



Thinking racial capitalism and black radicalism from Africa: An intellectual geography of Cedric Robinson's world-system

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ABSTRACT

Recent writing on race and capitalism in geography and related fields has taken much inspiration from the work of Cedric Robinson. Yet the specificity of his most important concepts—racial capitalism and black radicalism—remains somewhat underdeveloped in the conversations surrounding the resurgence of his work. This article conducts an intellectual geography of Robinson's interventions by identifying some of the key theoretical and geographical contexts in which his work intervenes. It places Africa at the center of his political and intellectual evolution, and explores the centrality of the continent to his early work from the 1960s through the 1990s. It argues that Robinson was shaped by a close engagement with world-systems scholars, who were in turn also markedly informed by the study of Africa and their time spent on the continent. The article conducts an exegetical study of Robinson's key texts, draws on interviews with his surviving partner, Elizabeth Robinson, and from ongoing archival work to explore the African roots of world-systems analysis and the relationship between Robinson's own ideas and debates concerning South Africa, Tanzania and Liberia. It concludes by offering a synthesis of four constituent elements in the Robinsonian black radical tradition.

“What is required for the African Diaspora to assume its historical significance is a new and different philosophy and a new theory of history...Such systems and constructs may, indeed, borrow from the defectors from European historiography, a Marx, a Nietzsche, a Kropotkin, an Oppenheimer, a Weber, etc., but they must be built upon the experience and consciousness of the new African people, the Blacks. In a very literal way, these new interpretations must come to terms with the historical force of Africans in the Ancient World, the Old World, and the New World.”

Cedric Robinson, “Notes Toward a ‘Native’ Theory of History”

1. Introduction

The theorization of racial capitalism most commonly traces its roots to the pioneering work of political scientist and black studies scholar

Cedric Robinson (1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1983). Until the past decade, his work remained relatively submerged within the broader academic fields of radical history and geography.¹ As Fred Moten explains, Robinson's “*Black Marxism* circulated underground, as a recurrent seismic event on the edge or over the edge of the university, for those of us who valorized being on or over that edge even if we had been relegated to it” (2013: 239). The growing attention it is currently receiving within academia is therefore very welcome. Yet the conversations around *Black Marxism* and Robinson's larger body of work remain somewhat limited in both conceptual and geographical terms. Too often, the unstated geographical relevance of Robinson's ideas remains confined to the African diaspora within the United States. In this time of new enthusiasm for Robinson's work, it is important that we understand the specificity of his interventions as well as their broad geographical sweep.

This essay thus aims to make accessible to geographers and other

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¹ It is largely due to the tireless work of Cedric Robinson's brilliant cohort of both formal and informal students (one need not have been an enrolled student at UC Santa Barbara, SUNY Binghamton or the University of Michigan to have studied under his intellectual guidance), along with the interventions by his closest comrades, that we know about his work at all. Anyone working in the Robinsonian tradition therefore owes special thanks to: Robin Kelley, Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, Daryl C. Thomas, HLT Quan, Elizabeth Robinson, Erica Edwards, Fred Moten, Clyde Woods, Laura Pulido, Ambalavaner Sivanandan, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Damien Sojoyner, Jordan Camp, Christina Heatherton, Avery Gordon, and many others. The contributions of these thinkers to radical scholarship collectively offer a living testament to Robinson's skill as a teacher and mentor, something many of them have acknowledged in their own writing.

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scholars engaging his writing the two enduring preoccupations in Robinson's work: racial capitalism and the black radical tradition. I accomplish this by conducting an intellectual geography of Robinson's earlier work from the 1960s through the early 1990s. Rather than assume that the relevance of his work begins and ends with the United States, I will explore the influence of African histories and theories upon his thinking, and their corresponding relevance for thinking globally about capitalism and race. By conducting a close reading of *Black Marxism*, placing it into conversation with his dissertation and his lesser-known early articles, and by mobilizing additional findings from research conducted in his personal archive and from interviews with his surviving wife, Elizabeth Robinson, I hope to illuminate some of the broader relevance of his ideas as well as the particular contexts and conversations out of which they emerged.

This article argues that Robinson saw himself as crafting a series of interventions into different fields. Foremost among these interventions is Robinson's close reading of world-systems analysis, the body of literature drawing on the *Annales* school of historians, institutionalized in places like the Fernand Braudel Center at Binghamton University, State University of New York, where Robinson taught from 1973 to 1978. Second, and like most of the leading world-systems thinkers, Robinson began his work with a deep study of not only the African diaspora, but of *Africa itself*.² This article will argue that these neglected concerns—thinking about race and capitalism in broad terms beyond the confines of any particular nation-state, and a close attention to African culture, politics and history—fundamentally shape, and shed light on, Robinson's overall project. Robin Kelley argues that Robinson was initially introduced to the idea of “racial capitalism” through exposure to exiled South Africans who were engaged in vigorous debates in the 1970s about the nature of the apartheid system. “Having written much of the book [*Black Marxism*] during a sabbatical year in England, Robinson encountered intellectuals who used the phrase ‘racial capitalism’ to refer to South Africa's economy under apartheid” (Kelley, 2017). Indeed, Robinson's interest in African politics was an abiding one, beginning while he was an undergraduate at UC Berkeley. There he majored in anthropology, was mentored by scholars like Laura Nader and Mary Agnes Lewis, and traveled to the African continent for the first time, meeting everyday people living under colonialism as well as important figures like Jomo Kenyatta (interview with Elizabeth Robinson). His long-standing interest in and knowledge of Africa would prove crucial in his eventual theorization of an autonomous black radical tradition rooted more in culture than in political economy.

Robinson's conversation with world-systems analysts, and the question of the relation between his formulation of racial capitalism and those who developed prior theorizations of the same concept, brings to the foreground three African intellectual geographies that will be explored in this essay. The first concerns the relationship between world-systems analysis and the African continent in general, and the Dar es Salaam school of radical thought in particular. What I call “the Dar school” was comprised of emerging theorists, Pan-African scholars, and revolutionary activists gathering together at the University of Dar es Salaam in the 1960s and 1970s, as Tanzania was developing its own version of African socialism and surrounding Southern African nations were engaged in a protracted “30-year war” for independence that would last from approximately 1960 to 1990 (Saul, 2005; Sharp, 2014, 2011). I argue for situating the origins of world-systems analysis in this neglected intellectual geography, and then explore the extent to which Robinson's ideas simultaneously built upon and transcended some of the limits of this school of thought, even among those theorists who took the question of race seriously. The second African intellectual geography which I explore centers on South Africa and the aforementioned “race-

class debates” which emerged in the 1970s to grapple analytically with the nature of apartheid South Africa and politically with the trajectory of the anti-apartheid movement (Hudson, 2018). While it is true that these South African militants developed their own theory of racial capitalism prior to Robinson, much of their debate remained largely restricted to a European framework, where one theoretical pole represented the dogma of the Communist Parties and the other pole represented the heterogeneity of Western Marxism, especially the writings of Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. Robinson's own formulation of racial capitalism, I argue, adds a neglected third reference point to this conversation, constituting a triangulation whereby both the dogmatic and heretical Marxisms of Europe are forced to walk a tightrope between Marxisms of the white radical tradition on one side, and the black radical tradition on the other side. Finally, the third African intellectual geography I examine concerns the importance of the anti-colonial writings of figures like Frantz Fanon, the problems with W.E.B. Du Bois's defense of an authoritarian Liberian government, and the limits of black sovereignty. By engaging Robinson's thoughts on the limits of a political struggle for state power, we are better able to come to grips with the specificity of his formulation of the black radical tradition as a non-sovereign metaphysics rooted in the everyday practices of African and African descendant cultures rather than in the politics of black sovereigns.

