

Decolonial Ecology

Critical South

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Decolonial Ecology

Thinking from the Caribbean World

Malcom Ferdinand

Translated by Anthony Paul Smith

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For my mother Nadiège and my father Alex

To the struggles of the shipwrecked and the ecological battles for a common world

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Foreword

Malcom Ferdinand's astute analyses in *Decolonial Ecology* moved me to reflect in myriad ways on many of my own core ideas and life experiences over the decades. I found myself thinking that this is a book I wish I could have read years ago, especially when I was attempting to grasp the interrelationalities of gender, race, and class. And even as I thought about the many ways his theoretical and methodological approach might have advanced our thinking then, I also recognized how perfectly his conceptualizations illuminate the frameworks we need for both philosophical and popular understandings of our planetary conditions today.

Whoever recognizes how entangled we are in the chaos of contemporary racial capitalism with its heteropatriarchal contours, and whoever is attempting to imagine emancipatory futures in ways that do not privilege a single component of the crisis, will greatly benefit from spending time with this remarkable text. Ferdinand calls on us to embrace holistic methods of inquiry and responses to crises grounded in the interdependencies that constitute all of us – plants, human and other animals, the soil, the ocean – while recognizing that racism has deposited white supremacy at the very heart of our notions of the human.

When I initially agreed to write a short foreword for this book, I was thinking about my first visit to Martinique in December 2019, when I learned about the devastating impact of the pesticide chlordecone on the populations of Martinique and Guadeloupe. I still

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feel the shock I experienced when I wondered why I had not previously known about this calamitous intersection of racial capitalism and systematic assaults on the environment, including its human expressions. Ironically, the banana plant, which chlordecone was designed to protect from weevils, is one of the few products in the food chain that has not been polluted. This is a part of the world with which I have long experienced a deep spiritual kinship through its literature - especially Aimé Césaire and Maryse Condé - and its popular visual art, as I had the good fortune of meeting Euzhan Palcy in Paris shortly after the 1983 release of La Rue Cases-Nègres [Sugar Cane Allev], and I was interested in expanding my awareness about the environmental crisis that is taking place there. As soon as I began to read Decolonial Ecology, I quickly realized that, as important as it may be to learn more about one of the world's least recognized ecological disasters, Malcom Ferdinand's research, in closely and complexly engaging with the conditions of the Caribbean and the Americas, radically reframes the way we have been primed to theorize and engage in active protest against assaults on the environment more broadly.

I also found myself overtaken by waves of self-criticism regarding earlier encounters with ways of understanding intersections between antiracism and environmental consciousness. Many years ago, in the immediate aftermath of my own trial and after the successful conclusion of a massive global campaign for my freedom, I helped to establish the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, an organization that continued to advocate for political prisoners and to engage in popular education campaigns about the connections between state violence and structural racism. One of our leaders, now deceased, was a phenomenal organizer named Damu Smith. When he chaired the Washington, DC, chapter of the Alliance, he pushed us early on to incorporate into our efforts what we now refer to as environmental justice. We were largely concerned with contesting political repression and with identifying the persistence of white supremacy and structural racism, especially with respect to the criminal legal system. I continue to regret that we did not then reevaluate the theoretical framework we employed for the understanding of the long history of racial and political repression in the US. Certainly we acknowledged colonialism and slavery as the foundational historical oppressions that enabled the trajectories leading, for example, to the incarceration of Mumia Abu-Jamal and Leonard Peltier. But our sense of the damage spawned by xvi Foreword

colonialism and slavery was not nearly as capacious as it would have been if we had grasped the gravity of the connections Damu was urging us to make.

