

Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018, ISBN 978-1-4529-6105-7.

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“No geology is neutral” are the final words of Kathryn Yusoff’s 2018 book, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*. This manifesto-like phrase encapsulates the primary thesis which the author attempts to demonstrate throughout the book. Far from being a supposedly apolitical, “neutral”, objective science, Yusoff argues that geology is, in fact, one of the most important vehicles for the sedimentation of a racialized logic in the social sphere. The racializing mechanisms of geology function ambivalently, depending on the subject’s location on what the author calls the “geologic colour line”. If one is situated on the Whiteness spectrum, then the accumulative mode of geology is set in motion, while the side correlated with Blackness activates its dispossessive logic. Although the interlinking between geology and race are not contemporary, it is all the more pressing to demystify this interrelation on the background of the emergent talks of the Anthropocene.

Starting as a geological label for the new epoch we are currently inhabiting, the term “Anthropocene” has quickly permeated into social and cultural studies. Here, it was favoured conceptually for its materialist and cautionary characteristics and it rapidly became an increasingly popular catchphrase in recent studies. Yusoff argues, however, that the current use of the term “Anthropocene” also subsumes one notable blind spot. With all the supposed materialist and historically contextual attentiveness it displays, the Anthropocene fails in self-reflexively retracing its colonial histories. The author argues that in each of the three usually advocated origin stories of the Anthropocene, there is an undeniable interlinking between the “extractive grammars of geology” and an identity politics which fabricates a concept of humanity almost exclusively coded white. In order to cease this erasure of Blackness, the author replaces the simple, crypto-racialized terminology of “Anthropocene” with one homonymous to the title, that of a “billion Black Anthropocenes”.

With *A Billion Black Anthropocene*, Yusoff's aim is, thus, double-folded. In the first part of the book (roughly chapters 1-3), she seeks to deconstruct the supposed neutrality of geology, while raising awareness about the discipline's subtle and closely related links to a programme of racialization. This is done, on one hand, by discussing the actual colonial context of each of the three origin stories attributed to the Anthropocene I have briefly alluded to earlier, also known as Golden Spikes or, in geological terminology, Global Boundary Stratotype Section and Point. On the other hand, Yusoff highlights how the overlap between a geological and racial grammar has been functioning for a long time, analysing some parts of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, published in three volumes between 1830 and 1833.

In the second part (chapters 4-5), the author sets the foundation for another type of geology, one written against the patronage of "White Geology" and toward the "nonevent" of a "billion Black Anthropocenes". Instead of the aforementioned geology, based on racism, slavery and colonialism, which draws a hierarchical "geologic colour line" sympathetic to Whiteness, the author calls for an "insurgent geology", one which reclaims materiality and uses it to establish the importance and "presentness of Blackness". Yusoff draws inspiration from several black feminist scholars in this undertaking (Dionne Brand, Sylvia Wynter, Tina Campt), intertwining their concepts in an analysis of two films by Steve McQueen and a novel by Dionne Brand.

I have already briefly mentioned the ambivalent racializing functionality of geology as both a mode of accumulation and dispossession, but what exactly makes this discipline so prone to such divergent usages? For Yusoff, geology and racialization work particularly well together due to the former's categorizing capabilities. One of geology's main tasks is that of creating taxonomies, dividing the different material artefacts encountered in several sub-groups, all of them sharing a characteristic passivity, inertness. This material categorization has been rapidly reproduced and extrapolated to another level, that of subject-making. At this level, given the Western, imperialist origins of geology as a field of study and "technology of matter", as the author calls it, it is unsurprising to see which side of the "geologic colour line" is correlated with passive, inert matter.

By equating Blackness with such a characterization of matter, another racialized dichotomy becomes visible. Geology and its materials are sometimes referred to as "subject-less", specifically because they are objects, "thing-like". Biology, on the other hand, deals mostly with organisms, "body-like" and sentient beings, much closer to

what is commonly congenial to humans. This makes way for the hierarchical distinction between human (i.e. Whiteness, a subject endowed with biology) and inhuman (i.e. Blackness, extractable matter). Extractable means, in this context, being passive (possessing properties and awaiting extraction) and able to be “activated” through the mastery of humans. Thus, slaves, or in a larger sense Black persons, much like other geologic materials, such as gold, coal or other minerals, need to be recognized and have their inhuman properties extracted by White persons.