Robinson's most enduring and important work, *Black Marxism*, revolves around two inextricable concepts: racial capitalism and the black radical tradition (Pulido, 2017, Pulido and Lara, 2018). Only part one of the book is concerned with the origins of racial capitalism. Part two unearths an actually existing black radical tradition and part three unpacks the central theoretical frameworks of some of the most prominent intellectuals who first began theorizing this tradition and its tense relationship with the white radical tradition. The theorization of racial capitalism in part 1 and the genealogy of the black radical tradition in parts 2 and 3 should be read as simultaneously related and autonomous from one another. That is, it is only through an understanding of the fundamentally intertwined nature of capitalism and racial regimes that we can comprehend the limits of the white radical tradition embodied in Marxist theory and practice. A recognition of these limitations creates the buffer required for Robinson to draw his readers into a close study of an autonomous black radical tradition, one not dependent on its material conditions of exploitation but instead comprising its own (neglected) historical events, practices, strategies, and theories of struggle. It is only after having developed his theory of racial capitalism in part 1 of the book that he is able to justify to his readers the necessity of uncovering this autonomous tradition. Engaging *Black Marxism* and a series of early articles by Robinson, the final section of the article elucidates four constituent features of the black radical tradition that recur throughout his scholarship.

2. A black world-systems analysis? The theory of racial capitalism

“The critical dialectic was the world-systemic character of capitalism. The transformation would proceed from the system's periphery, the ‘satellite’ nations, not from its stagnant metropolises.”

Cedric Robinson, “Oliver Cromwell Cox and the Historiography of the West”

Robinson's *Black Marxism* and his theory of racial capitalism were profoundly shaped by a critical engagement of what came to be called world-systems analysis.³ The world-systems approach to global capitalism aimed to shift the principle unit of analysis in the social sciences

² While this article deals with Robinson's orientation toward Africa, he was, of course, deeply engaged with European history and theory as well. This is a theme I explore in a separate article.

³ Robin Kelley (2016), Carol Boyce Davies (2009), and Jordan Camp and Christina Heatherton (2017) all usefully mention the fact that Robinson was shaped in part by an engagement with world-systems analysis. This article aims to elaborate on this important claim in greater detail.

from the nation-state to the integrated and uneven world-system as a whole (Wallerstein, 2004; Flint, 2010). World-systems analysis emerged out of the anti-colonial conjuncture of the post-WWII era. It also drew heavily on the early 20th-century French debates in the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, where historians such as Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch were engaged in identifying the long-term trends in global change over time. Fernand Braudel became the school's most prominent thinker by the mid-20th century. Braudel built on prior work by the *Annales* historians that explored the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe, with special attention to the Mediterranean world and its budding network of cities. He emphasized the *longue durée* (long duration) as a “means for historians to perceive structures, and as a common language of all the social sciences” (Dosse, 1997: 228). As intellectual historian Francois Dosse puts it: “Fernand Braudel had already reacted to the structuralist challenge in 1958 when he focused historical discourse on a practically immobile history of the long duration. In this way, he contrasted the legacy of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre's *Annales* with Claude Levi-Strauss. These historians were no strangers to the structuralist effervescence: May '68 had shaken up the antihistoricism of structuralism's early days and broadened the possibilities for history, which had already been renovated by the *Annales*, but reconciled with the structural point of view, with greater attention to permanent features than to changes” (227).

The establishment of the Fernand Braudel Center at Binghamton University in 1976 and the 1977 launch of *Review*—the trademark journal for world-systems research—is often looked to as the founding moment of the school of world-systems analysis. In 1980, at a time when very few other journals were willing to publish his work (interview with Elizabeth Robinson), Robinson published “Notes Toward a ‘Native’ Theory of History” in *Review*. It offers us a window into his early interest in Africa and his theorization of radical black studies as contrasted with what he calls “black scholasticism,” a tradition of black scholarship disconnected from struggle. Despite such important early contributions to the flagship journal of world-systems analysis, little attention is given to the school's own debt to studies of Africa or to the black radical tradition (West and Martin, 2009). While Braudel seems like an obvious choice for the school name, Bill Martin, an early student and later a key figure there, states that other possible names for the center which were circulating at the time included Frantz Fanon and Walter Rodney (personal communication). Even less attention is given to the fact that Cedric Robinson was a scholar at SUNY Binghamton at the precise time he would have been developing the arguments for *Black Marxism*, from 1973 to 1978, and that he closes the preface to his first book *The Terms of Order* (1980)—not coincidentally published by State University of New York Press—by thanking the founding members of the world-systems school: “to Terrence and Gloria Hopkins, to Immanuel and ‘Bea’ Wallerstein, I extend love and appreciation: such friendship is invaluable” (1980: xii).

Of the five most prominent founders of world-systems analysis—Terrence Hopkins, Andre Gunder Frank, Giovanni Arrighi, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Samir Amin—three began their careers as scholars of Africa, and two (Arrighi and Amin) spent significant time in Dar es Salaam during the heyday of the Dar school in the 1960s and 1970s. Before serving as the first director of the Braudel Center in Binghamton, Wallerstein had already spent two decades as a scholar of African independence movements, meeting Frantz Fanon on a 1960 trip to Ghana. Wallerstein was close enough to the anti-colonial theorist to find himself at Fanon's hospital bedside in Bethesda, Maryland in 1961 just before he passed away from leukemia (Wallerstein, 2009: 117–118). Wallerstein's co-founder of the Braudel Center in Binghamton, Terrence Hopkins, overlapped with another major figure in the black radical tradition, Walter Rodney, at the University of the West Indies in 1968, and Giovanni Arrighi would also become a close colleague of Rodney's at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1966–1967 and again in 1969.

In addition to their debt to the “total history” debates among the *Annales* school of French history, therefore, world-systems thinkers

would also build their new framework out of their direct experience with African anti-colonial movements in general, and with the Dar school in particular. It was at the University of Dar es Salaam during the late 1960s and early 1970s that Walter Rodney, Marjorie Mbilinyi, Giovanni Arrighi, John Saul, Issa Shivji, Mahmood Mamdani and others would advance the project of a socialist and decolonized curriculum that would unite the social sciences across competing disciplines in favor of the unitary approach that world-systems analysis would later support, and which Robinson himself would build upon. The historian Seth Markle notes that Rodney's courses at the University of Dar es Salaam became a key influence in the budding world-systems analysis approach of shifting the unit of analysis from nation-states to an interconnected global system:

“In another advanced course, ‘Black Peoples in the Americas,’ Rodney's primary goal was to provide students with a comparative lens from which to analyze the impact of the transatlantic slave trade...It was a course that challenged the restrictive categorization of history as nation-centric by ‘bourgeois’ historians, maintaining that the history of black peoples tied to the transatlantic slave trade is best understood from an analysis that traverses national-territorial boundaries.”(Markle, 2017: 94).

Rodney's Dar colleague John Saul would later reflect on his time at the university in his memoir, *Revolutionary Traveler* (2009). There, he identifies the influence that Arrighi and others would have on this shift from thinking in terms of nation-states to a broader continental and global approach to knowledge:

“The campus was an intellectual hothouse on any number of fronts and, to an extraordinary degree, a perpetual stimulus to thought and action...Giovanni Arrighi...came to Dar after his own detention and near arrest for very practical and applied liberation-support related work in (then) Rhodesia. It was Arrighi who encouraged me to join with him in pushing out from the Tanzanian case to examine the continental and global implications of what we had both begun to discover in East and Central Africa” (44).

