

Reparative Democracy

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ABSTRACT This essay argues that the democratic practices and ethos we require today must be relentlessly and radically reparative in relation to past and present ways of life that threaten human and planetary well-being. Such an orientation transmogrifies what democracy means and entails, including its temporalities, ontologies, and spatialities, as well as its notions of justice, freedom, and equality. The essay begins by identifying the crises and lingering damages of “fossil modernity” and the overdetermined exhaustion of liberal democracy. It then adumbrates features of reparative democracy, in theory and practice. It concludes with a discussion of one contemporary instance of reparative democracy, #StopCopCity, the mobilization against clearing a forest adjacent to impoverished Black neighborhoods in Atlanta, Georgia, for the building of a militarized police training facility.

KEYWORDS Anthropocene, liberal democracy, reparative democracy, climate emergency, critique, Cop City, freedom, equality, justice

This essay introduces the notion of “reparative democracy.” The idea of reparative democracy does not refer to restoring liberal constitutional democracy to a mythical former splendor.¹ Nor is it primarily concerned with reparations to peoples and places oppressed or exploited under past regimes, or with building new constitutional orders “after evil.”² Rather, my argument is that the democratic practices and ethos we require today must be relentlessly and radically reparative in relation to past and present ways of life threatening both human and planetary well-being. This orientation transmogrifies what democracy means and entails, including its temporalities (practices of relating to past and future); its ontologies (ways of relating human and nonhuman life); and its spatialities (understandings of where democracy resides and matters).

Reparative democracy is not an abstract normative concept born from the heads of political theorists. Rather, without being named as such, it is emerging immanently from the twin crises of democracy and ecology that imperil all planetary life today, albeit unevenly. It engages the deep damages of colonial capitalist

modernity, or what Andreas Folkers calls “fossil modernity.”³ As reparative democracy is called into being by these crises and damages, it is an orientation and set of practices—sometimes unannounced, even inchoate, other times explicit about its novel aims and radical turns—that arises from the limits, failures, and vulnerabilities of existing social and economic forces and arrangements of political power. Yet if, for Marx, such immanence was keyed exclusively to modes of production, today it is also keyed to exhaustions and residuals, both ecological and social, of these forces and arrangements.

In what follows, I briefly elucidate the twin crises of ecology and liberal democracy, then adumbrate reparative democracy as one of their potential offspring. (Neofascism twinned with big capital is another.) I then narrate an instance of reparative democracy today, the multipronged mobilization against clearing a forest adjacent to impoverished Black neighborhoods in Atlanta, Georgia, in order to build a large, militarized police training facility. This mobilization, known as #StopCopCity and #SavetheAtlantaForest, was not ultimately successful, and many of its most dedicated participants now face outsize criminal charges and prison sentences. However, initial iterations of a new political form are often marginalized or violently suppressed. Significant for our purposes is less this mobilization’s failure to achieve its explicit aims than its contrast with the liberal democratic practices it opposed.

1. Critique

What we know. The climate and biodiversity emergency, as well as its manifest imbrication with human inequalities of every kind, is a colossal indictment of past and present modes of human living, governing, provisioning, and relating to each other and to other life-forms. Western civilization, especially but not only Euro-American modernity and its spawn, colonialism and capitalism, appear now as unmitigated disasters for much of human and nonhuman life. This makes our present task that of unflinching critique—not only of manifest wrongs but of inherited understandings and practices of politics and economy, human and other-than-human, nature and culture, time and space, agency, science, life, growth, consumption, cohabitation, wealth, and well-being. If earth system and science studies scholars grasped decades ago this need to rethink fundamental paradigms of knowledge and practice, social and political theorists have been strangely slower to arrive. But as we do, finally, here is our predicament: The emergency is upon us, alarm sirens scream, yet we must reckon with all that brought us here—historiographies, ontologies, epistemologies, political economies, and more.

So there is no time to think yet no choice but to think, deeply and differently—that is, to engage in critique that aims at illuminating how we arrived at this catastrophic conjuncture. We cannot just promulgate reversals and inversions—socialism for capitalism, nature for culture, vitalism for inertness, small for big,

local for global (or national), plants for animals, sovereignty for empire, Indigeneity for colonialism, networks for individuals, dependency for autonomy. These are the very co-constitutive modernist binaries we need to question. Moreover, the most basic assumptions and associations have been disrupted by our current conjuncture, from freedom's link with emancipation to the province of human governing, to revolutionary dreams anchored exclusively by human lives and labor. Infinite growth and abundance, enlightenment, humanism, productivism, and more appear now as riddled with blindness and hubris. In political ecologist Pierre Charbonnier's elegant formulation, "We inherit a world that no available political category is designed to manage"—a condition, he adds, that severs us "from the past and the future as we had imagined it up until now." He thoughtfully names this condition one of "historic loneliness."⁴

There is a paradox inside this loneliness, though, to which Charbonnier does not attend. The climate crisis radically unmoors us from received political coordinates and landscapes, yet, as eco-social theorist Andreas Folkers reminds us, any future we make now will forever bear *residuals* of the extraction-production-consumption practices of the last two centuries.⁵ In this paradox, we are at once thrown from our intellectual and political inheritances yet materially ensnared in the histories they set in motion. Put differently, if, for Marx, "the traditions of all dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living," the weight of the lingering social practices and consciousness Marx invokes is feather-light compared to the earthly damages conditioning all possible futures now.⁶ It is not only that, as Eva von Redecker puts it, "destruction is stored in traumatized bodies, toxic residues, and, via the atmosphere, in our weather system" (pers. comm., February 2025) but also that residuals of fossil modernity generate new agencies, or what Bruno Latour calls "actants" in the Anthropocene and so-called postcolonial era.⁷ Soaring piles of toxic trash, plastic particulate and forever chemicals in everything everywhere, accelerating extinction chains, and greenhouse gas atmospherics generating geothermal cycles, loops, and crashes of growing speed and force—all of these actively participate in shaping conditions for all life on earth, forevermore.⁸ Centuries of colonialism—with its extractivist basis and extreme disparities—also produce enduring political, economic, cultural, and topographic legacies and agencies that, as its subjects know well, are not overcome with sovereign independence, progressive development schemes, or reparations.

A second paradox, then. Never in history has there been a more obvious need for total revolution, yet gone is the prospect of a revolutionary break with the past—of an *Aufhebung* that carries forward the good and leaves behind the bad.⁹ Not only will the effluents and emissions of the past two centuries linger long and heavy; they have future lives on and above earth for which mass migrations and starvations, monsoon floods, wildfires, droughts, species collapse, and ocean life

with bellies full of plastics are simultaneously metaphors and practical events. Toxic emissions and debris, unprecedentedly ubiquitous, permeating *and* agentic, participate in making futures now experienced as rushing toward rather than opening before us. These are futures to navigate or survive rather than anticipate or craft as we wish; they are envisioned as narrowing tunnels rather than expanding horizons and approached in the mode of damage control rather than through those old revolutionary tropes — natality, rebirth, and renewal, not to mention utopia. Benjamin’s angel of modern history, for whom “the storm we call progress irresistibly propels us into a future to which our back is turned,” has left the scene. The historiography of the angel has become an earthly one amid quotidian recognition that instead of “a chain of events, [modernity wrought] one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurl[ing] it in front of [our] feet.”¹⁰

For Folkers, the temporal orientation of critique is itself altered by the crisis of what he terms “fossil modernity.”¹¹ All elements of modernist critique, Folkers suggests, have lost their “prime source of nourishment—the open future once facilitated by fossil fuels.”¹² This feature of fossil modernity (yes, wrought by and plumping empires and their beneficiaries) also severs critique decisively from utopia. Not because all possible futures are necessarily dystopian (we need to put that unhelpful word in a corner for a while—it keeps utopia alive more than we know) but simply because earthly life will never be free of what fossil modernity unleashed. There is only what Anna Tsing and colleagues call “arts of living on a damaged planet,” arts that include critique and theory, not just tiny houses, climate justice, or the wily ways of fungi.¹³ This is as true of the politics of the postcolony as of rivers fouled with cadmium, selenium, and arsenic from mountaintop mining runoff, or plant and animal microbes learning to metabolize plastic.¹⁴ We will end fossil fuel use or it will end us, but fossil modernity shapes every aspect of every possible future now; such is the unique history the Anthropocene set in motion and why we still need the term, whatever its limits.¹⁵ Thus, Folkers concludes, critique at this juncture necessarily becomes *reparative* in orientation and form.¹⁶

Reparative critique (which re-sutures the rending of critique and repair that Eve Sedgwick advanced in the 1990s) bears a profoundly different ethos and orientation from critique bound to totality and utopia.¹⁷ It is humbled by past errors of progressivism and anthropocentrism, of course, but also by those of dialectics, pure immanence, *Geist*, and standing the world on its head. This humility does not weaken critique’s radical impulses, its powerful puncturing of orders of power to achieve incandescent exposés of those powers and their effects and to reveal the assumptions and norms they sediment and circulate. But it does bring critique closer to the ground, making it radically material, divesting it of historical meta-narratives, toppling many of its idols, anachronizing its favored tropes, and replacing the notion of Man at its center with imbricated earthly life, or what Latour calls

terrestrials.¹⁸ Let us see what happens when we bring this orientation to the problem child that is democracy today.

