On the Politics of Extraction, Exhaustion and Suffocation

Part of Class and Redistribution

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The words of S'bu Zikode (founding president of the South African Abahlali baseMjondolo shack dwellers' movement) on rehumanising the world, still resonate for me. [1] He underlines, in the dark times we are living, the importance of celebrating all the gestures, all the efforts, that go towards the humanisation of the world, when what Audre Lorde called 'the master's house' still prevails, with its predatory economy, its brutal patriarchy, and its political devastation.

What I'm presenting tonight is a work in process, which I have touched upon previously in the articles 'Racial Capitalocene' and 'Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender', [2] as well as in my latest book, *Une théorie féministe de la violence, pour une politique antiraciste de la protection (A Feminist Theory of Violence, A Decolonial Perspective)*, in which I reflect on the twin project of unleashing systemic and structural violence on the Global South and on minorities in the North, and the accumulation of laws of 'protection' and 'security'. [3] In this book, I tackle the question of who these laws are supposed to protect, the wars of punitive feminism, and strategies for developing anti-racist political protection. As ever, the dual notions of imperialism and racial capitalism, quite often forgotten in feminist theory, are very important for me.

Here I will move through five interlinked points:

1. It is clear that colonial slavery, colonization, capitalism and imperialism extract and exhaust. To accumulate wealth, the capitalist economy mines the life force of people of colour around the world until their deaths, and mines the resources of soil, subsoil, plants, animals, rivers and oceans. This economy inevitably leaves behind ruins, toxic waste, pollution; poisoned land, air and water.

How then can we clean centuries' worth of waste? How do we repair a world damaged by racism and colonialism, which have ravaged spirits and bodies, the Earth, its seas and animals? How do we dismantle the economy of extraction, exhaustion and suffocation that is killing everything around us? How do we humanise the world?

2. If racial capitalism is the production of waste – not of goods but of waste –

1. **S'bu Zikode 'The Living Politics of Abahlali' for the series 'Thinking Freedom from the Global South', hosted by Irene Calis, American University, 21 March 2021, youtube.com.**

2. **Françoise Vergès, 'Racial Capitalocene' in Gaye Johnson and Alex Lubin (ed.),** *Futures of Black Radicalism*, **London, Verso, 2017; and 'Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender',** *e-flux Journal*, **no. 100, May 2019, e-flux.com.**

3. **Françoise Vergès,** *Une théorie féministe de la violence, pour une politique antiraciste de la protection*, **Paris, La fabrique éditions, 2020, forthcoming in English,** *A Feminist Theory of Violence, A Decolonial Perspective*, **London, Pluto, 2022.**

where does it dump its tonnes of waste? And how does this relate to the West's construction of who is considered 'clean' or 'unclean'?

3. Who is cleaning the world and its waste, and under which conditions? What does it mean to clean, in this economy of wasting? This work that has been historically racialised, gendered and underpaid. We know that white feminism has long lamented the fact that women are locked into domesticity. They have denounced its burden and demanded that it be shared, overlooking that the burden has more often been carried by women of colour.

I should add that I do not make a rigid distinction between cleaning and caring. There is always some caring in the work of cleaning and vice versa.

4. How to make the right to breathe a transnational struggle for humanising the world? According to the United Nations, one in four deaths worldwide can be linked to pollution; air pollution causes seven million premature deaths every year. It is a global public health disaster that does not get the attention it deserves because most people who die are poor or otherwise vulnerable people of colour. Air pollution does not respect national boundaries, but it is usually most severe in poor, dense neighbourhoods, and in countries of the Global South.

5. To conclude, I will ask: Taking into account these histories of extraction, exhaustion and suffocation, and the accumulation of land and wealth by colonialism through the centuries, how can we imagine a new politics of cleaning, repairing and protecting?

