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FRANÇOISE VERGÈS 

Foreword

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Foreword by Françoise Vergès

The essays in *War-torn Ecologies, An-archic Fragments: Reflections from the Middle East*, edited by Umut Yıldırım, could not have arrived at a better moment. Indeed, the consequences of the state of permanent war that capitalism, racism, colonialism, and all forms of imperialism are waging upon peoples and the planet are now closely studied by scholars, artists, scientists, and activists. The contributors to this volume — scholars and artists — propose an ‘imaginative methodological exercise in thinking through the multispecies actualities and afterlives of war-torn worlds in the Middle East.’¹ Looking at specific cases but avoiding exceptionalism, they examine the possibilities of ‘war-torn ecologies’, which Umut Yıldırım describes as ‘an ecologically infused aesthetic stance and political perspective that seeks to unsettle the geographical profiling of the Middle East.’² The Middle East is thus not simply a site of sectarian violence, of petroleum capitalism and a dumping ground of imperialist debris, but a site where ecological practices are imagined.

The contributions are exceptional because they remain close to the ground and open to the ways in which people interpret how wars are impacting their lives and environment, but they do not do this through an ethnological gaze. They reject the ‘romantic gesture

1 Umut Yıldırım, ‘War-torn Ecologies: Human and More-than-Human Intersections of Ethnography and the Arts’, in this volume, pp. 1–25 (p. 2).

2 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

toward vibrancy and authenticity'.³ War-torn ecologies are abolitionist geographies; they practice what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has called 'life in rehearsal, not a recitation of rules, much less a relentless lament'⁴ but a 'historical geography of the future', building what feminist activist and author Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls 'constellations of coresistance' that 'affirm[...] life and world-making in a time of acute racial violence'.⁵ Rehearsing life because 'we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to overwhelming force though not *only* known to ourselves and to each other *by* that force', as Christina Sharpe has written.⁶

The authors introduce us to haunted wells, djins, ghouls, goats and goatherds, herbs and politics of the commons, toxicity by non-living agents, and tales that make sense of the world that wars make. The authors explore what Rob Nixon has analysed in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*,⁷ in which he discussed the inattention to the 'attritional lethality of many environmental crises, in contrast with the sensational, spectacle-driven messaging that impels public activism

3 Ibid.

4 Excerpt from Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition on Stolen Land*, online video recording of the keynote address of the public programme 'Sanctuary Spaces: Reworlding Humanism', 9 October 2020, UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy, Vimeo <<https://vimeo.com/467484872#t=28:14s>> [accessed 24 March 2022].

5 Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2022), p. 7. See also Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), chapter 12, 'Constellations of Coresistance', pp. 211–31.

6 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 16.

7 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

today'.⁸ But what I think makes the book necessary reading is its feminist approach to the world that war has made, and continues to make, in the Middle East, a region whose realities are masked behind so many clichés — veiled women, terrorism, traditions, lack of democracy.

THE POLITICS OF UN-BREATHING: DREAD, STRESS, LUNGS

Even when we do not want to yield to a catastrophic ideology that produces powerlessness, we cannot ignore a sense of dread caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the daily assaults of racism, capitalism, genocide, colonial occupation, dispossession, wars, femicide, imperialism, xenophobic nationalism, fascism, Islamophobia, performative anti-racism, liberal multiculturalism, climate disaster, and civilizing feminism. As the 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report announced 'widespread, pervasive impacts to ecosystems, people, settlements, and infrastructure'⁹ in the near future and especially in the Global South and we observed governments choosing to remain deaf to the warnings, the weapons industry continuing to flourish, and extraction and exploitation ceaselessly ravaging the planet, it was understandable that some of us had a hard time processing such an appetite for destruction and death. When I experience this feeling, I tell myself that I need to look the monster in the face, at all its features in

8 Ibid.

9 Hans-Otto Pörtner, Debra C. Roberts, and others, 'IPCC, 2022: Summary for Policymakers', in *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability; Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, ed. by Hans-Otto Pörtner, Debra C. Roberts, and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming) <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGII_SummaryForPolicymakers.pdf> [accessed 22 March 2022].