Eventually Damu Smith became one of the founders of the environmental justice movement, to which Malcom Ferdinand refers. On Earth Day, 2001, he spoke at a protest outside the US Capitol in Washington, DC, organized by Greenpeace:

All of us have scores of chemicals in our bodies, in our tissues, in our blood, that come from a host of polluting industries and industrial processes under way throughout the planet. Particularly in the United States and other industrialized countries, we have industries like vinyl and plastic and petrochemical industries that are emitting dangerous toxins that are harming human health and causing many people to die We are being poisoned and killed against our will. ... While everybody on the planet is suffering from toxic contamination, there are some communities that have been targeted, who as a result of that targeting based on race and income are getting a disproportionate share of the planet's and the nation's pollution. People of color, African-American, Latino, Native American, Asian, and poor white folk are getting a disproportionate share of the nation's pollution. As a result the disease and death in those communities is higher. We have got to oppose and challenge environmental racism. (April 18, 2001: Earth Day protest in Washington organized by Greenpeace)

It is also interesting to note that the term "environmental racism" was coined by Dr Benjamin Chavis, who had been imprisoned in connection with the case of the Wilmington Ten from North Carolina and was freed as a result of an international campaign, supported especially in France, spearheaded by the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression. In 1982, he described environmental racism as "racial discrimination in environmental policy-making, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of colour for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of colour from the leadership of the ecology movements" (www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/what-is-environmental-racism-pollution-covid-systemic/).

Environmental racism was and continues to be a crucial concept, one which advances our understandings of the strategic location of Foreword xvii

dumps and toxic waste sites and other practices that devalue the lives of Black, indigenous and Latinx people. Ferdinand's work, however, unmasks the logic that impels us to conceptualize assaults on the environment and racist violence as discontinuous and in need of a kind of articulation that preserves the discreteness of the two phenomena to the extent that, when we bring them together in the concept of environmental racism, we tend to misapprehend their deep and fundamental interrelatedness. He asks us not only to acknowledge the part that racism plays in defining who is more vulnerable to environmental pollution but also - and more fundamentally - how racism, and specifically colonialism and slavery, helped to construct a world grounded on environmental destruction. In other words, the racism does not simply enter the picture as a factor determining the way environmental hazards are disparately experienced by human beings but, rather, it creates the very conditions of possibility for sustained assaults on the environment, including on the human and non-human animals, whose lives are always already devalued by racism, patriarchy, and speciesism.

The poisoning of the water supply of Flint, Michigan, in 2014,¹ which resulted from the austerity-motivated switch to the Flint River for the city's water, was clearly linked to capitalist industrialization on land historically stewarded by the Ojibwe. The trajectory that led from the production of carriages to the emergence of the automobile industry with no regard to the deleterious environmental changes included, among other developments, the pollution of the Flint River, especially by General Motors, which is why the river had not been previously considered as a source of water. However, under conditions of austerity, the switch from the Detroit River to the Flint River unleashed a cascade of issues, including the dislodging of lead from the pipes transporting water to the Flint community, where the majority of residents are Black and where over 40 percent live below the poverty line. Revealingly, even before the impact of the lead on the children of Flint was acknowledged, General Motors petitioned to switch back to the Detroit River because the existing supply was corroding engine parts and thus placing the profitability of the company in jeopardy. Apparently it was more important to save the automobile engines than the precious lives of

¹Laura Pulido, "Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 27/3 (2016): 1–16; DOI: 10.1080/10455752. 2016.1213013.

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Black children, whose fate recapitulated the violence directed at the Ojibwe people, who were the original inhabitants of the area where the city of Flint is located.

Flint should have been a lesson to the US and to the world that, when Black children's lives are jeopardized by the logic of contemporary capitalism, there are so many more humans, animals, plants, water, and soil that are cavalierly relegated to the realm of collateral consequences, a term that is also used to reflect the far-reaching ravages of what we have come to call the prison industrial complex. Not long after the Flint calamity, the protests on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation demanding a halt to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline revealed that it had been redirected through the reservation in order to avoid contaminating the water of Bismarck, the capital city of North Dakota, overtly signaling that indigenous lives are inherently less valuable than white lives.

Malcom Ferdinand insists that we not understand such slogans as Indigenous Lives Matter or Black Lives Matter as simple rallying cries that, while certainly meaningful to First Nations people and people of African descent, are otherwise marginal to the project of safeguarding the planet. Instead he encourages us to recognize that the deeper meaning of these assertions is that we cannot retain whiteness and maleness as measures for liberatory futures, even when the presence of such measures is deeply hidden beneath such seductive universalisms as freedom, equality, and fraternity. He recognizes the importance of new frames, new trajectories, and new ways of imagining futures where chemical and ideological toxicities – including insecticides such as chlordecone, along with racism and misogyny – are prevented from polluting our worlds to come.

