

## Text Transcript of “Off the Shelf” Podcast Episode 4 with Sundiata Cha-Jua

**Augustus Wood:** Welcome to another episode of "Off the Shelf: Revolutionary Readings in Times of Crisis," where we recover, resurrect or give exposure to scholarship and scholars who offer frameworks and insight into understanding this current historical moment of these multiple crises facing struggles today.

Our mission at “Off the Shelf” is to bring the critical thinking, the intellectualism, back at the heart of diagnosing and intervening in the social problems plaguing oppressed groups worldwide. I'm your host, Augustus Wood, and “Off the Shelf” is brought to you by the Humanities Research Institute at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

And today we are honored to have Black Studies scholar Dr. Sundiata Cha-Jua with us today, and folks who know me know I've been waiting to bring you on to do this do this interview.

Because this is kind of like, this is kind of like the culmination of really why I thought of “Off the Shelf” in the first place is because of our conversations over the years and about what we see as the the pieces that are needed in terms of building a movement from a moment.

And so to hear your comments and your thoughts today on how intellectualism can be the foreground for building that, our listeners are really going to get a treat today. So for folks who don't know who Dr. Cha-Jua is, which is a shame, because I argue that he's one of the most important scholar-activists working today, he is the author of many award-winning works, including his incredible study of Brooklyn, Illinois, called *America's First Black Town, Brooklyn, Illinois, 1830 to 1915*. And also the ground-breaking award-winning article “The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies.” He's also a co-editor on the book *Race Struggles* with Theodore Koditschek and Helen Neville.

And his extensive scholarship has undoubtedly influenced a generation of radical scholars, material, materialists, and other figures who are looking at political economy and wanting to put intellectualism back at the heart of Black Studies. He's currently on the executive board of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. And he's been there since 2016. He's a former two-term president of National Council of Black Studies. A former senior editor of *The Black Scholar* and associate editor of the *Journal of African American History*. And so that's

kind of a, a small summation of the storied career so far, brother, Sundiata Cha-Jua. So again, I just want to thank you for joining us today.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Brother, it's a pleasure to be here. It's a pleasure to look at your multitude of projects, because you are certainly from my perception one of the best, premier young scholar-activists. So it's a pleasure.

**Augustus Wood:** That means a lot coming from you. So let's go ahead and get right into it because a lot of folks have been waiting for this and I kinda, I kinda tease this episode when I finish the Lou Turner episode, which was our premiere episode of "Off The Shelf," because one of the reasons why I was so excited about doing this project is because of the work that both you and Lou Turner did working with the late great scholar Hal Baron. And Lou's episode was really a deep dive into how he's taking Hal Baron's work and putting it towards a more contemporary understanding of racial oppression, the ideas of social engineering, the issues of class struggle within African American, African American working class struggles. And you actually take Hal Baron's work from another perspective and can add a lot, other depth to it as well.

So let's go ahead and get into it now because one of the things that I argue is that Baron's work is really essential, especially now as right-wing white supremacists have reorganized themselves into a very, kind of, neo-nativist, doctrinist strategy, that seems to be growing as this past week's events have demonstrated. So talk to me about how you first encountered Hal Baron's work and how your theories, particularly Black racial formation and transformation theory, are utilized Hal's work on these issues.

**Sundiata Cha-Ju:** Interesting, I first came across Hal Baron in a book that I think was called *Institutional Racism*. Some sociologist, they might have been Pettaway or something. And it was an article entitled "The Web of Urban Racism." And I was just struck by the way in which he was able to describe the institutional matrix in which Black people found themselves trapped in the 60s, right? Because I think I read this book in '69, so I must have been a freshman or a sophomore in high school. And from that web of urban racism, I was so impressed that I kind of searched how Hal, and it is interesting in terms of how began to read Hal. So then the next big thing, and this is probably a piece that more people know. It's something called "The Demand for Black Labor." It was initially an article in *Radical America*. And then it was issued as a pamphlet. Now, it builds on the ideas in the "Web of Urban Racism," but it is not confined to the urban space, right? And he also, you're watching the evolution of a scholar. So they're ideas that appear in the web that are not as developed as they are. Demand for Black labor and their ideas and he lets drop, right. When you look at the "Web of Urban Racism," since it's focused

on the urban experience, and the essential argument, of course, is that when we think about African Americans now, we have to recognize the profound transformation that occurred in 50 years after enslavement.