2. Democracy in Crisis

Constitutional (representative, liberal, bourgeois) nation-state democracy is in crisis, a crisis that indexes an overdetermined historical exhaustion of the form and that implicitly calls for a new one. Here, we face not only liberal democracy's rickety and challenged present and its seeming haplessness before global powers and problems, but its poisonous and lingering pasts—its legacies of violences and exclusions, both human and nonhuman.

The most familiar face of the crisis features overt attacks on liberal and constitutional democratic principles, processes, and institutions by autocrats, plutocrats, neofascists, authoritarians, religious nationalists, and ethnonationalists. The legitimacy and success of these attacks builds from four decades of neoliberal effects. These include extremes of wealth and poverty; declining prospects for working- and middle-class populations; unprecedented demographic displacements and migrations; intensifying control of subjects, industries, and states by novel formations and operations of finance; and a form of governing reason that torched the meaning of the common good, supplanted the principle of equality with the principle of winners and losers, flooded politics more generally with market values and techniques, and equated social justice with totalitarian statism.¹⁹ Intensifying these effects are powerful right-wing machineries built for manipulating voters, electoral corruption, and instrumentalizing democratic institutions and principles for antidemocratic purposes.

There are also the heavily eroded conditions and collective capacity for democracy, a capacity that requires political equality, modestly shared political culture, civic education, thoughtfulness, and care for the common.²⁰ This erosion includes what Fintan O'Toole names the unprecedented aestheticization of political life today, its ubiquitous theatricality.²¹ It includes the catastrophic crisis of accountable knowledge fomented by the intertwining of this aestheticization, the nihilistic deprecation of all values and consequent dissolution of all political aims apart from power positioning, and the paradoxical webs and silos of unregulated social media.²² It includes the saturation of contemporary political discourse with polemic and mendacity. Democratic culture does not require Truth with a capital T but does require reflexivity, even critique, to advance its aspirational universalism and ability to respond to contemporary challenges. It dies when it dissolves into demagoguery and power politics, sectarian public passions, and other forms of unwillingness to brook challenges or stay with hard questions.²³

Today's oft-decried political polarization, which breeds winner-take-all politics in place of principles of coexistence, compromise, and commitment to the

whole, is the symptom rather than the cause of this lost capacity for democracy and this absent faith in democratic culture or institutions. No one today expects adherence to democratic procedures, deliberations, compromises, or problem solving—either among leaders and legislators or among the people. No one expects more than performances and strategic positioning, including from their own party or leaders, or even reputable media. No one feels represented in constitutional democracies today. Political scientists refer to this as a crisis of trust animating populism; it is far deeper than that.²⁴

Liberal democracy's exhausted and outmoded condition also arises from the fact that most contemporary world-shaping forces—production, supply chains, finance, climate change, extinction chains, displaced peoples, terror, digital communication and surveillance, AI, securitization—all have transnational flows and coordinates even if states remain important actors in relation to them.²⁵ Many of these forces entail complexities beyond even an educated people, let alone citizenries produced by the neoliberal assault on practices of education bound to worldly knowledge as opposed to job training. Some index emergencies. And to be justly and effectively addressed, most require massively transformed ways of life.²⁶ These qualities—global powers, complex problems, emergencies, necessary sacrifice, and changed ways of life—have always been the weak suits of democracy, especially but not only liberal and nation-state democracy.²⁷

This portrait of constitutional democracy in peril from the combination of organized right-wing attacks, neoliberal erosions, weakened national sovereignty, and damaged political culture is deeply familiar. However, liberal democracy is also challenged today by antiracist, anticolonial, anti-imperial, feminist, queer, ecological, and neo-Marxist critiques.²⁸ These critiques indict democracy's long record of failed inclusion and power-sharing, its faux neutrality, and its inability to deliver even equal treatment before the law. They identify the imbrication of modern Euro-Atlantic democracy and patriarchy, slavery, Native genocide, empire, and capital with the persistence of white monied thumbs on the scales of justice, and with carceral states that punish the poor and marginal, protect the privileged, and ransack the global commons for the few. Framing liberal democracy as a racket for the powerful, at home and abroad, these critiques shine light on the exclusions, supremacisms, and violences of actually existing democracies, excavate their deplorable histories, and cast worship of democracy's idealized form as cover for gendered and racial capitalism's savage ways.

Then there is the problem of life beyond the demos, nonhuman life. Its lack of place in modern Western democracy was an absence the West was so proud of for so long, part of its imagined superiority to those it colonized, enslaved, or cast as "closer to nature." Constitutionalizing nature and securing legal standing for rivers, forests, or threatened species together aim at modestly correcting this exclusion.²⁹

But these practices do not reach to the sequester of a democratic citizenry from what sustains it that we find in Western democracy's origin and development, prior to modernity, prior to its entwinement with the liberal ontology that, with its methodological individualism, disavows interconnected earthly life. Democracy not only was conceived and practiced historically as anthropocentric but also inscribed this anthropocentrism through a cascade of culture/nature binaries that rendered the *demos* itself partial. There has always been a large part of earthly life—both human and nonhuman—that is no part of democracy or democracies.³⁰

Let us probe this more closely. Democracy in the West emerges at the site of ancient Greek oppositions between *polis* and *oikos*, politics and economy, city and outside lands—all of these binaries corresponding to that between the free and unfree. While the big Greek thinkers were wary of democracy, moderns plucked it from their disregard only to remain saddled with this sequester of politics from life, both social and earthly, and hence with practices of political freedom—ruling ourselves—that rest on yet depoliticize social, economic, and ecological relations of subjection. Put another way, *politika*, the Greek term behind the English one for politics, signifies rule over “common affairs,” but these common affairs are exclusively those of *polis* and citizenry, both heavy with exclusions of the creatures and labors sustaining them. The birth of democracy in the West thus semantically and practically excludes the politics of households, countrysides, production, extraction, and human relations with the nonhuman world. As such, it naturalizes domination in each domain, disavows the interdependencies they embody, and builds a figure of democratic man with slaves and instrumentalized beasts as its premise, not only its opposite.³¹ The foundational Western splitting of politics from everything arrayed under “necessity” and “nature”—nonhuman life, and human production and reproduction—delivers both an exclusionary *demos* and an irresponsible form of *kratia*, one cut off from and self-authorized to violate the sources of its own sustenance.³² This makes ontologies and practices of Western democracy co-responsible with the voraciousness of capitalism for the histories of damage to human and nonhuman life that have now reached an emergency pitch.

Women and workers can be enfranchised, slaves can be emancipated, without rectifying this detachment of *kratia*, political rule, from economic, ecological, and social powers. This was the possibility that animated Marx's critique of “political emancipation” equated with civil rights and the franchise.³³ It is why he shifted his critical gaze from the political to the social, from freedom as formal belonging to transformation of the material conditions generating unfreedom, and why he regarded bourgeois constitutional democracy as a ruse and gave up on political life as a venue for both freedom and equality. Turning not only Hegel but also Aristotle on their heads, however, Marx tacitly embraced the schema he inverted. Now the social would be primary, the political derivative, and nonhuman life still

in the shadows. The embrace was consequential; the sequestration remains intact! Abolition of private ownership does not democratize political power or remake our relation to the rest of earthly life. Indeed, the twentieth century was a long, painful lesson that public ownership without democratic rule can be as unemancipatory and ecologically devastating as democracy bound to capitalism.