Angela Y. Davis



Figure 1 Joseph Mallord William Turner, Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On, 1840.

A Colonial and Environmental Double Fracture: The Caribbean at the Heart of the Modern Tempest

Of course, we're only straws tossed on the raging sea ... but all's not lost, gentlemen. We just have to try to get to the eye of the storm.

Aimé Césaire A Tempest¹

A modern tempest

An angry red covers the sky, the waves are rough, the water is rising, the birds are panicking. Swirling winds wrap around the destruction of the Earth's ecosystems, the enslavement of non-humans, as well as wars, social inequality, racial discrimination, and the domination of women. The sixth mass extinction of species is underway, chemical pollution is percolating into aquifers and umbilical cords, climate change is accelerating, and global justice remains iniquitous. Violence spreads through the crew, chained bodies are thrown overboard, sinking into the marine abyss, while brown hands search for hope. The skies thunder loudly: the world-ship is in the midst of a modern tempest. In the face of this storm, which finds horizons hidden behind the clouds, vision blurred by the salty waters, and cries covered up by unjust gusts, what course can be taken?

This book seeks to chart a new course through the conceptual sea of the Caribbean. For the Europeans of the sixteenth century, the word "Caribbean," being the name of the first inhabitants of the archipelago, meant savages and cannibals. Like the character Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, "Caribbean" would refer to an entity devoid of reason. The inspection of this entity by waves of European colonization and their sciences would bring forth economic profits and objective knowledge. This colonial perspective persists today in the touristic representation of the Caribbean as a place where one can take a break on the beach without people and offside to the world. To think ecology from the perspective of the Caribbean world is a reversal of this touristic perspective, driven by the conviction that Caribbean men and women speak, act, and think about the world and inhabit the Earth.

Many rushed to Noah's Ark when the ecological flood was announced, with little concern for those abandoned at the dock or those enslaved within the ship. In the face of the ecological storm, saving "humanity" or "civilization" would require leaving the world ashore. This desolating perspective is revealed by the slave ship Zong off the coast of Jamaica in 1781, painted by William Turner and found on the cover of this book. At the mere thought of the storm, some are chained below deck and others are thrown overboard. Environmental collapse does not impact everyone equally and does not negate the varied social and political collapse already underway. A double fracture lingers between those who fear the ecological

tempest on the horizon and those who were denied the bridge of justice long before the first gusts of wind. As the eye of the storm, the Caribbean makes it necessary to understand the storm *from the perspective of modernity's hold*. Through the Caribbean's Creole imaginary of resistance and its experiences of (post)colonial struggles, the Caribbean allows for a conceptualization of the ecological crisis that is embedded within the search for a world free of its slavery, its social violence, and its political injustice: *a decolonial ecology*. This decolonial ecology is a path charted aboard the world-ship towards the horizon of a common world, towards what I call *a worldly-ecology*. Three philosophical propositions guide the way.

Noah's ark or the colonial and environmental double fracture

The first proposition is based on the observation of modernity's colonial and environmental double fracture. This fracture separates the colonial history of the world from its environmental history. This can be seen in the divide between environmental and ecological movements, on the one hand, and postcolonial and antiracist movements, on the other, where both express themselves in the streets and in the universities without speaking to each other. This fracture is also revealed on a daily basis by the striking absence of Blacks and other people of color in the arenas of environmental discourse production, as well as in the theoretical tools used to conceptualize the ecological crisis. With the terms "Black people," "Red people," "Arabs," or "Whites," far from the a priori essentialization of nineteenth-century scientific anthropology, I am referring to the construction of the racist hierarchy of the West that resulted in many peoples on Earth having the condition of being associated with a race, culminating in the invention of Whites above non-Whites.⁴ Because of this asymmetry, I refer to those others, non-Whites, by the term "racialized," for it is their humanity that has been and is being contested by these racial ontologies, and it is they who de facto suffer a discriminatory essentialization. Even though this hierarchy is a socio-political construction that no longer has any scientific value, it should not in turn lead to the denial of the ensuing social and experiential realities (for example, by refusing to name them) or the denial of their violence, including when those realities and violence take place within environmental discourses, practices, and policies.⁶

