

# Blacks weather, Whites climate

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## Abstract

This essay explores the intersections of race, weather and climate. Earth science construes weather as the temperature and precipitation that impacts environments. Thinking about how this applies to bodies has come into vogue in trying to understand the disproportionate number of COVID-19 infections and deaths for Blacks and Latinx people. Arline Geronimus pioneered this in 1992 when she transposed the notion of “weathering” from its standard meaning of a process that decays wood onto the cumulative racism experienced by Black women resulting in excessive maternal death. Her “weathering hypothesis” tracks the assemblage of negative health outcomes for all African Americans caused by dangerous work environments and polluted neighborhoods. My essay shows how these embodied health effects are linked to larger histories of burning fossil fuels. We now know burning coal and oil transforms the climate by increasing the ratio of CO<sub>2</sub> molecules. We also know that this shifting climate determines specific weather outcomes. However, we don’t yet have a full picture of the racial dynamic undergirding this. As a corollary to weathering, this essay proposes a “climating hypothesis” to help expose the power that Euro-descendant whites have wielded for centuries to intervene in the earth’s climate.

## Keywords

capitalism, climate (change), COVID-19, health, race, whiteness and white supremacy

*I don't want to die and leave a few sad songs and a hump in the ground as my only monument. I want to leave a world that is liberated from trash, pollution, racism, nation-states, nation-state wars and armies.*

—George Jackson, 1970

## Part I: White skin, no masks

On May 5, 2020, I went to a far white protest in North Carolina’s capital of Raleigh organized by ReOpenNC, a group that challenges the restrictions on businesses and churches to

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control the spread of COVID-19. North Carolina is undergoing intensification of an already polarized political environment and these protests reflect that. Starting at the end of April, the regular Tuesday marches in Raleigh attracted between 2 and 600 protesters. As North Carolina is an open-carry state, some of the participants brought handguns.

For 15 years I have been writing and teaching about the 19th century origins of white supremacy, so I decided to check out the May 5th event. I and about 10 journalists and counter-protestors wore masks but only a handful of the 500 participants had bothered to don protective face coverings. When I asked why they weren't wearing masks, most refused to answer. Finally a woman in her 50s offered the neo-Confederate rationale "rebels don't wear masks." A man in his early 30s said simply, "COVID is for coons".

A few weeks later, on May 30th, I was at another protest in the exact same place in downtown Raleigh, this one against police brutality and for Black Lives. Among about a 1000 people, approximately half of them Black, I didn't see anyone without some form of protective face covering. After an hour of speeches, police closed in to disperse the peaceful crowd with batons and tear gas. Only then did I realize that, apart from Robocop-like darkened face shields and knee guards, most of them did not have face masks on.<sup>1</sup>

The differences in the two protests are stark. The diverse anti-racist group followed the recommendations of public health officials and their own politics emphasizing collective well-being by wearing masks to prevent infections. In contrast, the far (all) white group blithely disregarded the recommendations of public health officials and the well-being of those around them, claiming that mask mandates and forced quarantine for those exposed to the coronavirus unnecessarily inconvenience them and violate their personal freedom and civil liberties. Ironically, given the white claim that the coronavirus only infects Black, Audrey Whitlock, one of the two organizers of ReOpenNC, tested positive for COVID-19 in April. The *Raleigh News and Observer* reported on April 27 that although Whitlock insisted she had reluctantly skipped the regular Tuesday protest on April 21st, she appeared to have attended the first ReOpenNC protest on April 14th and vowed to attend the April 28th event, putting other white protesters at risk. The asymptomatic Whitlock denounced the orders mandating a two-week quarantine for everyone testing positive for COVID-19 and refused to acknowledge the fact that asymptomatic people can easily infect others. She complained that because she had almost no symptoms of the disease, she should be allowed to freely attend church services and the anti-government protests.<sup>2</sup>

A pandemic is an outbreak of a disease with global effects and, at the time of writing, that definition is being applied to COVID-19. But it's easy to see that identifying COVID-19 as the pandemic confuses cause and effect. In the situation above where far white protesters are putting other people in danger by refusing to physically distance; far white heads of state like Donald Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro refuse to wear protective face coverings; and, in the manner of Audrey Whitlock, white people rail against any governmental attempt that inconveniences them or curtails their boundless sense of freedom, it is more accurate to call whiteness the pandemic. In the manner of a highly infectious coronavirus, whiteness has caused death and destruction at a planetary scale. The old African American saw, "when white folks catch a cold, Black folks catch pneumonia," is turning out to be an understatement.