all their heinous configurations, and not be petrified; to transform dread into anger, into the desire to fight back, into a place to conspire: Where is the monster vulnerable? Where to throw a stone to stop the machine? How to organize? The authors have no fear, they have looked the monster in the face. They show how capitalism, racism, and imperialism are making the world uninhabitable. ‘I Can’t Breathe’, which has become the rallying cry against police violence worldwide, also brings to light the politics of unbreathing and the suffocating effects of capitalism and imperialism, the systemic and structural violence that denies the right to breathe to peoples of colour. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), ‘Air pollution is one of the greatest environmental risk to health.’¹⁰ Air pollution causes millions of premature deaths every year, largely as a result of increased mortality from stroke, heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer, and acute respiratory infections.¹¹ More and more babies in the Global South are born with respiratory disease, making them vulnerable to premature death as children and adults. More and more children are dying of asthma, a condition that is easy to cure.

‘War makes atmosphere’, Kali Rabaii writes. She describes how non-living, more-than-human agents left behind by armies harm human and more-than-human lives, polluting and contaminating land, water, air, and bodies. War ecologies deeply affect women’s wombs, and babies are born with birth defects. War makes the womb into a threat. Can we then talk of *pre-natal death*, by which I

10 ‘Ambient (Outdoor) Air Pollution’, website of the World Health Organization (WHO), 19 December 2022 <[https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ambient-\(outdoor\)-air-quality-and-health](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ambient-(outdoor)-air-quality-and-health)> [accessed 21 June 2023].

11 Ibid.

mean the fact that before a child is even born, she/he is already condemned to premature death? Its healthy development is threatened in the womb of the black, indigenous, Arab, or brown woman whose life is threatened by poverty, lack of proper food, clean water, and air, and lack of pre- and post-natal care. In the Global South and among poor minorities in the North, babies are born with many more diseases than those born in white and bourgeois families, especially respiratory diseases (they can't properly breathe). In other words, the more children of the rich are protected, by laws and forms of care, the more children of the Global South are denied childhood. This is not a paradox. It is the result of a political choice: some children are deemed worthy of the right to a good childhood while others not only are denied childhood but are treated as adults, abandoned and criminalized. Palestinian legal scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kervorkian has described as the politics of *un-childing*, the 'understanding of children as political capital in the hands of those in power, the political work of violence designed to create, direct, govern, transform, and construct colonized children as dangerous, racialized others, enabling their eviction from the realm of childhood itself'.¹²

Racial and class politics of un-breathing mean that the lungs of humans and of the planet are under attack. They are suffocating. Trees, fish, rivers, seas, lakes, and ani-

12 See Nadera Shalhoub-Kervorkian, *Incarcerated Childhood and the Politics of Unchilding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Heidi Morrison, 'Review of Nadera Shalhoub-Kervorkian, *Incarcerated Childhood and the Politics of Unchilding*', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 49.3 (Spring 2020), pp. 82–84 <<https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1650365>> [accessed 22 March 2022]; Sarah Sheriff, 'Unchilding of Palestinian Children', *Muslim News*, 28 June 2018 <<https://muslimnews.co.uk/newspaper/human-rights/unchilding-palestinian-children/>> [accessed 22 March 2022].

mals cannot breathe. There is a worldwide crisis of breathing. The definition of racism by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, as the fabrication of ‘group differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death in distinct yet densely connected political geographies’ has never resonated so truly.¹³ She remarks that racism as a form of structural selectivity among humans correlates with the ‘technology of antirelationality’ that racial capitalism creates, by which she means that ‘collective life in humanity is separated and then reconnected in ways that feed the production of capital and wealth.’¹⁴

THE POLITICS OF TOXICITY AND POISONING

The colonial/racial fabrication of landscapes along the lines of clean/unclean, preserved/abandoned is explored by Nadine Hattom in ‘Great Sand: Grains of Occupation and Representation.’ Telling us that military training areas cover 6 percent of the earth’s land mass (which means we have to add all the maritime zones to get a better view of the occupation of the planet as a military training space), Hattom shows how military landscapes are constructed with intent.¹⁵ She questions the military’s claim that its training grounds are good environmental politics since plants and animals are not disturbed by human activity. She raises an important question: In resisting militarization, what to show and what not to show? Hattom does not wish to give centre stage to the occupying US army in Iraq. She removes

13 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 28.