In the United States, a 2014 study showed that minorities remain under-represented in governmental and non-governmental environmental organizations, with the highest positions held predominately by White, educated, middle-class men. A similar situation exists in France, Racialized people who have come as part of colonial and postcolonial migration and who collect the cities' garbage, clean public squares and institutions, drive buses, trams, and subway trains, the ones who serve hot meals in university dining halls, deliver mail, care for the sick in hospitals, those whose welcoming smiles at the entrance of establishments are a guarantee of security, are the same ones who are usually excluded from the university. governmental, and non-governmental arenas that focus on the state of the environment. As a result, environmental specialists regularly speak at conferences as if all these people, their stories, their suffering, and their struggles remain inconsequential to the way we think about the Earth. This leads to the absurdity that the planet's preservation is thought about and implemented in the absence of those "without whom," as Aimé Césaire writes, "the earth would not be the earth."8 Either this fracture is completely hidden behind the fallacious argument that non-White peoples do not care about the environment, or it is restricted to a subject that is deemed secondary to the "real" purpose of ecology. My proposition here is that this double fracture be positioned as a central problem of the ecological crisis, thereby radically transforming its conceptual and political implications.

On the one hand, the environmental fracture follows from modernity's "great divide," those dualistic oppositions that separate nature and culture, environment and society, establishing a vertical scale of values that places "Man" above nature.9 This fracture is revealed through the technical, scientific, and economic modernizations of the mastery of nature, the effects of which can be measured by the extent of the Earth's pollution, the loss of biodiversity, global warming, and the associated persistence of gender inequality, social misery, and the "disposable lives" that are thereby created. 10 The concept of the "Anthropocene," popularized by Paul Crutzen, winner of the 1995 Nobel Prize in Chemistry, attests to the consequences of this duality.11 It refers to the new geological era that comes after the Holocene, in which human activities have become a major force impacting the Earth's ecosystems in a lasting way. This fracture also conceals a horizontal homogenization and hides internal hierarchizations on both sides. On the one side, the terms "planet,"

_	eagles, tigers, elephants, whales	sheep, lambs, tuna, salmon, shrimp, conch
	Animal	salmon, shrimp, conch nal fracture Signature Cities, urban nature, slums, plantations, oilfields, suburbs, farms, slaughterhouses mental fracture Humans, men, women, poor, sick, racialized, Black, Red, Yellow
forests, mountains, slums, plantations oilfields, suburbs, fai	slums, plantations, oilfields, suburbs, farms,	
	Environmental fracture	
Man, Human, anthropos White, male, Christian, and upper-class Humans, men, poor, sick, rad Black, Red, Y Arab, indige Muslim, Je Buddhist, you	poor, sick, racialized, Black, Red, Yellow, Arab, indigenous, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, young, gay,	
Valorization and homogenization		
	Man, Human,	Planet, Environment, Nature Virgin nature, wilderness, forests, mountains, ponds, parks, safaris Environmer Man, Human, anthropos White, male, Christian, and upper-class

The environmental fracture

"nature," or "environment" conceal the diversity of ecosystems, geographic locations, and the non-humans that constitute them. Images of lush forests, snow-capped mountains, and nature reserves mask those of urban natures, slums, and plantations. Also masked are the internal conflicts between nature conservation movements and animal welfare movements, *the animal fracture*, as well as the latter's own hierarchies in which "noble" wild animals (polar bears, whales, elephants, or pandas) and pets (dogs and cats) are placed above animals that are farmed (cows, pigs, sheep, or tuna). On the other side, the terms "Man" or *anthropos* mask the plurality of human beings, featuring men and women, rich and poor, Whites and non-Whites, Christians and non-Christians, sick and healthy.

