

Postcolonial Ecologies

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Prologue

During the 2018–2019 Gaza “March of Return - border protests,” Palestinian refugees from several refugee camps in the Gaza strip organised a weekly peaceful demonstration along the borders of historic Palestine, demanding their right of return to their homes and the land that they were expelled from. It did not take long for the Israeli border control to attack protestors, resulting in the deaths of many. As a senior officer in the Israeli army counterterrorism school stated, the snipers’ objective was “not to kill but to wound... At first, we told them to shoot at the leg; we saw that this could kill, so we told them to shoot under the knee. Later we made the order more precise to shoot at the ankle.” The demonstrators started throwing stones in self-defence only to be met/targeted by the Israeli shoot-to-kill policy.

In the same context, between 31 March and 6 April 2018, demonstrators gathered tires in Gaza to be burnt on 6 April, in preparation for what was dubbed the "Friday of the Tires/Jumat al-Kawshook," using Twitter and a hashtag with the same title to collect and organise. Burning tires was an attempt by the demonstrators to shield themselves from sniper fire and killing machines as they faced off against heavily armed Israeli troops. By the end of the day, 9 Palestinians were killed, and 1,350 were injured. Among those killed was Yaser Murtaja, a 30-year-old Palestinian photographer and filmmaker. Murtaja produced works for Al Jazeera, BBC, and other international news agencies and worked as a cameraman and assistant with Ai Weiwei on his *Journey of Laziz* video installation in 2017. On view in the Israeli Museum, the work highlighted the mental breakdown and suffering of Laziz the tiger living in the so-called “world’s worst Zoo” in Khan Yunis, and the journey he took from the Gaza Strip to an airport in “Israel” and from there to Johannesburg where he was set free. Laziz left behind over 2 million Palestinians living their 15th year of suffocation and isolation under siege within an area of 365 square kilometres.

This series of demonstrations took place in the context of the 70th anniversary of the Nakba/Catastrophe. Israeli officials had cautioned that the mass burning of tires along the border could produce environmental harm, calling on the World Health Organisation to prevent what they called an “ecological catastrophe.” The contradiction inherent to the situation entangles the entire history of the modern and colonial project. From the very beginning, colonialism unfolded through processes of extraction and transportation and the exploitation of labour-power and “natural resources.” In its essence, the Palestinian catastrophe is an ecological catastrophe; it is the offspring of a colonial enterprise that thrives on the contamination and destruction of native ecosystems; from ethnic cleansing and land dispossession to climate apartheid and radioactive colonialism. In his book, *Popular Defense & Ecological Struggles*, Paul Virilio –who died a few months after the Friday of the Tires– writes: “Ecological catastrophes are only terrifying for civilians. For the

military, they are but a simulation of chaos, and consequently a subject of study and an opportunity for large-scale manoeuvres in open terrain, beyond the constraint of national boundaries.”

In May 2000, Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer published an article in the IGBP's (International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme) Global Change Newsletter [No. 41] with the title The “Anthropocene.” The newly re-introduced concept is based on the idea that “humanity has driven the planet into a new geological epoch.” The Anthropocene claims that Humanity as a whole (all races, genders, ethnicities, and classes) share the same amount of responsibility for the current ecological crises, notwithstanding the colonial and capitalist genocidal legacy. In looking at the amount of carbon footprint produced, it does not ask where, why, and from whom?

Eco-capitalism/Green capitalism's solutions for an impending ecological collapse align with this discourse, upholding the notion of economy first, climate second. Instead of looking into environmental, climate, economic and racial injustice, Green Capitalism offers projects and investments designed to extract more profit from the disaster. Catastrophe management and the human rights industry think in financial logic.s

With its foundations based on the duality of “White Man” vs “Nature,” capitalist colonialism is of a planetary scale. If the colonial project is a planetary project, decolonisation is planetary. Decolonisation is decontamination.

Decontamination as decolonisation.