In order to provide a contextual and exemplified view of the aforementioned arguments, Yusoff showcases how racialized are, in fact, the three proposed Golden Spikes (origin stories) for the Anthropocene. A Global Boundary Stratotype Section and Point, or, more colloquially, a Golden Spike, is a geologic marker fabricated by a planetary event, which leads to long lasting global changes. Although international geological institutions have not come to a consensus regarding a definitive Golden Spike for the Anthropocene, there are three such proposed originary moments: the 1610 Columbian “exchange”, heavy industrialization in the 1800s and the spread of nuclear radioisotopes from the 1950s. This revisiting of origin stories is not meant to offer an alternative narrative, instead, it could make way for questions which the author deems more important, related to the specific influence of geology on subjectivity or the perpetuation of anti-blackness through different “structures of materiality”.

Colonialism and Western imperialism are self-evident when considering the 1610 Golden Spike hypothesis. This dating of the Anthropocene sees the latter’s origins in the invasion of the Americas by the European empires, which started in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Invading the Americas meant not only the massive genocide of indigenous populations, but also a continuous process of enslavement and dislocation of persons from their homeland, with entire fleets taking part in transatlantic slave voyages. Another important component of this colonization was the introduction, in the Americas, of new and – before that – unseen species of animals and plants. The very large decrease in population in these lands (going from 54 million people in 1492 to 6 million in 1650), combined with the mixing of separate biotas, led to a significant reduction in farming and the capacity of forests to regenerate. This, in turn, led to the important global event which made specialists, like Lewis & Maslin, to consider the 1610 hypothesis, namely the noticeable decrease in Antarctic ice cores of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere.

The second Golden Spike, the 1800 Industrial Revolution hypothesis, highlights the full force of the then nascent capitalist mode of production and its technological innovation. The scenario of the explorer as hero (Columbus) is replaced with that of the inventor as hero (Watt and his steam engine), Yusoff argues, but this still functions to reinforce the idea of the vast and increasing power of the Western man. The planetary change brought forth by this hypothesis is a climatic one as well, the production of greenhouse gases (GHGs) caused by burning large amounts of coal leading to another rise in CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere. What most of the narratives about the Industrial Revolution and this Golden Spike fail to convey is the degree of importance slavery had in achieving the material conditions necessary for the construction and use of all these new technological devices. Yusoff believes that similar weather conditions have appeared, previous to the 1800s, in the mines and on the plantations where slaves worked, making these sites direct predecessors to the Industrial Revolution both literally and figuratively. Without extracting the labour power of the slaves and the resources of the lands they helped dispossess, the existence of the “slave-sugar-coal nexus”, as the author calls it, would not have been possible.

The last of the Golden Spikes analysed by Yusoff is also the most popular and favoured among geology specialists to denote the start of the Anthropocene. This is known as the “Great Acceleration” of the 1950s, set in motion by the nuclear radioisotopes produced by testing nuclear weapons. The effects of these nuclear residues have had a great impact on the environment, but also on the biochemical composition of the human body, some specialists arguing that every human on the planet now has Strontium-90 (a human-made radioactive by-product) in their body. A notable aspect of this Golden Spike, most of the times overlooked by official, “scientific” reports, is the “nuclear colonialism” which played a crucial role in these nuclear testings. Many islanders from the Pacific were displaced during the US nuclear tests, being relocated to uninhabitable islands, where they suffered from severe hunger and lived in inhuman conditions. After those tests were finished, they chose to move back to their home islands, even though radiation was a massive problem, because of the lack of food and conditions.

A particular conjunction between race and geology appears, Yusoff claims, not only when discussing the origin stories of the Anthropocene, it is deeply embedded within geology as a science *per se*. As a mode of extraction and dispossession, that is, when applied to Blackness, geology functions in a double sense. As already mentioned

when discussing the Golden Spikes, one of these meanings is linked to settler colonialism and the dispossession of resources, materials and humans which have started occurring since the first invasions of the Americas (or maybe even earlier, by some accounts). The second sense in which geology works upon Blackness is related to the relegation of all the entities endowed with said traits of Blackness to the level of the “inhuman”, transforming actual persons into “things”. In order to offer arguments for this latter functioning of geology, Kathryn Yusoff examines Charles Lyell’s classic geology text, *The Principles of Geology*.