I call "environmentalism" the set of movements and currents of thought that attempt to reverse the vertical valuation of the environmental fracture but without touching the horizontal scale of values, meaning without questioning social injustices, gender discrimination, political domination, or the hierarchy of living environments and without concern for the treatment of animals on Earth. Environmentalism therefore proceeds from an apolitical genealogy of ecology comprised of its figures, like the solitary walker, and

its pantheon of thinkers, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Pierre Poivre, John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, or Arne Næss. ¹³ They are mainly White, free, solitary, upper-class men in slave-making and post-slavery societies gazing out over what is then referred to as "nature." Despite disagreements over its definition, environmentalism remains preoccupied with "nature," cherishing the sweet illusion that its socio-political conditions of access and its sciences might remain outside the colonial fracture. ¹⁴

Since the 1960s, some ecological movements have been concerned with addressing vertical and horizontal scales of value. Ecofeminism, social ecology, and political ecology have argued for a preservation of the environment intrinsically linked to demands for gender equality, social justice, and political emancipation. Despite their rich contributions, these green interventions make little room for racial and colonial issues. The colonial and slave-making constitution of modernity is veiled by pretentious claims to the universality of socio-economic, feminist, or juridico-political theories. In the green turn of the 1970s, arts and humanities disciplines confronted the environmental fracture while at the same time sliding the colonial divide under the rug. The absence of people of color who are experts on these issues is striking. From universities to governmental and non-governmental arenas, movements critical of the environmental fracture have marked the boundaries of a predominantly White and masculine space within postcolonial, multiethnic, and multicultural countries where the maps of the Earth and the dividing lines of the world are imagined and redrawn.

On the other hand, there is a colonial fracture sustained by the racist ideologies of the West, its religious, cultural, and ethnic Eurocentrism, and its imperial desire for enrichment, the effects of which can be seen in the enslavement of the Earth's First Peoples, the violence inflicted on non-European women, the wars of colonial conquest, the bloody uprooting of the slave trade, the suffering of colonial slavery, the many genocides and crimes against humanity. The colonial fracture separates humans and the geographical spaces of the Earth between European colonizers and non-European colonized peoples, between Whites and non-Whites, between the masters and the enslaved, between the metropole and the colonies, between the Global North and the Global South. Going back at least to the time of the Spanish Reconquista, when Muslims were expelled from the Iberian peninsula, and the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas in 1492, this fracture places the colonist,

Valorization	Colonized/slave- making colony	Racialized man (Black, Red, Yellow), Christian and non-Christian, heterosexual	Racialized men and women, rich, poor, sick, urban dwellers, peasants, disabled, young, old, homosexuals
oriz	Colonial fracture		
Val	Settler-colonist/ mainland master	White male, Christian, college-educated, middle-class, heterosexual	Men, women, disabled, poor, sick, young, elderly, urban dwellers, peasants, homosexuals
	Valorization and homogenization		

The colonial fracture

his history and his desires at the top of the hierarchy of values and subordinates the lives and lands of the colonized or formerly colonized under him.¹⁵ In the same way, this fracture renders the colonists as homogeneous, reduces them to the experience of a White man, while at the same time reducing the experience of the colonized to that of a racialized man. Throughout the complex history of colonialism, this line has been contested by both sides and has taken different forms.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it persists today, reinforced by free markets and capitalism.

From the first acts of resistance by Amerindians and the enslaved in the fifteenth century to contemporary antiracist movements and anticolonial struggles in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, this colonial fracture is being called into question, exposing the vertical valorization of the colonized by the colonist. Anticolonialism, antislavery, and antiracism together represent the actions and currents of thought deconstructing this vertical scale of values. History has shown, however, that these movements have not always challenged the horizontal scale of values that in places maintains the relationships of domination between men and women, rich and poor, urban dwellers and peasants, Christians and non-Christians, Arabs and Blacks, among the colonized as well as among the colonists. In response, movements such as Black feminism and decolonial theory shatter both vertical and horizontal value scales, linking decolonization to the emancipation of women, recognition

of different sexual orientations and different religious faiths, as well as to social justice. However, the ecological issues of the world remain relegated to the background.

