The formulation “Antiracism Inc.” explored in this volume raises two interrelated questions. First, is there an articulation of “antiracism” that is not “incorporated” and thus remains in opposition to the dominant social, economic and political order? Second, in what ways has antiracism become incorporated, or rendered commensurate with rather than antagonistic towards these dominant structures?

This essay takes up both of those questions in turn. I first explore a tradition of racial justice that long imagined and required a fundamental reconstitution, rather than amelioration, of broad forms of governance and material relationships of power. I then discuss contemporary articulations of multiculturalism and racial inclusion that have proliferated in corporations, the military, and some conservative formations that speak in the putative language of antiracism. I conclude with a consid-

eration of the hazards and challenges long-posed by these forms of antiracist incorporation.

In 1938, as the tremors of war began pulsating across Europe, the 37-year-old Trinidadian-born writer and political critic C.L.R. James penned a series of pamphlets from his London flat. Like many of his contemporaries on the Left, James sought to make sense of the broad political, economic, and social forces that shaped this moment of revolution and upheaval. What political traditions, popular struggles, and optics on life might have proved capable of liberating the world from perpetual violence, domination and crisis?2

James turned his attention to what he described as a “revolutionary history” that was “rich, inspiring, and unknown.” A particular tradition of Black revolt and struggle, he argued, represented the repudiation of the West’s most corrupting tendencies: slavery and labor exploitation; land appropriation and control; authoritarian governance and genocide. Published together as *A History of Negro Revolt* (and 31 years later, with a new epilogue under the title *A History of Pan-African Revolt*) the short essays took aim at a prevailing historical record that depicted Black people as passive objects of history, destined to realize a painful but inevitable fate of servitude. James subverted this narrative by describing a people in constant revolt: striking for better wages in the mines of West Africa; leading uprisings on the plantations of Haiti and Jamaica; acting decisively to win their liberation during the Civil War; building new churches, schools, and associations in the aftermath to secure their freedom. As he explained in another essay published a year later, “the only place where Negroes did not revolt is in the pages of capitalist historians.”3

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James argued that these particular struggles for Black liberation had universal implications; they were responsible for nothing less than the “transformation of western civilization.” This was not because of a predisposition within Black civilizations toward revolt, though James did note the cultural practices, memories and traditions that nourished these efforts. It was a quality of Black civilizations rather than particular forms of political consciousness, experience, and exchange produced in response to the domination they endured. In Haiti for example, James described the way in which slaves who lacked formal education and who suffered the degradations of bondage achieved “a liberality in social aspiration and an elevation of political thought equivalent to anything similar that took place in France.” Similarly, after the Civil War, the forms of schooling, governance, and public development enacted by free women and men in the South reflected “the policy of a people poor and backward seeking to establish a community where all, black and white, could live in amity and freedom.”

In the crucible of their despair, new understandings of freedom and human possibility emerged, ideas that could never be imagined by governments premised on the buying and selling of human flesh.

James urged others on the Left to pay attention to these traditions, stories, and histories, insisting that they held invaluable lessons for a world in permanent crisis. James concluded the last essay of *The History of Negro Revolt* in this way: “The African bruises and breaks himself against his bars in the interest of freedoms wider than his own.”

On first blush, James’s assertion seems puzzling. Political struggles led by a particular group appear by definition to be parochial, meaning that they are applicable only to the specific conditions and experiences of those group members. Within market or interest-based interpretations of political conflict and power, one group’s gain is often another group’s loss. From this perspective, struggles authored in the interests of Black people

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5 Ibid., 106.
are at best relevant only to other Black people. At worst, they may threaten the interests and status of those who are not Black. If you win, I lose.

James thought and wrote from a much different perspective. He understood the modern concept of race to be premised upon the unequal ordering of humanity, a social and political ideology indispensable to the operation of capitalist economies and authoritarian governments. The specific and localized struggles he recounted — the abolition of slavery in the French colonies; the end of lynching in Alabama; the demand for fair wages in the Congo — produced wider interrogations of power.