1. Extraction and exhaustion

The economy of the transatlantic slave trade, on which capitalism was built, destroyed the cultural and natural world of Indigenous peoples and of the continents colonized by European powers. The slave trade had a long-term effect on the African continent, its population and landscape, bringing desolation and death. The slave ship was a space of filth, blood and flesh, rotted by the shackles of slavery. Race became a code for designing and designating people and places that could be destroyed. The lives of Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans were made disposable; the flesh, bones and blood of their dead bodies were mixed with the earth of the plantation and the earth of silver and gold mines. They were, in a way, the humus in the soils of capitalism.

Black women's wombs were made into capital and their children transformed into currency. As Christina Sharpe has written, slavery turned the womb into the factory, producing blackness as a section, like the hold of the slave ship or the prison cell. [4] Nature was transformed into a commodity – and a cheap one, at that – there for the enjoyment, pleasure and profit of the master, the banker, the owner of industry. Primitive accumulation rested on the privatisation of the commons; on the rape of Black women to produce children that would be enslaved; on the extraction and exhaustion of the life force of Indigenous and Black peoples, of forests, rocks and soils, all worked to death.

There is, then, another history of geology to be made. As Kathryn Yusoff delineates

4. **Christina Sharpe,** *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, **Durham, Duke University Press, 2016.**

in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*: 'The transformation of the mineralogy of the earth in the extraction of gold, silver, salt, and copper to the massive transformation of ecologies in the movement of people, plants, and animals across territories, coupled with the intensive implementation of monocultures of indigo, tobacco, cotton, sugar, and other "alien" ecologies in the New World.' [5] She is speaking specifically about Ghana, where captives and gold were taken and extracted, but she could just as well have been speaking about the mines of Potosí [in Bolivia] or the plantations in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean and the Americas.

5. Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, **Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2019.**

The global economy of extraction, exhaustion and slavery shaped how non-white lives, work and environment were conceived. That economy of exhaustion/ extraction could not exist without a politics of terror, torture and murder: African villages and cities being burned, their communities destroyed; armies practising rape and public torture, the dismemberment of bodies – an arsenal of dread and shock.

And yet, the impact on the environment that this accumulation of land and people had was often experienced at a delay. Environmental historian Joachim Radkau has shown that the ecological damage of colonialism came less in the immediate than in the long term, with the extent of its impact becoming apparent centuries later, in the era of modern technologies, and in many cases only after the colonized states had acquired their independence.

On the level of time: I do believe that we have to rethink the question of temporality in relation to cleaning and repairing, so that it is not about a linear before and after – cleaning, then becoming clean. We are working with a multi-temporality: with a past that needs to be cleaned and repaired; with this present, which is being damaged, and which we have to repair; and with a future – because we already know from the present reality that things are being destroyed for future generations. So, when we consider an anti-racist politics of cleaning, repairing and protecting against the politics of extraction, exhaustion and suffocation, we have to move between these different temporal levels.

2. Where is all this waste dumped?

How does colonialism's production of waste – and the question of where to dispose of it – relate to who or what the West then considers 'clean' or 'unclean'?

Even during the era of the transatlantic slave trade, a huge amount of waste was produced. The mines that disturbed the Earth, the forests razed to make way for plantations of cotton, sugar, tobacco and coffee, or even to provide the wood for building the slave ships. Colonial slavery and its legacies produced all this waste, while claiming to produce goods and commodities, and with this, it produced and imposed a distinction between what (for the West) was clean and what was unclean.

Colonial slavery constructed the plantation as a domain of cleanliness and civilisation, standing apart from the unclean world of non-white people. Europe, said the colonial fiction, was a cradle of cleanliness and hygiene; two key elements in the making of the discourse of white supremacy and civilisation. Racialisation served to make the white world clean, while destroying and then 'cleaning' other

worlds. White supremacy created a clean/dirty divide that posited a clean, civilised Europe against a dirty, uncivilised world, even though archives testify to the fact that non-European people were aghast at the uncleanliness of white people.

