FORUM

The triple-sidedness of “I can’t breathe” The COVID-19 pandemic, enslavement, and agro-industrial capitalism

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On Juneteenth,¹ Friday, June 19, 2020, unionized workers of the Durham Workers Assembly of Durham, North Carolina, held a rally in front of Durham Police Headquarters to “defund the police” in support of the national Black Lives Matter movement protesting in massive numbers in the streets of US cities and being met with overwhelming police repression. Black Lives Matter marches in the streets of cities and towns of the United States continued, as the world looked on.

Circulars for the rally bore the following message: “Workers in the US are currently facing two tragic pandemics. The first is the plight of essential workers, going to work every day to risk their lives amidst COVID-19, which has now resulted in the tragic deaths of over 100,000 people. The second is the reality of racism and police violence. Both disproportionately impact black workers.” Elsewhere the circular stated, “Exposed by the virus—‘Essentially’ Involuntary Servitude,” and went on to state that “Tens of millions of workers find themselves in a condition of involuntary servitude, no effective voice in their conditions of work, their health or the security of their livelihood.”

Is the idea that workers, especially black workers, are facing two pandemics of racialized capitalism and of COVID-19 only a figure of speech, or is it more than rhetoric?

I see a profoundly intuited reality referenced here and one also theorized in concepts like racial capitalism and carceral capitalism by scholars writing in the Black radical and allied traditions that are avowedly antiracist, anti-capitalist, feminist, and (prison) abolitionist.² There is an historical relationship—the reality of imperialism, racism and the expansion of global capitalism—that animates the relationship between these two pandemics. Each pandemic has a distinct logic intertwined with the other made evident in the political economy of global capitalism, particularly agro-industrial capitalism and its connections to slavery—to “involuntary servitude.” The history of globalized agro-industrial capitalism ties together not only viruses with people and industrially produced animals but also sets the terms for both capitalism’s “normal” exploitation of wage labor of some workers and its extraordinary expropriation of the labor, lives, and property of other working people across the planet—whether urban African American in the United States, Eastern European contract workers in Germany, North African farm laborers in Spain, ex-farmers forming the “floating population” of urban China, the Roma of Hungary, or the indigenous migrants to the South American megacities, to name some who are well known.

FIGURE 1. Protesters march from headquarters of Durham Police to Durham County Jail, North Carolina. Photo credit: Jordan Wilkie/Carolina Public Press.

The insurgency of Black Lives Matter during the months of May–June 2020 has been widely theorized by its leaders/organic intellectuals such as Patrisse Khan-Cullers (Khan-Cullers and Bandle 2017) and others.³ It also has its own dynamics situated within the politics, economics, and ecologies of settler colonialism in North America, as this article seeks to demonstrate. That said, the wide turnout of protests inspired by Black Lives Matter in the streets of European cities and towns (e.g., London, Paris, Berlin, Stockholm, Milan, Kraków, Dublin, Manchester) demonstrates that the European left has strongly shown its ongoing antiracist solidarity with African American struggles and is seeking to come to terms with Europe’s own troubled imperial history of enslavements and challenging its current neo-nationalist or fascist resurgence under declining neoliberal capital-

ism (Kalb 2020). Future initiatives of both solidarity with Black Lives Matter and critique of US transnational capitalism can be predicted to come out of these engagements by the European left. Thus, it is particularly appropriate now to provoke these by turning attention toward the specific connections between the “peculiar institution” of US slavery, the global pandemic, and the Black Lives Matter movement and what animates it.

These connections are nested within the history of modern agro-industrial capitalism.

A helluva virus to run into on a dark night of time-space compressed life

Let’s start with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the agent of the COVID-19 disease pandemic, and

its origins. Let's start there because although its antecedent causes and conditions in agrarian capitalism are almost two centuries in the making, the pandemic represents the recent but extremely rapid emergence arising from a dialectical process that has evolved as the virus reproduces itself in increasing numbers of "cases" of human-to-human transmission, illness, and the fork of eventual recovery or "mortality." As of this writing, worldwide there are more than 18 million cases of COVID-19 and 700,000 deaths. In the United States, 5.8 million cases and 178,000 deaths have been recorded.

As the viral basis for a pandemic goes, SARS-CoV-2 is proving to be a major global bummer—as is becoming increasingly evident on a tragic daily basis to large numbers of people.⁴ The virus itself is highly virulent with the current Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate of a cumulative infection rate of 0.7 percent of the US population, with a 7.1 percent mortality rate for those infected with the virus. There are much higher mortality rates for infected persons experiencing certain "underlying conditions" (that is, being older than age 65, having preexisting chronic illnesses) (CDC.gov), and it should be added, being poor and/or economically and socially/racially marginalized. Such "underlying conditions" are particularly severe in the densely crowded slums of the megacities of the underdeveloped world in Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere (Davis and Abdel Kaddous 2020: 3).