In a 1948 essay, James noted that Black resistance in the United States had a “vitality and validity of its own” and “an organic political perspective” that was not simply derived from the broader labor movement or the dominant framework of rights-based liberalism. This “perspective” included a deep skepticism of “imperialist war[s]” that were never meant to secure the “freedom of the persecuted peoples by the American bourgeois.” These insights consistently led to forms of self-organization and mass action because Black people in the South in particular understood that ordinary structures of representative government, including voting, the two-party system, and other routine forms of political participation (e.g., “telegrams to Congress”) were incapable of addressing their grievances. As a result, Black movements have been able “to intervene with terrific force upon the general and social and political life of the nation….”

At their best, this collective action achieved what the theorist Cedric J. Robinson described as “the force of a historical

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antilogic to racism, slavery, and capitalism.”

In other words, in rebelling against the terms of their own subordination, these movements also confronted the broad foundations of violence, exploitation and despotism that defined so much of the development of the West. At particular moments in the development of the United States, James later contended, these rebellions “formed a force which initiated and stimulated” other sections of the population, acting “as a ferment” for much broader opposition. They demanded structural changes including the redistribution of land and resources, and the reorganization of social and political life. Thus, James argued, Black people had long toiled “in the interest of freedoms wider than [their] own.”

The claim that particular struggles against racial domination can upend much broader structures of power is most closely associated with a tradition of Black radicalism. As scholars such as Cedric J. Robinson and Robin D.G. Kelley have demonstrated, a long history of Black organizers, leaders and intellectuals, including Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hammer, Ana Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and many others continually pressed the claim that the abolition of particular forms of racist domination and violence could yield universal horizons of freedom. As the Black feminist organizers who penned the famed Combahee River Collective Statement in April 1977 explained, Black women could draw from their “position at the bottom” to initiate “revolutionary action.” They argued that Black women’s freedom would “mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”

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subordination, they invoked, demanded, and pursued visions of freedom that exceeded the terms of their own oppression.

As George Lipsitz contends, “the intellectual, moral, aesthetic, political, and spiritual legacy of the radical Black tradition” serves as “a repository of ideas and actions important to all people. The freedom dreams of Black people have never been only about Blackness, but rather have sought always to create a world transcending citizenship that would eclipse sectarian identifications and allegiances.” Following Aimé Césaire, Lipsitz advocates for “a universalism that is rich with particulars, that entails the dialogue of all, the autonomy of each, and the supremacy of none.”

This understanding of antiracist struggle as a capacious interrogation of power also has traditions and origins beyond the Black Freedom Movement. For example, across time and place indigenous people have revolted against the appropriation, commodification, and desecration of their lands and against attempts to abolish their political, cultural, and spiritual practices and traditions. The specific demands and contours of such resistance is well-documented across a rich archive, foregrounding issues of sovereignty, genocide, land theft, and the destruction of tribal cultural, linguistic, social, and political practices. The particularized revolts over these issues often directly confront the same regimes of private property, environmental exploitation, and state violence that undergird and order the United States economy as a whole.

The Nishnaabeg (First Nation) poet and scholar-activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson disputes the assumption that “Indigenous scholars and community organizers must therefore engage only in what is perceived to be Indigenous theory.” She explains instead that “our intelligence includes all the thinking that has gone into making the realities we live in and that on

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a more philosophical scale, internationalism has always been a part of our intellectual practices. With our complex ways of relating to the plant nations, animal nations, and the spiritual realm, our existence has always been inherently international regardless of how rooted in place we are.”14 Thus indigenous-led action against uranium mining on Diné (Navajo) lands in the Southwest and resistance against treaty violation and tribal sovereignty also have had universal bearing and implications. They too are bruising and breaking themselves across their bars in the interest of freedom wider than their own.15