During the Crusades, populations in the Middle East and the Levant observed the lack of personal hygiene among Europeans, and their ignorance of contamination that was already part of the basic principles of medicine. Europeans were often in awe of the cleanliness of the city they entered but then destroyed, and of the people they subsequently massacred. Then by the nineteenth century, in the age of imperialism and of the 'science of race', Europeans drew a strong contrast between, on the one hand, a 'clean' Europe with 'clean' European bodies, and, on the other hand, 'dirty' Indigenous dwelling bodies and their unhealthy habits of food, care, health and sexuality. To this day, for example in relation to the pandemic, there are echoes of this racialised ideology of what is clean and unclean.

According to the World Bank, an average of 0.74 kilograms of solid waste is produced per person every day. In 2016 the world's cities generated 2.1 billion tonnes of solid waste, and by 2050, this is expected to increase by 70 percent. Of course, this waste production is far from equally distributed. What is more, this data does not take in to account the huge amount of waste generated by imperialism, including the arms that are left behind, and the countries and bodies that are mutilated. Just imagine what is being done in Iraq and Afghanistan, all the detritus the US Army is leaving in its wake, polluting the land, resulting in cancer and other problems for the population. As we well know, this can have very long-term effects – in Vietnam, babies who are born even now can be victims of the Agent Orange sprayed by the US Army during the war. So, we need to hold in mind the *longue durée* of what is being done.

In other words, Western imperialism generates waste or produce for the comforting consumption of privileged white people, which ends up being dumped on racialised people either at home in impoverished neighbourhoods or in the countries of the Global South. Ships are sent to Bangladesh, e-waste is sent to Accra and other parts of Ghana, and so on. The way in which the amount of waste per person is calculated shows deep inequality. It also sets up the idea of a personal responsibility and deflects the problem of waste production and disposal on to the individual.

For me, the question is: How do we dismantle the economy of hyper-consumption that is producing so much waste? And the answer is not to preach individual resilience and responsibility or green capitalism, nor to propose sustainable development, which continues to deprive people in the Global South of basic rights.

3. Who is cleaning the world?

Every day in every urban centre across the globe, thousands of black and brown (mainly) women invisibly open up the city. They clean the space necessary for patriarchy and neoliberalism to function. They are doing dangerous work. They inhale toxic chemical products, and push or carry heavy loads – not mention the increased risk they face of being exposed to Covid-19 and other viruses. They usually make lengthy journeys at the crack of dawn or late at night; their work is underpaid and considered to be unskilled. Another group, who share with the first

an intersection of class, race and gender, travel to middle-class homes to cook, clean and take care of the children and the elderly, so that those who employ them can go to work in the place that the former group of women have cleaned.

Meanwhile, in the same hours of the early morning, in the same metropole, bourgeois white bodies jog in the streets, or rush to the nearest gym or yoga centre. They are striving to maintain a healthy, clean and lean body, as mandated by late capitalism. They will follow their workout with a shower, an avocado toast, and a detox green shake before heading to their office – or, in the time of the pandemic, to their Zoom meetings.

Meanwhile, women of colour try to find a seat for their exhausted bodies on public transport, after having cleaned the gym, the bank, the insurance or investment office, the newspaper headquarters, the restaurant. They doze off soon after sitting down, their fatigue visible to those who care to notice.

The working body that is made visible is the focus of an ever-growing industry, dedicated to the cleanliness and healthiness of body and mind, the better to serve racial capitalism. The other working bodies are made invisible, even though they perform a necessary function for the first: to clean the space in which the 'clean' ones circulate, work, eat, sleep, have sex and be parents. The pandemic has made this overlooked dependency all the more apparent, where what are deemed 'essential jobs' are carried out overwhelmingly by people of colour.

There is a dialectical relation between the white performing body and the racialised exhausted body; between the visibility of the final product of the cleaning/caring and the invisibility – along with the feminisation and racialisation – of the worker who does this cleaning/caring; between the growing industry of cleaning/caring and the conception of clean/dirty, the gentrification of the city, and racialised environmental politics.