Where are we then? Liberal democracy appears not merely under attack but exhausted as a historical form, and in need of critique. Assaulted by an openly autocratic right; undermined by neoliberal reason and its spawn, plutocracy and technocracy; castigated by much of the left; eroded and corroded by less visible forces such as aestheticism and nihilism; and unable to harness contemporary powers or address many of the predicaments they create, liberal democracy is also so thickly entwined with foundational and contingent exclusions, conceits, and neglects that it would be understandable if we thought it deserved to die. However, we rarely do. Or, even as we think it in one mood, we fret anxiously about democracy's imperiled state in another. If our attachment is not mere fetish or failure of imagination but is grounded in an abiding commitment to political self-rule, and if it is therefore democracy and not liberalism to which we are attached, then what lies before us is the project of building an alternative form.

3. Reparative Democracy

Repair is a ubiquitous term in social, political, and legal thought today.³⁴ The intellectual turn accompanies a practical one comprising racial reparations, postconflict reconciliation and restitution, ecological restoration and justice, and the “right to repair” consumer-environmental movement opposing barriers to repair built into appliances and devices, hardware and software.³⁵ Some have identified the turn to repair with “broken world thinking” where coordinates of “erosion, breakdown and decay” have overtaken modernist ones of “novelty, growth and progress.”³⁶ However, *repair* is a term du jour not only because the world is a mess or because “critique has run out of steam.”³⁷ Nor does this turn index political retrenchment or defeat in building a radically different future.³⁸ On the contrary, a reparative politics is a transformative one and in fact anticipates more transformations than those of a modernist left revolutionary agenda, since it must address not only ownership and distributional and representational issues but also the ideational frameworks shaping the politics threatening all planetary life, albeit in grossly unequal ways. At the same time, when revolution can no longer be imagined to redeem or overcome the past, what Tsing calls “the arts of living on a damaged planet,” or what Folkers terms “staying with the rubble,” becomes fundamental to reparative politics.³⁹

If, as Folkers argues, any futures we make now will forever bear the *residuals* (and, I would add, *agencies*) of fossil modernity, this pertains not only to ecological domains but also to the ways capitalism and colonialism carved and shaped

hemispheres, nations, peoples, wealth, and misery.⁴⁰ A reparative politics neither collapses helplessly or fatalistically before the immense damages of Euro-Atlantic modernity nor minimizes these to pretend that we might overleap them. It is a radically untheological stance.

It is also important to mark the difference between the term *reparative* and a more familiar and freighted one, *reparations*. Reparations—in the United States for slavery and for Japanese Americans interned during World War II; in Germany for Holocaust victims; routinely proposed for Indigenous peoples throughout the world; and from rich to poor nations for climate damage—differ from reparative democracy, though they might be part of it. *Reparation* (noun) is a concrete practice of restitution, redress, atonement, or payment for historical wrongs conditioning lives in the present and future. *Reparative* (adjective) reorients and resignifies the noun it modifies, resetting the noun's conventional spatial and temporal coordinates and altering the elements within its purview. Reparations are deeds or acts relating to historical wrongs, whether moral, political, or economic. At their best—the work of Olúfẹmí Táíwò and Elizabeth Anderson is exemplary here—they attempt to mitigate contemporary inequalities born of historical deprivations and exclusions that, if unaddressed, will be reproduced in future distributive arrangements.⁴¹ Reparative democracy, however, is not limited to distributive justice. Rather, it is an entire orientation and ethos for crafting futures in relation to the irreparable damages of the past, along with the agencies these set in motion. Reparative democracy is also ongoing and unfinished, as fossil modernity and legacies of political exclusions and violences are. Its temporalities are thus different from those of reparations, although, as I noted, it may include them.

Reparative democracy would entail above all self-repair of and from democracy's troubling long histories and not only its recent ones. Democracy's meaning, principles, and practices are transmogrified through tethering the *demos* both to the nonhuman and to histories of damage that bear on the present and future. These two tethers alter, uncomfortably for many, the meanings and temporalities of justice. Justice in the Western tradition, not only within liberalism but from Plato to Douglass, Marx to Fanon, is immediate, presentist. (The rallying cry: "What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!" is a signature of this immediacy.) Justice in this tradition also strives for atemporal coordinates and for institutionalization at odds with responsiveness to agentic elements of the past in the present, the interdependency of life-forms, and future thriving for multiple species. In reparative democracy, the immediate needs and demands of the present cannot dictate the terms of justice, a "cannot" that challenges liberalism's centering of justice on rights and distribution to individuals rather than sustenance and regeneration amid interdependence and the common. Of course, justice in reparative democracy must be alert to the extreme stratifications generated by

fossil modernity, especially but not only the disparate demographic effects of climate change, resource depletions, and water contamination as well as decarbonizing and degrowth projects.⁴² But alertness, while important, does not reach to the divide between social justice politics and ecological repair—that is, to the politics of the old culture/nature divide.⁴³ It neither incorporates nonhuman life into justice parameters nor recasts social-ecological relations as a reparative practice.

In addition to justice, reparative democracy would alter valences and practices of freedom, both individual and political. Freedom would shed its identification with sovereignty and autonomy, and rectify its disavowals of all the powers, ripple effects, and differential histories and positionings bearing on its exercise.⁴⁴ Freedom also would lose its presentist ethos; its temporalities would change in ways that Eva von Redecker has explored in her book *Bleibefreiheit* (*The Freedom to Stay*).⁴⁵ To mobilize human capacities for democratic ecological repair, freedom takes shape as relational, responsive, and responsible, with both past and future constantly on its horizon. Neither individual nor political freedom would lose their foundation in our singular species capacity to craft or govern powers for chosen ends. But this could not be further from license or entitlement limited by the (human) harm principle.

Reparative democracy also entails a new iteration of robust political equality. The voiced and unvoiced cannot count differentially, a “cannot” that supplements free speech with deep listening as the democratic practice par excellence. It requires listening differently than anthropocentrism or colonialism permits, consistently registering what eco-theorists call “the sounds of life” and not only human language.⁴⁶ Concentrations of economic and social power must also be vigilantly restrained from either amplifying or suppressing any part of this expanded democratic subject, constituency, and discourse. Still, political equality is about more than counting or who counts and also exceeds measure by individual units.⁴⁷ Political equality in a reparative mode is responsive to deep histories of inequalities—racial, gendered, regional, and hemispheric, and between human and nonhuman—that bear on discursive norms and agendas in democratic spheres. It requires access to material prerequisites to sharing rule: adequate food, shelter, knowledge, education, and protection from violence. Above all, it requires understanding the needs of life-forms democracy has not previously bothered with—earthworms and coral reefs, forests and bee colonies—in order to render them part of the commonweal and common good with which democratic rule is concerned. This is the challenge posed by replacing an instrumental relationship with nature with an interdependent one. Both freedom and equality in reparative democracy are built from recognizing that the fate of other species rests largely in our hands, yet our fate rests with them. As the figure of democratic citizenry and sovereignty is transformed and expanded in this way, the nature and constituents of political freedom—self-rule—are altered.

Framed philosophically, reparative democracy is rooted in the deep ecological materialism called for by Bruno Latour.⁴⁸ Such a materialism comprises not only modes of production and reproduction, or agency discovered in “things,” but also all constellations of interdependent planetary life, human intersecting nonhuman, and shaping past, present, and future. Similarly, reparative critique does not simply “grasp things by their root,” as Marx wrote in his critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. Rather, it further de-reifies the social processes Marx focused on in order to incorporate the soil nourishing the root, and the historical residuals within that soil, as part of what it engages.⁴⁹

The above are small tastes of the reorientations demanded by reparative democracy. We need not look for their emergence from the pens of normative theorists or legal reforms. Rather, we find adumbrations and whispers of them in uprisings that conjoin ecology, democracy, freedom, and justice—Standing Rock in the United States or the struggles of Indigenous forest protectors in the Amazon. They also appear in many radical political experiments today, with land trusts, food sovereignty, and local planning. Intellectually, we find them in the energies of what Jason Frank calls constituent power, the Colectivo Situaciones names destituent power, Etienne Balibar identifies as workshops of democracy, Cedric Robinson calls Black radical democracy, Sheldon Wolin terms fugitive democracy, Jacques Rancière formulates as the insurgency of the uncounted, and Anne Norton calls wild democracy.⁵⁰ They are captured in the chant, “This is what democracy looks like,” born in the 1999 WTO protests and reprised in countless uprisings and occupations since. The chant celebrates popular voice and noninstitutionalized assembly, and often stands for more than humans, yet dodges populist flirtations with demagogic leaders or an authoritarian spirit.⁵¹ In making demands for shelter, clean water and air, education, livable wages, or freedom from racial and gendered violence, *and* demands to protect or regenerate watersheds and wetlands, rivers, forests, oceans, and endangered species, these occupations and uprisings contest the sequestration of politics from social, economic, intimate, and ecological life that is at the foundation of the Western notion of the political.