The SARS-Cov-2 virus travels quickly through and by way of its mobile human hosts, is highly communicable, and has a high reproduction number (3.11), meaning on average it infects three people from exposure to a single infected person. COVID-19 disease has a two-week incubation period before symptoms necessarily manifest but is highly communicable to others during this period; studies estimate that between 30 percent and 60 percent of the people infected by the virus have received it from asymptomatic carriers (Apuzzo et al. 2020: 3, 13).⁵ That makes the classic epidemiological

measures of testing those with symptoms, tracing the people they have been in contact with, and quarantining them largely a non-starter prophylactically since "the bug ... has long left the barn, quite literally." A vaccine will be a long way from being widely available anytime soon—optimistically sometime in mid-to-late 2021. Major variants of it can be predicted to emerge annually, which means that any vaccine will have to respond to these new variants of it much as it does to the "seasonal flu." So signs are that SARS-CoV-2 is going to be with us for some time.

How then is the pandemic of the COVID-19 disease connected to the contemporary era of global capitalism?

What we need to understand about the emergence of COVID-19 is that medical ecologists are now convinced that the pandemic has occurred due to the expansion of intensive industrial production of genetically mono-cropped livestock and the meat commodities derived from it. As the evolutionary biologist and phylogeographer Rob Wallace and his colleagues observe, "By its global expansion alone commodity agriculture serves as both propulsion for and nexus through which pathogens of diverse origins migrate from the most remote reservoirs to the most international of population centers. It is here, and along the way, where novel pathogens infiltrate agriculture's gated communities. The lengthier the associated supply chains and the greater the extent of adjunct deforestation, the more diverse (and exotic) the zoonotic pathogens that enter the food chain" (Wallace et al. 2020: 5).

Nor is this a new phenomenon. Some of the most deadly and virulent diseases of the last several decades have been caused by "recent emergent and reemergent farm and foodborne pathogens" such as the SARS 2003 influenza virus, Ebola, H1N1 "swine flu," E. Coli O157:H7, hepatitis E, Salmonella, and several others (Wallace et al. 2020).

Wallace et al. go on to observe, "the entirety of the [industrialized food animal] production

line is organized around practices that accelerate the evolution of pathogen virulence and subsequent transmission” (2020: 5). The most economically valued and profitable characteristics of agro-industrial meat production also work in favor of disseminating the SARS-CoV-2 virus efficiently and widely throughout animal and human populations. Growing genetic animal monocultures accelerate the evolution of pathogens. Dense concentrations of animals depress immune response and facilitate greater transmission and recurrent infections. The high “throughput” speed of industrial production provides a continuously renewed supply of susceptible animals. The slaughtering of younger livestock selects for pathogens able to survive more robust immune systems (Wallace et al. 2020). The long distance trade and transport of industrial meat animals, even over thousands of miles⁶ (Daragahi 2018) allows more opportunities for the intermixing (reassortment) of viral RNA segments to occur and for new pathogens to emerge (Daragahi 2018).

To make these observations is to say that the SARS-CoV-2 virus in its Pilgrim’s Progress through the human biome is intimately connected to the dialectics of expansion and reproduction of global agro-industrialism itself.

Enslavement, the mathematics of the lash, and the advent of plantation ecologies

Before investigating the pandemic of the coronavirus and its connection to industrial agriculture, let’s look at the emergence of its intertwined twin—the pandemic of racial capitalism in North America. There is a clear relationship between the emergence of slave-based plantation agriculture and the evolution of full-blown agro-industrial capitalism. While many readers will be familiar with the history of antebellum plantation cotton production in North America, the close connections between fully rationalized capitalist plantation production and slavery have only recently become clear.⁷

Recent historical research on the North American southern plantation economies shows just how advanced rationalized capitalist production under the conditions of slavery was (Baptist 2014; Johnson 2013). The cotton selected for cultivation in the Mississippi delta slave-based plantations was a uniform specific variant called Petit Gulf, selected for its “pickability.” Beyond its monocropping ecology, “many of agribusinesses’ key innovations, in both technology and organization, originated in slavery” (Wallace 2016: 261). Slaveholders measured land only against the capacity of slave labor to transform it, setting the cotton production line in terms of “bales per hand,” with enslaved African men being “hands,” nursing mothers “half hands,” and children “quarter hands” (Wallace 2016: 262, quoting Johnson 2013). “Measuring crops and slaves ‘to the hand’ was an ecological as well as an economic measure—an attempt to regulate the exchange between slaves and soil by prescribing benchmark measures for the process by which human capacity and earthly fertility were metabolized into capital” (Johnson 2013: 154). The labor process of picking cotton was one measured and held to a standard by another unit of measurement—the “lash.”