*Soon you'll raise your world over ours,
blazing a trail from our graveyards to a satellite.*

*This is the Iron Age: distilled from a lump of coal,
champagne bubbling for the mighty!*

*There are dead and there are colonies.
There are dead and there are bulldozers.
There are dead and there are hospitals.
There are dead and there are radar screens
to observe the dead
as they die more than once in this life,
screens to observe the dead who live on after death
as well as those who die
to lift the earth above all that has died.*

*O white master, where are you taking my people
and yours?*

*Into what abyss
is this robot bristling with aircraft carriers and jets
consigning the earth?*

- The Penultimate Speech of the 'Red Indian' to the white man Mahmoud Darwish

Overview

Postcolonial Ecologies discusses and reflects on essential ecological questions, addressing the ways in which colonial practices and extractive economies have affected/contaminated the natural environments of indigenous peoples and native ecosystems. Departing from the epistemic violence enacted through dominant technologies of measurement and calculation that subdue life forms to market logic, the exhibition project unearths indigenous knowledge systems rooted in conceptions of nature and land as sources of life and subsistence. Thinking with Fanon, participants are invited to engage in critical readings of decolonization and speculate on life futures that acknowledge land as 'the most essential value,' its humus at once a carrier of collective memory/trauma and a site of anticolonial resurgence and regeneration.¹ Against a modern grammar of predation and extraction, the multifaceted program invokes other worlds in the making, exploring radical forms of social organisation that centre mutual aid and more-than-human collaboration.

Colonialism is examined in its historical form and the colonality of present-day corporate capitalism, economies of aid and development. Settler colonialism continues to shape the daily life of millions of Palestinians living under occupation, where agriculture and vegetation are mobilized as a primary medium of violence through the seizure of land and dispossession. Concurrently, the landscapes and bodies of indigenous peoples around the world continue to be violated by extractive industries and a developmental agenda which, in the name of productivity, has eroded the soil, destroyed agricultural biodiversity, and eliminated self-sufficiency.² The current pandemic is likewise the consequence of the destruction of natural habitats and the exploitation of animals driven by the expansion of capitalist extraction, urbanization, and intensive agriculture.

As argued by Fanon, part of the wretchedness of the people derives from the wretchedness of the land and the earth. In making a case for decolonisation, Fanon understood that land 'is the most essential value,'³ highlighting the inextricable connection between land and life through 'the figure of bread,' which signifies our dependence on the earth as a source of livelihood and subsistence.⁴ The appropriation of land and sovereignty over natural resources are such at the core of the decolonisation enterprise, in the absence of which the colonised remain in conditions of precarity. This correlation reverberates today, as MNCs continue to prey on our nature commons through landgrabs, privatisation, and mining activities, and communities continue to suffer the consequences of imperial oil wars that

¹ César, F 2018, Meteorizations, Third Text #32(2-3), pp.254-272

² Gray, R & Sheikh, S 2018, The Wretched Earth: Introduction, Third Text #32 (2-3), pp.163-175

³ Fanon, F 2004, Wretched of The Earth, New York: Grove Press, pp.1-180

⁴ Clare, S 2013, Geopower: The Politics of Life and Land in Frantz Fanon's Writing, Diacritics #41(4), pp.60-80

have left soils, waterways, and lungs contaminated.⁵ The colonial logic remains evident in the ways that this exposure to environmental damage and toxicity is organised along vectors of class, race, ethnicity, and geography. Driven by capital accumulation, it is a production of life that is essentially a production of death and scarcity.⁶

Underpinning this distribution of violence is a modernity that subjects all life forms to imperial modes of measurement and classification, in light of which indigenous knowledge systems are marginalised, and both nature and colonised subjects are constructed as 'other', 'nonhuman,' objects to be exploited and dominated. This construction upholds a market logic based on commodification and exchange and justifies colonial expansion.⁷ Contemporary technologies of computation and calculation reinforce this 'epistemic violence' by reducing life and nature to a financial problem and subduing all knowledge to the algorithmic.⁸ At best, the solutions they offer mend the surface of that which has been systematically and entirely decimated. At worst, they contribute to an infinite reproduction of 'the catastrophe' and hold the individual accountable for the devastation. This signifies the importance of breaking with this epistemic hegemony and expanding our engagement with decolonisation to 'recover the 'work of reason' and 'our ability to think' against the algorithmization and 'softwarisation of our existence'; moving toward a planetarity that hosts a multiplicity of knowledges, experiences, and ways of being.⁹