Likewise, groups such as the New York-based DRUM—South Asian Organizing Center (formerly Desis Rising Up and Moving) that emerged in response to the profiling and detention of Muslim and South Asian Americans after 9/11, represent the latest chapter of a much longer history of Asian Pacific American resistance against militarism and racial profiling. The working-class Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities DRUM organizes challenge both the particular surveillance and detention programs that wreak havoc on their lives as well as other interconnected forms of state violence, from the militarization of the US border with Mexico to drone strikes in Pakistan.16

Similarly, particular traditions of collective resistance emanating from Chicanx, Puerto Rican, and other Latinx communities have interrogated and resisted broad structures of power and domination. For example, in the 1970s in New York and Los Angeles, Latinas mobilized to end practices of coercive and involuntary sterilizations performed on thousands of women deemed unfit to make their own decisions about bearing children. Latina-led organizations such as the Committee to Stop

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14 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 56.
Forced Sterilizations centered their activism on the women most directly affected by abusive sterilization practices. But they explained that the stakes were much wider:

The racism of the sterilizations goes further than who is actually sterilized. White workers are told that the reason taxes take so much out of their salaries is because they are supporting all those non-white people and their kids on welfare. Minority people are told that the reason they are poor is not because of job and education discrimination but because they have too many children. This helps direct the anger of these people towards poor people or towards themselves instead of against the corporations and the government of the rich.17

The Committee to Stop Forced Sterilizations linked their demand to eradicate compulsory sterilizations to a wider vision of economic justice and redistribution that would no longer view poor women of color as objects of social policy.

Broadly then, “the revolutionary history” described by C.L.R. James more than 80 years ago as “rich, inspiring, and unknown,” extends across many communities and traditions of resistance. The events that constitute this history are linked by a shared understanding of the generative and complex connection that exists between the particular and the universal. Rejecting a market framework of politics rooted in a zero-sum understanding of interests and power, these episodes demonstrate the ways that particular antiracist struggles are capable of a broad interrogation and transformation of power.

**Antiracism Inc.: The Depoliticization of Racial Justice**

C.L.R. James argued that particular episodes of Black revolt against the conditions of their subordination produced far-

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reaching conceptions of freedom and human possibility. There continues to be important examples today in which localized actions in the name of racial justice press wide-reaching claims for redistribution of economic, political and social power.

To many critics, however, the assumption that particular struggles against racial domination are central to the restructuring of political, social, and economic life in the United States is not tenable. A growing chorus of progressive scholars and writers insist that antiracist initiatives and campaigns no longer have transformative political potential. In an age of vast material inequalities, they reason, an emphasis on racial justice does little to interrupt the structures and cultural norms that continue to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of the few. At worst, such an emphasis could actually strengthen the hands of the same military, corporate, and elite interests that help to maintain and reproduce this inequality.

The literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels argues that liberal condemnations of racism, such as those centering on the lack of race and gender diversity in corporate boardrooms, seek only to diversify the class of economic elites who claim an ever-increasing share of global wealth. It is capitalism and the profit imperatives of an unrestrained market economy that produces inequality, not race-based discrimination. As Michaels contends, multiculturalism and diversity more generally are even more effective as a legitimizing tool, because they suggest that the ultimate goal of social justice in a neoliberal economy is not that there should be less difference between the rich and the poor — indeed the rule in neoliberal economies is that the difference between the rich and the poor gets wider rather than shrinks — but that no culture should be treated invidiously and that it’s basically OK if economic differences widen as long as the increasingly successful elites come to look like the increasingly unsuccessful non-elites.  

For Michaels this has produced “a contemporary anti-racism that functions as a legitimization of capital rather than as resistance or even critique.” Or as the influential political scientist and public commentator Adolph Reed Jr. bluntly put it, “antiracist politics is in fact the left wing of neoliberalism.”

Nikhil Singh explains that in this context, critics fear that an emphasis on race “risks a descent into parochialism and mystification, leaving foundational issues of capitalist domination and class inequality untouched.” To some extent, these assertions have rekindled long-standing debates about the relative importance of race versus class in explaining structural inequality in the United States. Thus we might understand figures such as Reed and Michaels, advocating a “class first” position, to be fundamentally opposed to the analysis and insights centered on race pressed by writers like C.L.R. James.