“Enslavers used measurement to calibrate torture in order to force cotton pickers to increase their own productivity and thus push through the picking bottleneck” (Baptist 2014: 130). As Baptist (2014: 112) points out, “on the nineteenth century cotton frontier . . . enslavers extracted more production from each enslaved person every year. The source of this ever-rising productivity wasn’t a machine like the ones that were crucial to the textile mills. In fact you could say that the business end of the new cotton technology was a whip.” With the picking of cotton by the slave paced to the rhythm of the cotton gin, plantation owners and overseers developed a refined rationality based on the application of the whip measured out in lashes to the back of a slave calculated relative to their infraction—how many pounds of cotton his basket fell short of making a bale, whether

or not there were impurities in it, whether one slave helped another pick her quota—in which case the former received extra lashes. One day in 1825, Israel Campbell, a newly purchased slave in Mississippi went through his first day of picking and found that he could only pick 90 pounds of cotton between sunrise and sunset. Belfer the planter informed Israel that “his daily minimum was 100 pounds—and on this day he would ‘have as many lashes as there were pounds short’ in the ‘draft of cotton’ recorded beside the name ‘Israel’ on the Irish-born overseer’s slate.” And that evening, Belfer called out Israel saying, ‘I will settle with you now,’ and proceeded to whip him with ten lashes (Baptist 2014: 131–132). Enslavers organized the space of the cotton row to maximize both the labor of the slave and the cotton picked—one cotton planter in Tennessee wrote, “A good part of our rows are 550 yards”—a length down which stragglers could easily be identified by the overseer and made example of by being whipped in front of other slaves (Baptist 2014: 118). Under the circumstances, the rationality of increased “labor productivity” so vaunted by neoliberal economists depended straightforwardly on graduated torture—with little contribution (the cotton gin aside) made from “technological innovation.” It is no surprise that the amount of cotton on average extracted from each slave increased year-over-year from 1800 through 1840 (Baptist 2014: 112).

This assemblage of profitable techniques based in systematic sadism and hyper-exploitation also simplified and transformed the ecologies of the low lands of the southeastern and mid-southern United States, deeply implicated imperial, that is, British finance capital, and was backstopped by state dispossession and extermination of the resident American Indian population in the early to mid-nineteenth century.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 under Andrew Jackson culminated the violent displacement of Indian nations from their territories during the previous decade with their forced removal and elimination from the “new lands” of

the Mississippi Gulf region, which were transformed into thousands of acres ready for slave-based production (Baptist 2014: 228–229).

Cotton monoculture quickly exhausted the rich soils of their original fertility in the plantation South and exposed the crops to invasive rust, rot, and worms. Slaves plowing rows of cotton aligned to the day’s sunlight due to the planters’ attempts to maximize yield, irrespective of the pitch of the fields, eroded the land and exhausted aquifers within 10 to 15 years after its clearing (Wallace 2016: 266). Plantation managers were more obsessed with expanding the volume of cotton and increasing their slave populations than allowing food crops that could be grown locally to feed the enslaved population. This also turned the deprivation of food for the enslaved into another form of labor discipline (Wallace 2016: 264).

As a result of the lack of food self-sufficiency and the seasonality of cotton harvests, indebtedness by plantation owners to Northern financiers and cotton brokers became increasingly common, to the point that some planters began to refer to themselves, without irony, as “slaves” to the financiers. By the 1830s, owners of the new cotton plantations of Mississippi, Alabama, and Eastern Louisiana had adopted scaled-up forms of finance and indebtedness, when the Consolidated Association of Planters of Louisiana was established to allow their members to mortgage their slaves as collateral for loans from international financiers, led by the Baring Brothers and the Bank of England, which pooled investments from Europe’s finest old and new upper classes to buy the lucrative bonds issued by the Association (Baptist 2014: 245–248).

Monocropping of plants and animals, the simplification and degradation of local and regional ecologies, rapid expansion of supply and trade logistics over space, a heavy reliance on finance capital for debt to expand and maintain production, the separation of animals and labor force from the growing of their food sources (imported from outside the region), and the use of enslaved and degraded labor—these design

features of agro-industrial capitalism have remained in effect to the present.

Origin of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and the contemporary agro-industrial production of meat

Briefly summarized: according to medical geneticists and epidemiological geographers, sometime in late 2019, the SARS-Cov-2 virus emerged from its nonhuman host, a wild species of the horseshoe bat *Rhinolophus* that is prevalent in the forests of highland southern China and Southeast Asia, to infect industrial animals and human beings in Yunnan province, southwestern China (Andersen et al. 2020; Gorman 2020; Morens et al. 2020; Wallace et al. 2020). Genetic comparisons between the different SARS viruses endemic in this species of wild bat and the SARS-Cov-2 virus suggest that the habitat of these bats was probably either the Shitou cave outside of Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, or caves in Mojiang County in southern Yunnan, where the famous Pu’er tea is grown (Qiu 2020: 29–31). The family of SARS coronaviruses has a history of millions of years of co-evolution with this bat species in the region (Gorman 2020; Wallace et al. 2020).

Deforestation in this region of southern Yunnan province combined with the nearby industrial production of swine or the rearing and hunting of wild pangolins as “bushmeat”⁸ appears to have led to contact between the bats and one of these animal species and the transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus through the bats’ droppings or blood infecting the animals (Wallace et al. 2020). Genetic evidence suggests the pangolins as carriers (Andersen et al. 2020; Qiu 2020: 31), with domestic hogs as another possibility (Wallace 2020: 8). Intentional forest fires and deforestation in Yunnan have been extensive as the province’s population has rapidly increased.⁹ First has come logging, then shifts in land use from strip-logged landscapes to intensive agriculture and urban development.