Three things, though, to note about these bursts of popular power challenging the monopoly on democracy by constitutions, institutions, elites, liberalism, and nation states, and its profound corruption by neoliberalism: First, most hack democracy in half—demotic uprisings are not the same as democratic rule. Their energy is often rebellious and mobilized by cause and conviction, rather than ruling together in common across differences and disunity. Second, and relatedly, many bracket difficult elements of democracy, from living with difference and disagreement and submitting to decisions one dislikes to cultivating the ethos of uncertainty, curiosity, and reflexivity that democracy requires.⁵² If popular mobilizations of this kind speak truth to power, it is only because they are not themselves

ruling regimes that they can feature unified views and unity of purpose without the risk of totalization, suppression, or exclusion that such absolute conviction entails. They can be doctrinaire without being undemocratic because they do not rule. Third, demotic uprisings emerge from across the political spectrum. The January 6 insurrections in the United States and in Brazil, mob violence against Muslims in India, and contemporary neofascist mobilizations across the Euro-Atlantic world are reminders that these uprisings know no political party and bear no inherent affinity with democratic inclusion.

Perhaps, then, the chant “This is what democracy looks like” does not merely recall democracy’s roots in the energy of the demos, its preinstitutionalized and radical character.⁵³ Perhaps it is a *remainder* of democratic aspirations and values amid democracy’s exhausted liberal and nation-state form. This does not make it melancholic, but neither does it make it fully democratic. Indeed, perhaps mobilizations under its sign are less iterations of reparative democracy than cries for it—for democracy unbound from capital, anthropocentrism, colonialism, and inequalities of every kind, and from the separations of politics from the many forms of life that it can make suffer. In seizing the mantle of democracy for what is not yet and calling not only for more democracy but for democracy to be more, these formations limn a democratic imaginary bound to reparative common futures. They call for new democratic constituencies, constellations, and coordinates—beyond the human, beyond the nation-state, and beyond capital and colonial power and their exploits. Let us turn now to one instance of such a call.

4. Cop City

“Cop City” is the name given by opponents to a 171-acre, approximately 120-million-dollar police and firefighter training site in Atlanta’s South River Forest, known as the Weelaunee Forest by the Muskogee, the original human inhabitants of the land.⁵⁴ The controversial project features a mock village, a school, a nightclub, a burn tower, roadways for high-speed chases, a helicopter pad, indoor and outdoor shooting ranges, and bomb detonation and explosion test areas. Justification for the project rests on the need to boost morale among police officers by offering a “world-class” training site. It has met with protests since plans for it were made public in 2020.⁵⁵ Opposition came from local and national racial justice organizations, including but not limited to abolitionists; racial justice organizations; ecological and conservation groups; lawyers’ guilds; area schools; and neighborhood, church, and community associations along with many organizations and individuals outside the area.

The project gained international attention in January 2023, when forest protector Tortugueta Terán was shot dead by Atlanta police, adding the United States to the list of nations worldwide responsible for killing more than two thousand

ecological activists in the past decade. In April 2023, a county autopsy report established that Tortuguita was shot fifty-seven times with their hands in front of them. The officer wounded in the assault—originally alleged to have been shot by Tortuguita—was in fact shot by another officer, and five officers are now known to have riddled Tortuguita's body with bullets. (There was a second autopsy report with a different account, which led to dropped charges against the officers, but the county will not reveal its evidence for the revision.) On the day the first autopsy report was released, Mayor Andre Dickens gathered with a group of Black political leaders and civil servants to publicly reaffirm his commitment to building Cop City. Two months later, the City Council would do the same. Following a seventeen-hour hearing in which hundreds of constituents implored the council to halt the project and only a tiny handful spoke for it, the council voted 1–4 to add \$30 million more to funding Cop City.

The forest Tortuguita died trying to protect features a long history of human ignominy and violence. Muskogee people were forcibly driven out by white settlers in the 1830s. The settlers then cleared parts for cotton growing, including one very large plantation. The forest was a Civil War battleground, and for much of the twentieth century it hosted two different carceral institutions, a minimum security Federal Honor Farm and the Atlanta Prison Farm. Both were sites of forced and unpaid labor; sexual violence, including rape of Black female inmates; and particularly penurious treatment and conditions for Black prisoners. One part of the forest was also an informal city dump and contains pieces of old dismantled buildings and retired school buses. In recent decades, the Atlanta Police Department has used the dump for an informal practice firing range. One old school bus is riddled with bullets from this practice, and the image of the shot-up bus has become a symbol for the resistance.

In short, this patch of forest has not been pristine for centuries; relics, residues, and ghosts of violent indifference to human and nonhuman life are layered and littered throughout, and, starting in 2021, it began to host dozens of self-anointed forest protectors, of whom Tortuguita was one. Nor is it old-growth forest; large parts were clear-cut and have regrown. The land for Cop City abuts a youth detention center whose inmates are mostly young Black men. It is adjacent to a poor, predominantly Black part of unincorporated DeKalb County, one whose residents have no representation on the Atlanta City Council because it is unincorporated. These residents were barred from participating in—even collecting signatures for—a city referendum on the project initiated in 2022.⁵⁶ The Southeast metro area more generally includes crumbling infrastructure, landfills, polluting industrial complexes, a prison reentry facility, a high school with a 56 percent graduation rate, and a federal medium security prison notorious for violence and corruption, where some protesters against Cop City have been incarcerated.⁵⁷ In short,

the Cop City land was easy prey while the project itself constitutes another body and soul blow to adjacent neighborhoods.

In 2017, before the project was conceived, the Atlanta Planning Department set in motion permanent preservation of the Weelaunee Forest. In March 2021, two hundred acres were approved for this, and more acreage was designated as a large, forested park.⁵⁸ One month later, however, Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms announced that, as “an answer to rising crime,” 150 acres would become a police and firefighter training facility. In fact, property crime in Atlanta had fallen significantly over the past decade, with one brief exception: In the wake of Rayshard Brooks’s murder by Atlanta police, which came just weeks after George Floyd’s murder in summer 2020, Atlanta was seized by protests, occasionally violent, for the first time since a Black moderate machine formed to govern the city in the early 1960s.⁵⁹

The 2021 unveiling of plans to build Cop City followed a year of furious Black Lives Matter organizing, and active opposition to Cop City thus formed quickly. From the beginning, the mobilization combined forest protection, environmental justice, racial justice, and resistance to the intensification of Atlanta policing. And, from the beginning, the movement has been met with suppression featuring exceptional force and juridical harshness, the latter emanating from local courts to the FBI and the Biden White House. Cutting down trees and intense policing and incarceration, however, are only two threads of the story and only two reasons why the protest has become an emblematic site of reparative ecological democracy.

But let us dwell with the trees a moment. Atlanta, known as “the city in a forest,” has the highest percentage of tree canopy of any major metropolitan area in the United States. This canopy is essential to the health of city inhabitants, especially as climate change makes southern summers hotter.⁶⁰ Natural forests, as opposed to hapless if well-intended mass-planting endeavors, are vital for trapping air pollutants—Atlanta’s forests remove about nineteen million pounds annually—and for absorbing CO₂, releasing oxygen, stemming storm-induced flooding and erosion, and cooling surrounding areas. Neighborhoods adjacent to forest may be up to ten degrees cooler than the city.⁶¹ Atlanta’s forests are already jeopardized by sprawling development, increasingly spearheaded by large private equity investment groups, about which more below. And what is called “forest fragmentation”—chopping the forest into ever smaller, disconnected pieces—devastates biodiversity in the remaining forest.⁶² No surprise, then, that in 2017, the Atlanta Planning Department designated the South River Forest as one of the four major “lungs” of the city, leading to the permanent preservation proposal.⁶³

However, in addition to its tree canopy, Atlanta is a city unique in the American South for what is known as the Atlanta Way, an incredibly enduring coalition brokered in the early 1960s between a moderate mixed-race city government and