According to Arrighi himself, it was during his time in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) and Tanzania, from 1963 to 1969, that he embarked upon a “long march from neo-classical economics to comparative-historical sociology” (2009: 62). Along the way, he would pen a series of essays (1970) that would prove extremely influential for the race-class debate that emerged in South African scholarship in the 1970s, most prominently among exiled or unorthodox South African Marxists like Martin Legassick (1976, 2002, interview with the author 2013), Harold Wolpe (1972, 1975), Bernard Magubane (1979), and Neville Alexander (1985). These debates constitute one prominent prior reference point for the use of the term racial capitalism before Robinson's *Black Marxism* (1983). As Arrighi later summarized in an interview with David Harvey conducted just before he passed away:

“I analyzed the ways in which the full proletarianization of the Rhodesian peasantry created contradictions for capital accumulation—in fact, ended up producing more problems than advantages for the capitalist sector. As long as proletarianization was partial, it created conditions in which the African peasants subsidized capital accumulation, because they produced part of their own subsistence; but the more proletarianized the peasantry became, the more these mechanisms began to break down. Fully proletarianized labor could be exploited only if it was paid a full living wage. Thus, instead of making it easier to exploit labor, proletarianization was actually making it more difficult, and often required the regime to become more repressive. Martin Legassick and Harold Wolpe, for example, maintained that South African Apartheid was primarily due to the fact that the regime had to become more repressive of the African labor force because it was fully proletarianized, and could no longer subsidize capital accumulation as it had done in the past” (63).

In other words, full proletarianization of the indigenous African population was not entirely conducive to capitalist development in the settler colonies of Southern Africa. This argument clearly contradicted the orthodox Marxist view of capitalism whereby consistent proletarianization was perceived as a functional aspect of capitalist growth. According to Harold Wolpe, the contradictions within the process of proletarianization—the more Southern Africans proletarianized the less easily exploitable they became—would explain why apartheid South Africa sought to keep many black South Africans de-proletarianized and confined to the rural reserves (Bantustans), as a way of subsidizing the wages of those migrant laborers who were proletarianized. Building off of Arrighi's studies of partial proletarianization, Wolpe would argue that this process in South Africa constituted an *articulation*—"a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases" (Hall, quoted in Hart, 2007: 89)—between two fundamentally different modes of production:

"In certain circumstances capitalism may, within the boundaries of a single state, develop predominantly by means of its relationship to non-capitalist modes of production. When that occurs, the mode of political domination and the content of legitimating ideologies assume racial and ethnic and cultural forms, and for the same reason as in the case of imperialism. In this case, political domination takes on a colonial form, the precise or specific nature of which has to be related to the specific mode of exploitation of the non-capitalist society" (Wolpe, 1975: 113).

For Wolpe, only in *particular* social formations would class and race function together in an articulation of *distinct* modes of production—one capitalist and the other pre-capitalist—to create a situation in which racial discrimination was beneficial to capitalist exploitation by guaranteeing the continued provision of rurally-subsidized cheap labor power. This was important because it challenged both the liberal and the orthodox Marxist claims of the time that the racial structure of South African apartheid, and the system of segregation which had preceded it, were either in tension with capitalism or bound to die out as capitalist development advanced. Orthodox Marxist theorizations of apartheid contained the political implications that focusing on race would be a distraction, or at best a mere first step in a two-stage process *en route* to socialist revolution, while liberal theorizations of apartheid argued that the overthrow of racial apartheid did not require a corresponding overthrow of capitalism. For Wolpe, in contrast, the political ramifications of his theorization of race and class implied the need to struggle on both fronts as—in the South African context at least—they functioned together.

As Gillian Hart has argued in a brilliant genealogy of the South African race-class debates (2007) pointing to the crucial role of Stuart Hall's Gramscian Marxism as a complement to Wolpe's evolving Althusserian-inflected Marxism, the implications of this analysis for struggle were clear. Wolpe, she explains,

"built on his revisionist analysis of cheap labor power to launch a critique of theories of internal colonialism—in particular, 'colonialism of a special type' (CST) that had become the theoretical cornerstone of the ANC/SACP alliance by the late 1960s. These theories are unable to explain the relationship between class and race or ethnic relations, he asserted. As a consequence, race and ethnic relations are once more treated as autonomous and in isolation from class relations" (87).

After engaging Stuart Hall—who was closely following the South African debate—Wolpe would nonetheless move away from his reductionist early reading in an attempt to recognize the internal differentiation that exists within classes. This took place in the 1980s at a time when he perceived the rise of a prospective black bourgeoisie in South Africa, as well as budding divisions within the black working class itself (88). As both Gillian Hart (2007) and Sharad Chari (2017) point out, Hall's more fine-tuned, Gramscian-inflected approach to the problem of

articulation helped Wolpe push forward his theorization of the confluence of race and class. As Chari usefully elaborates, "Hall (1980: 328) pushes through this 'cryptic phrase' to consider various ways of attending to articulation as both 'joining up' and 'giving expression to'... What Hall accomplishes is a non-Eurocentric understanding of capitalism that does not distinguish 'distortions' from an English ideal, but rather shows how all capitalisms articulate differently through multiplicity and inequality" (836).

For our purposes, we should note the difference between Robinson's generalized theory of racial capitalism and Wolpe and Hall's more delimited, conjunctural analysis of the intertwining of race and class. As Hart reminds us: "Hall went on to note, racialized practices are not necessary to the concrete functioning of all capitalisms. Nor does it make sense to extrapolate a common, universal structure to race and racism: there is no 'racism in general'" (89). Indeed, in the 1980 essay by Hall that proved so influential for Wolpe's (1988) evolving analysis of race and class in South Africa, Hall is very clear about the specificity of his analysis, opening the essay by explaining that he will assess the existing attempts to study "racially-structured social formations," and to "analyze those social formations where race is a salient feature," clearly implying that there exist social formations where race is decidedly *not* an important feature (305).

Against the specificity of this formulation of the delimited salience of race,⁴ Robinson would draw from the broader claims elaborated by world-systems thinkers like Braudel and Wallerstein. Their project centered around the need to shift the unit of analysis in scholarly inquiry from many studies which deployed conceptual containers in the form of nation-states, to the modern world-system as a whole, comprising a single integrated world economy since the late 19th century. Mirroring (and surpassing) Wallerstein, Robinson's first chapter in *Black Marxism* climaxes with an argument for a departure from methodological nationalism:

"We begin to perceive that the nation is not a unit of analysis for the social history of Europe. The state is a bureaucratic structure, and the nation for which it administers is more a convenient construct than the historical, racial, cultural and linguistic entity that the term 'nation' signifies. The truer character of European history resides beneath the phenomenology of nation and state. With respect to the construction of modern capitalism, one must not forget the particular identities, the particular social movements and societal structures that have persisted and/or have profoundly influenced European life" (24).