The *double* fracture of modernity refers to the thick wall between the two environmental and colonial fractures, to the real difficulty that exists in *thinking them together* and that in response carries out a double critique. However, this difficulty is not experienced in the same way on either side, and these two fields do not bear equal responsibility for it. On the environmentalist side, this difficulty stems from an effort to hide colonization and slavery *within the genealogy of ecological thinking*, producing *a colonial ecology*, even a *Noah's Ark ecology*. With the concept of the Anthropocene, Crutzen and others promote a narrative about the Earth that erases colonial history, while the country of which Crutzen is a citizen, the kingdom of the Netherlands, is a former colonial and slaveholding empire that stretched from Suriname to Indonesia via South Africa, and now consists of six overseas territories in the Caribbean.¹⁷

In metropolitan France [France hexagonale], or the Hexagone, environmentalist movements have not made anticolonial and antiracist struggles central elements of the ecological crisis. 18 These struggles remain anecdotal or are even ignored within the extensive critiques of technology (including of nuclear power) carried out by Bernard Charbonneau, Jacques Ellul, André Gorz, Ivan Illich, Edgar Morin, and Günther Anders. The damage caused by nuclear tests carried out on colonized lands, such as the 210 French tests in Algeria and those in Polynesia from 1960 to 1996, is downplayed, but so is the damage caused by the plundering of mines in Africa by Great Britain and France and by the exploitation of the subsoil of Aboriginal lands in Australia, the First Nations in Canada, the Navajos in the United States, and of the Black workers forced to extract uranium in apartheid South Africa. 19 In addition to transforming the Hexagone, nuclear energy has relied on France's colonial empire, using mines in Gabon, Niger, and Madagascar - which have long been in use throughout Françafrique - while exposing miners to uranium and radon gas.²⁰ To disayow this colonial fact is to cover up the opposition to nuclear power that has been voiced by anticolonial movements, such as the demand for disarmament made by the Bandung Conference of 1955, or Kwame Nkrumah, Bayard Rustin, and Bill Sutherland's pan-Africanist rejection of "nuclear imperialism" and French nuclear tests in Algeria, or Frantz Fanon's denunciation of a nuclear arms race that maintains the Third

World's domination, or the contemporary demands for justice by Polynesians.²¹By omitting the colonial conditions for the production of technology, environmentalist movements have missed possible alliances with anticolonial critiques of technology.

Certainly, there were some bridges that were built in light of René Dumont's commitments to the peasants of the Third World, Robert Jaulin and Serge Moscovici's denunciations of the ethnocides of the Amerindians and their collaboration with the group "Survivre et vivre" [Survive and live], which led to a critique of the scientific imperialism that serves the West and the rare support of overseas citizens. 22 Today, Serge Latouche is one of the few people in France who has placed the decolonial demand at the heart of ecological issues.²³ Despite these rare examples, colonized others have not had important speaking roles within the French environmentalist movement, cast away with "their" history to a distant beyond that is reinforced by the illusion of a North/South dichotomy. The result is a sympathy-without-connection [sympathie-sans-lien] where the concerns of others that are "over there" are recognized without acknowledging the material, economic, and political connections to the "here." It is taken as self-evident that the history of environmental pollution and the environmentalist movements "in France" does not include its former colonies and overseas territories,²⁴ that the history of ecological thinking continues to be conceived of without any Black thinkers, 25 that the word "antiracism" is not part of the ecological vocabulary,26 and, above all, that these absences do not pose any problems. With expressions such as "climate refugees" and "environmental migrants," green activists appear to be discovering the migratory phenomenon in a panic, while they make a tabula rasa out of France's historical colonial and postcolonial migrations from the Antilles, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. So, it remains a cognitive and political embarrassment to recognize that French overseas territories are home to 80 percent of France's national biodiversity and 97 percent of its maritime exclusive economic zone, without addressing the fact that the inhabitants there are kept in poverty and on the margins of France's political and imaginary representations.²⁷ Aside from such sympathies-without-connection, the encounter between environmentalist movements and thought of the Hexagone with the colonial history of France and its "other citizens" has not vet taken place.²⁸

As Kathryn Yusoff notes, this invisibilization results in a "White Anthropocene," the geology of which erases the histories of