

**THE ECONOMICS OF NEGLECT: RACIAL CAPITALISM
IN COLSON WHITEHEAD’S CROOK MANIFESTO**

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ABSTRACT:

Colson Whitehead’s Crook Manifesto (2023) presents a textured portrait of 1971 New York City, serving as a literary critique of racial capitalism. By integrating Cedric Robinson’s concept of the Black Radical Tradition, Jodi Melamed’s analysis of postwar liberalism, and Walter Johnson’s history of slavery, the narrative exposes the inextricable link between economic exploitation and racial violence. The novel depicts Harlem’s systemic neglect and militarized policing not as anomalies, but as continuations of imperialist and slave-holding legacies. Ultimately, Whitehead’s work challenges myths of progress, demonstrating how modern urban crises are rooted in the historical structures of a racialized global economy.

KEYWORDS:

Racial Capitalism, Colson Whitehead, Crook Manifesto, Systemic Violence, Harlem.



Colson Whitehead's *Crook Manifesto* (2023) is a textured portrait of 1971 New York City which is a metropolis in crisis: "Trash piles up on the streets, crime is at an all-time high, the city is careening toward bankruptcy, and a shooting war has broken out between the NYPD and the Black Liberation Army" (Whitehead, 2023, p.1). This novel comes second in Whitehead's Harlem lineup and it showcases how imperialism, racial discrimination, and slavery have their ineradicable trace on the surface of urban life. As critics say, this trilogy shows all the attempts of a man to not yield to a crooked lifestyle in a city filled with theft, delinquencies, exploitation, and racial discrimination. This aligns closely with Cedric J. Robinson's idea of "racial capitalism" standing as the root cause for the establishment of western capitalism, and *Crook Manifesto* acts as a literary embodiment of racism noted by Robinson in the form of slavery and imperialism. Keeping *Crook Manifesto* alongside Robinson's *Black Marxism* (1983), Jodi Melamed's *Represent and Destroy* (2011), and Walter Johnson's *River of Dark Dreams* (2013) explains Whitehead's vision in the context of history and theory, providing deeper insights into this subject.

Black Marxism by Cedric Robinson revolutionizes the understanding of capitalism, stating that capitalism and racism are not separate and discrete from the old order but the combination of them both to evolve into a modern world system named 'racial capitalism' which functions on the entities: slavery, racial discrimination, and genocide. This presents a very strong idea that the global capitalist order was never neutral or equal in terms of social order and its origins always revolved around racism. European colonization, which is the transatlantic trade in enslaved people and appropriation of original inhabitants, were not anomalies according to Robinson but components that contribute to the development of capitalism. This racial exploitation acts as the grounding factor in which the pillars of mid-20th-century economic and political order are raised. In contribution to the investigation of the post-World War II world, Jodi Melamed's ideas show the American influence

in the arcs of capitalism, colonization, and imperialism and how it could consolidate only by disavowing overt white supremacy while still maintaining its underlying racial hierarchy. She argues that in the emerging Cold War order, liberal states needed to appear to combat racism even as they continued to rationalize racial inequality in service of capitalism.

This is clearest in Melamed's description of the postwar "new racial capitalism": a global order that remained deeply racialized. In the wake of formal decolonization, governments insisted on dismantling legally enforced segregation, but they did so not out of egalitarian fervor but as a condition for preserving capitalist stability. As Melamed summarizes:

"The emergence of a global order through a world-embracing system of capitalism, nation-states, colonies, and imperial rule was able to constitute itself as a global social structure only to the extent that it was racialized. As white supremacy was called into question, racial inequality was rationalized as something that needed to be eliminated to allow for the stability of this new global order." (Melamed, 2011, p. 33)

In other words, the Cold War-era U.S. projected an image of liberal antiracism even while channelling long-standing racial divides into new forms. White men might no longer openly claim genetic superiority, but policies and policing adapted so that racial hierarchies persisted in more subtle ways.