These "particular identities" which crossed emerging national boundaries in Europe were built on nationality and race. In a close reading of the *Annales* school and European historians of urbanization like Henri Pirenne, Robinson concludes that the formation of medieval European urban economies was fundamentally shaped by "the indispensable immigrant" (25, quoting Braudel). That is, each developing

⁴ While Hall's own use of the notion of 'social formation'—intended to deploy greater historical and geographical specificity in the otherwise abstract debates concerning the articulation of different modes of production—often corresponds to the scale of the nation-state, it is important to note that this was not always the case in the mode of production and articulation debates that raged throughout the 1970s. Indeed, world-systems analysis, which emerged in part in the wake of these debates, scales up from methodological nationalism to the world-system as a whole. Alternatively, Anibal Quijano, a fellow traveler of world-systems analysis and future key figure in decolonial theory, was already insisting in 1980 that his unit of analysis was Latin America as a region, rather than any particular nation-state (see Quijano's essay in the edited collection by Wolpe 1980). Others such as Gillian Hart (2006, 2017) and Philip McMichael (1990, 2000) would deploy notions of relational and incorporated comparison, respectively, in order to transcend the nation-state as a unit of analysis without relying upon what they see as the overly generalizing features of world-systems analysis.

urban settlement in Europe during the medieval period relied upon ‘outsiders’ to form a significant portion of its rising bourgeois and laboring classes.

“The development of capitalism can thus be seen as having been determined in form by the social and ideological composition of a civilization that had assumed its fundamental perspectives during feudalism. The patterns of recruitment for slave and mercenary we have reviewed held true for bourgeoisies and proletariats...*It was, too, the ‘indispensable immigrant’* who complemented the urban proletariat incapable of maintaining itself ‘let alone increasing without the help of continuous immigration.’” (24–25, my emphasis).

Robinson then offers a brilliant summary of his entire argument concerning a global racial capitalism that evolved out of a specifically European medieval culture.

“The bourgeoisie that led the development of capitalism were drawn from particular ethnic and cultural groups; the European proletariats and the mercenaries of the leading states from others; its peasants from still other cultures; and its slaves from entirely different worlds. The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize [Marx] but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones. As the Slavs became the natural slaves, the racially inferior stock for domination and exploitation during the early Middle Ages, as the Tartars came to occupy a similar position in the Italian cities of the late Middle Ages, so at the systemic interlocking of capitalism in the sixteenth century, the people of the Third World began to fill this expanding category of a civilization reproduced by capitalism” (26).

Robinson’s understanding of racial capitalism, then, offers a general theory of the “death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies” that lies at the core of capitalism anywhere it exists as a social relation (Gillmore, 2002b, 16).⁵ Crucially, the immediate consequences of this reading of racial capitalism for Robinson are that the European radical tradition is unlikely to transcend its cultural baggage of racism.

In sum, Robinson parallels world-systems thinkers in his insistence that methodological nationalism mystifies more than it clarifies, and in his corresponding attempts to think at a general level regarding a single integrated system. Where world-systems thinkers were most likely to place special emphasis upon the political economic hinges uniting this system, however, Robinson was more attuned to what they would call an emerging global “geo-culture.” While world-systems thinkers saw the ideas of liberalism as the key political and cultural weld uniting the different states in an interstate system, Robinson would make the strongest argument for the extent to which racism was embedded in the very *culture* of Europe, to such an extent that it penetrated even the most radical attempts to challenge inequality in anti-liberal Marxist and anarchist movements.

⁵ What is more, Robinson’s account highlights four stages in the consolidation of racial capitalism, two of which *precede* the modern era, and two of which emerge with the advent of modern colonialism and racial slavery: 1. the long-standing role of the “indispensable immigrant” as racialized outsider within Europe, as well as the blood distinctions drawn between nobles and commoners under feudalism; 2. The Islamic “conquest” of Mediterranean “Europe,” and the ensuing equation of blackness with Islam—think “blackamoor”—as the twin racial others of Europe; 3. the gradual incorporation of Africa, Asia and the Americas into a single world-system beginning under late feudalism and early merchant capitalism; and, finally, “4. The dialectic of colonialism, plantocratic slavery, and resistance from the sixteenth century forward, and the formations of industrial labor and labor reserves” (1983, 67). Racial capitalism is therefore entrenched not simply in the *political economy* of capitalism, although that obviously plays a central role, but given its long-standing, pre-modern roots in European society, Robinson argues that it is entrenched in the European *culture* that globalizes with racial capitalism.

Arrighi once explained that “In Africa it was easier to overcome many illusions; from there, we could see the centers of the world better” (quoted in [Deluguian, 2015, 454](#)). This entailed grasping a more properly global political economy—with its unequal relations of exchange, its countervailing territorial and capitalist logics of power, its cycles of boom and bust, and the cyclical rise (and eventual fall) of uniting hegemonic powers over the entire system—from the specific vantage point of peripheral countries in Africa. For Robinson, a similar Third Worldism guided his intellectual “return to the source” of Africa. And yet, Robinson’s journey would emphasize questions of culture to a greater extent than other world-systems thinkers,⁶ and it would place greater primacy on questions of resistance than on the structures of domination. Robinson followed the example of C.L.R. James in this regard:

“James took the labour theory of value and capitalist accumulation as both empirical observations and the sources of a moral imperative and bent his energies to discovering what the exploited could do and had done about their material degradation and spiritual humiliation...It was the dialectic between oppression and rebellion, the relations between exploiter and exploited, and not the scientific determination of mysterious commodity prices, which drew him to radical discourse...Consequently, James expended less energy on Marx’s *Capital* than on Hegel’s *Logic*, prioritizing the production of culture and meaning over the modes of commodity production” (Robinson, 1992: 49–50).

For Robinson, then, what is required in the face of racial capitalism is a greater plurality of radical traditions, especially those rooted in alternative ontologies and epistemologies, drawing from historically different—African and African diasporic—cultural foundations. Here, again, Robinson’s engagement with Africa proved foundational.

3. The search for a nonpolitical culture

“The political tends either to appropriate, efface or conceal the several alternative modalities of Pan-Africanism.”

Cedric Robinson, “In Search of a Pan-African Commonwealth”

Robinson’s study of Africa began early and drew heavily from the first-hand knowledge he garnered after taking a formative trip to the continent in 1962, during his senior year at Berkeley (interview with Elizabeth Robinson). As a member of a 291-person delegation of students from the United States, Mexico and Canada, he embarked on a trip to Africa under the auspices of Operation Crossroads Africa, organized by the Pan-Africanist Reverend James Robinson. In a newspaper article titled “How is it in So. Rhodesia?” penned upon his return from Africa and published in the Bay Area’s *The Sun-Reporter* just after his 22nd birthday, Robinson conveyed the urgency of the African struggle for self-determination he had witnessed while pointing to its diasporic resonance: “Will the UN understand the pleas of the tens of thousands of unemployed because they are not educated, uneducated because they are unemployed, both because they are black? What about the starvation, the malnutrition, the beatings, the humiliation? ...Africa understands, Asia understands, you and I and the millions of blacks in the U.S., Brazil, and the West Indies understand, not because we are black or brown, but because we have lived it and are living it now” (1962). Given this early formulation of a hitherto unnamed global racial capitalism and a correspondingly global Pan-African and Third Worldist resistance, it was no accident that he would once again turn to Africa in his first

⁶ More work can and should be done on the relationship between Robinson’s framework and that of world-systems scholars, particularly in the arena of culture and race. Important texts to draw upon in this vein include Amin’s study of *Eurocentrism* (1989), and Balibar and Wallerstein’s work on *Race, Nation, Class* (1988).

published monograph two decades later to uncover alternative conceptions of the political not rooted in Western notions of order, hierarchy and leadership.

