

ecology

*Heather Davis*

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future imaginaries  
for when the  
world feels like  
heartbreak



*“With all their genius and with all their skill, they ran out of foresight and air and food and water and ideas”*

-- U Thant, on the occasion of the first celebration of Earth Day, United Nations, March 21, 1971, my emphasis.



Pinar Yoldas, *Global Warming Hot Yoga Studio*, from the exhibition 'The Warm, the Cool and the Cat' at Röda Sten Konsthall, Göteborg, 2016. Photo credit: Hendrik Zeitler.



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I awoke the day after the United States election and my heart hurt. I felt devastated and afraid. My breath seemed to be constricted. Stepping outside was like stepping into a land in mourning. People looked sad and tired and depressed. I went to the wrong campus searching for the class I was meant to guest teach. When I began to come out of this stunned stupor, I started to realise that my silences, my inactions, my disbelief in the depth of what Michelle Alexander calls racial indifference, coupled with renewed and blatant white nationalism, had led to this moment.<sup>1</sup> In the weeks since that day, there has been a huge amount of mobilising in the face of renewed white supremacy and corporatocracy. Mobilising for what, precisely, we cannot yet be sure. But it doesn't look good. And everyday it seems to get worse. What has become clearer and clearer, for me, in the wake of the election is the deep entwinement of the twin formations

that are often treated as separate phenomenon. That is, white supremacy and ecological disaster. I want to make a case in the brief space here that racial and environmental justice cannot be separated, but are part of an entangled matrix of capitalism and colonialism that is killing the majority of the inhabitants on this earth.<sup>2</sup>

The history of the United States (and Canada) reveals that ecological disaster is premised on the twin-fold processes of accumulation by dispossession and chattel slavery that was at the heart of the settler-colonial project. In other words, the kinds of environmentally destructive processes that we are bearing the burden of now are not new phenomenon. Nor are they incidental to the larger frameworks of genocide, slavery, and the fact that, as Amitav Ghosh makes clear, “the poor nations of the world are not poor because they were indolent or

unwilling; their poverty is itself an effect of the inequities created by the carbon economy; it is a result of systems that were set up by brute force to ensure that poor nations remained always at a disadvantage in terms of both wealth and power” (110). It is not simply an unlucky coincidence that Indigenous, black, poor and other marginalised peoples bear the brunt of environmental harm. Rather, as Kyle Whyte has argued, settler colonialism has always relied upon the complete transformation of the biosphere, atmosphere and hydrosphere. Indigenous genocide and the implementation of slavery on plantations involved not only these social horrors, but also the *terraforming* of the earth to resemble an idyllic version of Europe. It was about moving and unearthing rocks and minerals. It was about forcing the people and the land to conform to a pre-established Eurocentric notion of reality, and in

Left side image: Still from Navjot Altaf's *Soul Breath Wind*, multi-channel video: open coal mines in Korba, Chattisgarh, Central India, 2015. Image courtesy: Navjot Altaf



Ravi Agarwal, *Sangam Dialogue*, multimedia installation, Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 2016. Image courtesy: Ravi Agarwal

the process erasing what makes a place ecologically unique. All of these acts were intimately tied to the project of erasure that is the imperative of settler colonialism. Climate change, as Eyal Weizman asserts, is not collateral in the project of modernity, but rather “its very target and aim. Indeed, colonial projects from North America through Africa, the Middle East, India and Australia sought to re-engineer the climate. Colonizers did not only seek to overcome unfamiliar and harsh climatic conditions, but rather to transform them” (36).

Courtney Morris makes a similar argument, when drawing from the rich traditions of black critical thought, she writes: “[Sylvia] Wynter’s argument suggests that we must contend with how race, specifically the category of Man, which is to say the structural and discursive project of white

supremacy, lies at the very heart of the current ecological crisis in which we find ourselves” (5). What the arts are being called upon now to do, I believe, is to respond to this ecological crisis, to respond with the deep and vast knowledges of peoples who never bought into this story in the first place. “What we need instead,” Ghosh writes, “is to find a way out of the individualizing imaginary in which we are trapped” (135). Many artists currently working in India and elsewhere are doing exactly this. The work of Sonia Mehra Chawla, Navjot Altaf and Ravi Agarwal each speak to an effort to move away from the moral liberal individual, instead drawing upon Indigenous and subaltern knowledges to articulate and create works that are collectively driven. If we are to save what is left of our air and food and water, what we need, more than ever, are compelling images and ideas. If this is a war waged on social media that has become completely disconnected from the truth, then what we need to harness is all of our creative capacity to tell stories that are more compelling, more interesting, more provocative, that will garner more airtime, more media attention. In addition to the political mobilising, what we need now are the images of the future beyond capitalism, beyond white supremacy,

beyond colonialism; images of a future where social and ecological justice are intertwined.

- 1 Alexander writes, “racial caste systems do not require racial hostility or overt bigotry to thrive. They need only racial indifference, as Martin Luther King Jr. warned more than forty-five years ago” (43).
- 2 ‘Inhabitants’ here refers both to the many human populations that are threatened because of climate change, chemical toxicities and other ecological crises, but I am also thinking of the extinction rates of other-than-humans which are happening faster than at any other time in geologic history. See Elizabeth Kolbert *The Sixth Extinction* and Ashley Dawson *Extinction: A Radical History*.

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