1968). In actuality, the Ute peoples signed the Brunot Agreement<sup>10</sup> with the U.S. government in October 1873, approved by Congress in April 1874. The first attempts at negotiating with the Ute people in 1872 failed as the Ute unreservedly rejected the request to sell the territory to the U.S. government (Horn 2016). After a year of ingratiating himself with the Ute people and their primary negotiator Chief Ouray, a Tabeguache Ute, Felix R. Brunot, the primary negotiator for the U.S. government and the Chairman of the Board of Indian Commissioners strong-armed the Ute peoples to sell their land for \$25,000 per year, plus a \$1,000 salary for Chief Ouray. Brunot added that the Ute peoples could continue to hunt on the ceded land (Horn 2016). Mining was very profitable during that early period, and white settlers did not restrict their settlement on the ceded land, of course. The summer after the Agreement was signed, 2,000 white settlers moved to San Juan county (Koschmann and Bergendahl 1968) with continuous mining in the region well into the early 1920s.

White settler colonialist efforts to displace, render subservient, and even kill the Ute Indians for access to land and the natural resources of that land, for the advancement of white people, for their economic advantage, and for the nationalizing project of the move to the West, put on display a willingness to engage in a necrotrophic form of parasitism. Elliott West (1999) argued that the move west, which displaced and killed Indigenous people, was not simply about gold, but also the creation of a white ascendancy, of a narrative and rhetoric of American success, and of “national destiny” (West 1999: 5). West writes,

the coincidence of gold, however, brought out and amplified the newer motifs of the national vision... First conquest, then the earth’s sudden gift of its most precious resource: the way was open for the full flower of national destiny. America would be the golden land in truth as well as metaphor. (West 1999:5)

The American Review noted that gold had the capacity to establish “a great American epoch in the history of the world” (American Review 1849: 331–338). In explaining the racial climate during the period of white invasion of Ute land and the signing of the Brunot Agreement, Peter Decker writes about Samuel Bowles who served as the editor of *The Springfield Editor* (and author of *Our New Northwest* [West 1999]), and Bowles’ call for the extermination of Indigenous people in the United States:

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<sup>10</sup> Note that the Indians Appropriations Act of 1871, while ostensibly presented as providing funds to Indian Agencies, included a clause that rejected Indigenous peoples’ sovereignty. Indigenous people would not be recognized as belonging to sovereign nations and therefore could not establish treaties. With the Brunot Agreement, the Ute people were the first Indigenous peoples to be affected by this Act.

Samuel Bowles, summed up what most Anglo-Americans thought of Indians and why they felt their present lands needed to be appropriated and the Indians moved and confined to reservations. White Americans possessed a superior claim to the continent's land because God gifted the earth to whites "for its improvement and development." They must say to the Indian, Bowles wrote, "you are our ward, our child, the victim of our destiny, ours to displace, ours to protect. We want your hunting grounds to dig gold from, to raise grain on, and you must MOVE on..." When, in the future, "the march of our empire demands this reservation of yours, we will assign you another; but so long as we choose, this is your home, your prison, your playground. The world for the Indian was now changed, Bowles declared, and "it is his destiny to die; we cannot continue [to protect his] ... barbaric life, [and] he cannot mount to that of civilization; the mongrel marriage of the two that he embraces and must submit to is killing him—and all we can do is to smooth and make decent the pathway to his grave. (Decker 2004: 37)

Motivated by a belief in the superiority of white Americans in the hierarchy of being, the civilizing imperative of the "Anglo-American," and the nation-building or Manifest Destiny project, Samuel Bowles exemplified the white urge for and their open advocacy for the genocide of Indigenous people and the occupying of Indigenous peoples' ancestral land. I would argue that this acute parasitism, necrotrophic in form, is indicative of, or even triggered during, moments of crisis as well as expansion as we see in the above period of the early American move west, unburdened in the quest for energy capture.