Robinson began the dissertation that became his first book with the question of knowledge/power, which he framed as “The Terms of Order.” In this study, he was eager to uncover what was taken for granted in the unquestioned epistemological and ontological frameworks governing Political Science as a discipline and its indispensable notion of the political. As Elizabeth Robinson recounts, Cedric Robinson was recruited to Stanford to complete his PhD in Political Science. But he had not even begun coursework there when he announced his intentions to demolish the discipline: “when he was brought to Stanford for admission, two or three of the stars of political science were in the room, and they asked him what work he was going to do, and he said I’m going to destroy what you stand for.” Indeed, he did just that.

The unstated assumptions in the discipline of political science concerned the necessity for order, authority, and leadership as central attributes of the political. These seemingly ever-present and natural characteristics of political society Robinson sought to unmask as socially constructed and historically specific (also see Edwards, 2012). What is more, Robinson insisted that the very notion of leadership as embodying an exemplary figure, one who stands out and is to be understood as distinct or “deviant” (1980a: 49–54) from everyday people, was not a neutral concept but a fiction that saturated our modern notion of the political. As Erica Edwards notes in her preface to the recently re-released *The Terms of Order* (2016 [1980a]), “what seems an elemental desire for order, Robinson argues, is actually a function of ‘scientific’ knowledge that has proceeded through the discourses of evolution, revolution, incremental integration, and disintegration, all of which are evidence of science’s naturalization of order as the *raison d’être* for political authority and for leadership as the practical embodiment of that authority” (xi). Against this normalization of exceptional leadership and authority in the sphere of the political, Robinson sought to uncover a hidden, anarchistic tradition amongst subjugated peoples whose history had been willfully neglected. In his first book and in a number of subsequent early articles critically engaging the work of Senegalese author and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène (1980c) and the Africana studies scholar George Shepperson (1980b), Robinson would feel the need to shift the geography of reason by turning to the African continent, drawing on his extensive study and critique of African anthropology, historiography, literature and film.

If for Marx the political was a necessary evil—the achievement of political emancipation a mere required first step on the path to the ultimate goal of achieving human emancipation—for the Western anarchist tradition, the political and its corresponding attributes of authority and leadership could never constitute a part of a liberatory program. Western anarchism therefore presented a tremendously useful paradigm for Robinson’s search to undermine the taken-for-granted nature of authority that pervades the discipline of political science and all modern notions of the political. And yet, it also proved insufficient. Just as he would go on to argue in *Black Marxism*—in tandem with Moishe Postone (1995), whose work Robinson had the opportunity to engage when Postone delivered a lecture at Binghamton in 1975—that the relevance of Marx’s arguments should be understood within, and ultimately confined to, their 19th-century European context, so too should the anarchist tradition be understood contextually within a European geography and epistemology. The Western anarchist tradition was therefore a response to the rise of the modern nation-state and an attempt to negate it. As such, this negation, however useful to the liberatory tradition, was still intertwined dialectically with that which it was seeking to oppose. As Robinson explains: “The anarchists were reflex to an evil history which penetrated their own remarkable and macabre achievements. In their efforts, the state was countered by the dissolution of the state, centralization by decentralization, elitist intellectualism by pedestrian peasantism, force by reason, obedience by disobedience, familiar entropy by ordered familiarity. They had failed to free

themselves, to disengage meaningfully from the existential boundaries and force of their own experience” (1980a: 185).

As an alternative to this tradition of *anti*-political thought and praxis, Robinson sought out in the anthropological literature on Africa the possibility of *non*-political societies. He claimed to have found a useful example in the Ila-Tonga people of Zambia. The Ila-Tonga formed a complex set of communities with innumerable overlapping allegiances based on kin networks. These networks were doubly complicated by the Ila-Tonga’s simultaneous practicing of both virilocality and matrilineality. This created a continuous pattern of migration within the communities of individuals, households, and entire villages who were constantly seeking to fulfill their obligations to their multiple and often-overlapping kin networks. In synthesizing the anthropological literature, Robinson gestures towards the metaphysical basis for such a community order, which he calls “the principles of incompleteness” where a decolonized notion of mutual aid is uncovered: “By ingenious design, accident, experience, and whatever other processes and machinations are decisive to the evolution of a social mesh, the Tonga have come into possession of an understanding of human organization which gives little prominence to the familiars of public-private, autonomy-subject, secret-shared, interest-exclusion oppositions. Each element of Tonga consciousness embraces another to secure its ‘own’ vitality—a game of life of running, jumping, spinning for a thousand-headed, millipede beast whose members would each, if severed, be unfit to survive” (1980a: 196).

While space does not permit us to expand upon the metaphysics embedded in the community of the Ila-Tonga, for our purposes it should be noted that it is a wonderful example of what Robinson would in his next book call the black radical tradition: “a revolutionary consciousness that proceeded from the whole historical experience of Black people and not merely from the social formations of capitalist slavery or the relations of production of colonialism” (169). For the Ila-Tonga are interesting to Robinson because of their complex form of organization that has its roots not in the political (the state or the political party) or the economic (modes of production and their articulation, the cooperative requirements of factory labor), but in the realm of culture. As one of his central arguments in *Black Marxism*, Robinson claims that “the Black radical tradition cast doubt on the extent to which capitalism penetrated and re-formed social life and on its ability to create entirely new categories of human experience stripped bare of the historical consciousness embedded in *culture*” (170, my emphasis). The cultural roots of the black radical tradition had their origin in the African continent and were drawn upon by generations of maroons living in the African diaspora.

Robinson underscored that the black radical tradition was radically democratic, operating at a distance from the state and its corresponding statist notions of the political. In a 1999 interview with the Institute for Anarchist Studies, he summarizes a great deal of his work as follows: “I believe that the historical struggles in Africa and the New World culled some of the best virtues of their native cultures. One such virtue was democracy, the commitment to a social order in which no voice was greater than another (I wrote about some of the precedents for this regime in *The Terms of Order*)...This alternative to hierarchy also produced a critique of political order; and during the anti-slavery struggles, it achieved a rather sophisticated critique of the rule of law.” (1999a: 6) As HLT Quan puts it, “throughout his body of work, Robinson masterfully shows that in the shadow of these real and fictive narrations about the state are individuals and communities of people who render themselves unavailable for governing” (2013: 120–121). At its core, then, “the Robinsonian method is, thus, part of a necessary toolkit for breaking state addiction in order to do emancipatory social research and free social inquiries from capital’s and the state’s terms of order” (121).