Moreover, how do we move beyond a critique of science and technology toward a techno-diversity that divorces itself from the logics and grammars of modernity?¹⁰ Can we think of 'science as 'translation' or 'interpretation'? Allowing for divergence, inconsistency, difference.¹¹ What has been historically claimed as Western knowledge is not a 'property of the West' alone. What Mbembe describes as the 'Western archive' carries the resources of its own unmaking, its own counterargument from within, for the 'wretched of the earth' have participated in its 'making'.¹²

⁵Sahakian, R 2019, Extraction Rebellion, n+1, viewed 15 December 2020, <<https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/extraction-rebellion/>>

⁶Federici, S & Anderson, A 2019, Ecologies of Care. [Online] 11 September, e-flux Videos. [Accessed 10 November 2020]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAhcq7o_JWc&feature=emb_title

⁷Ferreira da Silva, D 2017, 1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value, e-flux journal #79, pp.1-11

⁸Gray, R & Sheikh, S 2018, The Wretched Earth: Introduction, Third Text #32 (2-3), pp.163-175

⁹Mbembe, A 2019. Life Futures and the Future of Reason. [Online] 26 October, The European Graduate School, Saas Fee. [Accessed 14 August 2020]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uv11y10XaLY>

¹⁰Hui, Y 2020, For a Planetary Thinking, e-flux journal #114, pp.1-7

¹¹ Tsing, A 2015, The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins. Princeton University Press. pp.217

¹²Mbembe, A 2015. Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive. Africa is a country. pp.24

A rupture with the dominant epistemology also implies a break with dominant modes of representation. As artists and cultural practitioners, how can we move beyond the language of 'management and services' that reduces nature to an exploitable resource toward aesthetics and semantics that liberate the land and the soil from the language of capital and bring to light the liveliness and wretchedness of our land and its more-than-human labours?¹³ How can we let these creatures/beings speak?¹⁴ All while inhabiting a critical space in relation to the implications of 'speaking for' or 'giving a voice' to the more-than-human...¹⁵

While our reading of the ecological crisis draws on the effects of colonial knowledges and practices, it simultaneously raises questions around the agency and complicity of local structures of power. The permanent state of emergency we have come to live under is as much a consequence of a postcolonial state whose trajectory in many places has been mapped with abuses of power, mismanagement of resources and corruption. The realities of inequality and poverty that have since independence defined the lived experiences of the majority of previously colonised populations signify the importance of moving towards a more complex understanding of self and other that eschews an entrenchment of identity politics, as well as the urgency of recentering issues of class, economy and privilege in present-day discussions of decolonisation.

Addressing the violation of bodies and landscapes is also incomplete without an account of the significance of the reproduction of labour-power in sustaining extractive and predatory capitalist economies. And with that, an attentiveness to the primacy of the body as a complex of needs and desires in resisting exploitation and as one of the main drivers of our collective capacity to imagine a liberating praxis.¹⁶ Moreover, in returning to the body, how do we account for the affective ecology of despondency, despair, anxiety and loss in reckoning with the present and the future?

Contemplating futurity often raises the question of the commons. Many accounts of the future of life on the planet seem to stress the sharing of resources and a return to collective decision making in their attempts to choreograph imaginaries of resistance. But beyond that, how do we bring into being a communal politics of sharing that transcends the figure of the human to include more-than-human beings as 'witnesses' and agents of change? And as artists and cultural practitioners, can we imagine life futures that in acknowledging land

¹³Gray, R & Sheikh, S 2018, *The Wretched Earth: Introduction*, Third Text #32 (2-3), pp.163-175

¹⁴ Sheikh, S 2017, *Second Assembly: Non-Human Assemblages*. [Online] 25 November, BAK basis vooractuele kunst. [Accessed 8 January 2021]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xtdKCIzY8M

¹⁵La Bellacasa, M, P 2014, *Encountering Bioinfrastructure: Ecological Struggles and the Sciences of Soil*, Soil Epistemology #28(1), pp.26-40

¹⁶Federici, S 2018, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, Oakland: PM Press. pp.151-198

as the most essential value, undo proprietorship and cultivate more-than-human relations? Unmaking and remaking the human. Forming ourselves anew. Taking as our point of departure that the pursuit of modalities based on interdependence, reciprocity and mutual aid is not a luxury, but rather, a matter of collective survival.

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