14 See Jodi Melamed, ‘Diagnosing Racial Capitalism’, *Boston Review*, 10 September 2018 <https://bostonreview.net/forum_response/andrew-douglas-diagnosing-racial-capitalism/> [accessed 22 March 2022].

15 Nadine Hattom, ‘Great Sand: Grains of Occupation and Representation’, in this volume, p. 119.

the soldiers from a series of archival photographs of Operation Iraqi Freedom and from photographs of training sites in Germany to challenge the naturalization of a military presence. Whether they walk along dunes or through an oasis, their walk is not just an ordinary walk. They learn to walk in order to kill. They do not inhabit these spaces innocently. Hattom also looks at the argument that training grounds protect natural habitat since they are remote from civilian activities that are said to be more invasive and disruptive than military practice.¹⁶ When military landscapes, which, as Hattom observes, are ‘constructed with intent’,¹⁷ are made into sites of nature conservation and preservation, the imperialist, occupying army becomes the protector of nature. What precedes its occupation of landscape is hidden — the weapons industry, the training of men and women into machines to rape, maim, and kill, the high degree of contamination and pollution caused by the fabrication of weapons and their use. The civilians become a threat; nature is shown as being able to repair itself, so why stop the creation of waste? According to the World Bank, eleven million tons of solid waste are produced every day

16 There is a literature on Cold War landscapes, nature preservation, and even tourism; see James Card, ‘Paradise in No Man’s Land’, *Earth Island Journal*, 23.1 (Spring 2008): *The Argicultural Issue*, pp. 51–54 <https://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/magazine/entry/paradise_in_no_mans_land/> [accessed 22 March 2022]; Peter Coates, ‘Borderland, No-Man’s Land, Nature’s Wonderland’, *Environment and History*, 20.4 (November 2014), pp. 499–516. On Cold War landscapes, see *The Cold War in the Heart Land*, a web resource created by faculty and graduate students and hosted by the Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies at the University of Kansas <<https://coldwarheartland.ku.edu/landscapes>> [accessed 22 March 2022]. Cold War landscapes have been made into sites of tourism; see Keun-Sik Jung, ‘The Construction of the Cold War Landscape and Tourism: The Possibilities and Limitations of its Peaceful Use’, *Journal of Asian Sociology*, 48.3 (September 2019), pp. 287–319

17 Hattom, ‘Great Sand’, p. 114.

in the world. Although they only account for 16% of the world's population, high-income countries collectively generate more than a third of the world's waste. It is not clear if this data takes into account the huge amount of waste generated by imperialist armies, but capitalism is clearly the prime producer of waste. Waste 'is a sign of capitalism's success', Fred Magdoff and Chris Williams have argued.¹⁸ All that 'the enormous economic financial sector does is find ways to make money with money, providing little of social value', they add. The military industry is an economy of waste, waste of the huge amount of energy it needs to be fabricated and run; it leaves behind wasted lands and wasted bodies, it has no social value whatsoever. It feeds a masculinity that is educated to rape, kill, and maim. The success of capitalism as waste's producer is measured by the capacity to make the white world clean and externalize its waste.

As states deliberately dump garbage in poor neighbourhoods and build dumping grounds near them, imperialist armies deliberately dispose of their toxic waste in countries they invade or occupy. The relation between colonization, racism, and creating dirty, polluted, contaminated spaces is historical, linked with slavery and colonization. But we have examples today, too. For instance, during its siege of Gaza in 2007, the State of Israel dumped untreated sewage into the sea, producing a visual culture of contrasting images: on the Israeli side, a dreamy vision of Mediterranean beaches; on the Palestinian side, overcrowded beaches as sewage dump. White Mediterranean vs. Black–Arab Mediterranean. The racialized visual

18 Fred Magdoff and Chris Williams, 'Capitalist Economies Create Waste, Not Social Value', *Truthout*, 17 August 2017 <<https://truthout.org/articles/capitalist-economies-create-waste-not-social-value/>> [accessed 22 March 2022].

culture of clean vs. dirty, of protected nature vs. nature destroyed by the uneducated poor, perpetuates the idea of a civilized/clean white world vs. an uncivilized/dirty black and brown planet.