The combination of racial capitalism and discursive justification of racial violence as frameworks proposed by Robinson and Melamed provides a structured way to read Crook Manifesto. The strategic calculus of security and economy inflected by race is made visible in Whitehead's narrative. In the novel, the black militants were treated as internal insurgents analogous to foreign guerillas by white politicians and civil authorities. For instance, the portrayal of Detective Munson by Whitehead shows that he's a corrupt and cynical appropriation of revolutionary rhetoric: "We are

indebted to the rebels in Algeria and North Vietnam and whatever the fuck for inspiring the Black Liberation Army,” he says of the domestic Black militants (Whitehead, 2023, p. 64). This dramatizes exactly Melamed’s point that white power structures higher in the American hierarchy saw Black radicals in the premeditated mental view as anti-colonial insurgents. The police response is coercively enforced “A motherfucking siege” as one character notes. The New York Police Department’s response to the turmoil, which is widely prevalent across Harlem, reflects a racialized way of approaching the warfare, and The Black Liberation Army is hounded like a trespassing foreign army suggesting that Black Americans do not belong to the streets of New York and are being recast as the enemies of the postwar order.

Robinson’s concept of the Black Radical Tradition further clarifies the stakes. *Crook Manifesto* along with its predecessor *Harlem Shuffle* picturizes the Carney family’s deep-rooted connections with Harlem’s underworld society and the attempts to promote endorsed ways of running the business. The exact opposite poles of resistance and accommodation are perfectly thrown to light through the characterization of Ray Carney and his brother Freddy. Robinson argues that orthodox Marxism which was endorsed by the African American community saw a downslide and transformed into a rebellious tradition and this is evident from Carney’s family history that despite being descended from Southern sharecroppers, they are caught up within the web of organized crimes and police corruption. The character arc of Ray sticks inside the bounds of living a respectable and honest life while Freddy is sketched to be a character fighting for Black liberation. The hierarchy of crime in Harlem as understood is not opportunistic but deeply political and this condition of Harlem is not just the product of spatial arrangement but the outcome of a subjugation-based social order.

Capitalism has a history which shares bound pages along with racialization which can be traced from Walter Johnson’s portrayal of American slavery in *River of Dark Dreams*. Johnson

shows that the antebellum American economy, centred on cotton production, was inextricably linked to global markets and European finance. The vision that the speculators had saw its fruits in the hard work of the black slaves in the Cotton Kingdom. The dreams of the cotton planters, in other words, reached material reality through slave labour that connected the U.S. South to Liverpool and New York through the values of cotton and human property. Slave traders even tracked cotton prices: as Johnson recounts, by the 1840s “slave prices in Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans would track... the price of cotton in New Orleans, New York, and Liverpool with a remarkable degree of precision.” (Johnson, 2013, p. 42). This is just taking a holistic approach to commercial logic that abstracted living bodies into “a single scale of comparison” based on their value in the international market. Johnson emphasizes the violence inherent in the system itself, that it is an infusion of slave trade and involuntary displacement of millions to the Deep South through the weapon of violence which amalgamated the “Cotton Kingdom” and knitted together regional economies under the whip of the market.

Johnson’s history reminds us that imperialism and racial discrimination form the base of the U.S. economy which was deliberately used and not something that came through circumstances. The ideological veneer of freedom covered a brutal reality and that legacy got carried over into the 20th century. By 1971, when Crook Manifesto is set, Harlem itself was a product of segregationist housing policy and post-World War II migration where the descendants of sharecroppers were compelled north by the collapse of the black rural economy. The pain and turmoil that people in Harlem had to go through is in straight contrast to the situation in Manhattan which was built generations ago in the Cotton Kingdom and the wealth and leisure is by whites. Thus, the novel’s depiction of 1970s Harlem—blighted buildings, corrupt police, a Black community bristling with militancy—is legible as the long-term outcome of Johnson’s “river of dark dreams,” the currents of slavery and empire running through American capitalism.

