

The relationship between racial capitalism and environmental justice struggle is one that is so interwoven and linked that to discuss one without at least bringing up the other would be doing an injustice to the topic at hand. Just like in racial capitalism, the issues of environmental justice need to be examined through a lens of intersectionality. We need to discuss these topics while examining the multi faceted layers of race, class, gender, and handicapability. Let's define racial capitalism before we dive into its endless layers. According to Cedric Robinson, a pioneering black intellectual that the term is largely associated with due to its use in his book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983). "Having written much of the book during a sabbatical year in England, Robinson encountered intellectuals who used the phrase "racial capitalism" to refer to South Africa's economy under apartheid. He developed it from a description of a *specific* system to a way of understanding the *general* history of modern capitalism."¹ After discovering this term, he began working on another largely overlooked black man's work, Oliver Cox, Robinson worked to disprove Karl Marx's claim that "capitalism is a direct revolutionary negation of feudalism." Capitalism, he argued, bloomed through the European system of feudalism, which itself, had already been steeped in racism towards groups of Europeans. "The first European proletarians were *racial* subjects (Irish, Jews, Roma or Gypsies, Slavs, etc.) and they were victims of dispossession (enclosure), colonialism, and slavery *within Europe*."² The argument goes, that capitalism was not revolutionary, it was not new and uninhibited, it evolved from the old twisted order to create a new one just as reliant on inhumanity, injustice and ignorance, to thrive.

¹ Kelly, R. D. G. (2021, November 22). *What did Cedric Robinson mean by racial capitalism?* Boston Review. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://bostonreview.net/articles/robin-d-g-kelley-introduction-race-capitalism-justice/>

² Kelly, R. D. G. (2021, November 22). *What did Cedric Robinson mean by racial capitalism?* Boston Review. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://bostonreview.net/articles/robin-d-g-kelley-introduction-race-capitalism-justice/>

Environmental justice is quite interwoven with racial capitalism, but not as reliant on each other to survive as racism and capitalism. As we already established, capitalism relies on the oppression of certain races because that is how its ancestor feudalism functioned. “Indeed, Robinson suggested that racialization within Europe was very much a *colonial* process involving invasion, settlement, expropriation, and racial hierarchy.”³ What are some examples of capitalism performing in the way it was built to? A prime example is the prison system. The constitution itself states that a “slave is free until a crime is committed.” So under vagrancy laws, as well as Jim Crow, it was possible to be arrested for no reason at all, and it continues in one way today with stop and frisk laws. “New Yorkers have been subjected to police stops and street interrogations more than 5 million times since 2002, and that Black and Latinx communities continue to be the overwhelming target of these tactics. In 2019, 13,459 stops were recorded: 7,981 were Black (59 percent). 3,869 were Latinx (29 percent). 1,215 were white (9 percent). At the height of stop-and-frisk in 2011 under the Bloomberg administration, over 685,000 people were stopped.”⁴ To bring this around to environmental justice, California is known for having devastating wildfires. It is also well known that they employ the work of prisoners, paid possibly as low as \$2 to fight off these fires. “Armed with shovels and pickaxes, they fight fires like lumberjacks: digging holes, chopping wood, clearing brush and providing essential support for state and federal firefighters.”⁵ The article I am citing, from NBC news, frames the work of

³ Kelly, R. D. G. (2021, November 22). *What did Cedric Robinson mean by racial capitalism?* Boston Review. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://bostonreview.net/articles/robin-d-g-kelley-introduction-race-capitalism-justice/>

⁴ ACLU. (2022, February 24). *Stop-and-frisk data*. New York Civil Liberties Union. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://www.nyclu.org/en/stop-and-frisk-data>

⁵ Khan, I. (2021, June 8). *'in desperate need of these programs': California to close inmate Firefighting Training Center*. NBCNews.com. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/desperate-need-these-programs-california-close-inmate-firefighting-training-center-n1269570>

these prisoners in a positive light, that without their undervalued labor, these fires would have spread and caused much more severe damage, that these prisoners need to redeem themselves.

“While these decisions are never easy, they are opening the door for the department to increase efficiencies as California continues to focus on reentry and rehabilitation efforts,” Corrections department Secretary Kathleen Allison said in a statement. The key word here is efficiency, the goal of capitalism, to produce as much capital, means cutting costs and creating exploitation, in order to be more efficient. Why is hard, undervalued labor being framed as the primary way that jailed individuals can be rehabilitated, and what does that even have to do with their crimes?