By 1886, Ute Indians were experiencing great difficulties living off the land. In the *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs of 1886*, only 14 farms were being cultivated in the southern Ute region (United States Bureau of Indian Affairs 1886: 49–50). Ute Indians complained about the loss to their crops due to a neglected promise by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to provide a thrashing-machine to assist with the thrashing of grain from their 1885 crop, as well as other conditions that led to crop failure and/or reduction in overall wheat and oat crops. The report also notes that the Ute were not as convinced of the farming endeavor prescribed by the Bureau. Further the Bureau's delivery of stock cattle to the Ute in the region in 1885 generated additional conflict between Utes on the Reservation and white settler colonialist on the border. More importantly, the Ute leaders continued to demand a change in the location of the Reservation. Given the geographic location and shape of the Reservation, the quality of the land, the encroachment of whites onto the Reservation, and the overall physical limits of the space, the Ute continued to demand change, without which they threatened to leave the Reservation. They understood the dynamics of land use, the political and economic geographies of racial separation; more specifically, the spatialization of race and the racialization of space (Razack 2002; Lipsitz 2007) and the resulting asymmetries of wealth and overall wellbeing that it generates for the white settler colonialists.

The violent removal of the custodians of Indigenous ancestral lands also meant that white settler colonialists illegitimately secured and consumed an unequal amount of energy while additionally generating entropic energy via land exploitation (remember that entropic energy is energy not available to do work). Mining generated economic wealth (millions of dollars in the

San Juan region alone<sup>11</sup>), but also engendered various industries that supported the mining sector such as ranching and agriculture which provided food. Coal and iron industries produced the required energy for railways, as well as steam powered mining equipment for the extraction of not only gold but of other valuable metals. All this changed the geography and the environment in the region (Blair et al. 1996). In particular, “deforestation associated with the mass construction of flumes, cabins, sluices, railroads, and mining camps, as well as the removal of large quantities of rock in subsurface mining operations, resulted in less stable hillsides” and damaged streams (Encyclopedia Staff 2016). Large scale mining also exposes buried rock to oxygen which initiates acid mine drainage, a highly acidic source of sulfate and heavy metals (Dhir 2018) and the main cause of polluted water in the United States (Bergerson and Lave 2004). The legacy of mining in the San Juans is one of acid mine drainage, and although there are now remediation techniques (Dhir 2018) and new technologies to minimize its incidence, it still occurs in abandoned mines (Bergerson and Lave 2004). In 2015, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency accidentally released more than three million gallons of water contaminated with heavy metals that had been trapped in an abandoned mine in the San Juans into the Animas River. The river immediately turned orange and devastated one of the region’s most important watersheds (Cech 2015). Remediation cost were astronomical, let alone the energy used to clean up the water supply.

The level of parasitism described in the historical example above continues to define contemporary socio-political and economic relations in the United States. In fact, I would argue that this parasitism is part of the logic of capital accumulation as well as the white supremacist,<sup>12</sup> antiblack, anti-Indigenous organization of the world-system and the Civilizational (Rodríguez 2021) project of Western European-American hegemonic world order. And parasitism becomes acute during accumulation phases (as seen above) and during crises; it also suggests that the systemic logic of continuous, yet uneven growth, is animated by this parasitic relation.

### **The Logics of Parasitism and Antiracism**

The more recent crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the contemporary protocols of the Western European-American parasitic paradigm much in the same way as the anti-Indigenous civilizing project discussed earlier. As any scholar of the Black Radical Tradition, from W.E.B. Du Bois (1935, 1947) to Cedric Robinson (1983, 2019) or Olúfémi Táíwò (Táíwò and Bright 2020) have argued, the emergence of *global* capitalism is indelibly tied to the emergence of the transatlantic slave trade and is constitutive of the emergence of Black(ness)/racialization of Black people. Furthermore, the underlying assumptions of Western modernity’s so-called scientific paradigm for comprehending the world, facilitates the justification of the ascendancy of whiteness

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<sup>11</sup> See Duane Smith’s *Song of the Drill and Hammer* (1982) for complete figures.

