ENGL 795

12 April 2020

This Bitter Earth: Post-Segregation African American Film as Expression of the "Racial Capitalocene"

This analysis of African American cinema is predicated on re-reading cultural narratives as representative of the racial 'Anthropocene' era. Key analysis will be reserved for the historical period of the 1970s, an era that I broadly define as post-segregation independent African American cinema. Coming at a time of burgeoning Black autonomy, this period is recognized as a significant moment in the development of African American cultural narratives (Diawara 4; 107). However, existing analysis of these texts has rightfully been reserved for the material socioeconomic struggles that these films represent. This is a crucial analytic space, but the intention of this paper is to traverse beyond rigid "human history" to recognize larger motifs of oppression drawn from "natural history" (Chakrabarty 201). Therefore, my claim is Black American cinema of the 1970s post-segregation period is a product and reflection of the environmental racism that characterizes the Anthropocene era. During a time when popular media narratives became increasingly urban, African American auteurs documented a racialized pattern that exploited Black bodies and fed into a wider oppression of the natural environment. For these purposes, Vergès' notion of a "Racial Capitalocene" will be adopted as a heuristic mechanism, because it is a more representative encapsulation of disparities than the universalizing 'Anthropocene' concept. Once this has been established, I will reconsider three key texts of the 1970s Blaxploitation and independent African American cinema movement as anticipatory "climate fiction," an inviting category that is averse to genre and temporality

(Trexler 14). Guided by race studies, critical theory, and the Racial Capitalocene concept, my analysis will treat African American cinema as a palimpsest of which tracings of environmental issues have been effaced in favour of linear socioeconomic readings. My intention is to reinvigorate these readings by merging these socioeconomic reading with an environmental analysis.

This analysis is predicated on situating texts in the 'Anthropocene,' but this contentious term deserves some exploration and recalibration. To begin, Chakrabarty popularized the notion of the Anthropocene as a "new geological era … in which humans act as a main determinant of the environment of the planet" (209). Initial scholarship pounced on the term, eager for a concept that sufficiently abbreviated environmental issues that were in vogue. This led to the 'Anthropocene' as what Reddy calls a "charismatic mega-category," an encompassing concept that straddles sciences, humanities, and commerce as the nom de plume of the climate crisis (Reddy). However, this abridgement simplifies the climate crisis through a "'streamlined,' rationalized, labor-saving device," a trend that concerned Horkheimer as the instrumentalization of reason (15). At issue is the Anthropocene as "universalizing" in its depiction of a "blanket humanity, a blanket history, a blanket geological record" (Malm 271; Vansintjan). Furthermore, Luke says that the Anthropocene term suggests that environmental "changes allegedly are caused by all human beings … when they largely have been caused by a few privileged human beings" (129). By classifying "humans as a species," Chakrabarty simplified mankind as inhabiting a single cultural taxonomy, a conclusion that fails to account for how class, race, or gender lead to disparate experiences of climate change (219). As Luke mentions, the Anthropocene concept does not account for "material inequalities between different racial, ethnic, and class groups," and therefore "merits closer critical reconsideration" (129). In this spirit, the Anthropocene

moniker is uninformative for the specific heuristic goals of this paper. To approach a discourse that attests to categorical disparities in climate fiction, it is necessary to branch off from the traditional narrative to arrive at a more representative model.

To articulate the human/nature paradigm, we require a framework that is reflexive of the "asymmetry of power" that characterizes how climate change is processed (Vergès 75). To Moore, the issues of climate change are the product capitalism, a "system of power, profit, and re/production in the web of life" (13). To fasten this bond, Moore established the "Capitalocene" to define an epoch where *capitalism* is the primary determinant of geology, rather than humanity writ large (1). The Capitalocene effectively challenges the Anthropocene and its "reluctance to consider human organizations – like capitalism – as part of nature" (1). Like Luke, Moore viewed the Anthropocene concept as simplistic, and sought a holistic notion that was representative of the "inequality, commodification, imperialism, patriarchy, racism and much more" of the present epoch (4). Vergès expands on this "much more" of the Capitalocene in her re-appropriation as the "Racial Capitalocene" (72). In her work, Vergès concluded that "studies on the emergence of the 'Anthropocene'" had not adequately "addressed the role of race in its making," and turned to something more emblematic (73). Influenced by Robinson's decree that "realization of theory ... [requires] new history," Vergès' Racial Capitalocene is a mechanism that recontextualizes the Anthropocene as "a political question [that] must be understood outside of the limits of 'climate change' and in the context of the inequalities produced by racial capital" (Robinson 307; 74). Vergès' claim provokes Chakrabarty's "illusion of an organic and undifferentiated universal humanity," and instead seeks a clear exigence of the racial elements of the climate crisis (75). Therefore, Vergès' "Racial Capitalocene" is a powerful heuristic model for codifying inequality as it relates to climate change.