And so essentially what he's talking about is the move from Black people being predominantly a rural people, you know, I mean, like 90 percent in the rural area to, where by the time we get to 1970 or so, 73 percent of Black people are urban. That's a profound transformation, right? He deals with the transformation from south to north. And then of course, the most profound transformation is to move from a agrarian labor force, right? Tenancy, sharecroppers, to, part of the industrial proletariat. So he's assaying those major changes, but he's mainly focused on the urban environment and what he's trying to do... In fact, I think the concept, that probably best explains what Hal's doing in, in, in a later piece, he speaks to what is Louis Althusser's notion of over determination. Because what, what Baron is trying to show is that the various institutions that Black people find themselves immersed in, right, and he's using the metaphor of the spider's web. And what he's saying is that each strand strengthens the trap, right? So it's, it's a spiderweb. But then he makes the argument that, unlike the fly, Black people have strengthened themselves in the urban environment and are beginning to tear apart some of the threads. But, but the point is that he looks at employment. And the big thing here is he's arguing a dual labor market and that Black people find themselves in a, not in the primary labor market, but in a sub-labor market. That you are paid less, you have lower quality union benefits, um, there's greater turnover. It's essentially what was called "Negro jobs," right? Hot, dirty, dangerous, low paying, insecure jobs. So he talks about the location of Black folks there as the centerpiece of this web. And then having been located there, right, he moves from employment to housing. When he talks about then, given the low wages and given racial policies, Black people are then herded into, he used the term "ghetto." And the ghetto lies housing. And he makes the point, right? And the point that still needs to be made is that studies show that Black people pay 10 percent more for comparable apartments and rental housing to what white folks pay. So in other words, there was a color tax.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Right? So we have to remember that, that the Black poor pay more.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** So he moves from housing, saying that what's being confined into these ghettos. Then, comes the question of schooling, and because of neighborhood school policy,

the schools are inadequate, and insecure, right? And then he works through that to simply show that each strand, each institution or strand, is reinforced by the other institutional strands.

Right? Hence, the concept of the web enhanced the notion of institutional racism, right? So that's more of a piece on trying to explain a contemporary Black urban community, in fact, metropolitan communities at the end of the sixties. By the time we would get to demand for Black labor, he's now trying to go back, right, and really deepen the understanding of slavery, particularly exploitation of slave labor, moving to sharecropping and farm. But in this iteration, right, he's not developed his periodization of African American history yet. Or I should say the periodization that he develops, he later recognizes that it's not adequate. So he talks about enslavement. And then he talks about two transitional periods. And the first transitional period is from Civil War to World War One. So the emphasis is on the Great Migration.

The second transition is World War One and World War Two, right? And he sees these as transitions because again, he's focused on the Great Migration, which is a seminal form of resistance that he's highlighting. And then he gets to the contemporary period. And he does much of the same type of analysis that he used in the "Web of Urban Racism." So that's the demand for Black labor, which became a major thing, had an impact, um, and then in fact, let me get these years right.

So it's '69 with the "Web of Urban Racism." It's '71 or '70 with *The Demand for Black Labor*. The article might've been '70. The pamphlet is '71. And then in '77, he does a piece that I think is the, not seen as widely, and it's a piece on advanced capitalism in the Black community. Advanced capitalism is in the title for sure, right?

**Augustus Wood:** Yep.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** And again, it's an elaboration, right, of the work that he had begun with the "Web of Urban Racism" and the "Demand for Black Labor." And now he's trying to talk about how the contemporary form of corporate capital, actually transnational capital, has helped structure the African American community. And so he's interested here. This is the piece that he's explicit about working with Marx's categories. In the other pieces, if you know Marx, you know what he's doing, but he's not telling you, right. But here he's very explicit in terms of what he's doing in terms of the category. And for him, the dominant categories are, of course he's taken the base, the superstructure, and then he's adding nation to it. And with nation, he then talks about white nationalism and Black nationalism, right. And he has a, he, again, he discusses these different historical moments, but the tendency is still leaning toward the present, right, so that's like 1977. And then in '85, he does "Racism Transformed." And this is

where we get the crystallation of what I would argue as the Baron historical methodology and the Baron theory. The article is called "Racism Transformed."

But within the context of that, he doesn't necessarily use the word "formation, transformation." But if you follow the logic of the article, you understand that he's talking about different historical periods, right? Enslavement, agrarian ascendancy, and advanced racism are his categories.

And he talks about those as the historical periods. And within those historical periods they are comparable to a formation. So in cause of racial formations in the sense that a social formation is always bound by time. A society is always bound by time, as well as spaciality, right? And so these three historical periods are racial formations, and he's concerned with how the movement from one to another. All right, now, what's, what's, what's interesting in Baron is that probably the web of urban racism talks more about resistance, right, in Black struggle. But that is always suffused within all of the Baron, Baron's work. But I would argue that it's these four works for one approaching Baron, from a standpoint of history and looking for frameworks, model, and insight, right? So embracing the transform, the big piece is of course, he argues that the building on, what comes out of the demand for Black labor, which was also somewhat in a "Web of Urban Racism." So he really raises up the question of the exploitation of Black labor as the centerpiece, right? And then he uses that to describe how Black people respond to economic exploitation. And the other things that go along with that production relationship or whatever the dominant production relationship is for Black folks in a particular historical period. And you know, and he kind of fleshes that stuff out.

But the big thing, the big takeaway is the periodization schema, right? And of course, the notion of moving from formation through transformation to a new formation. And that's been the kind of centerpiece of what I've taken from Baron and made critical to my own work and to my elaboration of Baron. So it turns on those four articles and my, my attempt to update and deepen some of the things that Baron does there. So for example, Baron really doesn't dive into the transformations. So in my work I try and really emphasize the process of transformation beyond the great migrations that Baron focuses on, right? Now there again, there's insight in Baron. So he always talks about, you know, the thing that we have to be, that we gotta look at in a very sober way, African American advancement has always been key to moments of extreme violence.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** War, revolution, revolt. And so when you figure out well, how do you end enslavement? The Civil War, right?