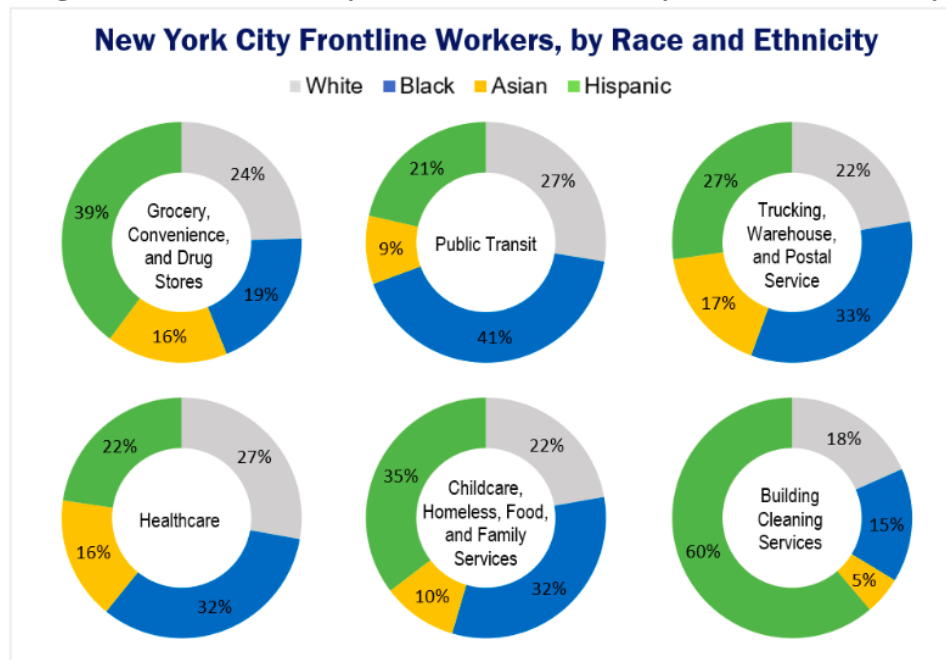
<sup>12</sup> Here, my understanding of white supremacy is informed by Dylan Rodríguez’s: “White supremacy is a global sociopolitical imagination and changing historical apparatus of human dominance. It is simultaneously an ideological, epistemological, cultural, institutional, militarized, and aesthetic structuring of power, (legitimated/state and illicit/state-condoned) coercion, and social identity” (Rodríguez 2017: 1).



(Hall 1980; Robinson 1983; Wynter 1997) in a hierarchy of being (Dussel 1996; Wynter 1997, 2003; Quijano 2007; Mignolo 2011).<sup>13</sup> Both racial capitalism and coloniality of being embodies the parasitism of the modern world-system that results in the dynamics of the pandemic.

On March 19, 2020, California was the first state to issue a stay-at-home order, to protect the health and well-being of all Californians (Newsome 2020) with only critical infrastructure sectors (Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency 2020) and “essential businesses” allowed to remain open. Forty-two other states would go on to issue similar orders with varying alterations. But, by the end of April, the governors of Alaska, Colorado, and Montana had lifted stay-at-home orders. Since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, “essential workers” (first responders, grocery store workers, public transit workers, U.S. Postal Service workers, workers in meatpacking and other food-processing plants, factory workers, corrections workers, transportation and logistics workers, food service workers, etc.) have been on the frontlines—people deemed necessary for the maintenance of the “supply chain,” as Governor Newsome put it (2020). They allowed for the economy, and society as a whole to continue its course, to continue to function relatively smoothly, while many of us stayed home to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and the more vulnerable in our society.

**Figure 1. New York City Frontline Workers, by Race and Ethnicity**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2014-2018 five year estimates

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed counternarrative of the dominant view of the development of rationality (as opposed to a divine centered knowledge source) foundational to our understanding of the world see Arturo Escobar (2007) or Sylvia Wynter (1997).

Highlighted in Figure 1, New York City's Comptroller, Scott M. Stringer's (2020) report on frontline workers document that during the early days of the pandemic (pre-Fall 2020) that 75 percent of all frontline workers were Black and non-white people, with 82 percent of cleaning service employees being people of color. Not only that, but the work was heavily gendered with women making up 60 percent of frontline workers, 81 percent in the social services, and 74 percent in healthcare. Furthermore, many frontline workers were living at or below the poverty line. Non-white people are overrepresented in *frontline work*, and the Economic Policy Institute added that people of color made up the majority of *essential workers* in food and agriculture as well as industrial, commercial, residential facilities, and services (McNicholas and Poydock 2020). Still, there is a difference between *essential workers* (those required to continue to work in the critical infrastructure sectors like the energy and financial sector) and *frontline workers* who are required to work in-person and engage in face-to-face interaction with the public on a daily basis.