As praxis, the Racial Capitalocene involves a campaign of scrutiny against history and cultural narratives to uncover how environmental racism dominates marginalized groups. In this fashion, the Racial Capitalocne is an exercise in critical theory, which perpetually adapts in the battle against oppression. This is what Biro connotes when he says, "while critical theory has a transcendent normative basis (the critique of domination), its specific prescriptive content must change with the particular historical circumstances" (3). To Vergès, the prescription against environmental racism is confrontation through recontextualization. This is predicated on necessary engagement, requiring us to "to renew the ways that violence is narrated" (Vergès 78).

To accommodate the realities of the Racial Capitalocene, cultural narratives must represent the oppressive contours of environmental racism. There are several avenues for this, chiefly the burgeoning climate fiction, or 'cli-fi,' canon that Vergès mentions (81-82). Cli-fi exists as a versatile canvas where the grievances of global warming may be hashed out. It is genre-averse and "is not the result of a literary 'school' of related authors" (Trexler 10). It is informed by the belief that "climate change necessarily transforms generic conventions," and thus cannot be "placed into discrete generic pigeonholes." (Trexler 14). Most importantly, cli-fi holds "no singular influence or unitary 'idea,'" necessitating a range of inroads across disparate perspectives, temporal positions, and mediums of expression (Trexler 10-11). This broad conception obliges the "de-historicising" Anthropocene to be approached not only from the standpoint of a Racial Capitalocene, but also from disparate historical points that are outside the traditional medium of the novel.

Merging the mission of cli-fi with the rhetoric of the Racial Capitalocene will elucidate new insights into the human/nature paradigm. As visible inheritors of diasporic exploitation, the

African American cultural text is perhaps the most suitable point of departure. Although a Racial Capitalocene analysis is applicable to any period of African American art, this particular analysis will be reserved for post-segregation African America cinema of the 1970s, a period of newfound Black autonomy that disseminates grievances to a popular audience. Henceforth, I will turn towards this medium of expression to secure the connection between the African American conscience and environmental racism.

While Black African cinema has been recognized for its themes socio-political struggle, the tenable connection to environmental disconnect has received less attention. In fact, the African American filmic oeuvre has always maintained a rich connection to the environmental, even during the early days of tenuous Black authorial control. Although Black involvement has existed since the dawn of cinema, initial participants "realized that the emerging American film aesthetics and politics were such that their involvement would be minimal and that the treatment of Black stories would be distorted at best" (Massood 46). Therefore, early productions were characterized by the worst of minstrelsy and caricature, so their authenticity as Black expression is inaccurate (Massood 45). But African American cinema gained a modicum of agency in the early sound era with Black musicals such as *The Green Pastures* (1936) and *Cabin the Sky* (1940). As can be gleamed from the titles, these films maintained a connection to the Earth as a "static rural space," a conception that Massood terms the "antebellum idyll" (14). The settings "suggests that rural, southern space is a paradise in comparison to the city," and reject post-World War I demographic shifts to the urban in favour of an idealized rural setting (Massood 29; 30). This dismissal of the industrial is purposeful and forebodes the grievances to come, but the legitimacy of these films as proper Black expression is negligible. African American cinema would follow further problems of representation until its blossoming in the 1970s, when Black

filmmakers garnered unprecedented autonomy and rejected antiquated notions of the rural "antebellum idyll." Instead, burgeoning independent African American cinema moved towards authentic stories, "in which aesthetics, political concerns such as authorship and spectatorship, and the politics of representation with respect to Black cinema [became] more prevalent" (Diawara 4). With this change, African American filmmakers would occupy the screen with narratives that mattered to their communities.