The owner of the performing body is expected to demonstrate their willingness to spend long hours at the gym and the office; this being the sign of success, the same way that spending is the sign of hyper-consumption. The performative body of neoliberal masculinity, perpetually speeding through many tasks, masks the under-rested and invisible body. The owner of the invisible body is most often a woman of colour. Her exhaustion is a consequence of the historical logic of extractivism, which builds the primitive accumulation of capital, extracting labour. Indeed, women who clean – whether they live in Maputo, Rio de Janeiro, Riyadh, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta or Paris – speak of their limited time to sleep, of the long hours of commute, and of the work they have to do when they return home.

The economy of exhaustion is therefore very important to comprehend. It is upon these precarious lives, this endangered life, this worn-out body, that the comfortable lives of the middle classes and the world of the powerful rest. The struggle of black and brown women who work in the cleaning/caring sector – whether in private homes or in institutions – against sexism, sexual violence, rape, and all kinds of abuses of power, their critiques of racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy, are absolutely revolutionary.

The invisibility of the cleaning jobs of women and men of colour produces the

visibility of clean homes and public space, effectively erasing everything that could disturb that cleanliness. The representation of cleanliness/dirtiness constructs a racial spacialisation that is not just about the city, but about the world. Indeed, the accumulation of images of filth and garbage in the Global South fills the Western public with horror: 'Why are these countries so dirty?', 'Can't they clean their streets?', 'How can people work in this filthy place?'… Warning about hygiene and health when travelling to these countries adds to the creation (fictive and real) of a clean world versus an unclean world, populated by unclean people. Images of mountains of garbage, dirty streets, dirty rivers, dirty beaches, dirty neighbourhoods; of fields covered in plastic; people searching through garbage or pushing carts filled with refuse; of children swimming in polluted water – such images contribute to the creation of a naturalised division between dirty and clean.

What lies behind the white person's Eden? The legacies of colonialism, of colonial urbanisation and the racial restructuring of the landscape, the externalisation of polluting industry. This slowly ingrains the feeling that cleaning *that other world* is an impossible task. What becomes the pressing issue, instead, is how to keep externalised pollution from reaching clean areas.

The geopolitics of clean/dirty draws a line between areas of dirtiness, characterised by disease, an unsustainable birth rate, violence against women, crime and gangs, and areas of cleanliness, which are overly policed and where children can safely play, women can walk freely at night, and streets are occasionally closed to traffic for shopping, dining, and other leisure activities. The clean/dirty division is connected to the militarisation and gentrification of cities, with poor people of colour blamed for the inner city's dirtiness and driven out of their neighbourhoods in order to make the city 'clean'. Political discourse around the current pandemic also assures that hygiene, public health and protection remain highly racialised.

4. The right to breathe

The amount of deaths caused by extraction, exhaustion and suffocation shows a deep disregard for black and brown life. Racial capitalism decided, without blinking an eye, that millions of people would be deprived of clean water and clean air; that toxic industry would be built in poor neighbourhoods; that corporations can lie, dissimulate proof, and drag trials on for years, until people are too exhausted to continue. Fatigue, depletion of life energy and lassitude have long been the weapons of heteropatriarchy, along with dread and the feelings of burnout, impotency and weariness.

Exhaustion, ever the product of crippling, debilitating conditions of transportation, work and nutrition, impedes love. Growing up on Réunion Island, I witnessed the exhaustion of both body and mind. I also saw how the struggle for equality and dignity against racism and colonialism can bring back energy, joy and desire to the people, so that their exhaustion somehow goes away. This is why the state was determined to crush the hope for social justice using all the tools at its disposal, offering consumption rather than community and social life, targeting activists with defamation and censorship. The whole politics of divide and rule, offering respectability for abiding by norms, or using the weapon of pacification. In France, it

was during the colonial era that what was then called 'the doctrine of races' (*la politique des races*, proposed by French military officer Joseph Simon Gallieni) was instituted – administration through race, in order to create divisions among communities and tribes, and to assert colonial power.