Just this simple distinction can make a difference in the acuteness, as well as the form in which parasitism will manifest in this situation. The level of macabre is astounding—with little to no choice in the matter, in their jobs, Black and other non-white people faced the possibility of contracting COVID-19 every day so that in the United States we did not have to undergo total quarantine like in Italy (Lowen 2020). High cost of living, low pay, a devastated climate, constant exposure to pollution, and exposure to the persistently oppressive and violent death-dealing (both physical and ontological) nature of structural racism and white supremacy—these are the conditions under which frontline workers faced the pandemic. The protocols engaged sought to mask the depraved siphoning of life and the experiences of Black and other non-white people, who were, and still are, subjected to the violent logics of capitalist accumulation during the pandemic. The discursive framing and attention to them in the media, at least in the beginning of the pandemic, placed their “heroic sacrifice” front and center for white and upper socio-economic peoples’ consumption. At the same time, the performative celebration of frontline workers like the unironic ringing of bells in their honor, while we knew full well that we were exploiting and overworking them and that they were dying at disproportionate rates, is axiomatic of our prioritizing of economic success at the expense of the worker. In a particularly performative post, in May 2020, Brookings Institution posted an article to their website about frontline workers and their heroic sacrifice (Kinder 2020). Six of the eight people they wrote about were Black and posed with big smiles. All of the workers mentioned extreme exploitation, with poor working conditions, and very low compensation. Molly Kinder wrote,

despite the hardships and health risks, millions of essential frontline workers continue to do their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. These hardworking heroes are keeping Americans fed, picking up their trash, providing them life-saving medicine, delivering their groceries and packages, preparing their food, cleaning their hospitals, caring for those who are most vulnerable, and keeping us safe—often while earning low wages and few benefits. (Kinder 2020)

The “series” was ostensibly to “introduce” the reader to the frontline workers who would tell us “in their own words,” what policymakers and employers can do to protect and support them. And

it isn't that we should not celebrate the people who make sacrifices for the overall social good; it is that the parasitization of the Black and other non-white workers' bodies and their experiences were sanitized, and cloaked in a layer of respectability, just enough so that the reader can feel slightly engaged while maintaining a safe distance and without genuinely addressing their own complicity or social responsibility in the exploitation of a fellow human being.

Still, in the early days of the pandemic, stuck at, or working from home, we were prevented from averting our eyes from the parasitic system that coerced people into choosing between the possibility of death by contracting COVID-19 or providing food and shelter for themselves and their loved ones. Existing health disparities due to antiblack racism meant that not only were Black people less likely to receive proper healthcare during the pandemic (Gee and Ford 2011; Yearby, Clark, and Figueroa 2022), but that any confrontation with police and resulting incarceration meant yet another way to be subjected to and experience Black abjection. Black male-presenting people faced a particular dilemma. How could they keep themselves safe from COVID-19 by wearing masks and how could they keep themselves safe from the police if they were wearing masks. Yet, as data began to show that those most affected by COVID-19 were in fact Black and non-white workers (Cineas 2020), the clamor to “return to normal”—that is, forego all restrictions related to minimizing the spread of COVID-19—grew louder. In April, despite research showing that stay-at-home-orders were effective in minimizing the spread of COVID-19 (Fowler et al. 2021), a small but predominantly white group of people launched protests in Washington, Michigan, Texas, and Maryland. They displayed symbols of white supremacist ideology (McConahay and Hough Jr. 1976; Inglis et al. 2021) and claimed economic hardships even while residing in locations where the average median income is about \$123,000 per year (Hoskin 2020), while the median income in the United States is \$67,521 per year—\$48,175 per year for Black Americans—as per the U.S. Census.<sup>14</sup> Their protests not only prioritized their own economic wellbeing over that of the lives of Black and other non-white people who were on the frontlines, but given their propensity toward white supremacist and other hate speech, and their display of known symbols of white supremacy, it also spoke to the firm belief that white life was inherently more valuable than any one else's.