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Then comes reconstruction. Once Blacks are emancipated, well how is reconstruction overthrown? One could argue in essence a second Civil War.

**Augustus Wood:** Yep.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Right? The amount of violence that occurs as a consequence of the Great Migration, i.e., Black people flee the South. Flight is a form of resistance, right, a form of struggle. Well, those years, you know, if you just take 1919, you're looking at massive violence in this country. 26 rebellions. Elaine, Arkansas, you know, Chicago, Washington, D.C., on and on and on. But that whole historical period, lynchings, right? There's a moment in the 1890s, right, for that decade, every 2.5 days, a Black man, woman or child is lynched. And so extreme violence to transform. And then of course we get to Civil Rights, Black power movements. Again, you're talking about extreme violence. So that when we talk about Black problems we have to be very clear. It's not, it has never happened without a great deal of violence. And one would say, past is prologue on that question, right? So, you know, drawing on those insights from Baron. You want me to keep going?

Because I can you elaborate what I do, with Baron, what I get from Baron?

**Augustus Wood:** Well, yeah, that's why I'm saying, I think I think what's really important about what you've just said, and especially in terms of your work, and having read your work is your attempt to really tease out the dialectic of it. Because again, I think one of the biggest issues that we, on the left have, when you read a lot of scholarship is people are so obsessed with structuralism, which is important, the structure, the, the, you know, being able to actually conceptualize how we are oppressed is incredibly important. And sometimes, well not sometimes, but oftentimes there are misinterpretations and we have to be diligent in correcting that. However, I think what you do and what Baron kinda started and you kinda finally pull out, is that these transformations don't occur by them organically. There's something in the resistance of the African American majority that drives the ruling class or the structure to have to reshape itself. That there has to be a reshaping based on a reaction to the struggles on the ground, the resistance or those incidences of violence that you mention, that that they're all related to one another.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Absolutely. I mean I do think that I highlight agency.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** A resistance to a much greater sense than what you see in Baron's historical corpus. But those things are there. They are there, they are, they are definitely there. So what I've done is one, modified the, the, the, the, the, the periodization scheme.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** So I keep his notion, his category, or I should say, his historical period of enslavement. What he called the agrarian ascendancy, I take from scholars of the Caribbean and South and Central America and the Pacific Islands. The notion that a plantation economy, right, as a way to think about that um, and what that allows us to do then is see it as different than slavery.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** But also based on coercion, right? I mean, the fundamental labor relationship is called the social relations of labor or coercion, right? So you've got, they still try and maintain the right to whip people. You get white capping, And of course you got lynching and racial pogroms to, you know, keep people in line. So that period, and Baron, again suggests but he doesn't really draw out the difference. So that for me, the plantation economy is a Southern phenomenon.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** All right. And so in a periodization, even though the next moment, which I call proletarianization... and at one time I talked about in terms of proletarianization in ghetto, and I think there I was following Baron. But the reality is that yeah, that, that, that, that, that, that structural, spatial confinement of, of new African people it was a reality, but the way in which we moved within that space was around community building, where we're building communities, we're creating in an institutional infrastructure. We're creating a public sphere, a counter public sphere, to use the words of Michael Dawson, right? So I shift and begin to call it proletarianization, i.e., incorporation of Black people into wage labor in the North and the struggle to build communities, right? Institution and cultures and those kinds of things and social movements, so that's shifted there. And I see that as largely a Northern phenomenon. That's not to say that that it doesn't occur in the South, of course it does. But at this period, and where it reaches its high point, right, is a consequence of the Great Migration. So it's a Northern phenomenon. And I see that moment, right? Plantation economy is essentially from abolition,

right, emancipation to 1965. Right? When that plantation south was finally broken apart. Now it begins to disintegrate in the 40s, but it's with us into the 60s. Well, the proletarianization community-building phase is overwhelmingly Northern. And it's about, you know, you can say 1910 to 1979. And I make '79 the cut off because there's a severe recession in the winter of 79-80, right?

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** And like in the community I grew up in, they were probably, I think there were five or six Fortune 500 companies and four of them, three or four of them fold in a number of other industrial employers cut back severely, Black unemployment in the city of Decatur in the winter of '79, '80 is over 25 percent. You know, I mean, it's a depression. A lot of people lose their homes, right? And Black people never recover in terms of industrial jobs, right? And in terms of employment period, right? Because there's also the loss of public sector jobs. And so that kind of ends the period.

And then of course in 1980, you get a political realignment it to the right with the election of Ronald Reagan and between the destruction of the old Fordist economy, that industrial economy, that was built on working class and the working class, and in fact, incorporation into that political economy explains the strengthening of the Black institutional base to Black institutional infrastructure, Black civil society. In that period, that paves the way for the launching, that is Civil Rights and Black Power Movement, two separate things, right?