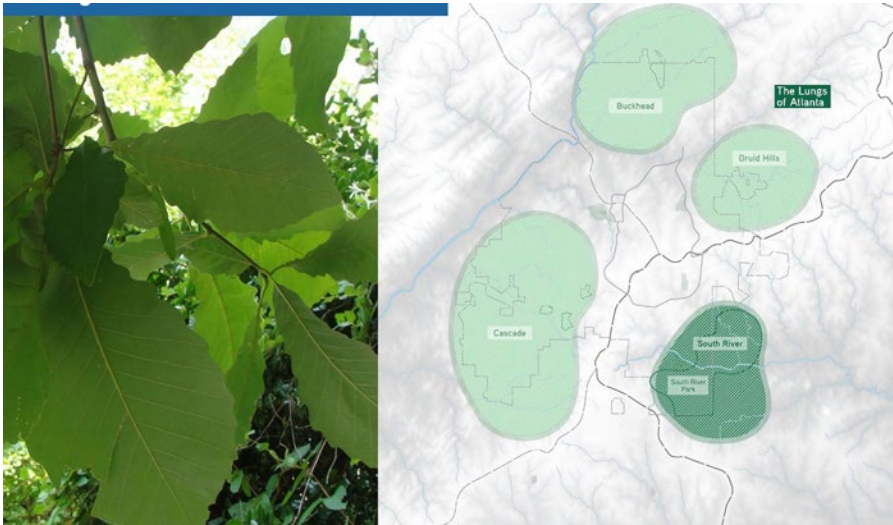


FIGURE 1. The four “lungs of the city.” From City of Atlanta Department of City Planning, *The Atlanta City Design*, 345–46.

Black and white business elites.⁶⁴ More recently, animated by this social stability, a relatively low-waged and unorganized labor force, and Georgia’s low state tax rates, massive amounts of global tech, entertainment, real estate, and predatory finance capital have driven economic and suburban expansion in the city. Enormous quantities of private finance also pour into politics, policing, and mobilization of the judicial system. Consequently, if there is a current ground zero in the United States for the nexus of de-democratizing financialization, racialized securitization and incarceration, land and home dispossession, ecological destruction, and weaponization of the judiciary against dissent, Atlanta may well be it. Here is how this goes.

Atlanta is the most surveilled city in the nation, with “Operation Shield” connecting more than thirteen thousand public and private security cameras across the city to the Atlanta Police Department. This is more cameras per capita than anywhere in the United States, and, unsurprisingly, Black Atlantans are surveilled at nearly three times the rate of whites. Selling, installing, and networking these cameras is Motorola Solutions, which also sells security products to US prisons and detention facilities, for the US-Mexico border, and to Israel for use in West Bank settlements, along the West Bank wall, and at checkpoints.⁶⁵ Motorola is owned by Silver Lake Management, one of the largest tech-focused private equity firms in the world; its portfolio of companies employs over half a million people, holds over \$100 billion in assets, and generates more than \$250 billion in annual revenue. In addition to provisioning Atlanta with surveillance equipment and contracts, Silverlake funds through the Atlanta Police Foundation an exchange program between Atlanta’s police and the Israeli Defense Force “to share best practices” of

securitization. Also in Silver Lake Management's portfolio is Shadowbox Studios, formerly Black Hall Studios, one of the largest soundstage operations in the world, with locations in Los Angeles, London, and Atlanta. Shadowbox, now owned by Commonwealth Private Equity, seeks another bite of the Weelaunee Forest.⁶⁶ In a complex land swap deal with DeKalb County, Ryan Millsap, the former owner of Black Hall, planned to clear forty acres of forest to build the largest movie production facility in the United States, comprising two million square feet, thirty-one soundstages, and a private airfield.⁶⁷ Hence the #SavetheForest protest slogan: "Stop Cop City, no Hollywood dystopia!"

Notwithstanding the 2017 Planning Department forest preservation proposals, substantial local opposition to the project, and the absence of a rationale beyond police force morale and recruitment, Cop City has been repeatedly ratified and defended by city government.⁶⁸ It is also defended by the city's daily paper, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, which is owned by Cox Enterprises, a privately held global conglomerate. Cox donated \$10 million to Cop City, and its CEO is a major fundraiser for the project.⁶⁹ The newspaper has editorialized repeatedly in favor of Cop City.⁷⁰

This brings us to the private funding and beneficiaries of the project. The non-profit Atlanta Police Foundation (APF) began dreaming of Cop City in 2019 and in 2021 pledged to raise \$60 million to build the facility. The city of Atlanta originally promised the Foundation \$30 million for the project, a figure that later rose to \$67 million. The police department itself already received approximately one-third of the city's annual \$220 million budget, but the APF—like its cousins everywhere in the country, only much richer—permits the force to buy and do more without the transparency, accountability, and oversight that city-funded activities require.⁷¹ For example, the foundation provided five-hundred-dollar bonuses to every Atlanta officer a week after the Rayshard Brooks shooting (a small-ticket item) and funds much of Operation Shield (a big-ticket one). It successfully lobbied the city council to quash a referendum effort that aimed to put Cop City to a citywide vote.⁷² Most importantly, the foundation's trustees and major donors constitute a rich list of global corporate and financial entities, ranging from JPMorgan Chase, Goldman Sachs, Wells Fargo, Amazon, and UPS to scores of global law and consultancy firms, Fortune 500 real estate investment and management conglomerates, and local corporations headquartered in Atlanta, including Delta, Home Depot, Chick-fil-A, and Waffle House. Little wonder that, as one former council member put it, when the police foundation says to jump, the council asks, "How high?"⁷³

Close examination of the membership of the APF boards suggests that the wealth and drive behind Cop City thus exceed the usual motives: Koch brothers-style support for a racialized security state, Motorola's efforts to profit from securitization, the pursuit of lucrative building contracts, or the aim of achieving good

neighborly relations between corporate entities headquartered in Atlanta and the cops. Certainly these are present. For example, Georgia Power, which partners with Operation Shield and has three seats on the APF boards, is a major funder of climate change denialism, opposition to renewables, and all of Trump's presidential campaigns. Just as important as these ideological political commitments is the fact that Georgia Power is a subsidiary of Southern, which is majority owned by Vanguard, a private equity fund. In the context of what Elizabeth Warren termed the legalized looting by private equity and its deep investments in Atlanta real estate development and management, tech, retail, and fast food chains to extract exorbitant returns, this is the power-security nexus we need to focus on.⁷⁴ Global capital, especially its most predatory offspring in private finance, needs a stable, well-policed investment environment. Privatized policing for private investment—the APF is the circuit board for this double loop of privatized power. How does this work?

Private equity firms hold pools of investor funds operating outside public markets to acquire firms that the equity firm can extract rents from, charge fees to, indebt, and transform. Drawing large institutional investors like universities, insurance companies, and pension funds along with “high net worth” individuals, private equity promises high returns on investments. With profits heavily shielded from taxation through categorization as “carried interest,” private equity and its cousins, real estate investment trusts (known as REITS), are notoriously indifferent to stakeholders of their holdings—whether employees, customers, tenants, home buyers, neighborhoods, medical patients, or small subsidiaries, all of whom they bleed for high returns. Just one example: Over the past decade, private equity converted sixty-five thousand single-family homes at the low end of the Atlanta sales market into investment products. Snapped up with cash offers, these homes are converted to ill-maintained rentals handled by distant, often unreachable real estate management companies. Such predations quash the dreams of would-be working- and middle-class home buyers as they tighten housing supply *and* spike home values.⁷⁵ These moves hit Black neighborhoods particularly hard; it is no exaggeration to frame them as neo-redlining in places like Atlanta.

Private equity strip mines whatever it gets its hands on, from retail and fast food franchises to health care systems, which it sometimes drives into the ground after milking them for profit streams under the rubric of “unlocking potential” through “restructuring.”⁷⁶ Private equity's standard *modus operandi* is to acquire a company; to cut costs through union busting, layoffs, and wage and benefits reductions; and to otherwise increase revenue through strategies like selling off and then renting back buildings to the entities it owns. Or, in the case of medical and dental care, nursing homes, veterinary clinics, and rehab centers, by combin-

Bulk buyers in Black neighborhoods

Investor-owned homes are more than twice as likely to be located in majority Black neighborhoods as other single-family homes.