THE IRREPARABLE AND THE POLITICS OF REPAIR

Will it be possible to repair the accumulated layers of devastation inflicted by genocides, massacres, slavery, colonization, and plantations, agro-business, monoculture, extraction, dispossession, exploitation, wars, and racism? The ‘open veins’ (to borrow Eduardo Galeano’s expression)¹⁹ of the planet, the dreadful scars — memories and histories erased, personal and collective suffering, exile, deportation, exploitation, dispossession, the destroyed archives, abandoned mines leaving huge mountains of dust and huge holes, the coasts forever damaged by resorts, cities, privatization, the deep seas forever disturbed by extraction, the discarded industrial factories, the bombed cities; we will have to live with some irreparability. But, as writer and poet Keguro Macharia has observed, the irreparable does not need to be eschatological.²⁰ The irreparable is not an end. Ruins are not ruination, though this is not to celebrate the aesthetics of ruin. What this collection of essays shows is that we cannot ignore the multiplication of zones of non-being whose creation Frantz Fanon connected with colonialism and racism. A line is traced, Fanon argued, above which there is the zone of being, where the full humanity of ‘humans’ is socially recognized through human, civil, and labour rights; below that line is the *zone of non-being*,

19 Eduardo Galeano, *The Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans. by Cedric Belfrage (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973).

20 In an online conversation I shared with him and Christina Sharpe on 17 February 2022.

where those who are considered sub-human or more-than-human live, their humanity either not recognized or put into question. Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter has called the figure that embodies that line *Man*, an exclusionary European representation that precludes other ways of being human.²¹ What Munira Khayyat describes in 'Of Goats and Bombs: How to Live (and Die) in an Explosive Landscape' is a zone of non-being created by the Israeli army. Khayyat tells the story of a goatherd, Abu Bilal, who, despite the danger presented by the thousands of cluster bombs the Israeli army has dumped on the region, wants to continue to follow his goats through fields and hills, goats being known to be able to survive periods of scarcity and, most crucially, being light-footed enough not to trigger the cluster bombs that Israel rained on the roads, valleys, villages, towns, orchards, fields, gardens, and homes of Southern Lebanon. We learn in passing that the 4.6 million cluster bombs the Israeli army dropped were expired stock inherited from the US war against the Vietnamese. Military technologies of death are recycled, since laying waste upon land and body is a market and money must be made. Hence, we could map the deadly market of cluster bombs that have contaminated Vietnam, Laos, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Congo, South Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, from the factory where they are fabricated to the barracks where they are stored, to the planes that carry them, and along with these places all those who are involved in the market of death: businessmen, engineers, middlemen, soldiers, truck drivers, handlers, pilots. An entire economy whose workings and structure are much more hidden than

21 Sylvia Wynter, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human After Man, Its Overrepresentation — An Argument', CR: *The New Centennial Review*, 3.3 (Fall 2003), pp. 257–337 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>>.

those of other deadly economies, like oil or minerals. Why is that so? It is a huge market that amounts to billions of US dollars²² with huge investments,²³ with leading producers and sellers, among them the US, France, and Russia. The cluster bomb that killed the goatherd Ali in 2005 had a history. And yet, as Khayyat shows, life has a place in the landscape of war where goatherds are caught between Israeli and Palestinian soldiers. There is a slow resistance to the speedy death brought by cluster bombs. Lives are lost, but the everyday fight for life is ‘life in rehearsal’.²⁴

WAR-TORN ECOLOGIES

Throughout the essays, we learn about de-poisoning practices and the kind of fragments of repair that artist Kader Attia has said are ‘about shaping a possibility of emer-