4. The constituent elements of black radicalism

Robinson’s meditation on African societies thus opened a window for conceiving of a radical tradition *otherwise*. He would pursue his method

in an archaeological dig through the archives of black radical thought, focusing on those figures most emblematic of what he considered to be the essence of this tradition. In the early 1990s he penned a series of essays returning to the formative thinkers he had examined in *Black Marxism*: “Du Bois and Black Sovereignty: The Case of Liberia” (1990), “Oliver Cromwell Cox and the Historiography of the West” (1991), “C.L. R. James and the World-System” (1992), and “The Appropriation of Frantz Fanon” (1993). In these pieces we uncover Robinson’s wrestling match with four of the most important figures in this tradition. Foremost in Robinson’s mind is the relationship between Marxism on the one hand—as both a dissident framework to comprehend the world and as a philosophy of praxis guiding the liberation struggle—and the specificity of what he began to call the black radical tradition on the other hand.⁷ In these essays we get a sense of Robinson’s enduring concerns regarding the making of the actually existing black radical tradition and its intellectual discovery by dissident members of the primarily middle-class black intelligentsia. Reading these articles alongside *Black Marxism*, I glean four constituent elements of the Robinsonian black radical tradition: (1) identifying both black *antecedents* and *correctives* to radical white scholarship, (2) an unrelenting critique of the black middle-class and intelligentsia, (3) a rejection of the paradigm of sovereignty and state-based models of self-determination, and (4) a reappraisal of

⁷ The relationship between black radicalism and Marxism is a key theme that runs throughout all of Robinson’s work. Some might frame the two as incompatible, while others might frame them as complimentary but nonetheless distinct, while still others might see them as primarily overlapping but somewhat different traditions within the same broader current of radical thought and praxis. Reading the work of Robinson’s students, one quickly notes that some of them are much more comfortable working within *both* Marxism and black radicalism at the same time, while others view these traditions as in need of sharper distinction. While I tend toward the former approach, I do not take an explicit position on this question in this essay, where my aim has been to accurately portray the specificity of Robinson’s own ideas by linking them with his long-standing interest in Africa, and to do so without turning Robinson’s framework into a new form of dogma. The epigraph at the beginning of this article is intended as a window into Robinson’s generous formulation of the relationship between black radical thought and European radicalism. This quote represents merely one approach Robinson takes to this question among many others, and it could be argued that his own position changes slightly throughout his writing. What is more, and as I point out in the conclusion to this article, one might make the argument that Robinson’s most explicit claims about the relationship between the two traditions—Marxism and black radicalism—in the book *Black Marxism* at times exceed or even contradict his own evidence. The most general point I would make about the relationship between the two traditions is that they are overlapping and yet distinct, complimentary but at times in contradiction. I believe black radicalism emerges in part out of an informative, productive, fraught, and frustrating series of ongoing conversations with Marxism. Marxism, in turn, needs to be understood as an extremely heterogeneous tradition comprising both a theoretical framework for understanding the world and a practical mode of changing the world through specific organizations that claim to represent this tradition. And while it is important to remember that most Marxists around the world are people of color—thus rupturing the easy binary between a presumed European Marxism and a non-Marxist radical tradition for people of color—Robinson’s own use of Marxism refers primarily to the tradition as it was established by Marx himself within specifically European geographical, historical and conceptual constraints, to the tradition of Western Marxism that it gave birth to, and to the political praxis of the Communist Parties which tended to operate within a Eurocentric frame insofar as they first emerged within Europe, or were later under the sway of the centralizing and hierarchical force of the Comintern centered in Moscow. The Marxist “white radical tradition” referred to throughout this article does not necessarily include, and certainly should not discount, the important theorizing and practical political experiments of the many heterogeneous Marxist currents elaborated among people of color throughout the world, although it should be stated that many—but certainly not all—of those Marxists of color do indeed adopt the hegemonic Eurocentric current of Marxism, at the expense of black radicalism and other currents of struggle.

culture and spirituality as key attributes that the black radical tradition brings to an excessively secular and materialist white Marxism.

Black radicalism emerges from this discussion as a tradition of struggle that offers up non-sovereign dreams of freedom rooted in a metaphysics that places special emphasis upon culture and spirituality as the raw material of organization rather than its economically determined relation to the capitalist mode of production, and which furthermore both precedes and evolves coeval with, but “relatively autonomously” from, modern European Marxism and its various global progeny. Black radicalism comes to theoretical self-understanding in part as a result of a productive but incredibly fraught conversation with the white radical tradition that also offers correctives to European Marxism. And finally, black radicalism is a liberatory tradition that remains critically cognizant of the structural and contradictory role played by the middle-class black intelligentsia, many of whom betray their subaltern black subordinates, but some of whom manage to use their privileged positions to discover the actually existing black radical tradition through fidelity to the events of black revolt by way of extensive political praxis and historical-theoretical scholarship.

In making a claim about some of the *constituent* elements of Robinson’s black radicalism, one should be careful not to overly systematize an otherwise open-ended and beautifully eclectic tradition. The below list is therefore necessarily incomplete, variable, and always open to debate.⁸ Nonetheless, I believe that the four specific elements of Robinson’s black radicalism discussed below are central enough to his own framework that they warrant elaboration here, while simultaneously acknowledging their incompleteness as well as the ability of this tradition to evolve and adapt according to historical and geographical context.

i. Black antecedents and correctives to radical white scholarship

The Trinidadian intellectual Oliver Cromwell Cox authored a series of books from the late 1940s through the 1970s which, while roundly ignored by white scholars until much later, prefigured the world-systems school by shifting the unit of analysis from methodological nationalism to the world-system of global capitalism. Cox not only anticipated world-systems analysis by more than a decade, he also offered up revisions of their history of the world-system, insisting, as later world-systems scholars Andre Gunder Frank (1990) and Janet Abu-Lughod (1989) would argue, that it pre-dated the sixteenth century, that it did not mark a radical break with feudal society but instead built upon it, and that it was undergirded by a racial logic (Robinson, 1991: 11–16; McAuley, 2004).

Similarly, fellow Trinidadian C.L.R. James offered a most American account of the Western origins of fascism in his 1953 appraisal of Herman Melville, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*. As Robinson has it, “While Cox concentrated his efforts on the pre-modern beginnings of the capitalist system, James, eventually, turned his attention to its corruption into barbarism” immediately following the Second World War and the confrontation with fascism (1992: 52). James represented a crucial figure in twentieth-century Western Marxism, but was left out entirely from Perry Anderson’s seminal account of that tradition, *Considerations on Western Marxism*. James offers up a more culturalist reading of radical politics for Robinson, insisting that he learned more from his readings of 19th-century novelists Thackeray and Melville than he did from Marx. James reads the story of *Moby Dick* for insight into the limits of Stalinist (Ahab) and Trotskyist (Ishmael) models of political change, insisting that both fell into the trap of what Robinson would later call “the terms

⁸ For example, missing from my list of the constituent elements of Robinson’s black radicalism are the equally important principles of internationalism and the primacy of resistance. The constraints of space permit me to elaborate on only four elements in this article.

of order,” models of leadership that lacked faith in the self-activity of the rank-and-file working-class. Eventually breaking from Trotskyism in the 1940s and 1950s, James would go on to claim that “there is nothing more to organize” (Robinson, 1983: 283), a radically democratic doctrine intended to bypass the hierarchical model of political organization and change adopted by almost all political factions on the Left—the political party under the leadership of enlightened intellectuals. As such, both Cox and James *anticipate* later, more recognized currents in radical left thought (world-systems analysis, autonomist Marxism, cultural studies), while also *correcting* for the limits of these Western traditions through their own nuanced appreciation of black history and currents of black political struggle rooted in culture and self-organization.