New settlements with houses, fruit orchards, hog and poultry farms, and rubber plantations that impinge on the habitat of *Rhinolophus* have in rapid succession appeared within these disrupted mountain ecologies.¹⁰ One third of the households in these highland areas have insufficient food for at least seasonally one third of the year and often hunt wild animals to eat or sell (Jabr 2020). Ecological disturbance associated with deforestation in southern Yunnan in connection with the construction of the planned Trans-Asian Railway lines that run from Kunming southward toward northern Laos and northeastern Myanmar—part of the neo-imperial fantasy of Xi Jinping’s “One Belt, One Road” to economically integrate China with greater Southeast Asia (He 2017)—may also be implicated.

Deforestation and incursions by human settlement and industrial animal production cross over the highlands’ previous barriers between wild bats and SARS viruses, on one side, and industrial animals and humans, on the other—spatial and ecological barriers where forests’ ecological complexity “keeps deadly pathogens from lining up hosts for a straight shot onto the world travel network” (Wallace et al. 2020: 8). Once grown or captured, these infected pangolins or hogs were transported in trucks from where they were collected, over hundreds of miles from their source in southern Yunnan northward to the Huanan Wet Market of Wuhan, a city of 11 million people and capital of Hubei province in south-central China. Either in the course of transport to Wuhan or once present in these animals captive in its wet market, the virus successfully passed to humans. From Wuhan in December 2019, within four to six weeks, the virus had spread through transmission to other humans via high-speed train and air travel from the infected human population of Wuhan to elsewhere in China, Eurasia, and the Asia-Pacific and was on its way to the rest of the planet by mid-to-late January 2020. Broadly speaking, we know what occurred thereafter in terms of its transmission and dissemination around the

world and its manifestation as the COVID-19 disease pandemic.

Twentieth-century transformations in agro-industrial capitalism and the neo-slavery of African Americans in the United States

The history of agro-industrial food capitalism since the American Civil War can only very briefly be summarized—as well as the separation of African Americans from the southern plantation economy under conditions of twentieth-century outmigration and urbanization. By the Great Depression of the 1930s, the post-plantation complex of impoverished, indebted, and ecologically depleting cotton sharecropping gave way to the rise of industrialized poultry production, as white men appropriated the previous small-scale domestic growing of “fryers” by white women and African Americans. They capitalized, systematized, and scaled-up the production of “broilers” and became “hatchery men,” feed mill owners, and poultry growers, and eventually they created a new industry (Gisolfi 2006; Striffler 2005).

Subsequent developments in this pioneering mode of agro-industrial meat production from the 1940s onward have taken place within the path-dependent circuits of capital accumulation of the industry. These include the vertical integration of all steps of production—from hatchery and feed production/supply to “growing out” of poultry from chicks to harvested young adults and slaughtering of the animals (Heffernan and Constance 1994; Striffler 2005). There have been corresponding transitions to and intensifications of the industrial production of swine and beef meat industries, coextensive with the rise of transnational markets for huge quantities of industrially produced soybeans and corn grown elsewhere and transported to Concentrated Animal Feedlot Operations (CAFOs) for use as animal feedstuffs (Patel 2012: 192–194, 304; Schneider 2017: 90–93). Slaughterhouse technologies have been redesigned to

increase assembly line tempos (Schlosser 2012 [2001]). By the 1950s, there was an incorporation of meat eating as an almost universal practice within the diets of the US population (Schlosser 2012 [2001])—an advertisement for US “prosperity” combined with Cold War triumphalist braggadocio with respect to the USSR. Finally, since the 1980s, there has been the transnational expansion of agro-industrial meat production in all its stages to the newly industrialized BRIC economies, where meat is increasingly consumed as a status marker by upwardly mobile members of the new capitalist and professional classes. Such transnational expansion has been made possible by the lubrication of capital provided by hedge funds and investment banks, such as Goldman Sachs’ deal-making and investment in the sale of Smithfield Foods to Shuanghui in China (Wallace et al. 2020).¹¹

Subjugated and coerced labor forces have anchored and offered up surplus value to agro-industrial cotton and meat production since the end of legal slavery. First, there were indebted African American sharecroppers often pressed by local police into cotton harvesting of white landlords’ crops during the Jim Crow period. Later, as part of vertical integration, white small-scale farmers specializing in the grow-out phases for young poultry and hogs came to be recruited by the industries. However, they were so indebted to banks to finance their grow-out sheds that they were little more than proletarianized rural laborers and, of course, suffered physically from the ammonia and bacteria emitted from animals’ excrement deposited on their land. Since the 1960s, rural poor African Americans, especially women, have worked in the meat processing plants of the Midwest, Mississippi delta, and Carolinas regions experiencing intensified exploitation, sexual harassment, and brutalized and unsafe working conditions.¹² By the 1990s, they were joined by immigrant Mexican and Central American workers (Nonini 2003; Striffler 2005; Stuesse 2016), with whom white plant managers set them in competition or even forced them out once they began to assert their

legal rights against wage and labor discrimination under Civil Rights laws (Sider 2006).