Whiteness emerged as a pandemic with planetary effects during the 16th century. The earth scientists Lewis and Maslin demonstrate conclusively that the global temperature

drop between 1550 and 1700, causing the Little Ice Age, resulted from the Spanish and Portuguese genocide of 90% of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.<sup>3</sup> While the Iberian terrorists butchered millions, most Native Americans died from the new diseases and microbes brought by the Europeans—the first mass exposure to whiteness. This extermination wiped out much of indigenous agriculture and infrastructure and resulted in an extensive forest regeneration, which sequestered so much carbon that atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels fell by six parts per million between 1520 and 1610; average temperatures dropped accordingly. As a direct result, colder and wetter weather in Europe reduced agricultural yields and increased heating costs, putting downward pressure on profits. This pushed European investors and militarists to intensify their conquest of the warmer tropical areas in the Americas, this time forcing African slaves to clear forests and work plantations from Brazil to Maryland.<sup>4</sup>

In 1992 Arline Geronimus proposed a “weathering hypothesis” to explain the negative health outcomes for Black mothers, especially when compared to their white age-mates.<sup>5</sup> Weathering usually refers to the breaking down of rocks and wood through exposure to the earth’s atmosphere. Geronimus chose the word to reference the cumulative (atmospheric) racism experienced by Black women in particular and African-Americans generally which she saw leading to conditions varying from maternal death to premature heart and lung disease. In a recent essay, Linda Villarosa deployed Geronimus’s weathering hypothesis to frame the preventable loss of Black life in and around New Orleans in March 2020.<sup>6</sup> Just as cell phones and social media make it harder to hide police brutality, the flagrant racial disparities in COVID-19 infection and death rates make it increasingly impossible to ignore the fact that Blacks weather. In other words, since the mid-16th century, Afro-descendants continue to bear the brunt of specific political ecologies, or shifting assemblages of the natural environment, racial capitalism and social politics.

Weather is construed by earth scientists as the combination of temperature, humidity, precipitation, clouds, and wind. We talk about changes in weather in the short term, and how it impacts us on a daily level. On the other hand, climate is the larger container for the weather of a place. With this we can expand on Lewis and Maslin’s thesis on 1610, that Europeans’ near genocide of the Indigenous people of the Americas caused a significant drop in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels. Consequently, we can move from that to underline the continuity with the explosion in carbon emissions from the proliferation in the UK and US of coal-powered technologies like Watt’s steam engine at the turn of the 19th century. And add to these the white US military industrial complex culminating with the Manhattan Project’s successful detonation of a nuclear weapon in July 1945. Even if readers accept only a part of this chain of causation we still need to confront the issue that Caucasians stand alone in creating the systems that have directly altered earth’s climate. It follows that when imperious whites like Spanish conquistadores, British industrial capitalists, and US nuclear physicists alter the climate, this will impact weather. But equally as important, white people’s direct manipulation of the climate “weathers” races and populations of people dealing with the fallout from what W. E. B. Du Bois called the “title to the universe claimed by White Folk”.<sup>7</sup> Since the Conquest of the Americas by European Catholics, people of color have been relentlessly weathered by climate-interfering white people. As the focus of this essay will be on Afro-descendant people, I will insist that Blacks weather, while Whites climate.

## Part II: Labor markets, capitalist masks

It's more accurate to say that, when we are talking about the US, Europe and most of Latin America, white capitalism climates. And like all iterations of capitalism, its markets work through the theft of a part of work, as Marx argued convincingly. However, this central critical insight that value in capitalism is based on social necessary labor time is frequently misunderstood. Marx's idea comes first from Adam Smith in his 1776 *Wealth of Nations*—building on his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments*—who tried to arrive at a fair price for commodities on the market, and then from David Ricardo. In Marx's synthesis, the value of any commodity is anchored to the average amount of labor-power that has gone into making it. Following Adam Smith's contention that any good's worth should be an accurate reflection of how much labor time goes into its production—the design, the materials, as well as the labor that went into producing these and assembling the final product—the value of labor-power is, ideally, similarly determined.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the value of labor indexes the total time and cost of materials required to keep the worker alive and to reproduce daily her capacity and readiness to go to work every day.