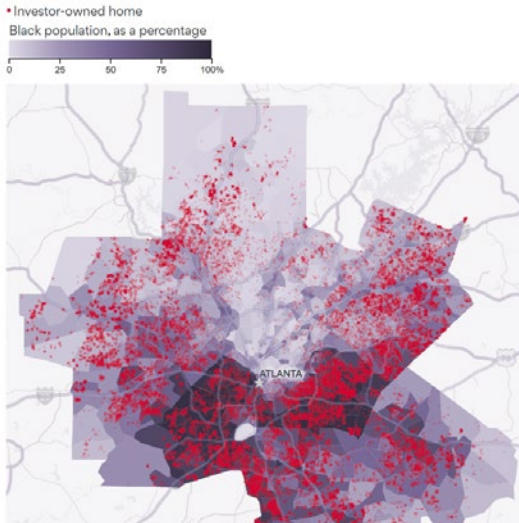


FIGURE 2. Graphic by Emily Merwin DiRico and John Perry / *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Data: US Census Bureau 2021 American Community Survey five-year sample and county tax assessor records. In Zachary Hansen, “American Dream For Rent.”

ing care-stripping with unnecessary but lucrative procedures, often billed to the state or private insurance.⁷⁷ Or, in the case of real estate management, by combining rent spikes and merciless eviction practices with building neglect. Private equity is also able to load up its acquisitions with fees and debts (up to 90 percent of the company’s value) for which the company, not the investor, is responsible. Thus, private equity often takes a perfectly healthy enterprise—Toys “R” Us is an infamous example—and first bleeds it dry, then sells or tips it into bankruptcy, leaving employees without severance pay and their pensions wiped out from creditor payoffs.⁷⁸

In short, the legal protections and shell companies that private equity depends on for its exceptional returns destroy worlds—of decently remunerated labor, affordable housing, neighborhoods, health care, and nonhuman ecologies—and they do so from a distance, with indifference, and without accountability. With the help of *Citizens United*, the political power of this arm of finance in the United States is also phenomenal—it pours billions into elections, into destroying rent control and antispeculation campaigns, and into destroying political efforts to rein in private equity itself. In short, it has become a mighty antidemocratic political player as well as a ferocious economic force.⁷⁹

Private equity and real estate investment trusts are all over Atlanta, driving expansion in tech and film, real estate development and management.⁸⁰ And private equity, REITS, and their supporting apparatuses in law and insurance are all over the APF’s executive committee and board of trustees.



FIGURE 3. Color-coded illustration of the Atlanta Police Foundation's Executive Committee, Board of Trustees, and Young Executives Board in 2023 by Wendy Brown. Atlanta Police Foundation, "About the Atlanta Police Foundation."

Race and Class War and the Suppression of Democracy

Which returns us to Cop City. The expansion and militarization of police training facilities and equipment are lucrative for companies like Motorola and match the right-wing political interests of certain corporations and donors, but they are above all crucial to the rent-seeking practices of *financially* driven and controlled economies. That is surely why there is so much of this power represented on the APF boards and funding the training ground. It is also why the mayor and city council bow to the foundation's wishes, allowing both its police force and its training facilities to be, effectively, privatized. Bluntly, this is racialized class and ecological war taken off the public books. Privatized investment funding that avoids accountability while maximizing profits *both parallels and is integrated with* the privatization of policing to avoid the scrutiny attached to public budgets. If the outsize presence on the APF boards of investment banks, asset managers, real estate development and management conglomerates, and insurance companies, along with the credit bureaus, consultants, and law firms this sector relies on, reminds us what is being advanced and secured, so also does a remarkable absence: There is not one community organization represented on the boards.⁸¹ Not one.

There is also this: Notwithstanding the rhetoric of rising crime that public officials use to justify Cop City, crime in Atlanta—apart from gun homicides—has declined substantially over the past decade.⁸² The slightly increased gun homicide rate can be traced to unsecured firearms stolen and wielded by teens, largely against each other. Only serious gun regulation could rein this in, which reframes former Mayor Bottoms's declaration that Cop City, with its militarized training grounds, is essential for a city beset by crime.⁸³ Seen in the larger context of Atlanta's saturation by remote capital, tech, and real estate investment and its already deep relationship with securitization, the training facility appears less a response to the crime rate than producing and signaling an attractive investment climate *and* prepping for racialized class wars ahead.

This appearance ramifies with the intense policing and judicial crackdown on the Cop City protesters. Resistance to Cop City has included sabotaging bulldozers and construction equipment; throwing objects at the police in skirmishes and vandalizing police vehicles; and defacing banks, corporate headquarters, and select private residences. A night of furious reaction to the killing of Tortugueta culminated in setting fire to police cars in downtown Atlanta.⁸⁴ However, the protests also drew thousands from all walks of life, who offered surprisingly little criticism of the ecotage actions. On the contrary, an increasingly explicit pact arose among activists to recognize and affirm different tactical and political principles in the effort to block the project; these ranged from anarchist to mainstream liberal democratic efforts. The responses of the city and the state, however, have been extreme in every way: Of thirty-six activists arrested at the end of a

music festival during a “week of action” in the forest in March, two-thirds were denied bail and nineteen charged under Georgia’s domestic terrorism laws with a felony that can yield five to thirty years in prison.⁸⁵ The assistant chief of police explained: “None of these people live here. They do not have a vested interest in this property. . . . Why is an individual from Los Angeles . . . concerned about a training facility being built in the state of Georgia? That is why we consider that domestic terrorism.”⁸⁶ The trope of “outside agitators,” of course, is an old and freighted one in Southern social justice politics. It is also a politics of place out of place in the Anthropocene.

Bail has been denied because activists had a Solidarity Fund leaflet for legal assistance in their pockets, were photographed next to “signs for anarchy,” were wearing dark-colored clothing, or had “muddy clothes.” Activists holding a protest in front of a council member’s house and hanging a banner on an overpass were arrested for being pedestrians on a roadway. SWAT teams have been deployed against activists handing out flyers downtown; outstanding parking tickets have been used as pretexts for arrest. A warrant to raid a large encampment of protesters in April listed lighters, tents, camping equipment, spray paint cans, black clothes, and political pamphlets as items establishing probable cause for “evidence of conspiracy to commit domestic terrorism.” In May 2021, leafleters in downtown Atlanta were jailed for felony intimidation of an officer because the leaflet named and pictured an officer who shot Tortugueta. Later that month, a phalanx of Atlanta police and Georgia Bureau of Investigation officers raided a community center that also served as a home for community organizers to arrest three Atlanta Solidarity Fund workers on specious allegations of charity fraud and money laundering. The assistant attorney general demanded pretrial detention of the organizers for their “virulent anti-establishment beliefs.” And, while their lawyers were preparing their case for bail, the organizers were incarcerated in the most dangerous jail in the city, and some were placed in solitary confinement.

Then, in early September of last year, the Attorney General charged sixty-one protesters with RICO violations under 1970s laws designed to capture Mafia racketeering, which carry jail sentences of up to twenty years.⁸⁷ The indictment devotes twenty-five pages to vilifying the Defend the Atlanta Forest group as “an anti-government, anti-police and anti-corporate extremist organization.”⁸⁸ It indicts an entire movement, whose beginnings it identifies with George Floyd protests, which commenced a full year before plans for Cop City were announced and the resistance organized.⁸⁹ The indictment names everything from mutual aid, raising bail money, and flyer distribution to collectivist and anarchist beliefs as hallmarks of criminal conspiracy. The absence of cell phones among arrested protesters (now a norm in civil disobedience training) and their wearing the same color clothes have also been deemed markers of conspiracy by the state of Georgia.

In December 2023, the city launched a \$200,000 reward campaign for information about saboteurs. And, in February 2024, the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives joined forces with Georgia and Atlanta police for a SWAT-style predawn raid of three homes where activists lived—confiscating computers, diaries, and phones and arresting residents.

These are policing and judicial practices intended to destroy protest, not contain it.⁹⁰ But it is not only direct action that is being repressed. Every kind of retardant was also poured on the fires of participatory democratic efforts to stop Cop City.⁹¹ Testimony at public hearings was repeatedly ignored, and at the last one, hundreds of attendees were prevented from signing up to speak. For the signature-based legal referendum filed in December 2023 with nearly twice the signatures required, the city hired expensive corporate legal counsel first to delay and encumber it with impossible deadlines and elaborate signature cross-checks and then to try to invalidate it in advance.⁹² At the APF's urging, the mayor denounced the referendum that is an emblem of democratic voice, declaring that it could have no bearing on the city's contract with the Atlanta Police Department. And those residents of unincorporated DeKalb County facing the potential exchange of forest for the sights and sounds of gunfire, speeding cop cars, and detonating bombs? In early summer 2023, they sued the city and the state in federal court for the right to collect signatures for the referendum, arguing that, since they live adjacent to the site, they ought to be able to participate in the process. Atlanta, "the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement," did everything imaginable to keep them disenfranchised.