The Great Migration of six million African Americans from 1915 to 1970 from the South to cities in the northern and midwestern United States arose in large part as flight from cotton sharecropping’s stoop labor and from re-legalized enslavement at the hands of Jim Crow whites—in the form of black criminalization, lynchings, and burnings and lootings of “black towns” and murders of their residents in the South.

Migration to the Midwest and Northeast placed large numbers of blacks at the factory doors of the Fordist industries of the North, even while black women sought alternative employment as domestic workers in the homes of affluent white families. Almost always relegated to the secondary labor markets of the industrial North and Midwest due to discrimination by white industrial labor unions (Cowie 2010: 236–244; Foner 2017 [1974]), nonetheless a significant number of black industrial workers in the 1950s to 1970s experienced a period of brief prosperity, particularly in industrial areas such as Detroit and Chicago.¹³

Since the 1990s, with the advent of NAFTA and the WTO, large numbers of black industrial workers in the North and Midwest have, like their white counterparts, been thrown out of work by the globalization of industrial production, with its new links to production value and supply chains to Mexico and East Asia. The only large-scale exception has been the neo-slavery of hyper-sweated meat processing and related food industrial labor.

“Broken windows” and the expropriation of Black lives: Tales from the frontiers of urban finance-rentier capital

The grown children and grandchildren of these laid-off black industrial workers, with more recent Latinx immigrant workers, now form both the hyper-exploited workers in the food industries (meat processing, fast foods, farm work)

and most exploited sectors of healthcare (e.g., in nursing homes) situated in the cities and small towns of the South, Midwest, and the Northeast, and those who are chronically unemployed and underemployed, doubly discriminated against due to poverty (forcing them to leave school before high school graduation), and their race. Those African Americans who have more or less steady employment also show disproportionate levels of consumer debt—from credit cards, student loans, and medically related debt (Aspen Institute 2018; Wang 2018: 128–131). Whether steadily employed or no, a key insight is that by and large both groups are the same population of urban African Americans—and it was this fact that the Juneteenth circular of the Durham Workers Assembly pointed to.

The population of urban African Americans who constitute the most disposable elements of a heterogeneous US working class have had the profound misfortune of living in urban sites that have been recurrently subject to gentrification at the new “urban scale” of real estate and finance-rentier capital (Smith 2008: 239–266). Their residence in spaces made newly desirable by gentrification by the 2000s is the obverse of the fact that up to the 1990s, whites fled inner cities in large numbers and moved to the newly built segregated suburbs outside these large cities, while African Americans found themselves only able to afford, and only allowed to live within, the housing provided in these redlined inner-city districts.

By the 2000s, however, real estate in these districts and nearby had become quite “hot properties” for finance capital—subject to “development” and gentrification made possible first by US government Title VI “urban redevelopment” funding in the 1970s, and more recently by the influx of global capital seeking new sites for safe but extraordinarily profitable rent collection and property speculation in realizing value. This trend by the 1990s was shaped by and reinforced the War on Drugs and stereotypes about Black male criminality during the Clinton years (Alexander 2020 [2010]), and by the “broken window policing” that targeted unem-

ployed and underemployed African Americans and Latinx populations, and was first instituted in New York City, and then extensively disseminated to other major cities throughout the United States from the 1990s to the present (Camp and Heatherton 2016).

What precisely is the role of broken windows policing in the gentrification process? Put non-too-subtly, based on the idea that even a broken window is the indication of the existence of a criminal element who is an undesirable feature of a neighborhood, the role of such policing is the physical removal to jails or prison, or, if that is impossible, the destruction of African Americans whose very presence threatens the “real estate values” that the finance industry and its local ally, the Chamber of Commerce, holds dear. It is this that has much to do with the facts that of the more than one thousand people killed by local police every year in the United States, more than one fourth are African American; that the United States has the largest incarcerated population per capita in the world; and that “fully 29 percent of black male high-school dropouts between the ages of 19 to 35 in 2014 were institutionalized”—in jail awaiting trial, on bail, undergoing trial, in prison, on probation or parole—and form a plurality of incarcerated people grossly disproportionate to their representation in the US population (Guo 2016; also see Alexander 2020 [2010]).

Nancy Fraser (2016) has observed that there is an historical dialectic between capitalist strategies of “normally” exploiting workers, on one hand, and strategies that violently expropriate confiscated lives, labor, and property of racialized and vulnerable (e.g., immigrant) populations, on the other (see also Harvey 2018: 48, 70, 199–200). For Fraser, these strategies are complementary modes of appropriating surplus value and governing labor and lives that have operated simultaneously throughout the history of capitalism. Their relative roles in governing labor and securing surplus value shift over time as capitalism passes through periods of expansion, crises of overproduction and realization, and devaluation: expropriation of racialized

and vulnerable subjects comes to the fore when normal exploitation fails, as the state apparatus, including the police, come to the aid of capitalists in crisis (Fraser 2016: 169–173). In the current era of neoliberal “financialized capitalism,” Fraser argues that instead of a prior sharp divide between those who are exploited and those who are expropriated, there now “appears a continuum. At one end lies the growing mass of defenseless expropriable subjects; at the other, the dwindling ranks of protected exploited citizen-workers. At the center sits a figure . . . : the *expropriable-and-exploitable citizen-worker*, formally free but acutely vulnerable” (Fraser 2016: 176).