At this point, Marx breaks significantly with Smith and Ricardo. While all three stress the importance of labor in creating all the things needed and desired in a society, Marx singles out labor as the “special commodity” in capitalism. Why so special? From Smith he insists that the capitalist must begin with money, purchase commodities at their true cost, and ultimately sell his product at a fair price. Nevertheless, the capitalist must end up with more money than he started with. In *Capital Volume 1* Marx clarifies:

Our friend the money owner must be lucky enough to find within the sphere of circulation, on the market, a commodity whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is therefore itself an objectification of labour, hence a creation of value. The possessor of money does find such a special commodity on the market: the capacity for labour, in other words labour-power.<sup>9</sup>

Capitalist bosses buy an employee's ability to work in exchange for a wage. But the worker will routinely create more value during her shift than the sum total of the daily wages with which the capitalist purchases her labor power; ideally for the capitalists, much more. Marx tries to calculate this more through his notion of the rate of surplus, or the rate of exploitation.<sup>10</sup> In other words, exploitation in the capitalist versus labor relation is determined by the ratio of the total amount of unpaid (or surplus) labor done to the total amount of wages paid. Labor power is, indeed, a very special commodity but only for the capitalists who reap its advantages. Capitalist market apologists insist that this situation isn't coercive and that workers are free to choose the best situation for them.

Opposed to this fantasy (or mask) of freedom, theorists of racial capitalism like Cedric Robinson<sup>11</sup> and Ruth Wilson Gilmore<sup>12</sup> insist that markets are saturated with coercion and unfreedom from beginning to end. This coerciveness emerged first in the capitalist enclosures of the commons in the United Kingdom which occurred simultaneous with the Atlantic slave trade, what Marx depicted as the “turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of blackskins”.<sup>13</sup> Given this history of foreful dispossession and

racial terror, Cedric Robinson argues that in slave and post-slave societies like Brazil or the US the uneven power dynamic of the capitalist versus worker relation and the hierarchies of white supremacy overdetermines all market relations.

After considering a labor market shot through with racial discrimination, any aspect of “freedom” remaining for the worker of color evaporates upon entering the workplace. “The use of a commodity belongs to its purchaser,” explains Marx, “and the seller of labor-power, by giving his labor, does no more, in reality, than part with the use-value he has sold. From the instant he steps into the workshop, the use-value of his labor power . . . belongs to the capitalist.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, Marx makes clear that there is nothing free about the working day for laborers in capitalism. Of course, in many cases, workers maintain the legal right to terminate employment. But with many workers of color lacking the resources to refuse work, even temporarily, this supposed freedom to walk off a job is yet another mask hiding the structural unfreedom of labor markets in a capitalist regime. Indeed, COVID is for coons when workers of color are twice as likely as whites to be designated “essential workers,” and therefore stripped of the right to strike and walk off the job—if they ever had those rights to start off with.

Contemporary Smithians often respond to these kinds of critiques by insisting that capitalism is still relatively young and gradually getting more free. Many point to Smith’s notion of the “natural order of liberty” in the *Wealth of Nations* as correctly identifying a progressive tendency inherent in capitalism that will bring more and more freedom. This is the argument in, for example, Robert Sirico’s 1994 *A Moral Basis for Liberty* and the famous neoclassical economist Arthur Laffer’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of States*.<sup>15</sup> The Nobel Prize winning economist Gary Becker went so far as to posit that truly free markets will end racism.<sup>16</sup>