ii. Critique of the black middle-class

But Robinson was not content merely to celebrate these important figures in the black radical intelligentsia. He was always keen to identify the structural conditions that were part and parcel of their making: their rooting in the middle-class institutions and world-views that facilitated their own education and offered them the opportunity to speak on behalf of those less fortunate. As such, Robinson’s biographical accounts of these thinkers usually emphasize the pained and winding manner in which they eventually stumbled upon the black radical tradition, only after engaging in frustrating encounters with the limits of white radicalism and after unlearning some of the central tenets of their own formal education. Two prominent examples of this are on display in Robinson’s critical accounts of Du Bois (1990) and Fanon (1993). In “Du Bois and Black Sovereignty: The Case of Liberia,” Robinson subjects Du Bois to a rigorous critique whereby the latter’s support for the authoritarian regime in Liberia demonstrates a commitment to black sovereignty that Robinson always found problematic. Here we learn that in order to curb the influence of his more working-class rival, Marcus Garvey of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (see Bledsoe and Wright, 2018), Du Bois collaborated not only with the state department, but with the Firestone family—maker of rubber tires and managers of the largest rubber plantation in the world in Liberia for most of the twentieth century. The collaborationist, elitist, capitalist Du Bois of the 1920s was markedly removed from the radically democratic Du Bois who authored *Black Reconstruction* in the mid-1930s. As Robinson has it,

“Du Bois’s encounters with Americo-Liberia in the 1920s and 1930s exposed a set of characterological weaknesses in his historical and social consciousness. These amounted to an envelope of petit-bourgeois nationalism—an ideology grounded in the presumption that the state occupied a unique, rationalizing position in human history. At the root of this ideological limit in Du Bois’s imagination was the class arrogance exhibited repeatedly by intellectuals of Du Bois’s class” (1990: 48–49).

Against these limits, Robinson would mobilize the writings of later, “more radical and more renegade representatives of the Black middle-class,” (Bledsoe and Wright, 2018) who saw through the limitations of their own positionality. Some of these iconic figures were even more steeped in the praxis of African liberation than Du Bois, despite his central involvement in the Pan-African Congresses. Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral both recognized the limits of statist models of revolution in the “pitfalls of national liberation,” called for “class suicide” among their own middle-class ranks of the “national bourgeoisie” in order to ensure continuity of struggle from below, and placed questions of culture at the center of decolonization. As Robinson puts it: “together, their works constitute the most comprehensive study and critique of the historical promise and political limitations of their class and the role of the state in the struggle for Black liberation” (49).

Nonetheless, Robinson would not exempt even Frantz Fanon from his critique of the black middle-class. In his 1993 article, “The appropriation

of Frantz Fanon,” Robinson makes a distinction between the 1952 Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks* and the 1961 Fanon of *Wretched of the Earth*, writing after having immersed himself for several years in the African anti-colonial struggle. For Robinson, “the Negro” Fanon dwells on in *Black Skin* is not a generalizable figure, but instead really concerns people like Fanon himself—middle-class black migrants from the periphery to the French metropole, aspiring to assimilation in white society but finding themselves confronted with racist exclusions at every turn. According to Robinson, Fanon does not yet understand the class basis of “the Negro” he psychoanalyzes in his early text. In contrast, in *Wretched*, Fanon specifies his description of this aspiring group as a ruling elite cut off from the experiences of everyday people. “The national bourgeoisie is not psychologically pathological, it is merely a class whose vocations are ambition, power and greed” (Robinson, 1993: 83–84). Robinson’s intervention in Fanon studies in the early 1990s was inspired by what he saw as the prevailing misreading of the great anti-colonial thinker, above all by Harvard scholars Henry Louis Gates and Homi Bhabha, both of whom Robinson accuses of conducting an “appropriation of Fanon.” Just like Fanon in the early 1950s, similarly aspiring middle-class academics of color had entered the halls of white institutions of higher learning in the 1970s and 1980s, and had become obsessed with *Black Skin, White Masks*, while neglecting the lessons of *Wretched*. They essentially understood their task as making palatable for white academia Fanon’s supposedly essentialist and excessively violent account of the anti-colonial struggle in *Wretched*. In sum, while Robinson understood Fanon as coming closer to reality by shifting his geography of reason from an academic perch in Europe to the anti-colonial struggles in Africa, these post-structuralist black and brown academics believed they would discover the truth by disavowing the anti-colonial African past and by moving from the Third World to elite academic institutions in the United States.

iii. Black radicalism as non-sovereignty

Perhaps the most central characteristic of the black radical tradition in Robinson’s account is that of non-sovereignty. It constitutes a disavowal of statist concepts of liberation, breaks from a reliance upon the law as the only mechanism for pursuing justice, and instead embraces the necessity for forms of marronage that flee established polities and embrace communities of mutual aid bound by non-political ties like those shared among the Ila-Tonga. Though statist projects have been a part of black struggles, both in anti-colonial Africa and in black nationalist currents in the diaspora, for Robinson these do not capture the essence of the black radical tradition and have revealed their obvious limitations in the neo-colonial relationships of contemporary global capitalism (Robinson, 1996). Bringing together the continental and diasporic visions of black freedom, Liberia—a settler colony in Africa comprised of returning New World Africans who imagined they would civilize and develop the Old World Africans who had never boarded slave ships—also embodies these contradictory tendencies within the black liberation tradition. For Robinson, the key mistake made by those members of the black middle-class invested in Liberia was to imagine a statist and developmentalist vision of freedom. Robinson draws close parallels between their discourse of uplift and that of 18th and 19th century European philosophers like Kant and Hegel, who claimed to have found in the state the perfect embodiment of human freedom: “Du Bois and many other prominent intellectuals drawn from the Black middle-class of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries recited from the same ideological catechism. With respect to Liberia, however, their most fundamental conceptual error was mistaking it for a nation-state” (1990: 41). Robinson here insists upon a vision of black radicalism as uncovering non-sovereign visions of freedom in our midst. Without this conception it is difficult to understand much of the radical theorization in black studies today, from Neil Roberts’s *Freedom as Marronage* (2015) to Saidiya Hartman’s “Fugitive Dreams” (2007: 211–236) and “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner” (2019:

229–256).

iv. The centrality of culture and spirituality

Pushing against the grain of the materialism dominant in Marxist circles, Robinson was keen to grapple with the persistence of an alternative idealist metaphysics that he repeatedly uncovers over the *longue durée* of black radicalism. As Robinson demonstrates in *Black Marxism*, Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* credited the autonomous political activity of the slaves beyond the control of any vanguard party—what he termed a spontaneous “general strike”—with having won the American civil war by mobilizing beyond traditional models of class consciousness within a fundamentally spiritual domain that he terms “The Coming of the Lord.” It was not merely by coming together to cooperate for capital in a factory—like Marx's European proletariat—that slaves were able to mobilize against their oppressors. Rather, it was by drawing upon a spiritual tradition stretching back to Africa in the form of slave music and folklore that enslaved people mustered the will to invent a new world. “The slaves had produced their own culture and their own consciousness by adapting the forms of the non-Black society to the conceptualizations derived from their own historical roots...This was the human experience from which the rebellion rose” (1983: 238). Similarly, Robinson focuses on C.L.R. James's fleeting argument in *The Black Jacobins* that in the story of the Haitian revolution, “voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy” (275). On the one hand, Robinson tells us that James was attempting to insert the revolting slaves of San Domingo into the dominant Marxian historiography of the revolutionary proletariat. On the other hand, James was forced to grapple with what was unique about this budding proletariat in the form of its African-derived metaphysics whose “ideological, psycho-social, cultural, and historical currencies were *more charismatic than political*” (169, my emphasis).