And so I try and capture that aspects of what we're talking about then is that that's third moment ends in the late 70s, early 80s, and we get... Baron doesn't theorize beyond that moment. In fact, he doesn't theorize. Yeah, well, he does theorize that moment, but he doesn't see what comes next.

**Augustus Wood:** Yeah, exactly.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** He has a phrase that one could call, we use the phrase advanced capitalism and advanced racism. But he's really talking about that prior period. And if you get into see some of the things that turns a transition. So what I do is try and pick that up instead of what we're talking about is globalization. But more specifically, right, we're talking about a transition, a transformation to a financialized global racial capital. And it's important because the financial sector, because it's much more dominant in that moment, right? And the way you can see this is that if you're tracking something like Ford or GM, okay?



In the early 20th century, they made cars. They make their money by making cars. By the time we get into 1950s, 1960s, they made their money by making parts for cars. When we get into the late 70s, 1980s, and the present, they make their money by financing the purchase of cars—the financial sector, right, rises, and then I think there's some mirror mean. There's some wonderful work here showing that transition, right? In addition to William Tab also doesn't really get work showing those transitions. And so this financialized global racial capitalism, um, that transformation of course, creates deindustrialization for working class Americans, but for Black folks it's deep proletarianization because we lose all kinds of jobs, right?

**Augustus Wood:** Exactly.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** We're booted, we shrink in the public sector. And so that, that, that moment I argue characterizes where we are now with particular tweak. Right? That, rather than find ourselves as, there is a tremendous increase in the number of people who are unemployed, but what, what, what begins to happen is sub-proletarianization. Temporary work. Part-time work, right? I think, either I was listening to the Free Labor Hour with you, or you made this point on the Ubuntu podcast, Sunday, about the rise of temporary work and the deep location of Black folks in temporary work and in part time work. And you know, the Bureau of Labor Statistics data is very clear in that regard. Those things are the sectors that we've been pushed and they've grown exponentially in terms of characterizing the African American community. Yeah, you want to go next?

**Augustus Wood:** Yeah, I'm glad you brought that up because right now there's this war being waged by the temporary corporations, the temp industries, as well as the gig economies like DoorDash, Uber, Lyft, all these companies that offer unstable temporary work with no benefits, below minimum wage, etc., no unemployment insurance, all these things. They're coming out and making the exact opposite argument that you've proven in your research, that they make the argument that African Americans enjoy the freedom of going and working for these companies. Because we can wake up when we want to, we can work we want to, is that, we we, we, we don't get pushed to those. We choose to work in unstable labor, and that we prefer it. And so talk more about how this, how that notion goes into...pretty much flies in contradiction to the, our real material realities now and your concept of the New Nadir.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** You know, basically that's a "Sambo" thesis, right? We're happy in slavery. Just the modern twist on a Sambo thesis. And that's what you would expect from capital. But if you are a middle class person and you're working at a particular skill level in the tech industry, and working from home, and having the freedom to work when you want to work is kind of liberating. Because you're, you're, you're being remunerated for that labor at a high rate. Right?

Um, but if you are forced to work, like a former student of mine who's doing some hard labor work now, is working at FedEx, right. Now I worked at UPS when I was quite younger, for a bit. So you go in and you're moving these packages out of a truck bed and it's backbreaking work when you have a package, you don't know how heavy, you don't know what's in it. It could be just a box of steel bolts. So he's working at FedEx and after nine hours, you know, can I get a 15 minute break? Excuse me, after eight hours he has a full 15 minute break. And the boss laughs, the supervisor laughs. You know, they they tell him, you know, the way this contract work, you get a 15 minute break after nine hours. So you do nine hours of backbreaking work a night for a 15 minute break. You know, you get his lunch. Because you don't have good unionization. UPS which has much better unionization, you get a break every four hours. So the point is that people don't choose to work like that.

**Augustus Wood:** Exactly.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Right. You're forced into it. And people put two and three of these jobs together. You know there's that instance when George W. Bush and I think it's when he's running in 2004 and he's on stage with this woman. And she says she has three jobs, and he says, "only in America." A person has, not one, not two, but three jobs, you know, clearly, totally clueless. So the point is that this constitutes what I call the New Nadir, that new moment, that Baron kind of gestures toward with advanced capitalism and advanced racism. But he's really speaking to the moment that I call proletarianization and community building. So this New Nadir, and nadir meaning the abyss, the low point. And Rayford Logan, in his book, *The Betrayal of the Negro*, he calls it the low point in the Negro's struggle for freedom, right? And so this New Nadir, which is the third nadir, in the history of the new African people. Right, the first nadir comes with the ratification of the US Constitution. Because that constitution enshrined slavery, and it makes slavery national, because it has a fugitive slave clause.