As the pandemic progressed like a festering wound, we were forced to confront the antiblackness endemic to the modern world-system (Grell-Brisk 2022) and in particular, to America's foundational ethos of racialized capital accumulation (Du Bois 1935), its civilizational discourse (Almaguer 2008; Rodríguez 2021), and its disciplining of workers such that they are unable to grasp the obvious moments for collaboration across race and ethnicity (Du Bois 1935; Robinson 1983). It all came to a fore on May 25, 2020, when Derek Chauvin, police officer and exemplar of state-sanctioned violence, murdered George Floyd (Vera and Wolfe 2021); placing folks who reject unchecked capitalist expansion, worker exploitation, and antiblackness on a collision course with the police and carceral state. It exposed yet another death-dealing element of the pandemic and the extent of parasitism on the Black body: the need to “contain, control, and

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<sup>14</sup> For a breakdown of earnings in the United States, see the U.S. Census page at <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.html>

criminalize” (Kaba and Ritchie 2022: 70) the Black body and allow the continuation of an exploitative and extractive system. Understanding the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, its necessity, and knowing the country’s history of weaponizing the legal system to protect agents of state-sanctioned violence who murder Black and non-white people (Taylor 2016; Hill 2020); on May 26, 2020, protest broke out in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The protests soon spread across the United States and eventually around the globe. Floyd’s murder was on the heels of the racially motivated killing of Ahmaud Arbery, and the murder of Breonna Taylor by police earlier that year, as well as countless other instances of antiblack racism and disproportionate<sup>15</sup> and historic police violence against Black people. By the summer and well into the fall of 2020, the pandemic had crystalized for many the centrality of the extractivist and exploitative nature of the modern capitalist world-system, its foundational ideologies of white supremacy, and the corresponding deleterious effects on society. The Black Lives Matter movement became the face of the protests. Folks, particularly young people across race and class, protested police brutality and police repression, antiblack racism, and the logics of disposability (Grell-Brisk 2022) within racial capitalism (Hinton 2021).

The state’s (in its myriad forms like the police, lawmakers, agencies and bureaus etc.) response to the 2020 protests was typical; although it wasn’t because the protests were “typical.” They were anything but. The protests represented a unique moment that captured our imagination and our lived reality simultaneously. But it also dealt with the annihilating, death-dealing issue of antiblackness. I want to be clear, the state’s response was not a unique response to a unique situation. Antiblackness is transnational and transhistorical; it is continuous; and it is constitutive of the global racial capitalist world-system, and the entire modernity project. When police attack Black Lives Matter protesters and attempt to undermine the fight for Black liberation, it is within the context of this “racial matrix of capitalist accumulation of land, exploitation of labor, and appropriation of resources” (Chakravarty and Da Silva 2012) for the ascendancy of the white civilizational project (Rodríguez 2017, 2021). Their intention has always been to contain, domesticate, and repress Black people.

Racial justice was at the center of the protests, particularly in the summer, but people also mobilized around other interests including LGBTQ+ rights, women’s rights, and so on (Fisher and Rouse 2022). Dana Fisher and Stella Rouse argue that the movement in 2020 brought a diverse group of people together who recognized that the issues that were important to their subgroups overlapped with that of the Black Lives Matter movement (Fisher and Rouse 2022). But this was no accident or sudden clarity on the part of the various subgroups; the Black Lives Matter

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<sup>15</sup> A recent study found that not only were Black people more likely to die at the hands of police compared to non-white people, the number of deaths as a result of police violence committed in the United States is significantly underreported. Between 1980 and 2018, across all races and states in the United States, the Global Burden of Diseases, Injuries, and Risk Factors Study (GBD) found 17,100 more deaths as a result of police violence as opposed to what was reported in the National Vital Statistics System (NVSS). More than half of all deaths due to police violence were unreported in the NVSS (Sharara, Wool, and Collaborators 2021). Frank Edwards, Hedwig Lee, and Michael Esposito also found that the risk of being killed by police violence was highest for Black men and that risk was highest between the ages of twenty and thirty-five (2019), at the prime of their lives.

movement had started in 2013 and struggled to obtain robust support from such a cross-section of the U.S. population. What did happen was that Black Lives Matter activists became much more effective at articulating the connection between racial injustice and police brutality, to the underlying socio-political and economic structures of the modern capitalist world-system. Zackary Okun Dunvin and colleagues' (2022) study on how Black Lives Matter helped shift the public discourse in their favor note that movement organizers encouraged antiracist terminology at all their rallies, "encouraging people to use terms such as 'systemic racism,' 'White supremacy,' and 'mass incarceration,' terms that now have become part of the popular discourse" (Dunivin et al. 2022: 1).