During the 1970s, a newly segregated and urbanizing African American population would turn to film aesthetics to document narratives of oppression in this new world. The most prominent early example is Melvin Van Peebles' 1971 feature *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. In this picaresque film, the titular Sweetback evades law enforcement and other agents of White society after an encounter with the police. Unlike earlier films that presented Blackness as an ancillary "thorn in America's heel," *Sweetback* is assertive in its African American centrality (Diawara 3. Right away, the film opens with a dedication "to all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the Man," and proudly stars "The Black Community" in the opening credits (Van Peebles). This Blackness also informs the mise-en-scène, which fluctuates between inner-city motifs and African iconography. Before Sweetback's flight from police, the film occupies "run-down and ill-maintained" city settings, which Massood characterizes as "dystopian" (96). This apocalyptic urban is exclusively congregated by lower-class Black people, which is indicative of Vergès' claim that cities are "inscribed in the colonial and postcolonial economy" (74). Contrasting this maelstrom, Sweetback is presented as a confident, independent, and stereotypically virile character. Yet despite his "baadasssss" nature, Sweetback is forced to flee the city that oppresses him. This juxtaposition invokes Motten, who notes that "blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay, even when that decay is invoked in the name of a

certain (fetishization of) vitality" (177). The implication is that Sweetback is weakened by the urban corral, and the "vulnerability in these locations indicates that they allow only for a temporary haven" (Massood 96).

The second half of *Sweetback* finds its protagonist escaping into a post-human desert landscape. The tonal shift is activated during the film's inciting incident, in which Sweetback beats a pair of corrupt cops. During this crucial moment, Van Peebles cuts away from the violence to show an oil well, followed by Sweetback running through the desert. In this scene, the film associates the capitalist mechanism of production with White authority, a force that is equally as antagonist as the racist policing system. The choice of an oil well is apt, since LeMenager notes "oil literally was conceived as a replacement for slave labor" (5). The decision to transition the montage with Sweetback fleeing the oil well is reminiscent of Yusoff, who notes that "approaching race as a geologic proposition … open up the imbrication of inhuman materials and relations of extraction that go beyond a place-based configuration of environmental racism as a spatial organization of exposure to environmental harm" (6). It is further noteworthy that this incident marks Sweetback's escape from the city, a desert odyssey that "shifts the narrative into a space that includes both traces of the antebellum idyll and African motifs;" a segment that works to "connect Sweetback to a diasporic cultural context" (Massood 99-100; 101). However, instead of the "nostalgia and fantasy of Black-cast musicals," Sweetback's desert exodus places him in a worse position than his previously urban existence (Massood 100). This environment is dangerous and "much more threatening than what was to be found – at least for Sweetback – in the ghetto" (100). Particular attention is given to heat and scarcity of resources, such as a scene where Sweetback crawls towards the sustenance of a miniscule puddle. The sequence is practically dystopian and indoctrinates a sense of pessimism about Black exodus

from the contemporary urban. The nomadic Sweetback wanders into a future where he is subjugated by a confluence of systemic and natural oppressors.