Within this framework, Crook Manifesto can be read as a critique of how racial capitalism operates at street level. Crook Manifesto perfectly demonstrates how power and criminal activities converge at a point of providing capitalist benefits. The NYPD, locked in a “shooting war” with Black militants, is depicted as incompetent and vicious. Ray Carney’s partner in violence, the corrupt Detective Munson, exemplifies how the police have internalized the lesson of Vietnam: domestic Black fighters become the new Viet Cong. At the same time, local gangsters and bookies operate a parallel economy of hustles and underground commerce. While the city’s economy as a whole was seeing a downfall, speculative capital had a steep rise. Whitehead conveys it through the act of police officers who were huddling around stock market tickers while the entire Harlem city was burning. This also gives an understanding that racial capitalism creates a sense of social detachment in the attempt of profiting individuals rather than moving towards the greater good.

Crook Manifesto is saturated with this contradiction. The state presents itself as maintaining order and protecting democracy, yet its actions reveal a willingness to use overwhelming force against Black communities. Policing in the novel is militarized, indiscriminate, and often corrupt. Black political movements are framed as existential threats, echoing Cold War rhetoric that conflated domestic dissent with foreign insurgency. Whitehead’s depiction of law enforcement reflects Melamed’s insight that violence becomes rationalized when it is presented as necessary for stability. The police are not aberrant actors but institutional representatives of a racial order that prioritizes property and control. Harlem’s residents understand this intuitively; survival requires navigating both criminal and legal systems that are equally compromised.

Meanwhile, Harlem is changing demographically and politically. Through the novel, the rise of militant Black groups and the putrefaction of postwar bipartisan consensus in urban policy can

be understood. When Ray visits his old neighborhood, he sees vacant brownstones and burned-out businesses which are symbols of the race riots and “negro removal” policies of the 1960s. Yet he also encounters black entrepreneurs who know how to “ride the wave” of poverty programs and city contracts. This captures the ambivalent legacy of America’s official anti-racist stance. On the one hand, public initiatives have brought a degree of economic upliftment and on the other hand, they have been absorbed into the logic of profit and control. This duality reflects Melamed’s point that racial inequality was officially condemned, but only in a way that served capital’s needs. Whitehead’s characters speak this implicit contradiction: Munson the cop alternates between anti-Communist blather and misogynist expletives, but all the while he is crookedly “rationalizing violence” in the name of social order. In Melamed’s terms, the postwar regime casts itself as defending liberal democracy, while displacing its older ethos of white supremacy into coded policing and urban management.

In sum, *Crook Manifesto* offers a compelling literary meditation on racial capitalism as lived experience. Through its depiction of Harlem in crisis, the novel reveals how historical systems of exploitation adapt to new contexts without losing their fundamental character. When read alongside Cedric Robinson, Walter Johnson, and Jodi Melamed, Whitehead’s narrative emerges as part of a broader Black radical critique that challenges myths of progress and inclusion. The novel does not propose solutions or heroic resistance. Instead, it insists on recognition: recognition of how deeply racial capitalism structures everyday life, and how survival itself can become compromised under its weight. By foregrounding decline as profitable and order as violent, *Crook Manifesto* forces readers to confront uncomfortable continuities in American history.

By drawing on historical and theoretical texts, we see that *Crook Manifesto* is more than genre crime fiction and extends to a social history. The novel’s depiction of Harlem in 1971 highlights

how the legacy of slavery and empire endures. Economic destabilization, racialized policing, and intergenerational poverty all trace back to the global system described by Walter Johnson. At the same time, it dramatizes Cedric Robinson's insight that capitalism has always been racial, and Jodi Melamed's account of how postwar liberalism managed racial conflict. The characters' dialogues and struggles serve as narrative proof that America's "manifesto" has long been crooked, written in the ink of stolen lands, exploited labour, and sanctioned violence.

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