Unsurprising, people eventually got weary of the protests. The weariness, or "protest fatigue," that became apparent toward the end of 2020 is unfortunate but in line with overall system logic. In discussing "protest fatigue," Richard Thompson Ford (2020) argued that people get tired of protesting the same things over and over again and that demonstrations and protests were occurring too frequently; they are too predictable, and too safe. He praised past protests like the January 2017 women's march on Washington, and the Montgomery bus boycott of the 1950s (Ford 2020). These were ideal demonstrations to give one's time and energy. For Susan Brison (2020), protest fatigue, was not simply about "being sick and tired of being sick and tired" or having to decide on an ideal cause given that protests were happening too frequently. It was about reframing our approach to protests and asking whether or not a cause was worthwhile. That way, we could conserve our energy and minimize protest fatigue. But, the 2020 protests were centered around issues that predominantly affected Black people. So, I would argue along the lines of João Costa Vargas (Vargas 2018a), that non-Black people were able to recognize the state machinery of containment and repression, but not that its deployment against them has a different logic. This means that they experience state repression and exploitation in a different way from Black people. They identify with Black folks up to a certain point (Vargas 2018b), after which they are unable to comprehend the totalizing experience of antiblackness. Contemplate briefly on the January 6, 2021 attempted coup and the state's response to it, and compare that to the 14 days of protest immediately after the George Floyd's murder during when 19 people died (McEvoy 2020).

The excuse given for disproportionate police response to Black Lives Matter demonstrations was that the protesters were looting and that they were violent. More accurately, however, is that the police and FBI actively sought to undermine the protests by inciting violence, spying on protesters, and generally creating an environment of distrust amongst protesters. The Alphabet Boys Podcast<sup>16</sup> documents in detail just how much the FBI disrupted racial justice organizing after the police killing of George Floyd in 2020. This included paying an informant at least \$20,000 to infiltrate and spy on activist groups in Denver, Colorado. The informant also encouraged other

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<sup>16</sup> Alphabet Boys (<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/alphabet-boys/id1668980612>) is a 10-part documentary podcast detailing state intervention in protests and their attempts to coopt and undermine the Black Lives Matter Movement. "Alphabet boys" is a colloquial term for the US federal government law enforcement agencies like the FBI, ATF, and IRS, i.e. the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, and the Internal Revenue Service.

activists to purchase guns and commit violence, echoing the FBI's use of the Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) program to sabotage radical left and Black nationalist activist groups in the 1960s. COINTELPRO supported police militarization efforts (Hinton and Cook 2021) and as Dhoruba Moore (1981) quoted from declassified documents, Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI, wanted "to prevent the coalition of militant black nationalist groups which might be the first step toward a real mau mau<sup>17</sup> in America" (Moore 1981: 10) and "to prevent groups and leaders (nationalists) from gaining 'respectability' by discrediting them to the 'responsible' Negro community, to the white community and to Negro radicals" (Moore 1981: 10). Not only did the police and FBI attempt to "discredit, disrupt, and destroy" (Hoban 2021) using agents-provocateurs and spies in the style of COINTELPRO (Beals 2020; Singhvi 2020), they actively committed violence against protesters; who were, ironically, protesting police violence. A Human Rights Watch report documents police brutalizing peaceful protesters in New York using the tactic known as "kettling"<sup>18</sup> (Human Rights Watch 2020). They engaged in these acts of brutality in the New York communities with some of the highest rates of poverty and homelessness and among those hit hardest by the pandemic. "Human Rights Watch found that the police response to the peaceful Mott Haven protest was intentional, planned and unjustified" (Human Rights Watch 2020) but this was one of the many instances of police actively escalating confrontations with protesters (Buford et al. 2020) and violently violating their basic rights. Moreover, these acts of barbarity against protesters happened despite the protests being relatively peaceful with little loss to property (Beals 2020; Chenoweth and Pressman 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020; Singhvi 2020; Best 2023). Furthermore, the Black Lives Matter protests were safe as they did not cause an increase in COVID-19 transmission (Dave et al. 2020; Bui et al. 2021).