Sweetback's endgame cultural flux is intriguing in conversation with the Blaxploitation features it engendered. Blaxploitation initialized as a reactive genre that repackaged White conventions with a Black urban aesthetic. But like Sweetback, the genre attempted a break from the urban in the mid-70s, rejecting the Western locale for "'exotic' territory" (Massood 119). Films such as *Superfly T.N.T.* and *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* transgressed the American urban setting to imply that "the black city, worked in a larger diasporic context" (Massood 119). Most indicative of the disparities experienced in Racial Capitalocene is the 1973 feature *Shaft in Africa*. In this film, New York detective John Shaft is offered an assignment in West Africa. The Americanized Shaft tellingly admits that Africa is not his "turf," but nonetheless offers his labour for a fee (Guillermin). To prove his suitability, a naked Shaft is forced to withstand eight hours in a scorching hot simulated African environment. Similar to *Sweetback*, the film metonymizes Africa as an unpopulated space of humidity, sand, and scarcity. But while Sweetback escapes the urban, Shaft's captive Africa is situated within the urban epicenter of New York City. The heat motif is employed again, but this setting is induced to an unnatural temperature from electric lamps. Whereas the heat was incidental in *Sweetback*, Shaft's trial is predicated on withstanding heat to prove his suitability to the African clime and, by extension, his Blackness. It is a diabolical set-up for what is essentially a job interview, and its Afrocentricity places undue emphasis on Black torture. This sequence suggests that Shaft, must suffer for his Blackness, an asymmetrical punishment that channels rising heat to inflict pain.

If Blaxploitation like *Shaft in Africa* depicted escapist fantasy, Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* returned to African American ennui in an industrializing world. Burnett's 1978 feature portrays the daily tribulations of protagonist Stan and his family. As the title alludes, Stan works at a slaughterhouse, where he kills sheep for a living. As opposed to the vagrant Sweetback, Stan is somewhat acclimatized to American society, and fulfills a functional role through his labour. Yet Stan is still poor, stuck in a cycle of indentured servitude that has swapped cotton with wool. The purposelessness of Stan's situation is reflected in the film's neorealist tendencies, which present a series of loose, unconnected vignettes of working-class, Black existence. In one extended segment, Stan and his friend Gene buy an engine to fix a car. In a Sisyphean moment, the two carry the engine downstairs, only to watch it tumble off their truck and break. It is telling that Burnett selects the engine – a poignant symbol of industrial capital and efficiency – as a mechanism of immobility. This is consistent with James, who notes a confluence of unreliable and junk cars in the film, communicating a general theme of "stultifying carcereal stasis" (34). This ties into a larger notion of African American entrapment in the industrial system, and a futile longing for release. In one tender moment, Stan and his wife dance to the haunting strains of Dinah Washington's song "This Bitter Earth." When their dance is complete, Stan exits the scene, leaving his wife crying in reminiscence of her Southern upbringing: "Memories that don't seem mine, like half eaten cake. Rabbit skins stretched on the backyard fences. My grandma; ma' dear, ma' dear, ma' dear, dragging her shadow across the porch. Standing bare headed under the sun, cleaning red catfish with white rum" (Burnett). The monologue implies a displacement from pastoral existence to a cramped and painful inner-city space. The film dissolves into a montage of sheep preparing for mechanized slaughter, codifying a powerful metaphor for the Black industrial paradigm.

As Vergès notes about the debates around climate change, "voices of the [global] South and of minorities – the prime victims of these phenomena's consequences – have developed an analysis that brings together race, capitalism, imperialism, and gender. This analysis rests on past struggles" (72). Furthermore, Chakrabarty claims that "explanations of climate change spell the collapse of humanist distinctions between natural history and human history" (201). The Racial Capitalocene disrupts historicism as it has been understood, so seemingly "invisible" transgressions committed against past victims become relevant to how we comprehend the present (Malm 6). This paper has approached a discourse for listening to these perspectives on climate effects. The cli-fi mission is instructive for approaching texts that directly react to climate change, but it has offered little headway into of historical works. My analysis has demonstrated that any work can be approached with an Anthropocene reading, and Vergès' Racial Capitalocene is particularly illuminating for understanding art by marginalized groups. Although my corpus was limited to exemplary texts from post-segregation Blaxploitation and independent African American cinema, the general applicability of this project is vast. With this enticing critical posture, we can create new questions about how environmental issues inform other Black genres in subtle but informative ways. For example, how is the Racial Capitalocene represented in cinematic adaptations of the slave narrative? What are the implications for recent treatments, such as Disney's 'Afrocapitalist' *Black Panther*? How does the Racial Capitalocene help us understand cinema of the African continent, or other filmmakers of the global South? The underprivileged casualties of the unfolding climate crisis offer a powerful perspective of how violence is documented, and their voices are instructive for how we move forward.

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