We can see these two modes of appropriation of surplus value in operation with tense interconnections between whites and African Americans in the United States through the latter’s vexed history with respect to agro-industrial capitalism. What now distinguishes the current era of finance capital is that the “risk”-based mechanisms for creating indebtedness for this “*expropriable-and-exploitable citizen-worker*” increasingly operate through the divide of race: debt is onerous but bearable for most petty-property-owning whites (that is, mortgage debt), while debt (e.g., predatory payday lending and student debt) becomes ruinous for large numbers of African Americans marked by propertylessness as the legacy of enslavement. As Fraser emphatically notes, the racialized distinction between those defined as being only exploitable and those predictably expropriable still exists (Fraser 2016: 176), although some whites are expropriated (and end, say, being incarcerated), while some African Americans are only (hyper-) exploited. Anxieties among an increasingly indebted white, self-proclaimed “middle class” (that “we’re all dispensable now”) juxtaposed with the (receding) legal gains for blacks from the 1960s US Civil Rights movement, may go far toward explaining the current high pitch of white supremacist animosities toward African Americans and other people of color.

Due to reasons that merit much discussion, neoliberal globalized capitalism is in a realiza-

tion crisis having to do with the build-up of such debt or “negative value” (Harvey 2018; Kalb 2020), whose burden on the future of most individuals will never be lifted or even partially discounted due to the sheer volume of debt held by the populations of the West. Ongoing criminalization and the indebtedness of black people (much of it from Wall Street’s predatory lending¹⁴) are the instruments driving large numbers of urban black workers, disproportionately employed in the agro-industrial food and health-care sectors toward the toxic mix of bankruptcy, unemployment (where employers refuse to hire or even fire workers holding consumer debt [Traub 2014]), bankruptcy, evictions from shelter, police “stop and frisk” harassment, enforced fines and fees levied against them (via police working for distressed municipalities undergoing austerity), assault, imprisonment, and killing by police (Camp and Heatherton 2016; Wang 2018: 120–136, 151–162).

The looping back of agro-industrial capital to incarceration and the COVID-19 pandemic

Let us now see how the two pandemics—of COVID-19 and of racial capitalism—are complexly intertwined in helical, spiraling connections. The connections are intimate and inseparable—neo-slavery and the highest incidences of COVID-19 infections—and come full circle consistent with the dual dialectic between expropriation and (hyper-)exploitation of racialized workers that Fraser sets out.

Among the most expropriable:

We find that major loci for the outbreaks of COVID-19 infections are in prisons and jails—disproportionately filled by African Americans experiencing involuntary servitude due to their criminalization as part of broken window policing. Despite some inmates being released from municipal jails since the pandemic began, large numbers of prisoners are still confined in crowded cells in prisons, jails, and detention centers. The number of infected prison inmates

in the United States doubled to 68,000 cases during the month of May 15–June 15, 2020, and deaths in prisons due to COVID-19 have risen by 73 percent during the same period. As of this writing, the five largest known clusters of COVID-19 in the United States are inside correctional institutions (Williams et al. 2020).

Simultaneously, since the pandemic began, there have been the killings by police of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and numerous others, which incited the most recent protests by the Black Lives Matter movement. The violent police repression of these protests sanctioned by the Trump administration has led to the beatings and killings inflicted by police on African American men and women and their allies followed by their arrests and confinement, leading to further transmission of COVID-19 to thousands of nonviolent protesters and bystanders.

Among the hyper-exploited racialized labor force, unlike most white workers exploited “normally”:

Workers in agro-industrial food assembly and retail work, transport, and health care sectors have all been deemed “essential” workers, that is, legally required to labor at whatever risk of contracting COVID-19 disease their employers may (in most cases) wish to impose on them, and thus treated as ultimately disposable. These sectors are characterized by disproportionate numbers of African American workers represented in the labor force. Workers are denied sufficient (or any) personal protective equipment and are prevented by the employer from maintaining the social distancing that protects them from infection by the virus. Most are either expected to attend work even if they are symptomatic or have tested positive with the virus or laid off temporarily without pay while symptomatic.