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- 22 See the site of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute for data <<https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2018/global-arms-industry-us-companies-dominate-top-100-russian-arms-industry-moves-second-place>> [accessed 22 March 2022].
- 23 Consider Gillian Rich, ‘The Best Defense Stocks for Today — and the Future’, *Investor’s Business Daily*, 14 March 2022 <<https://www.investors.com/news/best-defense-stocks-to-buy/>> [accessed 22 March 2022]; Lou Whiteman, ‘Investing in Defense Stocks’, *The Motley Fool*, 22 March 2022 <<https://www.fool.com/investing/stock-market/market-sectors/industrials/defense-stocks/>> [accessed 22 March 2022]. Indeed, *US News and World Report* announced on its front page on 8 March 2022: ‘Bank of America analyst Ronald Epstein. Epstein estimates that U.S. defense spending as a percentage of gross domestic product could rise from around 2.8% to between 3.5% and 4% in response to the recent Russian aggression, and says there is likely upside to both U.S. and European defense budgets. Epstein is projecting at least \$800 billion in U.S. defense spending in 2023, creating big opportunities for defense companies. Here are eight of the best defense stocks to buy now, according to Bank of America.’ Wayne Duggan, ‘Best Defense Stock to Buy Now’, *US News and World Report*, 8 March 2022 <<https://money.usnews.com/investing/slideshows/best-defense-stocks-to-buy-now>> [accessed 22 March 2022].
- 24 Gilmore, *Abolition on Stolen Land*.

ging into another reality, into another, more just world'.²⁵ Jumana Emil Abboud, Kali Rubaii, and Marwa Arsanios remind us that a poison is also its cure. '[T]he very spring waters that poisoned you will also set you free', Abboud writes.²⁶ The wonderful tales Abboud and Rubaii tell us are forms of what Umut Yıldırım calls in her essay 'er-redaction', 'an aesthetic manoeuvre for thinking with erasure so as to uncover ecological clusters of destruction and transformation.'²⁷ The authors celebrate constellations of resistance in the war-torn worlds in the Middle East, that region which hegemonic powers have tried for centuries to shape and reshape. They fight against erasure and through an exposé of what the racist, colonial, imperialist monster is capable of, demonstrate that the patient daily work to maintain life constructs a world full of sensual acts, of tenderness and love. Building a politics of the commons, women and men in the Middle East, with their understanding of the social, political, and economic dimensions of struggle, trace, across time and space, spaces that strengthen our efforts everywhere in the world. They do not want to summon outrage and political consciousness through appeals that result in pity. When I read their essays, I saw the killings fields of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, the afterlives of US bombings to this day. I saw the mining of lithium, cobalt, copper; I saw the floods, the fires, the anti-

25 Kader Attia at the study programme *Fragments of Repair/La Colonie Nomade*, which I convened in Paris, April–July 2021. For the curriculum of this programme, see <<https://www.bakonline.org/program-item/fragments-of-repair/fragments-of-repair-la-colonie-nomade/>> [accessed 22 March 2022].

26 Jumana Emil Abboud, 'Hide Your Water from the Sun: A Performance for Spirited Waters', in this volume, pp. 121–38 (p. 132).

27 Umut Yıldırım, 'Mulberry Affects: Ecology, Memory, and Aesthetics on the Shores of the Tigris River in the Wake of Genocide', in this volume, pp. 27–66 (p. 29).

life politics against refugees in Europe and the US. I saw billionaires getting richer while the majority of humanity is getting poorer. But I also saw wonders, the fact that in the darkest hours of oppression and war, solidarity is active, roads are created, sanctuaries are opened.

Yet, as I write, I am reminded that not all war-torn worlds are equal in the eyes of hegemonic powers. I have recently heard journalists and politicians naturalizing racial difference between refugees when they talked about the millions of Ukrainian refugees fleeing their invaded country: ‘This is not a place like Iraq or Afghanistan. This is a *relatively* [sic] civilized, relatively European country.’ ‘We’re not talking about Syrians fleeing bombings, we are talking about Europeans leaving in their cars that look like us.’²⁸ This is how consent is fabricated to the racial division between ‘good refugees’ and ‘bad refugees’, between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ migrants.

In the uninhabitable world of racism, imperialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, the need for establishing spaces of freedom, spaces where transmission and imagination are fostered and encouraged, spaces to rest and recuperate, to prepare strategies and express love, have always been the first task of the wretched of the earth. *War-torn Ecologies, An-archic Fragments* contributes to that work. Read it and organize!

28 See e.g. Sarah Ellison and Travis M. Andrews, “‘They Seem So Like Us’: In Depicting Ukraine’s plight, some in media use offensive comparisons”, *The Washington Post*, 27 February 2022 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2022/02/27/media-ukraine-offensive-comparisons/>>.

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