But on closer examination, this tension might be understood as productive rather than polarizing, helping to clarify the particular conditions under which resistance against racial domination might yield new possibilities of political transformation. That is, not every invocation of racial resistance, uplift, or progress produces wider visions of freedom. As critics like Reed and Michaels argue, some are fully commensurate with the status quo; others may even legitimate unequal distributions of power.

To this end, it is helpful to consider some contemporary examples in which particular invocations of antiracism serve to sustain rather than displace exploitation and inequality, or what we describe generatively in this volume as Anti-Racism, Inc. These cases demonstrate that many of the most familiar signifi-

\[19\] Ibid.
ers of antiracism have become subject to far-ranging and sometimes reactionary political ends. The very institutions that drive militarism, economic exploitation and inequality, and the appropriation of land and life in the United States and around the world, also regularly incorporate people of color as spokespersons and representatives, emphasize themes of cultural diversity and pluralism, and uplift and empower non-white groups. These gestures have become a mainstay of public discourse, devoid of any shared political meaning or intent.

Consider, for example, the various ways that units of the United States military deploy and incorporate references to race and cultural difference. In September 2011, the US Marine Corps marked Hispanic Heritage Month by launching its “Values 2.0” campaign. The initiative included a nationwide billboard campaign featuring a photo of a solemn, crisply dressed military officer silhouetted by a faintly clouded sky. The adjacent text read: “Celebrating Hispanic values and the Marines who act on them.” The campaign was partly aimed at helping the Marines cast a wider demographic net in meeting its recruitment goals. As Eric Lindsay, the Marine Corps Recruiting Command’s diversity advertising officer explained, “the values of many Hispanic families are in line with our core Marine Corps values of Honor, Courage and Commitment. We want to ensure that the Marine Corps is representative of the different ethnic groups across the country.”

Representations of racial diversity in the Marine’s $100 million annual recruitment budget have another intent too. A subsequent campaign titled “Fighting With Purpose” included web and broadcast-based videos and print ads profiling an African-American infantry officer and a Latina helicopter pilot, and a multi-media campaign that celebrated the “Monford Point Marines,” a segregated all-Black unit in the 1940s and 1950s, situating the Marines as an historic engine of

Black progress. The campaign incorporated racially diverse figures and themes in part to stress the “humanitarian” reach of the Marines Corp, a theme that focus groups found to be appealing to potential recruits of all backgrounds. As a Black soldier explains in one ad, “It’s always been a part of me to fight for those who couldn’t fight for themselves, whether on my block or around the world.”23 Marine recruiters suggest the campaigns “show the American people that their Marines are not just the world’s finest war fighters; they are also some of the world’s greatest humanitarians.”24

At a time when the US military operates bases in some 150 countries, maintains an active force of more than one million personnel around the globe, and faces continued criticism for occupation, torture, and civilian and combatant deaths, the invocations of race here are crucial. Representations of racial diversity, narratives of racial uplift, and the incorporation of people of color to signify humanitarian and service-oriented commitments perform important political labor for the Marines and other units of the US military. In this context, racial colorblindness has little payoff. Racial incorporation, diversity, and uplift are articulated as fully commensurate with the military’s global presence and mission. At the state and local level one can find hundreds of examples of law enforcement agencies pursuing similar strategies in order to both recruit people of color into their ranks and to “humanize” institutions that are continually accused of dehumanizing violence.

In several affirmative action cases heard by the Supreme Court since the early 2000s, both the US military and a coterie of Fortune 500 corporations have submitted amicus briefs

in support of race-conscious college admissions. As the military’s amicus brief for the *Grutter v. Bollinger* case (2003) concerning the University of Michigan’s affirmative action policies contended, “to lead our country’s racially diverse enlisted men and women, our nation’s fighting force requires a diverse officer corps: affirmative action policies have helped our military build a top quality officer corps that reflects America’s diversity.”