Black radicalism therefore corrected for the excessively dismissive tone in much of the white radical tradition when it came to questions of spirituality and culture. The Hegelian idealism that Marx had famously critiqued in favor of “empiricism, positivism and historicism” (Robinson, 2019, 18), needed to be contextualized once again within the confines of intra-European affairs, for the black radical tradition was nurtured and sustained only through its immaterial, spiritual and cultural resources. As Robinson summarizes the long history of the black radical tradition, “where rebellion was immediately impractical, the people prepared themselves through *obeah*, voodoo, Islam, and Black Christianity. Through these they induced charismatic expectations, socializing and hardening themselves and their young with beliefs, myths, and messianic visions that would allow them, someday, to attempt the impossible” (310). Africa was the source of this tradition, offering a malleable archive of spiritual practices and beliefs to be drawn upon by generations of descendants scattered throughout the African diaspora. But the Marxist account of the slave trade tended to view the captive cargo as mere commodities in the service of capital's imperative for accumulation, rather than complete spiritual beings.

“Marx had not realized fully that the cargoes of laborers also contained African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality. These were the actual terms of their humanity. These cargoes, then, did not consist of intellectual isolates or deculturated Blacks—men, women, and children separated from their previous universe. African labor brought the past with it, a past that had produced it and settled on it the first elements of consciousness and comprehension” (121–122)

5. Conclusion

Global conversations around anti-blackness have lurched to the foreground of academic debate in recent years, with Black European

Studies (Hawthorne, 2019, 2017; Smythe, 2018), Black Indian Ocean Studies (Hofmeyr, 2007), and Afro-Latin American Studies (Bledsoe, 2017) all highlighting the broad geographical sweep of racial regimes. Perhaps nowhere is the transnational reach of anti-blackness and black radicalism more salient today than in South Africa (Baderoon, 2018, Madlingozi, 2017, Msimang, 2018, Mbembe, 2015), where the afterlife of apartheid geographies defines even new regimes of black sovereignty. In South Africa today there is a pressing need to build on the rich traditions of struggle excavated by Robinson in order to elaborate new visions of black radicalism capable of eclipsing the mystification at the heart of its ruling ideology of “rainbow nationhood.”

In deploying a global perspective on the question of racial capitalism, Robinson was in line with leading African scholars like Mahmood Mamdani, who argued that apartheid in South Africa was not the exception but the model for British colonialism on the continent (1996). In contrast, the debate led by Harold Wolpe and Martin Legassick sought to explain why the centrality of racism to South African capitalism was supposedly *unique*. And while Mamdani's Pan-Africanist analysis pushed back against those readings of racism in South Africa which separated the white settler colony from the rest of the African continent, Robinson's more diasporic black radical theorization of racial capitalism sought simultaneously to link Africa to the African diaspora, and to carve out space for a black radical tradition that was in fraught conversation with the Marxist and anarchist white radical traditions. Despite some of Robinson's overt proclamations of the incompatibility between Marxism and black radicalism, he never quite resolves this tension, and it is usually only in the midst of the wrestling match itself that he and other seminal thinkers are able to produce a relatively autonomous theory of black radicalism. I believe it is for this reason that Robinson at times refers to black radicalism as either “the critique *or relocation* of socialist theory” (1983: 312, my emphasis).

Robinson's generalized approach to racial capitalism had the benefit of linking supposed anomalies like South Africa with a broader structure of capitalism. Even more importantly, it facilitated the linking of struggles against racial capitalism by identifying a continental and diasporic black radical tradition that was already connected in practice, as early 20th-century black South African activists formed alliances with Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and today build bridges with the landless movement in Brazil and the Anti-Eviction Campaign in Chicago (Roy, 2017, A4). As a framework, racial capitalism must therefore be coupled with Robinson's later concept of racial regimes (2007), a nuanced appropriation of Foucault's notion of truth regimes. Racial regimes should not be understood as unilateral structural determinants, then, but as conjuncturally specific and fluid formations that must constantly adapt in the face of an inextinguishable black radical tradition. As Robinson argued, “these histories of radicalism are neither determined nor dictated by the world-system” (1999a: 6).

Tiffany Willoughby-Herard rightly laments the fact that in the purportedly post-apartheid South African present, “becoming post-racial (i. e. not talking about blackness and politics—which are misconstrued as coterminous and synonymous linguistically) and leaving behind the generic memory of state and globally championed anti-black systematic violence and injury is the only remedy that institutions seem to have the will to enforce” (2013: 217). Against this romantic “non-racial” notion of the post-apartheid rainbow nation, Robinson's work all along underscored the mutual imbrication of the racial with capitalism. Unlike the orthodox Marxist platform of the South African Communist Party, which argued for a two-stage struggle—anti-apartheid national (read as anti-racist) struggle first, followed by a post-apartheid (read as post-racial) socialist struggle to overthrow capitalism second—Robinson's theorization of racial capitalism allows us to understand why an autonomous black radical tradition will necessarily persist into the present day in South Africa and beyond.

In his only visit to the country in 1999, Robinson delivered a lecture on “Truth and Racial Order in South Africa,” dissenting from the

country's celebrated regime of transitional justice that sought to move the country beyond the horrors of apartheid through collective healing by way of truth-telling. In his address, Robinson would return to old themes in his work, highlighting the persistence of racial capitalism in the post-apartheid present, the transnational constitution of racial regimes (Willoughby-Herard, 2015), and the need to align with historical and contemporary instantiations of the anarchistic, nonpolitical, and spiritual traditions embedded in black radicalism. Instead of moving the world beyond racism, Robinson was concerned that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission generated an image of South Africa finally having overcome the unique horrors of what was perceived as a nationally delimited racism (also see Farred, 2007). Reminding his South African audience of the global dimensions of racial capitalism, he argued that "racial orders are not national phenomena. Race discourse and practices do not comfortably reside within political boundaries or fit into convenient periodicity" (1999b: 7). As such, Robinson was concerned that "the true normalcy of the South African Apartheid regime in the present world order was displaced by the narratives of the local terror employed to police it" (Robinson, 1999b). Demanding a reactivation of the global black radical tradition in the post-apartheid present, he closed his remarks with the following statement: "No matter the quality of local genius, apartheid South Africa did not invent itself. It was an incubus in all those racial regimes that preceded it; from ancient Greece to the modern Americas" (10).

Robinson's *oeuvre*, while simultaneously neglected historically and gaining influence in the present, is of course only one formulation of a multiplicity of approaches to black studies, black geography, and the black radical tradition. If state racism has "broad national and global articulations—connections not impeded by racialized boundaries" (Gilmore, 2002: 261), then Robinson's triplets of racial capitalism, racial regimes, and the black radical tradition allow us to understand such forces in their simultaneous generality, specificity, and vulnerability. Geographers engaging black studies, its theories of racialization and its historical geographies of struggle would therefore benefit tremendously from a closer engagement with the entire body of Robinson's work. But they must keep in mind that there are a "plurality of black geographies" and black studies (Bledsoe and Wright, 2018). Robinson's work serves as just one entry point into the intersection of black studies and geographical thought. It opens up a variety of rich and vexed questions, such as the role of the state in freedom movements, the relationship between Marxism and black radicalism, and the competing primacy given to culture or political economy in studies of black life. But in order to critically assess the salience of his concepts, we must first understand what intellectual geographies produced them, the precise meaning Robinson intended for them, and the key interlocutors that informed his thinking along the way, all preliminary objectives tackled here. It is up to future scholars to carve their own paths by drawing on, extending, and critically engaging this rich tradition. As Elizabeth Robinson reminds us, Cedric Robinson wouldn't have wanted it any other way: "My read on all of this is that Cedric's work has been neglected for decades. All of it was incomplete by design. He wrote the way he did because, as with *Black Marxism*, he was writing for people who had no libraries. He was providing the sources for them" (interview with Elizabeth Robinson).

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