Again, Marx broke with (neo)Smithian orthodoxy when he insisted on the unfreedom of commodified labor. While racial capitalists go further than Marx in exposing capital’s reliance on racial discrimination, the early and late Marx tore off other masks of capitalist ideology. The most important of these was Smith’s historicist assumption of an increasing realm of freedom for societies that adopt liberal capitalism, something that neoSmithians have tried to elevate to a science. However, against this supposed “law” of increasing freedom in capitalism, Marx largely refused to impute deterministic “laws” to contingent historical processes. For instance, in the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* he showed that older, feudalistic elements continued to play a role in modern capitalism: unpaid apprenticeships; child labor; prison workhouses; etc. Different from capital’s progressive temporality guaranteeing more and more freedom, the early Marx showed how capitalism needs to be understood in its specific configuration, largely outside of any “general laws”. Even in *Capital Vol. 1*, Marx underlined the fact that the unfree labor of the poorhouse worked together with the “free” labor of the early proletariat British capitalism in the 1840 and 50s.<sup>17</sup> While Smithians and neoclassical economists dismiss these unfreedoms as “distortions” and “irregularities,” Marxists insist that they should be construed as perfectly compatible with capital accumulation.

More than anything, this unmasks the ways that capital is necessarily supplemented by the state and extra-economic violence. Marx states clearly that “the rising bourgeoisie needs the power of the state, and uses it to “regulate” wages, that is, to force them [workers] into

the limits suitable for making a profit, to lengthen the working day” etc.<sup>18</sup> While Marx refuses to construe the actual experience of wage-labor under market capitalism as anything approaching “freedom” he also shows how the force of the state is required by capitalists both to keep wages low and to lengthen the working day. But Marxists aren’t the only ones that see the extra-economic authority of the state as essential for capitalism to generate profit. John Maynard Keynes famously understood that the role of the state in capitalism is to stabilize the wage-labor system, to maintain the legitimacy of sovereign currency, and to mediate between the different and competing interests of particular capitalists.<sup>19</sup>

Different from Keynesians and Smithians, Marx underlined the complicated diachronic process involved in getting workers into asymmetrical relations with capitalists. When we look through Marx’s eyes at what he calls the “terrorism” necessary to create conditions so desperate for displaced peasant farmers that all they have left to sell is their labor power, the relation between capital and labor in the workplace seems relatively inconsequential. Elaborating on the centuries-long process of privatizing church lands and enclosing the commons, Marx scathingly characterizes new proletarians as terrified and traumatized when they finally arrive at the factory door desperate to sell their labor-power: “Thus were the agricultural folk first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded, and tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws into accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage-labor.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, both the longer historical process birthing a new species of humans—the proletariat—having no means of survival other than to beg for wage labor, and the actual conditions of wage labor where the capitalist bosses rule over proletariat in the workplace, unmask the ideology of “freedom” in market capitalism.

### **Part III. Colored skin, no (money for PPE) masks**

Since the end of the Civil War, prisoners in US correctional facilities have worked for no or extremely low wages. The types of labor ranged from laying railroads and mining coal at the end of the 19th century, to building and maintaining highways in the first half of the 20th century. With the shift to mass incarceration beginning in the 1980s, work in prison has diversified and now includes making everything from computer parts to Victoria’s Secret lingerie. As the United States attempts to control the transmission of COVID-19, more than a dozen states are now relying on prison labor to make personal protective equipment (PPE) desperately needed by health care workers and other front-line responders.<sup>21</sup>

Thanks to activists and scholars working on mass incarceration we know that US citizens convicted of a felony are stripped of many of their rights. This means that many prisoners live and work in conditions bordering on slavery. What is most troublesome during the COVID pandemic is that prisoners in federal and most state prisons (Vermont and Hawai’i are exceptions) are excluded from the U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Administration protections that require employers to provide a safe working environment.

One of the only ways to get information about inmates suffering serious injuries and even death doing prison labor is through Freedom of Information requests. Linda Delp, the director of the University of California Los Angeles’s Labor Occupational Safety and

Health program, did just this in 2015. As covered by *The Intercept*, Delp and her team found that injuries in California prisons such as those leading to amputations were easily avoidable: “I did not really see anything in here that wouldn’t have been preventable,” Delp claimed.<sup>22</sup> This critique of California prison laborers doesn’t include the frontline firefighters who get paid one dollar an hour to do the most dangerous work in California, as the fire season has become longer and more intense in the last few years—this season is the worst on record and had extended to Oregon and Washington states.