Another brief in support of race-conscious university admissions was filed by sixty-five Fortune 500 corporations (whose collective revenues exceeded a trillion dollars) including Chevron-Texaco, Nike, Lockheed Martin, and Dow Chemical. The brief announces plainly that their support for affirmative action in higher education rests on the need to ensure their “continued success in the global market place.”

The support of corporations and the military should not be taken as a sign that affirmative action is an inherently flawed or reactionary policy. To the contrary, it has played and continues to play an important role in challenging inequality and race-based subordination in higher education. Instead, corporate and military support for affirmative action demonstrates the ways in which some of the most dominant forces in the global political economy have become adept at incorporating the language and policy commitments of antiracism toward their own goals.

The brand managers and strategists of multinational corporations rely similarly on racially diverse images, spokespersons, and themes to win customers, raise profits, and build particular emotional and affective connections with their products. Take, for example, a 2013 Coca-Cola commercial titled “It’s Beauti-

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ful” that incorporated a medley of diverse families describing why the nation’s multicultural diversity was its greatest strength. Launched during the Super Bowl, the ad celebrated this diversity—from an interracial gay male couple holding the hands of their two children as they skate happily across an ice rink to a tearful teenager recounting the triumph of her immigrant experience—as emblematic of the nation’s multicultural strength and identity, united by a shared passion for a sugar-laden soft drink.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Celebrity Cruises launched its “Sail Beyond Borders” promotional campaign featuring a 30-second ad that debuted during the evening of the first presidential debate. The ad seemed to take direct aim at the sentiments witnessed at hundreds of Trump campaign rallies and events in which frenzied supporters chanted “Build the Wall!” Instead, over images of global cities, ports, and people, a somber-toned female narrator explained, “Far from the talk of building walls, far from the threats of keeping people out, far from the rhetoric of fear, is a world of differences—differences that expand and enrich us. Because, after all, our lives aren’t made better when we close ourselves off to the world—they’re made better when we open ourselves up to it.” In an interview, company officials declared the ad to be an “unapologetic declaration of company ideology,” and was not “a left or right issue” and because “millions reject this [anti-travel] rhetoric on the right.”

For Coca-Cola, Celebrity Cruises, and many other companies, neither racial colorblindness nor appeals to white fears of racial diversity seem profitable. Multicultural logics, incorporations, and representations are central to their core business strategy. These efforts demonstrate investments of corporations and economic elites in what some scholars have called “neoliberal multiculturalism,” in which representations of pluralism, multi-

culturalism, and diversity are framed as fully aligned with a market-driven society, even one structured by vast racial disparities.

These connections are summed up succinctly in a 2013 report commissioned by the liberal W.K. Kellogg Foundation titled “The Business Case for Racial Equity,” which contended that in addition to social justice considerations, “moving toward racial equity can generate significant economic returns as well.”

Similarly, a 2017 report titled “The Competitive Advantage of Racial Equity” argues that “corporate America is missing out on one of the biggest opportunities of our time for driving innovation and growth: creating business value by advancing racial equity.” Co-published by PolicyLink, an Oakland-based non-profit explicitly dedicated to advancing economic and racial equity, and FSG, a transnational consulting firm, the report profiles companies such as PayPal, the Gap, American Express, Prudential and other multinational firms to argue that “racial equity” represents a critical “source of corporate competitive advantage.” And indeed, nearly every large corporation today boasts some version of a “diversity and inclusion” initiative. Lloyd Blankfein, the chairman and CEO of Goldman Sachs, proudly proclaims on the company’s website that “diversity is at the very core of our ability to serve our clients and to maximize return for our shareholders.”