5. Is This What Reparative Democracy Looks Like?

What does this movement suggest for reparative democracy? First, the obvious. On one side is the threatened forest along with poor, Black, Indigenous, and young people. On the other side is large capital and its props: law and risk management firms, security tech, a weaponized judiciary and carceral state, and heavily lobbied and largely bought elected representatives. The reparative politics of #StopCopCity itself transpires on what Anna Tsing would call a "patch" teeming with damaged life, including histories of Indigenous dispossession, Black slavery, contemporary racialized poverty, and blatant political disenfranchisement, all of which are outmatched by heavily coopted political power and exceptionally predatory finance.⁹³ The mobilization against Cop City resisted both deforestation and the double punch of a militarized police training facility adjacent to neglected, underrepresented neighborhoods already traumatized by racist policing. It braided together protection of nonhuman and human ecologies. It made intricate analytic and political connections between various forms of life—including democratic life—threatened or trampled by capital. It sought to enfranchise the disenfranchised

and, with its referendum effort, let all the people decide. It featured mutual dependencies and responsibilities limning new formulations of justice and freedom. It struggled to repair the exclusions of *politika* bound to culture/nature sequestrations and subordinations at the heart of Western democracy.

Even as most identified as anarchists, the forest protectors themselves reworked constituent elements of democracy in a reparative frame. As they lived both in and off the forest, were both protected by the trees and sought to protect them, they recast the demos as both less exclusively human and more interdependent than a liberal democratic lexicon makes possible. Those who support the protectors with legal assistance, mutual aid, bond funds, food, medicine, therapy, and more are also part of this recasting of democracy. They protect the protectors who protect the forest that protects all life. The movement features every kind of citizen-activist, from the former federal prosecutor who served in Trump's first administration, developed the legal strategy for the ballot referendum, and self-describes as a "privileged white lady with two corgis" to Atlanta Black Lives Matter and abolition activists, to community and union organizers, to trans tree sitters with names like Rutabaga and Tortuguita, to military vets deeply opposed to militarizing American police forces because they witnessed up close the nightmare of militarized policing in other countries.⁹⁴

Second, the fight against Cop City illuminates power at what Foucault calls "the extreme points of its exercise" where, he reminded us, power inevitably "surmounts the rules of right that organize and delimit it" and is always "less legal in character."⁹⁵ It also reveals entwinements of economic, juridical, and police power from those extremes, the potency of privatization in liberal orders for enabling and masking those entwinements, and the threat to the forest and its protectors that are its effects. But entwinement is not the same as centralization, and we need to keep the king's head cut off to feature reparative democracy in place of existing forms.⁹⁶ Only a few of the powers the protesters oppose legitimately govern, even while powers of finance and tech harness and saturate legitimate governing to complete the bankruptcy of actually existing democracy as they bend governors to their will. Put differently, this is a struggle against dispersed powers that infiltrate democratic institutions and upset checks and balances. The fight for the forest viscerally encounters and exposes this infiltration. Yet corruption—public power turned to private ends—is inadequate to name what is normalized in this story: increasingly privatized public power that matches increasingly privatized social and state functions.⁹⁷ This reminds us why seeds of reparative democracy must often be planted outside formal political venues.

Third, through protest, occupation, education, and some monkey wrench ganging, the movement expresses a reparative orientation toward the future, human and nonhuman life, and the dispossessed, disregarded, unrepresented,

and unmoneyed. The movement is not itself full-blown democracy, and not only because of the forest protectors' identification with anarchy. More *demos* than *kra-tia*, more insurgency than rule, #StopCopCity is a demotic uprising, a resistance movement, that does not itself seek to control or govern the complex powers and problems of the twenty-first century. Still, it calls for a politics that serves life rather than managing or damaging it, that features the interdependence of human and nonhuman life, and that carries a reparative rather than exploitative orientation toward the histories, conditions of existence, and futures for both. It is a sustained critique of indifference toward these histories and conditions by existing political, economic, and technological forces. Here is where reparative democracy takes shape today—as critique, resistance, and a call for alternatives. If its capacities are not yet strong enough to rival entrenched powers, its promise resides in the alternative it figures to a liberal democratic form that is outmoded, corrupted, and hijacked by capital, inapt for a thriving people or planet, and void of democracy's defining feature, rule of the people.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Hendriks et al., *Mending Democracy*.
2. See, for example, Robert Meister's brilliant work *After Evil*. The reparations literature is now very large; some of it is mentioned in the notes below.
3. Folkers, “Fossil Modernity.”
4. Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom*, 261.
5. For Amitav Ghosh, “it's as if the earth has become a literary critic,” laughing at the conceits of modernism (*Great Derangement*, 26); Folkers, “Fossil Modernity.”
6. Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.
7. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.
8. Davis, *Plastic Matter*; see also Davis, this issue.
9. See, for example, Claeys, *Utopianism for a Dying Planet*.
10. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 257.
11. Folkers, “Fossil Modernity,” 237. For Folkers, no longer does even the Benjaminian modification of critique pertain, with its obligations to the damned of history rather than future generations.
12. Folkers, “Fossil Modernity,” 237.
13. Tsing et al., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*.
14. Davis, *Plastic Matter*.
15. As Folkers puts it, “The critical task is to reckon with lasting ecological destruction, to repair what can be fixed, and to care and grieve for the socio-ecological relations

irreversibly severed. In other words, practicing critique in fossil modernity means staying with the rubble” (“Fossil Modernity,” 237).

16. Folkers, “Fossil Modernity.”
17. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading.” See also Stuelke, *Ruse of Repair*.
18. Bruno Latour calls this “landing on earth” in the subtitle of *Critical Zones*.
19. Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*.
20. Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and Rousseau’s *Social Contract* remain powerful and poignant theoretical accounts of democracy’s dependency on these elements.
21. O’Toole, “Negative Capability.”
22. Brown, *Nihilistic Times*.
23. O’Toole, “Negative Capability.”
24. Van der Meer, “Political Trust and the Crisis of Democracy.”
25. I chart the compromised character of contemporary state sovereignty in relation to global forces and flows in Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. In *Crack-Up Capitalism*, Quinn Slobodian identifies more than 5,400 non-nation-state economic “zones” that have emerged since the 1970s.
26. Olúfemi Táíwò, in *Reconsidering Reparations*, and Carmen G. Gonzalez, in “The Sacrifice Zones of Carbon Capitalism,” both treat sacrifice as critical, and critically difficult, in the project of decarbonization. In *Abundance*, Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson refuse this problem.
27. Both Tocqueville and Rousseau were alert to these problems.
28. Cowie, *Freedom’s Dominion*; Rana, *Two Faces of American Freedom*; Achille Mbembe and Bayo Akomolafe, “Is Democracy White?,” Othering and Belonging Institute, Berkeley, California, February 6, 2024, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/is-democracy-white>.
29. Christopher Stone’s *Should Trees Have Standing?* started it all, and Ecuador was the first nation to write nature into its constitution. Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, and New Zealand have each protected rivers with rights, in many cases in connection with Indigenous rights. There are now myriad and diverse efforts to constitutionalize nature. See Haniff, “Rights of Nature Movement”; McMillin, “Where Is Nature in Our Constitution?”; Tilburg University, “Constitutionalizing in the Anthropocene,” <https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/about/schools/law/departments/plg/research/anthropocene>; Universal Declaration of the Rights of Rivers, <https://www.rightsofrivers.org/>.
30. For Jacques Rancière, “the part that has no part,” inherent in all regimes, rises up against democracy to realize it (*Disagreement*, 30). But my claim augments his. More than merely parts of a people that are contingently excluded, there are spheres and activities with which these parts are identified that are constitutively or systematically excluded.
31. Aristotle is the quintessential theorist of this exclusion and instrumentalization. See *Politics*, book 1.
32. These entailments have been endlessly repeated, including through the colonial genocide and dispossession, chattel slavery, property, and patriarchy founding the world’s oldest and longest continuous democracy, the United States.
33. Marx, “On the Jewish Question.”
34. The notion appears in critical race and postcolonial theory, political theory, queer cultural studies, information technology studies, new media, and law. See, for example, Wiegman, “Times We’re In”; Gilbert, “Repairing Historicity”; Jackson, “Rethinking Repair”; Zolkos, *Restitution and the Politics of Repair*.