The pandemic, with its cost to Black lives, the ensuing protests, and the state's response, is occurring within the global racial capitalist order. There is no doubt that at the beginning of the pandemic, businesses saw a drop in sales and many businesses closed. This was especially so within the accommodations sector, as well as entertainment, and service sectors (Fairlie and Fossen 2022). However, this correspondingly affected the lives of those employed by these businesses. Unemployment skyrocketed and at its peak the unemployment rate was at 14 percent in April 2020. Research showed that the most vulnerable suffered (Tang et al. 2022) and despite claims that the pandemic was the great equalizer amongst Americans, this was certainly not the case (Antipova 2021). Furthermore, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that despite federal assistance, without which suffering would have been even more astronomical for poor

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<sup>17</sup> Mau Mau, or the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, was an armed anti-colonial group in Kenya who fought against British colonialists for political representation, sovereignty, and freedom. The British response was one of violence and torture.

<sup>18</sup> Kettling is a police strategy wherein crowds of protesters are surrounded by police, unable to leave for a sustained period of time (Joyce and Wain 2014; Neal, Opitz, and Zebrowski 2019). The police block off streets that forces protesters into a confined space, unable to use the restrooms, with very little space to move. Sometimes, tear gas is used to force protesters into this confined space (Fernandez 2008). It induces fear and panic. Traditionally, police "managed" crowds and protesters by forcing them to disperse but in the post anti-globalization protests of the 1990s police have begun using containment rather than dispersal as a control mechanism (Fernandez 2008).

Americans, those who were experiencing food, housing, and employment hardships continue(d) to do so even after the American Rescue Plan Act (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2022). With this in mind, understand the level of parasitism that is displayed here in the context of the pandemic and 2020 protests: In 2019, 181 CEOs of the largest, most profitable and influential companies “committed to move toward a more inclusive model of capitalism and pay their workers ‘fairly’” (Kinder, Bach, and Stateler 2022:2) During the pandemic, they had the opportunity to do this and they did not. The Brookings Institute conducted a study of 22 “iconic” corporations including Amazon, Disney, FedEx, Home Depot, among others. They found that

a vast majority of companies still pay their workers too little to get by; company shareholders grew \$1.5TRILLION richer, while workers got less than 2% of that benefit with more than 7% of wealth generated for US Shareholders (over \$800billion) benefitted the richest 5% of Americans, or 6 million families, and only 1% accrued to the bottom half of all American families; workers experienced the brunt of companies’ losses while corporate executives and shareholders generally avoided losses; and the companies made choices (like spending cash on shareholders instead of their workers) that contributed to inequitable outcomes for workers. (Kinder, Bach, and Stateler 2022: 3-4)

### To Meditate

Is it even possible to fully address this one-sided, parasitic structure in a way that allows us to come to terms with the accelerating technological changes that LePoire discusses in his paper? I would argue that within our current system, technological advances would only be leveraged to maintain the status quo. Like LePoire, I agree that Grimes was correct in his assertions that our evolution as a species is intimately tied to the natural and biological world in a complex adaptive system, but *adaptive* being the key word. The sociality that we have developed over time in this evolutionary process is objectionable; and no, a big history framework is not going to give us the tools to adapt and reorganize the system in such a way that we can sustain all human lives. In fact, I propose that we look to the margins of the disciplines to find perhaps more compelling, future-thinking ideas that could elevate us as humans living on this planet and in this universe—revolutionary systems change on the semi-peripheries as Chase-Dunn writes (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997); and the possibilities for new systems emerging on the “edge of chaos” as Stuart Kaufmann mused at the Santa Fe Institute (Waldrop 1992); the development of Black Study (Moten and Harney 2013; Myers 2023). Bertalanffy (1969) envisioned a general systems theory, but perhaps what we need is an integrated approach, not quite the transdisciplinarity that Hofkirchner and Rousseau (1969) talk about when referring to general systems research. It is what gets taken up by Black Study—integrating knowledge from different disciplines across the social, natural, and biological sciences within a humanities context, in a way that transcends disciplinary boundaries while maintaining disciplinary tensions rather than flattening them.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This is an adapted definition of transdisciplinarity that we adopted in the creation of the Department of Black Study at UC, Riverside.

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