Consider also the reaction of many leading CEOs from multinational corporations in the aftermath of the August 2016 “Unite the Right” white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia that resulted in the death of an antiracist activist named Heather D. Heyer. After Trump refused to offer an unqualified condemnation of the white supremacist protesters, insisting that there was “hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides,” CEOs resigned en masse from Trump’s two economic advisory councils, insisting the white supremacist commitments on display clashed with their values. As Inge Thulin, CEO of 3M explained, “Sustain-

ability, diversity and inclusion are my personal values and also fundamental to the 3M Vision. The past few months have provided me with an opportunity to reflect upon my commitment to these values.\textsuperscript{31}

The point here is that many of the most public and legible expressions of contemporary antiracism—celebrations of diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusion and condemnations of bigotry and extremism—are fully compatible with the dominant commitments of the neoliberal order. Jodi Melamed has argued that neoliberal policy itself “engenders new racial subjects, as it creates and distinguishes between newly privileged and stigmatized collectivities, yet multiculturalism codes the wealth, mobility, and political power of neoliberalism’s beneficiaries to be the just desserts of ‘multicultural world citizens,’ while representing those neoliberalism dispossesses to be handicapped by their own ‘monoculturalism’ or other historico-cultural deficiencies.”\textsuperscript{32} Neoliberal multiculturalism performs historically specific work by “breaking with an older racism’s reliance on phenotype to innovate new ways of fixing human capacities to naturalize inequality. The new racism deploys economic, ideological, cultural, and religious distinctions to produce lesser personhoods, laying these new categories of privilege and stigma across conventional racial categories, fracturing them into differential status groups.”\textsuperscript{33}

The contradictory uses of antiracism come into full view in a 2012 legal case titled \textit{Vergara v. California} initiated by a group of conservative foundations and Silicon Valley investors seeking to weaken state laws concerning the job security, tenure, and employment rights of public school teachers in California. The suit


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 14.
claimed that these protections were unconstitutional because they violated the civil rights of African-American and Latinx students who disproportionately suffered the burden of being taught by bad teachers. If teachers lost these rights, the suit asserted, they could more easily be disciplined and fired, thus improving the learning conditions of Black and Latinx students. A Superior Court judge ruled in the group’s favor, determining that statutes providing for the employment rights of teachers infringed upon the equal protection guarantees of the Fourteenth Amendment and the California constitution. And while it was conservative-leaning groups long hostile to the workplace protections of unionized teachers that initially pressed this claim, many people of color, including parents, students, elected officials, and judges, endorsed the idea that to promote racial equity, public school teaching must become a less secure profession. While the state court of appeals overturned the verdict in a 2016 decision, the underlying legal and political argument continues to find fertile ground in lawsuits filed in other states.34

Neoliberal multiculturalism has also come to shape political projects and mobilizations led by people of color. Take for example the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), founded in 1971 by African-American members of Congress, that fashions itself today “as the voice for people of color and vulnerable communities in Congress.”35 Many early members of the CBC had deep connections to mass-based civil rights, feminist, and Black Power movements that helped make their election possible. Today, the CBC also has deep connections to corporate lobbyists and donors that covet the influence of many high-ranking CBC members. Lobbyists and executives from “Boeing, Wal-Mart, Dell, Citigroup, Coca-Cola, Verizon, Heineken, Anheuser-Busch and

the drug makers Amgen and GlaxoSmithKline” sit on the board of the CBC Foundation.\(^\text{36}\) Between 2004 and 2008 alone, a time of growing Black poverty and rising corporate profits, these and dozens of other companies poured more than $55 million into the CBC’s political and charitable arms, often at lavish fundraising galas hosted by corporate lobbyists for CBC members.

All of these examples demonstrate the political capaciousness of antiracism. Like race itself, antiracism “floats” as a signifier; it has no inherent political valence or meaning. As the US military, Fortune 500 companies, and anti-union elites have learned, invocations of diversity, multiculturalism, and racial inclusion and equality can be fully commensurate with their agendas and interests. In many ways, the current regime of neoliberal multiculturalism represents the rise of a *depoliticized antiracism* — efforts presumed to stand against racial inequality and hierarchy that simply invite incorporation into existing systems of domination and power.

