

Cauleen Smith: Mines to Caves
December 15, 2023–April 7, 2024

*To See the Earth Before The End of
the World*

being property once myself
i have a feeling for it,
that's why i can talk
about environment.
what wants to be a tree,
ought to be he can be it.
same thing for other things.
same thing for men.

Lucille Clifton

While Anthropocene literature is often concerned with identifying a specific moment in which humans crossed a critical threshold in their relationship to the planet, an alternative perspective emerges from Clifton's revolutionary poem. The origins of the Anthropocene are entangled with histories of empire and modernity. Clifton underscores how the vulnerability of Black existence is intricately entangled and inseparable from nature. Slavery and colonialism ruptured and continue to rupture ongoing human relationships to place and our environments. This crisis in our connection to the earth, which in the words of Jamaican novelist, dramatist, and philosopher Sylvia Wynter reduced "Man to Labour" and "Nature to Land," and prioritized the logic of empire and external markets over planetary survival. Given the intertwined vulnerabilities of Blackness and the environment, how might we use Black studies to interpret the Anthropocene and search for alternative forms of relating to the earth, to (in the words of poet Ed Roberson), *see the earth before the end of the world?*

In *Mines to Caves*, artist Cauleen Smith delves into the artistic imagination and ethical concerns of this entanglement amidst the intertwining apocalypses of slavery, colonialism, and environmental catastrophe. Despite enduring unimaginable violence and loss, Indigenous and Black peoples have continually constructed and reconstructed worlds amidst the world-ending processes of imperialism, slavery, and ongoing colonialism. Resistance to the dehumanization of Man and Nature may be found in practices that

make the earth habitable once more, practices that concern sustenance over profit. Smith pushes us to reinterpret the Mine as a Cave, once a shelter to humans and nonhumans alike, with an emphasis on spatial practices concerned with the collective survival. Through cultural resistance against the market economy, we might rehumanize nature, and at the same time, save our own humanity.

Smith entangles the geologic, geographic, and botanical with Black thought to search for a reorientation to the planet. In her essay *Volcano Manifesto* (2022) she meditates on a discussion between Fred Moten, Robin D.G. Kelly, and Rinaldo Walcott where Moten provokes us to consider *Black studies as earth studies*.

Insofar as Black studies has earned the right to look out for itself, what that really means is that Black studies has earned the right to try again to take its fundamental responsibility, which is to be a place where we can look out for the Earth. I think that Black studies has on a fundamental level a specific, though not necessarily exclusive, mission to try to save the Earth, and on a secondary level, to try to save the possibility of human existence on Earth.

(Moten)

Black people have a particular relationship to land and property, being property once ourselves. Smith and Moten's instructive *Black studies as earth studies* is revealing in the search of guidance for alternative means of interplanetary solidarity and survival:

Black/earth studies to understand struggles of ongoing settler colonialism globally

Black/earth studies to understand the conditions in which abolition and resistance are envisioned

Black/earth studies to rehumanize Man and Nature

Black/earth studies to save the possibility of human existence on earth.

—Anisa Jackson