As of mid-May 2020, more than 36,000 meat processing and farm workers have tested positive for COVID-19, and at least 116 workers have died, although the numbers listed of infected and deceased are probable undercounts. Counties where meatpacking plants are located

show twice the incidence of COVID-19 compared to other counties in the United States (Graddy et al. 2020). In meatpacking, the hog and poultry processing lines still require workers to work shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow with one another—at frenzied speeds of production, using dangerous tools, under damp and nearly freezing conditions, around large amounts of animal offal and excreta. Employers collude with local and state public health authorities in some states by failing to publicly announce the numbers of workers infected or testing positive in their plants, thus allowing the virus to spread to nearby African American and Latinx communities, which now show much higher infection rates than other counties (Kendall 2020; Smith-Nonini 2020). The lack of state government regulation and the failure of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA) to intervene in these extremely dangerous worksites are complementary tributes to neoliberalism at its most ugly.

African American workers in nursing homes work without spatial separation between them and confined elderly and chronically ill nursing home patients—the sickest and most immune-compromised demographic with the highest rate of infection in the United States—and like those they care for, they become infected at high rates. In many instances, nursing home owners have denied workers masks and other personal protective equipment. As of mid-May 2020, nursing home residents and staff members made up at least 20 percent of COVID-19 deaths nationally (Gebeloff et al. 2020). Infection and deaths have been highest in nursing homes caring for African American patients within the racially segregated nursing home industry (Gebeloff et al. 2020).

Other African Americans are found in large numbers in the food services (e.g., fast-food) industries, where employers have been unwilling or reluctant to provide workers with personal protective equipment or to redesign and slow down labor processes (such as timed-to-the-second fast-food preparation and delivery) to allow for safe social distancing.

Neoliberal capitalism appears to be moving into a new phase in its treatment of its workforce. Neo-slavery among African American (and Latinx) workers working under hyper-sweated, sped-up and unsafe assembly lines and workspaces has become even more extreme in the absence of state regulation of employers, and in this new extreme, it sets the pace for abuse and degraded work undertaken by all “essential workers,” even as this category expands to include new labor sectors (e.g., higher education). That is, while racialized degradation of African Americans in the labor process continues, the new extreme conditions of exploitation come to be imposed on an increasingly large number of white workers as well. While it would be incorrect to say that a re-racialization of workers is occurring, clearly the logic of the lash and other mechanisms of expropriation has begun to shape neoliberal capitalism’s treatment of the white working class (Wang 2018). This is precisely the new figure of the “expropriable-and-exploitable citizen-workers” that Fraser (2016) writes about.

The Juneteenth circulars of the Durham Workers Assembly wrote of the twin pandemics and of being “Exposed by the Virus—‘Essentially’ Involuntary Servitude.” Profound insight indeed.

The double helix of two pandemics and the triple-sidedness of “I can’t breathe”

Capitalism has met its match. To understand how the new SARS-CoV-2 virus emerged and expanded its numbers prolifically according to its logic of reproduction, we have to view it dialectically. Just as Marx reminds us and we know historically that the process of capital accumulation is tenacious, productive of commodities, and exhausts the bodies of humans and the ecologies of “second nature” (Smith 2008: 49–91) when capital as “value in motion” expands and transforms itself in phases of value appropriation, realization, distribution, and reinvestment (Harvey 2018) and spirals out over space,

so also this virus likewise has its own logic of reproduction and increase that spirals out through human populations and is reproducing itself throughout the planet, within and across human bodies, wherever—at least so far—its hosts are to be found.

But the logic of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is refractory to the logic of capital—something made obvious from February to May 2020, when neoliberal state and national governments and corporations competed against one another in bidding wars to corner supplies of personal protective equipment, ventilators, intensive care units, and skilled healthcare workers while the virus continued to proliferate unimpeded rapidly in close to ideal conditions of transmission and reproduction. Just as accumulation of capital occurs through innovations brought about by capitalist competition, this virus (and the family of coronaviruses to which it belongs) have flourished through stochastic processes of mutations followed by natural selection that sets variants of the virus in competition with one another in a parallel world of relentless innovation (= mutation) and competition (= natural selection).

This world of the virus is not independent from but, as I have shown, one created by racial capitalism. Capitalism is the landscape through which this virus passes. It travels across the interface between the human and nonhuman—most frequently between racialized humans and industrialized hogs, poultry, and wild animal species—in circulation and metabolisms parallel to but distinct from those of capital. In this sense, the pandemic of COVID-19 accelerates within the helical spiral of a hyper-spiced-up capitalism of the present. This pandemic and future coronavirus pandemics that are certain to emerge come out of similar political economic and ecological structures. In fact in late June 2020, it became public knowledge that the flu of a new coronavirus, G4 (descended from H1N1) has passed from hogs to 10 percent of swine workers surveyed in China (Agence France-Presse 2020). This class of coronavirus

may generate the kind of pandemic for which neoliberal global capitalism is best suited. For people, much less so. Nonetheless, a leftward turn toward a rational governing (and more socially just) response to contain the pandemic combined with a multi-racial working class effort at mutual aid (e.g., with neighborhood brigades) could see the United States through with far less suffering and far fewer deaths (Wallace et al. 2020: 3–4).

George Floyd’s gasped last words, “I can’t breathe” (like Erik Garner’s in New York, and countless others) carry a triple valence that the Black Lives Matter movement has brilliantly intuited and elevated as its own statement to the world: while police chokeholds and knees-on-the-neck suffocate the person attacked, so also do COVID-19 disease and the neo-slavery of the agro-industrial labor process.