To some commentators, antiracism has become so thoroughly depoliticized that it no longer holds any possibility of transforming social, economic, and political relations writ large. Thus, there is no wider type of freedom at stake in the particular and localized rebellions of racially subordinated groups. From this perspective, those rebellions cannot be universalistic or broadly emancipatory because they fail to address the structures of control that *really* matter: the organization of the capitalist economy and the forms of exploitation, abandonment, or regulation that capitalism always produces.

Yet what this analysis, and so many others like it, fails to recognize and engage is a political tradition of antiracism and racial justice that has forged, in the crucibles of racial domination and violence, demands for a world organized around new structures of power, possibility, and life — including possibilities of economic life beyond the demands of capitalism. Rather than

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seeking incorporation into dominant systems of power or a limited set of rights to participate in these systems, these traditions of political imagination, cultural production, and collective struggle seek not only to challenge racial domination but also to reconstitute the society that has produced such a diminished view of humanity.

Central to this tradition has been the recognition that antiracism has always had many articulations, including some that are devoid of any transformative or oppositional possibilities. While these politically attenuated projects have accelerated in the era of neoliberal multiculturalism, they are hardly new. Many thoughtful and engaged critics have long understood that many political demands and mobilizations led by people of color or executed in the name of ending racial domination are not premised on emancipatory ambitions. C.L.R. James himself noted in 1938 that the “colored middle classes are making great progress. They grumble at racial discrimination, but their outlook is the same as that of the rich whites, and indeed their sole grievances are that they do not get all the posts they want, and that whites do not often invite them to dinner.” At the end of World War II he noted the growth of organized elite efforts to “win the minds” of Black people through modest reform efforts aimed at reducing individual racial prejudice. James offered these observations in order to clarify the relationship between particular struggles against racial domination and wider disruptions and transformations of power. But he does not presume that the parochial political vision of the “colored middle classes” necessarily poisons the emancipatory potential of all resistance against racial domination. To dismiss all such efforts as narrow or complicit misses their transformative and indeed universal potential.

Modes and experiences of racial domination are not singular or unitary, and resistance against racism does not always yield

37 James, A History of Pan-African Revolt, 97.
38 Meyer, “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in US (1948).” In this speech, James presciently identified the recent publication of Gunnar Myrdal’s An American Dilemma as expressive of a “powerful theoretical demonstration of the [bourgeois] position” on race.
new and transformative visions of justice. As many women-of-color feminists have long emphasized, there are significant and profound divisions and distinctions within communities of color. Their interests, identities, and experiences are not uniform, but are differentially shaped by the material forces of class, gender, sexuality, and place. For example, as the scholar/activist Andrea Smith explains, because white supremacy, as a global framework of power and dispossession, operates through multiple “pillars” or modes of domination, it is often the case that the surest way to escape one mode of domination is to participate in another. In the early nineteenth century, a small number of indigenous groups in the US Southeast participated in the system of chattel slavery that dominated the Southern economy.

These incentives have recruited even the most brilliant of antiracist thinkers and activists. At the end of the nineteenth century, the journalist Ida B. Wells penned devastating critiques of the lynching, extra-legal violence, and torture visited on hundreds of Black bodies each year. She explained that a nation that proclaimed itself to be at the vanguard of civilization and modernity was also one in which “butchery is made a pastime and national savagery condoned.” One of the ways Wells challenged the hypocrisy of these claims was to liken lynching’s brutal acts of dehumanization with the violence wrought by the “red Indian of the Western plains” who “tied his prisoner to the stake, tortured him, and danced in fiendish glee while his victim writhed in the flames.” She argued that a society that tolerated the lynching of African Americans was debasing itself to the status of the Indian’s “savage, untutored mind” which

knew of “no better way than that of wreaking vengeance upon those who had wronged him.”  