So if you escape from Tennessee and make it into Illinois, the authorities in Illinois, are obligated to turn, let you go back to Tennessee to enslavement. And right, so, so it gets nationalized and consolidated in that sense. So that what we end up with, right, is a kind of system that by the time... so that's the first nadir, right? So we enabled a system that also moves on these nadirs and these nadirs have a relationship to the high points of struggle. So when we lose the nadirs, there's a backlash that plunges into a nadir. So the second nadir is the period that Rayford Logan writing about from 1877, he goes to 1918. But again, when I look at it, you know, 1919, you got 26 major race riots. You got Tulsa in 1921, you got Rosewood 1923. And so I kind of push the second nadir into the 1920s, right? And then this moment that we're talking about, is a third nadir.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** So this New Nadir is characterized by the transformations in African American life that are wrought, by the transition, or transformation to financialize global racial capital, in which Black people have become largely part-time work. And there's a whole host of social relationships that attend to this transformation, right? One of them that gets highlighted often is, of course, mass incarceration, state violence, right? But also in terms of housing, residential, residential apartheid has dramatically increased in this moment. School apartheid has dramatically increased in this moment. There's been, because overall, right, financialized global racial capital has exacerbated wealth, inequality around the world. In relation to North and South, but also within societies and in societies that have, that are racialized, then you're going to see a strong racialized component of that exacerbation. So that on the one hand, there's been an effort to increase a Black middle class, but a dependent middle class, right, not a middle class that owns capital. That controls its own successful businesses, right? But, but a dependent middle-class franchise capital. But that's, so they exacerbate the wealth inequality within the Black nation.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** And one of the things that scholars like Jessica Gordon Nembhard have discovered, is that within the national group or racial group, wealth inequality is greater within than the comparison of the group like Black folk to white Americans, right? Intra-racially, the differences, the gap within new African folk, the gap amongst Latinx people, the gap within is greater than the gap between. And we know that wealth inequality, the racial wealth gap, is such that they projected around 2050 that Black people will actually have 0 wealth.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Okay, so those are the kind of transformations that we now have to then grapple with. And the reason why I've tried to take that kind of political economy approach and apply it historically and to the current moment, is that we have to have a very clear understanding of what we're confronting. We gotta have a theory, right, that explains the form of oppression so that we can strategize, try to create tactics in ideology that will push us toward liberation. So that's the overall project and the ways in which Harold Baron fits in in that it crystallizes historical materialism for me.

**Augustus Wood:** So let me, I want to kind of make one more point to this because I think one of the other aspects of your work that is really critical to this understanding of the New Nadir and

the piece that's really kind of driven a lot of my work on the political economy of African-American Atlanta is the resource deprivation aspect of it. Because again, one of the things that's so, one of the things that marks this transformation in the political economy into this New Nadir is that public resources are seized from the public and redistributed amongst the private sector for the first time in history.

Now, beforehand they would take public resources and then of course the state would keep some things, right, and they would be available. But now, in this moment, you have the point to where the public resources have been seized to the point to where they are not available and they're being redistributed amongst the private sector. Which is what people would term, coined the term "neoliberalization." And that, you know, a lot of people like to talk about neoliberalism as this grand concept. But I argue that neoliberalization is a process, a process of, of, of extending liberalism to this point of the New Nadir because the ruling class is saying, because of a response or reaction to the Black Power movement, to the Black consciousness movement and to working class struggles of the late 60s and 70s. And by take away your resources that help you fight me then you can no longer fight me. So that becomes a part of why they transition and move more closely toward seizing public resources to where everything now is towards privatization. The first reason, of course, is of course capital accumulation, surplus value. But the long-term goal...

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Yeah I was waiting for you to get that, to make that correction.

**Augustus Wood:** That the long-term goal though, the long-term is to crush opposition. Because if you don't have resources to fight, then you can't fight. And I think that your work, particularly your work on the New Nadir really hints at that. And takes a look at what you just mentioned earlier that intra-racial class warfare, where those managers and professional groups are those, are those junior partners of capital, whose job it is, is to not only redistribute for higher surplus value, but to also take those public resources and find ways to redistribute them for privatization.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** And this is where this question of what you read and how you read becomes important, right?

So that Baron's essay on advanced capitalism, that essay, when it comes out in '77, I believe, comes out in a book that was co-edited by David Gordon, Richard Wright, and that group of people who do what they call social, the social structures of accumulation. That's the kind of neo-Marxist model that they use, right? And one of the things you get from David Gordon in the early, mid-seventies, mid-seventies, is that he makes the argument about when capital is

introduced, new technology is usually that they responded to labor struggles and they're trying to cut the strength of workers, right? And Lou Turner, that special issue of the Black Scholar that I edited on Black political economy, the piece in there by Lou, Lou's very, very clear that using Detroit as a model, that the introduction of the new technologies was not just driven by capital accumulation, but it was a response to the number of wildcat, strikes, wildcat strikes in the sixties. It was a response to the rise of Black labor, Radical Black labor organizations like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. And so we gotta factor that in that capital, in addition to following this logic of accumulation, is responding to workers' struggle. So what's interesting here is that the moment that you were talking about, that's a moment in which Reagan destroys labor. Right? So labor is weak in the 80s and the Black social movement is weak in the 80s, having been decimated through COINTELPRO.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** So agency and the dialectic between agency and the ways in which capital changes its strategic approach.... so the rise, the shift to neoliberalism, and when you say liberalism, we gotta be clear that this is the neoclassical understanding of liberalism.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes. Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** It's laissez-faire that they're trying to move back to. So it's not just privatization is also deregulation. Right? In order to shift social resources into the hands of those private capitalists. And that has a devastating impact on the public. And especially racialized groups like African Americans. I think your dissertation on Atlanta shows the unerring way in which immiseration is created, I should say, is deepened and exacerbated, because of the theft of public resources, and the shift to, to, to the private sector. And that whole concept, and this is where Baron hints at, but he doesn't develop a theory of internal colonialism. Right. But racial formation transformation clearly point us toward a theory of internal colonialism.