Previous iterations of prison labor contributed even more directly to the Blacks weather, Whites climate calculus. The convict leasing of Black men after the Civil War in Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee was deployed in extractive industries like coal and steel, and in building railroads for coal-powered trains. Before and after World War I convict labor was also important in laying down the nascent infrastructure for automobiles, allowing a shift from coal to oil. In these two instances, Black captives degraded atmospheric conditions through the labor commands issued by climating white masters. In other words, captive Black labor in the US from 1865 until 1929 made a crucial contribution to the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the earth’s atmosphere, kicking off the beginning of rising temperatures and climate breakdown. Obviously, this Black (labor) power deepened the weathering conditions for all Afro-descendant people.

Arguably the most intimate linking of Blacks weather, Whites climate is in African-American inmates working for the fossil fuel industry and its subsidiaries. The US is the second highest exporter of plastic waste in the world (just behind China) and the massive amounts of US municipal plastic waste is devastating poor countries in Africa and Central America. And here at home, the plastics industry has been a leader in the use of prison labor.<sup>23</sup> This clear relation between profits for white (and Asian) investors based on the super-exploitation of its labor force and its dumping of “externalities” in majority Black, Brown and indigenous countries highlights the fact that some of the most profitable industries in racialized capitalism are the most destructive to our natural environment and the most predatory on people of color.

Nowhere is this more the case than when Black prisoners work for fossil fuel companies. In Louisiana, which has the largest concentration of workers in extractive industries, prison laborers routinely work for less than one dollar an hour for white capitalists climating by their ownership of oil and gas companies.<sup>24</sup> When Black inmates do this across the Deep South they are fueling ecological breakdown in places most vulnerable to its effects.

In Louisiana’s Lafourche Parish Work facility, on the Gulf Coast west of New Orleans, male prisoners, 80% of whom are African American, are loaded into vans at 4 a.m. and taken to places chosen by the facility operators, to toil for anywhere between 12- and 16-hour workdays. These are usually equipment leasing companies renting pumps, vacuums and generators to the large number of refineries and drilling operations nearby. These businesses—all white owned—pay the Lafourche Parish and the state of Louisiana a total of \$9 an hour for the right to the inmates’ labor power, while making a handsome profit for themselves on work that is often waged at \$25 and \$30 dollars an hour for non-prison labor.<sup>25</sup> Ten years ago, almost all Lafourche Parish (together with neighboring Terrebonne Parish) prison labor worked for fifty cents an hour cleaning up oil and toxic chemical dispersants from Gulf Coast beaches following the BP Oil Spill.<sup>26</sup> Predictably,

no protective equipment was provided to inmates to defend them from the toxic fumes emanating from the dispersants. While BP paid for much of this (at a huge cost savings), some was paid for by the state of Louisiana—one more example of fossil fuel capitalists dumping the “externality” costs of its operations onto the public.

So, whether it is Black inmates exacerbating their own environments by directly deepening the ecological crisis elicited by white racial capitalism—as in Louisiana prison labor working for oil companies in the Gulf Coast—or indirectly through completely unremunerated storm mitigation work, the binary of Blacks weather, Whites climate is consolidated. And whether it is face masks preventing the transmission of the coronavirus, or protective plastic shields blocking the inhalation of toxic fumes, for Black and other minority prison laborers the hegemonic position is Colored Skin, No (PPE) Masks.

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### Notes

1. Probably due to the emphasis on self-and community-care in BLM more generally, almost no coronavirus cases have been linked to protests of police violence anywhere in the US; see Black Lives Matter (2020).
2. <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article242317346.html>
3. Lewis and Maslin (2018).
4. Moore (2020).
5. Geronimus (1992).
6. Villarosa (2020).
7. Du Bois (1920), 31.
8. Marx (1969).
9. Marx (1977), 270.
10. Marx (1977), 320–321.
11. Robinson (2000).
12. Gilmore (2020).
13. Marx (1977), 915.
14. Marx (1977), 290.
15. Laffer et al. (2014).
16. Becker (1971).
17. Marx (1977), 822–825.
18. Marx (1977), 899.
19. Keynes (1971).
20. Marx (1977), 899.
21. Eisen and Seabrooks (2020).
22. Woodman (2016).
23. Fernández-Campbell (2018).
24. Berlin (2020).
25. Wolfe and Liu (2020).
26. Young (2010).



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