In a nation founded on both the dispossession of Black bodies and the theft of Native lands, Wells challenged the logic of the former by invoking the racist caricatures used to justify the latter. Andrea Smith argues that the structure of white supremacy rewards such forms of complicit resistance, as when Black and Brown soldiers from the US are summoned to participate in wars of imperialism abroad in order to secure basic rights and dignity at home. Similarly, one way for Asian Americans to struggle against the racist logic that renders Asians as permanently foreign and perpetual enemies of the state is to participate in forms of anti-Black subordination that demonstrate their belonging. In this perverse framework, one can escape some of the burden of racial subordination by partaking in the devaluation of others.

Vincent Harding, the influential historian of the Black freedom struggle and an important confidant of Dr. King, suggests that the very struggle against segregation and racism produces the complicity to participate in such a system. As the crescendo of the civil rights movement began to recede, and Dr. King’s appeal to struggle against the “triple threats” of capitalism, militarism, and racism faded from collective memory, Harding called for a critical self-examination that would “see how much over the past fifteen to twenty years we black folks have decided (consciously or not) to fight racism by seeking ‘equal opportunity’ or a ‘fair share’ in the nation’s militarism and its materialism. In other words, we have chosen to struggle against one of the ‘triple threats’ by joining the other two, a destructive choice.”

In pursuing such a course, Harding warned “we have imbibed much of the spirit...of greed, belligerency, fearful callouses, and

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43 Vincent Harding, Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero (Ossining: Orbis, 2008), 49.
individualism, a spirit that makes us anti-poor people, anti-immigrants, that creates injustice, that makes for war.”

Writing 40 years after Dr. King’s death, Harding warned about the risks of such complicity, explaining that it would be “unfaithful to our own best history of struggle and to the hopes of the exploited peoples of the world, if black folk in the USA were to settle for what is now called ‘a piece of the pie’—some proportionate cut of the wealth amassed by this nation’s military-industrial empire.” Harding argued that Dr. King “understood how fundamentally the structures of military and economic domination are built on the exploitation and deprivation of our own poor people” and that “by definition, that the shares of this system could never be fair.”

For Harding and Dr. King, the possibilities for articulating what he called “a greater, richer vision of freedom” lay precisely in those traditions of struggle and solidarity that refused such complicity. He asked: “How would history have judged us if our black fore parents had somehow managed to accompany the marauding American armies into Mexico in the 1840s and asked for our ‘fair share’ of the stolen, conquered land? And what would our children now be saying if in any large numbers we had followed the US troops on their genocidal sweep across the plains, stained with the blood of the Natives of this land, asking for our ‘fair share’ of their sacred places?”

Harding explained that Dr. King “urged us to see ourselves moving forward always, urgently holding ourselves in the vanguard of humanity’s best possibilities” and “asked us to see our freedom as empowering us to create new values, to envision a new society” that would “break beyond self-centered goals, to work for a new humanity.” Here, Harding follows not just King but a long tradition of Black women writers and organizers, including Lorraine Hansberry, Ella Baker, and Audre Lorde, in

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44 Ibid., 51.
45 Ibid., 49.
46 Ibid., 53.
47 Ibid., 49.
48 Ibid., 909.
describing the wider forms of solidarity, consciousness, and empathy that can be produced through particular struggles.49

These stories do not cohere into a fully formed and coherent manifesto, platform or normative political vision. They are more productively understood as episodes of rebellion that have yielded an archive of political practices, perceptions, and enactments that offer important lessons for those hoping to reverse the widening gulf in power and freedom that marks contemporary life. They recount and excavate struggles that have always been particular in their form and aspiration, yet universal in their insights. As Audre Lorde explained, “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives… Our struggles are particular, but we are not alone.”50

The wider type of freedom envisioned by C.L.R. James and so many others stands in bold contrast to the forms of “Anti-racism, Inc.” through which contemporary neoliberalism operates. Lorde’s understanding of ways that the particularities of specific struggles can contain the seeds of broad political transformation serves as one touchstone through which we might reverse the depoliticization of antiracism and realize an alternative future.

50 Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Berkeley: Crossings, 2007), 138.