They are thrown into a wildfire path after just two weeks of training, and the most ironic piece is that when they get out, they will not be allowed to work in the city's fire departments due to their records. In California, incarcerated firefighters make up a third of the state's firefighting force. In 2020, Governor Newsome passed a bill that would allow these individuals with a record, the possibility to have it expunged, but it is up to individual judges whether or not that will happen for each individual convict. The slight possibility of lifting one oppressive ink stain, is definitely enough to gain some “volunteers”- without valuing the labor at its worth. It’s also enough to silence some of the outcry associated with this business.

Why has California relied on bandaids for bullet holes? Why hasn't the infrastructure been developed to handle these fires as they worsen due to climate change? The easy answer is increased privatization. States stress a focus on maintenance and repair spending, as opposed to capital, repairing the broken systems failing us when we face natural disasters- “The emphasis on maintenance isn’t too surprising given the fact that most transit agencies, water utilities, and other local units are the primary owners and operators of our infrastructure.”⁶ What’s happening

⁶ Kane, J., & Tomer, A. (2022, March 9). *Shifting into an era of repair: US Infrastructure Spending Trends*. Brookings. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/shifting-into-an-era-of-repair-us-infrastructure-spending-trends/>

in California is occurring all over the States. “From saltwater-ravaged tunnels in New York to flooding in Houston to water loss along the Colorado River, it is clear that we did not design our infrastructure and communities to manage our new climate realities.”⁷ State And local governments rely on the cheapest bidders to repair issues, doing it cheaply and quickly (all while the federal government is cutting infrastructure spending, having declined 10 billion in the past decade), resulting in them needing repairs again much quicker. Water infrastructure has had one of the sharper declines of any other spending on this type, the results of which have led to crises like the water quality and poisoning of people in Flint, Michigan. The response has been abysmal, another way to cite the racism in this country that permeates infrastructure and government spending, as the repairs were surely to have been made to the water systems of Flint if it was a majorly white city.

How do we close the gap on confusion of the correlation between racism, capitalism, and environmental justice? As mentioned earlier, the key is an intersectional perspective. We need to look at the factors, not just of gender but of race, “developing an ecologically informed intersectional approach designed to disclose the ways racism contributes to the construction of illegible lives in the domain of climate policies and practices.”⁸ Recently there has been a strong uptick in paying attention to the gender mitigated differences caused and contributing to climate change. This is important work, but this is not a new concept. Focusing on gender still tends to focus on the higher class of white women, and reminds me of critiques made of “white

⁷ Brock, J. A. (2020, November 12). *As California wildfires raged, incarcerated exploited for Labor*. USA Today. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/policing/2020/11/11/california-wildfires-raged-incarcerated-exploited-labor-column/6249201002/>

⁸ Tuana, N. (2019). Climate apartheid: The forgetting of race in the anthropocene. *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 7(1), 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.7.1.0001>

feminism”. Black women are kept out of talks of police brutality, the focus being on black men, although “almost 20 percent of the women fatally shot by police are Black, even though Black women make up only around 13 percent of women in the U.S.”⁹ Black women also struggle to have their voice heard among prolific feminists and feminist spaces, because the most well known speak specifically to white women and their specific oppression, which is quite different. No matter how you shake it, a black woman is rarely thought of as having struggles from both but from one or the other, and conversations regarding race and gender have a hard time acknowledging the struggles of both and how they may be intrinsic. “. . .Race and gender converge so that the concerns of minority women fall into the void between concerns about women's issues and concerns about racism. But when one discourse fails to acknowledge the significance of the other, the power relations that each attempts to challenge are strengthened” (Crenshaw 1991, 1282)¹⁰. We already have an issue with acknowledging all the powers at play when it is right in our face, so applying it to a topic like environmental justice, where you would not immediately think of the racial and gendered differences, will be a task, but a task that will benefit everyone once accomplished well.

Once broken down into these sections of intersectionality, it is quite easy to understand how our system came to function this way. There are extreme hurdles hindering this education, as recently as the banning of critical race theory, and the issues with the “don't say gay” bill.

⁹ Samuels, A. (2021, May 6). *Why black women are often missing from conversations about police violence*. FiveThirtyEight. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-black-women-are-often-missing-from-conversations-about-police-violence/>

¹⁰ Samuels, A. (2021, May 6). *Why black women are often missing from conversations about police violence*. FiveThirtyEight. Retrieved March 26, 2022, from <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-black-women-are-often-missing-from-conversations-about-police-violence/>

Teachers are overwhelmingly underpaid and underappreciated, and now they are being attacked for giving children a fair perspective on our systems.

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