And so for, for me, it's important then that what racial formation and transformation does for me, is provide me with an analysis of the way in which the system functions. It's oppression of Black folk. Then the question is, what is the response, the strategic response? I shouldn't say, not the strategic response. The question is, then, once we see how the history moves, how do we explain each historical period? And it's in the explanation at a functioning in each historical period that internal colonial theory becomes useful to me because we have to understand, that there's always been a comfort to our class inside Black America. And we have to account for this isn't a caste system. Not all white people benefit equally from racial oppression, right? And not all Black people are exploited in similar ways to the same extent or are oppressed to the

same extent or made marginal to the same extent, right? So we gotta look at how this thing actually functions. And internal colonial theory is a far superior and more sophisticated frame of analysis than the simplistic notion of caste which just simply don't apply anywhere as far as I can tell outside of India.

**Augustus Wood:** And even, and even then it's still pretty much up in the air which we go into in which the, the, the late great Oliver C. Cox's caste, class, and race, kinda, goes into. We can spend a whole other hour on the problems of caste and how Isabella Wilkerson's deeply troubling and dangerous text is should not be a part of "Off the Shelf." Yeah. It needs to stay on the shelf somewhere. But I want to kind of we got a little bit more time left. I want to kind of dig into C.L.R. James a bit because one of the first things that when I first started working with you as your graduate student, you introduced me to an article you wrote on CLR James and, and Black Marxism.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** You know, in one sense, right, I'm taking a piece that I had previously done on C.L.R. James, and I'm updating it with new information. And I'm using more primary sources beyond the text. The initial piece was really an analysis of the most significant text James had produced. I'm using some of his correspondence, making sure that I historicize, provide historical context for what I'm attempting to do with, with James. But it's still in the framework that my argument would be that C.L.R. James is developing a African diaspora Black interpretation of Marxism.

**Augustus Wood:** Mm-hm.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Right? He's doing what Fanon said. You know, Fanon said that in the case of colonialism, Marxism must always be stretched. So I think of James as developing a race-conscious Marxism, one that moves race near the center of analysis. I don't think that becomes the center, right, labor exploitation remains the center. But he certainly does that.

**Augustus Wood:** He gets the closest.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Yeah. Yeah. And Du Bois. But I but I think James's piece, there's a great deal of similarity. I mean, it's amazing when you read *Black Reconstruction* and you read *Black Jacobins*, that they weren't corresponding. I mean, you would think they were because of the frameworks, the way in which the books are structured, but they weren't. So that tells you something about the power of the analytical method right? That they're using. But I think that James has a better grasp of Marx's categories and how to use them in *Black Jacobins* than Du Bois had in *Black Reconstruction*. And that's not a put down, it's just an observation.

**Augustus Wood:** Sure.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** So what I'm trying to do with James is a couple of things. I'm always concerned about historiography and about understanding that, if you are good historian and what you're tracking is, how continuity and discontinuity, right, change over time and space.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** All right. Now we've got a lot of people where nothing moves.

**Augustus Wood:** Yeah, that's true.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** It's like, I remember when I was a teenager and there was this guy who everybody liked his game on on the basketball court. And I remember this old man said he said the ball move, but he don't. But he's not advancing, he's not getting by his men, he said, the idea is to beat your men, and needs to be out there dribbling, and so you have historians who tell a whole lot of stuff, but what's changing? What's being made the same, and what's the relationship between those things? To me, I've always taken it that, as a person, as historical materialist, is that that's essential to what I have to do. I've got to show the relationship between change and continuity over time and space in everything that I do and be very keyed onto that. It's the whole periodization piece because that's what I'm trying to show in those periods. So James helped reinforce that fundamental notion. Then of course, the notion that you've got to pay attention to the alignment of forces. So when you reading Black Jacobins, right, I think the first chapter might be on, it's either on white workers or it's on the Black work of the slaves, and then you get a chapter that's on whites and it breaks them down by class, right? Du Bois essentially does the same thing in *Black Reconstruction*. And the point is to then look at how those contending forces interact: what the relationship is, what's the form of exploitation, what's the type of resistance, what's the social structures that are created by the oppressed in that regard. What's the institutional network by which oppression is made. Those kinds of things is what I'm always trying to be attentive to in everything and at every historical moment. Like I said, I'm into these transitional moments where we can really see the role of agency and resistance. So James, I try and track, and this is a Black Studies project. So while it is rooted in historiography, it's a Black Studies project because I'm trying to track James' racial consciousness and how it relates to the type of historical work and political economy work that he produces. So there I'm thinking in terms of Bill Cross, William Cross, and his theory on nigrescence.