All this exhaustion is also linked, from colonial times to this day, with killing by suffocation. During imperialist wars in Africa and North Africa, one tactic was to lock people in caves, start a fire and let them suffocate; or in the Vietnam War, there was the tactic of burning forests. Think of all these sides to the politics of suffocation: from lynching, to air pollution, or even to oceanic dead zones, which have too little oxygen for marine life to survive, and which have increased at least tenfold since 1950 due to human activities. Forest fires are more and more widespread, shores are disappearing, islands are drowning, and piles of waste asphyxiate the Earth and its peoples.

We should recognise that this suffocation, this politics of death, extends to animals. When there is disease, it is not just the animal that is sick that is killed, but the entire herd. For instance, with the outbreak of BSE in the UK in the 1990s, 4.4 million cows were slaughtered. These dead animals must be buried somewhere, and their corpses can then leak toxic fluid, which contaminates the land. We are constantly living on top of various levels of toxicity, all produced by racial capitalism.

We should understand the connection between the magnitude of the pollution crisis and the places where racialised and impoverished people are housed – in hostile, toxic environments of polluted air, water and land. The United States is among the top ten deadliest countries for pollution-related fatalities. One analysis showed that more than nine thousand federally subsidised properties sit within a mile of what are called Superfund sites – hazardously polluted locations where there is a high concentration of lead, arsenic or other carcinogens. And we should be aware that the state and the army have said they are already preparing themselves, knowing that, increasingly, they will have to protect enclaves with green forest, clean air, and clean water for white and wealthy people. The Department of Defense refers to what it calls the 'future war over water, food and energy,' and how they will curb this.

5. Towards an anti-racist politics of cleaning, repairing and protecting

To come back to what I said to begin, the accumulation of laws said to protect women, children and everyone – also in terms of protection from disease – are not in fact universal, but part of a very racialised politics. The politics of protection and hygiene advocated by white feminism, 'for the children', actually only protect a particular demographic of children. As Palestinian legal scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian raises with the idea of 'unchilding', some children will never be children, will never have access to childhood. [6]

6. **Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian,** *Incarcerated Childhood and the Politics of Unchilding*, **Cambridge, Cambridge University Press,**

2019.

She's speaking about Palestine, but we know that non-white children are criminalised elsewhere – think of the murder of Black minors by police and citizens in the US. By this logic, even the bodies of children are extracted from and made disposable. Meanwhile, neoliberal and green capitalist solutions remain wilfully ignorant of the political history of the West, perpetuated through racist policy, and reliant on the role of black and brown women, exhausted bodies, trying to clean.

I suggested earlier that in order to address these histories of extraction, exhaustion and suffocation, as they lead into the present, we need to think about other temporalities than that which is suggested by the Anthropocene today. If we look beyond the Western temporality that has been imposed, we must study the temporalities of cleaning. The time needed to clean the world, to repair what has been broken by slavery and colonialism, and which continues to be broken by the ravages of capitalism – so many wounds. The time taken by women of colour to care, clean and cook for their own families, and then to commute to the homes of middle-class families in order to clean their houses, and to care for the world. The time taken for the production of capitalist goods, and the temporality that this production imposes on the bodies of women and men of colour; for those young women working long hours in polluted factories, barely eating, with no time to go to the bathroom or to care for themselves during menstruation. Here again we see how this political extraction and exhaustion affects women's bodies in particular – for instance, in India, how women in the sugar cane fields are often forced to have a hysterectomy so that they can work more efficiently.

The fact is that none of this work is ever really finished because somewhere, something else is being broken, damaged or wounded. The time of decolonial caring, cleaning and repairing clashes with the accelerated time of neoliberalism. As we repair the past, we must simultaneously repair the ongoing damage, which increases the vulnerability and decreases the life expectancy of millions of people in the Global South. We have to rethink our own temporality. The past, in a way, is our present, and it is within mixed temporalities that futurity can be imagined, and new politics of cleaning, repairing and protecting can be developed.

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