The racialized grid brought forth by geology is apparent, in Lyell’s book, simply by looking at the table of contents. The author moves swiftly from “Geology and Cretaceous strata” to “Montgomery. Curfew. Sunday School for Negros” (chapter XXII), or from “Fossil Shells” to “Distinct Table for Coloured and White Passengers” (chapter XXIII) in the course of a chapter. Most importantly, the different geographical spaces which entered a certain racial hierarchy during colonialism (Europe dominating Africa, the Americas etc.) are now also doubled, in Lyell’s texts, by a spacialization of time along a vertical or hierarchical line. Lyell discusses the differences between white persons and black persons using the geological terms he applies to different rock formations or sedimentations, for example. The crucial contrast is given by a different position “in time”. This means that, for the Scottish geologist, black people are still behind and in need of much “emancipation” and “evolution” to arrive at the condition of the white people. Lyell’s theory was also used to legitimate different discriminations suffered by the people of colour, from different seats in public transportation based on skin colour to the need of slavery as a method of temporal “advancement”.

By analysing and revealing the subtleties of (now) forgotten racialized and colonial aspects of geological discourses, Yusoff attempts to deconstruct the supposed neutrality of geology, but also to raise awareness of the dangerous anti-blackness upon which the main ideas of the Anthropocene have been built until now. Without a critical survey of the different “grammars of extraction” geology has naturalized, it will be difficult to stop perpetuating the innate anti-blackness of the “structures of materiality” currently in place within the social sphere. In this sense, Kathryn Yusoff also attempts to set the ground for another type of geology, one which is closer to the “billion Black Anthropocenes” and strays away from “White Geology”, an “insurgent geology”, as the author names it.

The author considers that such a geology should be constructed through an “aesthetics of chaos” based on a novel poetic grammar, one which erases the erasures provoked by the extractive grammar of geology and makes visible the presentness and the underlying importance of Blackness. The most important quality of an “insurgent geology” is belonging, as it “refuses capture by geologic forces and redirects their nonstratified forces as a sense of possibility”. Yusoff exemplifies some coordinates of “insurgent geology” by referencing some products of Black aesthetics, namely Steve McQueen’s films *Caribs’ Leap/Western Deep* (2002) and Dionne Brand’s 1999 novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*.

In *Western Deep*, McQueen depicts the dangerous conditions from the homonymous mines in the Witwatersrand Basin in South Africa, the deepest mines in the world, which run almost 3.9 kilometres underground. This film, more than directly working towards a new geology, showcases precisely why such a geology is necessary. *Western Deep* is a portrait, both visually and sonically, through near-dark shots and harsh noises, the inhuman conditions in which slaves have had to work for centuries. Yusoff’s other two examples, the film *Caribs’ Leap* and Brand’s novel illustrate the refusal of a “White Geology” by consciously choosing acts of suicide, rather than subduing to slavery and colonialism. McQueen shows, in his film, the decision of the last Indian Caribs in 1651 Grenada to jump from a cliff, to their death, as a sign of refusing the French invasion. On the other hand, Brand, in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, writes about Marie Ursule, a slave from Trinidad who plans a mass suicide with her people, again, as a sign of revolt against the colonial domination.

With these examples and “insurgent geology” generally, the author does not call for a reformulation of the Anthropocene by taking into consideration a strictly “black ontology”. Yusoff deems necessary the self-reflexive excursus into the colonial and racial past which propelled the Anthropocene into existence, as a way of incorporating this past into a different present. Rather than re-writing the past, the author is interested in positing a different present and future, in “ending the world” we are in, which continues to perpetuate an age-old anti-blackness, thus writing “for the geology next time”.

*A Billion Black Anthropocenes* manages to offer a convincing depiction of geology as a profoundly racialized and biased field of study. Kathryn Yusoff’s analysis combines a variety of approaches, from geological scientific studies to Black aesthetics and different strands of Black cultural studies, such as feminism, in an intricate and

revealing manner. This multi-dimensionality allows her to steer clear from hasty generalizations, while also helping with the construction of a solid argument for the necessity of a new envisioning of geology as a more inclusive, self-conscious and critical field of study. By reconsidering both the historical colonial underpinnings of the current epoch and by highlighting some contemporary aesthetic possibilities of forging a new understanding and praxis of geology, Yusoff writes for the “billion Black Anthropocenes” to come.