**Augustus Wood:** Yeah.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** And you know, James is really good in the same way that the Autobiography of Malcolm X, or Assata. Those, her autobiography really seems as if they were writing with Cross' theory of nigrescence on one side at a table and they're reading from it and then they're laying out their life. But we know that's not what happened, but it seems that way. So the James really does track his developing racial consciousness, right? You can see its growth, you can see its limitations. So I start there and that allows me to understand how James is approaching the different histories he writes at different historical moments, as well as the social historical contexts, the movements he's working with and those kinds of things. But I start with a base of understanding who James is in a sense of race and class, right?

**Augustus Wood:** Yeah.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** I don't want to say his positionality. I don't want to sound like one of them people.

**Augustus Wood:** Yeah, I feel you on that.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** So then, you know what I'm able to do then with, with James is, then bring those aspects to bear in looking at James's historical theory in his political interpretation. And move through that. And of course, two things become real central, right? The question of the role of race in revolutionary struggle in which class is central. And the question of, the question of organizational struggle, right? How James moves away from the vanguard party idea, how he breaks with that notion. So those are the two things that I'm really grappling with in, in, in CLR James. And I accept as an axiom James's notion that in matters of, I don't know whether he says matters of colonialism... No, in matters of imperialism, it is a mistake to make race this central factor.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** And then he comes right back and he says, right, but to ignore the significance of race is an error as grave. Something to that effect, right? That you want to keep those things in balance. So I try to look at the extent to which James keeps those things in dialectical relationship across the corpus of his work. And then I tracked his movement away from the vanguard party, looking at state capitalism, but particularly facing reality, I think that's probably the main text that demonstrates that or that, or that shift. And that's what I'm trying to do with James. But, you know, there, there's so many little insights that you get with James



about one, how to write history, to how to organize politically and how to think, right, dialectically, that you pull up when you go through the corpus of CLR James.

**Augustus Wood:** And touch... and in concluding this episode, you know, this there's just been so many great, so many great instances where you've shown and you've given us a lot of scholars, you've given us a lot of books and articles that we can look to in terms of looking at this moment. What are some final words that you have in terms of your analysis of the current historical moment right now? What or what, uh, what, what do we as African Americans are faced with? What is the world faced with as this transition occurs?

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** I think that the first thing we should be fairly clear on, is that there's a desperation amongst a sector, a leading sector at a capitalist class. We've, we've witnessed over the past four or five years that, they're willing to get us in the illusion of democracy in order to secure their profits. And that's what their lines with Trump that Wall Street made.

**Augustus Wood:** Exactly.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** And he delivered because as you, as you suggest, they have to now rob the public till to a great degree in order to achieve the profit levels that they want to. They're in a severe crisis. And when capitalism is in crises, they tend to go toward an authoritarian system, right? Fascism.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** You know, you read George Jackson's *Blood In My Eye* and his analysis of fascism. And for me it resonates at this moment. And so what we saw was an example, right? And I would argue that it's a test. A dress rehearsal. Because this society has functioned in a way in which they have systematically built up to, the people now think they had the right, and I guess technically, they do. That they can take weapons and walk around the street with automatic weapons. They can enter governmental buildings. You know, the Panthers were prosecuted for entering the California State House.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes, they were.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** These people are walking around. They they are now completely armed and they can be mobilized with very little effort because of the technology.

You can send word and people in all 50 states can attack the State House, a few thousand. So the kind of fascism that people would see in Italy, in a Germany, is very real. Black people have lived under fascism since emancipation, right? A racial fascism. And you know, we had to really push that point that, this was a pseudo democracy. There was never a democracy. But the remnants of that pseudo democracy are being...Trump was eroding. And so we need to understand that, and for us that meant a particular type of a political response. And you know, the debates we had within Malcolm X grassroots movement. That, uh, is there a difference between Biden and Trump? And you know, a lot of our comrade organizations faltered on this and argued that they were the same. Right? And it was important to distinguish them and it was important to mobilize our people to defeat fascism, to defeat the possibility of a second Trump regime. Not with the illusion that we misunderstood who Joe Biden is. We know precisely who and what Joe Biden is, right?

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** A Southern bigot. Unlike any Southerner who, I should say like the Clintons, just because someone is comfortable around Black people, doesn't mean anything other than they're a sophisticated person, and they don't let the true feelings show. Right? And so we understood that you had to, we had to defeat Trump. That's the key to this moment, right? But we need a theory.

**Augustus Wood:** Yeah.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** We need a theory of anti-Black racial oppression. And so we need a revitalization from my point of view of internal colonial theory.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Because we had to make it clear to people that we constitute a nation. We don't have a state. But we do constitute a nation of people. And by understanding that we are a nation of people, we can talk in terms of Black immigrants. And we can talk about them in ways that are not xenophobic, like ADOS.

But that in fact, we're not a nation based on blood, we're a nation based on experience, historical experience, grounded in a particular historical reality and a relationship to an oppressing nation-state, the United, you know, the U.S. And so we had to push.