35. See, for example, Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations*; Perzanowski, *Right to Repair*; Houston et al., “Values in Repair”; Stone, “Right-to-Repair Movement Is Just Getting Started.”
36. Jackson, “Rethinking Repair.”
37. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” See also Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading.”
38. This is Sedgwick’s implicit argument.
39. Tsing et al., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*; Folkers, “Fossil Modernity.”
40. Folkers, “Fossil Modernity.” For Dipesh Chakrabarty, this is where wires of “the planetary” and “the global” intersect. See *One Planet, Many Worlds*, introduction.
41. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations*; Anderson, “Epistemology of Justice.”
42. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations*.
43. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*.
44. See Norton, *Wild Democracy*.
45. Von Redecker, *Bleibefreiheit*.
46. See, among others, LaBelle, *Acoustic Justice*; Bakker, *Sounds of Life*; Helmreich, *Sounding the Limits of Life*.
47. Rancière, “Democracy Means Equality.”
48. Latour, *Critical Zones*.
49. George Monbiot’s close attention to soil in *Regenesi*s is indispensable for such critique.
50. Colectivo Situaciones, *Nineteen and Twenty*; Balibar, *Equaliberty*; Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*; Robinson, *Black Marxism*; Frank, *Constituent Moments*; Norton, *Wild Democracy*.
51. On this dodge, see Biglieri and Cadahia, *Seven Essays on Populism*.
52. Fintan O’Toole, “Negative Capability,” lecture 2, Princeton University Tanner Lectures on Human Values, 2022, unpublished manuscript. O’Toole draws on John Keats’s notion of “negative capability” as the basis for this democratic virtue.
53. This is Sheldon Wolin’s characterization of radical democratic uprisings and mobilizations in *Fugitive Democracy* (112).
54. Scott and Rhoades, “Atlanta Now to Pay.”
55. Pratt, “Birds Stopped Singing.”
56. Bethea, “New Fight over an Old Forest in Atlanta,” 2; *Decaturish.com*, “Cop City Explained.”
57. Thrush, “Prison Personnel Describe Horrific Conditions.”
58. The plan remains available online: “The Atlanta City Design,” Atlanta Department of City Planning, <https://www.atlcitydesign.com>. It is worth studying for how wonderfully visionary it was in ways that exceeded forest preservation. As Grace Glass and Sasha Tycko describe it:

For years, the South River Forest Coalition lobbied Atlanta to open this land to the public and make it the centerpiece of a mixed-use megaforest: a 3,500-acre patchwork of parks, preserves, cemeteries, landfills, quarries, and golf courses linked through a network of trails crisscrossing the city’s southeast suburbs. And in 2017, it seemed like a rare success for grassroots environmental activism when the Department of City Planning adopted the Coalition’s idea into their vision for the future of Atlanta. You should see the glossy gorgeous, four-hundred-page book the city planners published unveiling their plan for a city of affluence, equality, cozy density, affordable transit, and reliable infrastructure for robust public spaces. We no longer thought optimism like this was even possible at the scale of the American metropolis. (Glass and Tycko, “Not One Tree,” 5–6)

59. On the making of the moderate-to-conservative political machine known as “the Atlanta Way,” see Hobson, *Legend of the Black Mecca*; Kruse, *White Flight*.
60. “Atlanta Is a City in a Forest,” Defend the Atlanta Forest, <https://defendtheatlantaforest.org>.
61. Featherstone, “Atlanta’s ‘Cop City.’” Parks and trees are also known to boost human physical and mental health: they are measurably counterdepressive.
62. Miller, “Impacts of Atlanta’s Urban Sprawl.”
63. See the Atlanta for All website, <https://www.atlantaforall.com>.
64. See Hobson, *Legend of the Black Mecca*; Kruse, *White Flight*.
65. Motorola is a producer of security systems on a UN watchlist for potential human rights violations and recommended for divestment by the American Friends Service Committee: “Motorola Israel is known as the security arm of the IDF” (Private Equity Stakeholder Project, *PE Profits from Destroying the Atlanta Forest*).
66. Peterson, “Path to Reopening Intrinishment Creek Park Remains Unclear.”
67. Cho, “Silver Lake Leads \$500M Investment.” Since Millsap sold Black Hall to Motorola/Commonwealth, it is unclear what will become of the property the city deeded to him.
68. A 2023 poll revealed opposition by a majority of black Atlantans and support by a slim majority of white Atlantans (more in wealthy Buckhead). See Emory University Department of Political Science, “Poll of Atlanta Residents.”
69. Pratt, “‘Cop City’ Backers and Opponents.”
70. Morse, “Atlanta, We Need the New Public Safety Training Center.”
71. Private Equity Stakeholder Project, *PE Profits from Destroying the Atlanta Forest*, 12; Redden, “Police Foundations and their Corporate Donors Give Cops Secret Slush Funds.”
72. Pratt, “Nearly Three Hundred Pages of Atlanta’s ‘Cop City’ Records Released.”
73. Riley, “Atlanta Is Trying to Crush the Opposition to ‘Cop City.’”
74. Warmbrodt, “How Warren Would Rein In Wall Street ‘Looting.’”
75. Eason and Perry, “American Dream for Rent.” Brian Eason and John Perry write,
 Eleven companies own more than 1000 homes each. The two largest—Invitation Homes and Progress Residential—own more than 10,000 homes apiece. . . . Metro Atlanta home values have risen across the board from 2012 to 2022. But . . . they climbed more sharply in places where investors bought more houses. *In the 30 zip codes with the most investor-owned properties, home values appreciated at nearly twice the annual rate as the 30 ZIP codes where investors own the least.* (emphasis added)
76. Ballou, “Private Equity Is Gutting America.”
77. Ballou, “Private Equity Is Gutting America.”
78. Real estate investment trusts, or REITs, have a different tax, legal, and dividend structure from private equity and are often publicly traded so anyone can buy shares, not just the superrich. But, like private equity funds, they are also mainly dependent on low costs and high rents to pay dividends. And they gobble up every kind of real estate—industrial, retail, apartment and condo complexes, single-family dwellings—to extract those rents.
79. Elizabeth Warren tried to explain all this to the public during her 2019 primary run and called for essentially regulating private equity unto death, making it fully responsible for the debt it forces on its acquisitions, eliminating its legalized fraud capacities, and taxing its returns to investors.
80. At its hands, historically Black neighborhoods are being rapidly white-gentrified, and home prices and rents are soaring.

81. Atlanta police are being fortified and mobilized to secure capital interest, both short-term profits like those of Motorola and Inspire Brands and long-term designs on the city as a source of capital from low wages and high rents in every meaning of the word.
82. Haspel, "Atlanta Crime Rates in Historical Perspective."
83. Kelley, "Mayor, Law Enforcement Celebrate Approval of 'Cop City.'"
84. Bloomfield, "Atlanta's 'Stop Cop City' Movement Is Spreading," 6.
85. Milman and Lakhani, "Atlanta Shooting Part of Alarming US Crackdown."
86. Human Rights Watch, "Letter Calling for Dropping of Domestic Terrorism Charges."
87. Bruce and Shamsi, "RICO and Domestic Terrorism Charges."
88. Most of the monetary transfers cited in the indictment are for nominal amounts—ten-to-twenty-dollar reimbursements for groceries and supplies for those living in the forest.
89. Amed and Taxel, "How Georgia Indicted a Movement."
90. More than a few have identified the attack on democracy entailed in repression of ecological activists carried out by police funded by the extractivists, from Chevron to private equity companies (Pratt, "Tents Slashed and Supplies Destroyed"). See also Potter, *Green Is the New Red*.
91. Riley, "Atlanta Is Trying to Crush the Opposition."
92. Lennard, "Atlanta City Leaders Are Subverting Democracy"; Thakker, "Georgia Leaders Want to Save Cop City"; Bethea, "Can 'Cop City' Be Stopped at the Ballot Box?"
93. Tsing et al., "Patchy Anthropocene."
94. Zickgraf, "Meet the Ex-Prosecutor Behind the Legal Effort."
95. Foucault, "Two Lectures," 96–97.
96. Foucault, "Two Lectures," 98.
97. Daniela Gabor's work on derisking and Brian Judge's work on financialization's choking of public agendas tracks this privatization in sustained theoretical and empirical detail. Gabor, *Wall Street Consensus*; Judge, *Democracy in Default*.

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