The major conclusion of this article is that these all-American modes of suffocating black people are intimately intertwined with one another and causally connected within the violent history of modern racial agro-capitalism.

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Notes

1. Juneteenth is a holiday that commemorates the emancipation of African slaves, referring to June 19, 1865, when the enslaved of Texas learned that they had been freed, and is widely celebrated among African Americans.
2. These scholars would include Angela Davis and Frank Barat (2016), Cedric Robinson (2000), Nancy Fraser (2016), Michael Dawson (2016), Kelly Lytle Hernandez (2017), Sarah Haley (2016), and Jackie Wang (2018), among many others.
3. Black Lives Matter, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>.
4. A more comprehensive treatment of the effects of the pandemic globally than this article would have to deal with the violence of global finance capital whose structural adjustment policies since the 1980s have degraded the public health infrastructures of the major cities in the developing world, making the result extreme suffering and death among their residents (Davis and Abdel Kouddous 2020), the equivalent of a crime against humanity.
5. Asymptomatic transmission of the virus was reported from China in late January (Wallace 2020), but Western infectious disease experts continued to doubt this process existed until early April, perhaps because it challenged cherished epidemiological models that assumed that transmissibility of this class of virus appeared only at the same time as symptoms, thus losing a valuable two months in limiting its spread (Apuzzo et al. 2020; Wallace 2020).
6. “Demand for meat is rising all over the world. . . . The live export business is thriving. At every moment of the day, animals are being moved huge distances across the planet’s surface” (Dargahi 2018).
7. For an early analysis of industrial rationality and slave-based plantation production, see Mintz 1985.
8. The industrial production of wild animals through hunting, capture, and breeding in “wildlife farms” throughout highland Southeast Asia is well documented. In Vietnam, autochthonous species of crocodiles, pythons, soft-shell turtles, bears, macaque monkeys, deer, and porcupines are either grown in captivity or captured in the wild, then brokered, transported, and sold to low land restaurants for consumption or are exported as exotic foods to China or elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Brooks et al. 2010; see also Wallace 2020: 9).
9. The provincial population grew from 19 million in 1948 to 46 million in 2010 (Jabr 2020).
10. One cannot but note how strongly the effects of ecological devastation portrayed here contrast with the elegiac treatment of “capitalist ruins” and “disturbed” landscapes offered in Tsing’s (2015) tome on the matsutake commodity—suggesting that research like that of the present article into the violent prehistory and present of the capitalism of that mushroom might be worthwhile.
11. In China there has been a rapid build-out since the 1980s in periurban areas of intensive production of swine in accordance with the logic of the Party-state’s massive urbanization “project of separating people and pigs, and putting them back together in new configurations” (Schneider 2017: 93). While farmers displaced from desirable farmland slated for urban “development” in inland China are pressed to migrate as workers to coastal cities or forcibly resettled in huge modernist new tenements constructed on the edges of regional cities, the production of 56.5 million metric tons of pork from a population of 770 million hogs (in 2014) has concentrated in large-scale Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) located on the edges of cities and roadways to cities that lead to their urban markets. China’s CAFOs have become dependent upon massive imports of soybeans from the United States and Brazil as feedstock (Schneider 2017: 90, 93). The marketing of meat consumption to the Chinese human population—putting hogs and people “back together in new configurations”—has been hugely successful, with even rural households consuming an average of 29 kilos of fresh and processed meat in 2012. Privately owned Chinese mega-agribusinesses in meats are now “playing a key role” in the consolidation of the meat industry globally, as in the case of the Shuanghui acquisition of Smithfield previously described (Schneider 2017: 92).
12. Writing of antebellum slavery, Wallace notes that then, “as today, the work itself was its own discipline, the danger and damage their own message. When an immigrant meatpacker loses her hand, the expectation that the line is re-

- started promptly is more than code for the replaceability of any of the other workers, but that each is as much a side of beef as the meat he or she is prepping” (2016: 263).
13. Improved wages and working conditions for African American industrial workers during the 1950s to 1970s that undeniably did occur were due to support from progressive white allies combined with legal gains in the 1970s through the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. However, with the recession of the Carter years and advent of globalized production and deindustrialization, these gains were quickly, decisively, and disproportionately reversed, as the AFL-CIO favored white industrial workers in its concessions to “lean and mean” capital.
 14. Wall Street investment banks have underwritten predatory lending targeting African Americans in the case of both “payday loans” and student loans taken out by students to pay for “educations” offered by new for-profit universities like Corinthian College. The gerund “targeting” is deliberate and refers to the sale of electronic financial “consumer scores” to lenders to identify susceptible applicants among African Americans and other marginalized populations (O’Neil 2017: 80–81). The collection, sale, and use of massive amounts of digital data and its analysis by AI-based algorithms in strategies designed to increase the hyper-exploitation of black people and other racialized minorities is quite intentional, and vastly understudied (Nonini forthcoming).
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