And we have to make it clear that inside our nation there are many classes. There's a very small bourgeoisie, a, somewhat, much larger, petty bourgeoisie, or middle class. And then there's a large working class that has been part of a large section, that is a reserve labor, right? A section is, there's a lumping group there and that there's a complexity there in terms of class.

But that same complexity exists also amongst the white oppressor nation. Right? Not to the same magnitude, but, but they had the same, similar sets of class-based divisions. And then we need that kind of complex analysis in order to forge the different sectors of the nation into a weapon of resistance. If we don't have a complex, sophisticated analysis of internal class, meaning the concrete material conditions upon which people make decisions about what they support, and what they won't support. Then it's, it's gonna be very hard to get more than a tiny sector of our people engaged in the struggle for national liberation.

So that's why I think it's important, you know, that we have to be very deliberate with what we read and what ideas we choose to invest time in, and the ability to which those ideas can be of service to the movement.

So for me, that's a kind of characterizes what I try to do with my work. You know, Robert Chrisman developed this notion of the Black scholar activist. And the simple notion was that it's not enough to simply produce engaged writing to take up and study the conditions of the people, to study the movement. And that's important because not everybody produces engaged scholarship, right?

**Augustus Wood:** Oh yeah.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** But, but our argument is that one must go beyond that. And that given the crisis that we face and the history to see, the history of the Black intellectual tradition is a tradition in which across ideology, these people were engaged in trying to make the world better, trying to liberate Black people, find a point of view of how they saw the oppression, right. Those liberals, they sought to create a world of equality, justice, and freedom.

Right? Revolutionary nationalists, nationalism sought to great autonomy. Right? If not independence. The left nationalists have sought to transform the US society to radicalize this society. So whatever framework... and even Black conservatives or activists, there's no contradiction between being conservative and being active. The question is what are you active on? But, but the point being that the Black intellectual tradition in all of its variations has been a tradition that combines scholarship and active struggle.

**Augustus Wood:** No, I think, and I think that's the most important point of why we started doing "Off the Shelf" in the first place is that that there's so much in for political fervor around doing something but yet there's no intellectual analysis or rigor that can point you towards developing that framework to say, I need to go join Malcolm X grassroots. Or I'm really interested in looking at this from a legal perspective, I can go do that. So I'm saying that's why that's...

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Well it's what you read though, Gus, you know what I mean?

**Augustus Wood:** Exactly. That's my point.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** If you are just reading these contemporary dudes who are distant from the community, yet they think they can speak for the community, that's one kind of thing. But if you reading the works out of the 60s, if you're reading the works that come out of the 30s and 40s, and that question of connection is more easily understood.

**Augustus Wood:** Exactly.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** So I think that one of the real problems, you know, in the courses I've taught, I have what I called a classic selection, where you're reading something from, you're reading a Du Bois, or you're reading a Robert Allen or Harold Cruse, and then you're reading the contemporary stuff. And so my thing was to always put those pieces in conversation. But if you got people who think that if a book is 10, 12, 20 years old, you don't need to read it. And we got a lot of people who think like that.

**Augustus Wood:** Yes, we do.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Right. And if you think that sales is an indication of the value of a book, you know what I mean?

**Augustus Wood:** Oh yeah.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** So, you know, there's, there's a bunch of literature that I've found that came out in the 90s and early 2000s, that didn't seem to make a dent, but when you start reading this stuff?

**Augustus Wood:** No, no, no. You're exactly right though. That's what I am saying, like, that's why we're taking this podcast very seriously.

And that we're going to be talking in depth like we just did today about those different types of works and why it's not just important to go and get your stuff that's coming out, but also to look at who you're referencing and who you're building upon. And going back and getting the Barons, getting the Robert Allens, and getting the C.L.R. Jameses, the Blassingames, all these cats and putting them at the center of developing a framework to ask those critical questions about how do we organize for national liberation. So that's the point of all this. And I think the way you just summed it up is exactly the stakes of "Off the Shelf." So I really appreciate that.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Thank you brother, and again, I appreciate being on "Off the Shelf."

**Augustus Wood:** Most definitely...

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Nice to dialogue with you, brother.

**Augustus Wood:** We will have you back on here, too, very soon. We got, we gonna come back around and we're going to do some more on James, particularly, because I think that one of the things I'm interested in, and the next go-round, when we do like Season 2, is to actually pick a scholar and actually go through a number of their works and actually have a discussion about exactly how you mentioned, how they transition.

Especially because James is one of those figures like Du Bois and in all these, all these really hardcore revolutionaries who thought about their experiences in struggle. And then they met and then they evaluated and they shifted to a different ideology or shifted to... I really want to get into that because I think that's one of the most fascinating parts of the training I got as a graduate student that really helped me along the way.

And I think a deep discussion like that would be beneficial for listeners, too.

So, yeah, well, we'll get to that next time, but we are out of time now.

So I want to thank Professor Sundiata Cha-Jua for coming in and just really laying out, which is sure to be one of the most highly rated episodes of "Off the Shelf: Revolutionary Readings in Times of Crisis." So again, thank you brother, and we'll see you next time. And stay safe and power always to the people.

**Sundiata Cha-Jua:** Power to the people, brother.