A Leap of Imagination

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No change for the good ever happens without it being imagined first, even if that change seems hopeless or impossible in the present.
—Martin Espada

When I was an adolescent on Réunion Island and I was walking in its impressive mountains, which all bear the names of Malagasy maroons,[1] I imagined them looking down at the land of unfreedom, of plantations and colonial administration. They were free. They carved a land that belied the normalization of enslavement. At night, they went to the shores of the Indian Ocean to train themselves in the art of fighting. The slave owners, who deeply feared them, organized armed militia to wage war. The war lasted a century. Those who had killed a maroon were awarded with enslaved women, children, and men. Those who had been brought in chains to this French colony and had dared to imagine freedom when everything around them said that enslavement was natural and normal, had to be destroyed. Yet, their leap of imagination was constitutive for the child and adolescent that I was. They created an art of marooning that had to be imagined in order to become possible.

1 Maroons were the enslaved who fled the plantations, for a day or more, or for years, establishing sovereign communities in the mountains of Réunion. They renamed themselves, rejecting with this gesture the surnames that slave owners had given them (which could be demeaning). Through this self-naming, they expressed their anti-slavery resistance and their fight for freedom in their native language, Malagasy: Tsimendef (from 'Tsi Mandevi,' which means 'not a slave'), Mafate (from 'Mahafaty,' which means 'one who kills'), Dimitile (from the Malagasy word for 'the watchman'), Tsilaos (from 'Tsy ilaozana,' which means 'a space that one does not abandon'), or Anchaing and Heva.

It is this leap of imagination that is again required as we are confronted with an increase of the global, systemic, and structural violence of racial capitalism and patriarchy. In 2020, as we witnessed the social and economic consequences of the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus, we learned without surprise that scientists had alerted governments for decades about the risks of infectious diseases, about the proliferation of zoonoses, the species leaping diseases, about reducing research budgets on these subjects. Unsurprisingly, we learned that the mortality rate was higher among poor racialized, black, indigenous, migrant communities with high rates of comorbidity. For me, the outbreak of the chikungunya virus in Réunion (2005–2006) had already illustrated the links between deforestation, capitalism, the proliferation of zoonoses, air travel, mass tourism, hyper consumption, and the collapse of public health services in the global South as

a result of austerity programs, medical research focused on diseases of the North, incompetence and contempt of the French government, the relationship between high mortality rates due to the virus and high comorbidity rates related to poverty, racism, and colonialism. The clauses of the racial contract and the sexual contract, and their racial, social, political, and economic logic based on extraction and predation, were again at play. The year 2020 started with impressive environmental destruction—huge fires in California, Siberia, the Congo Basin, the Amazon, Indonesia, Australia, and even the Arctic. Ashes darkened the sky and covered in grey the soils, landscapes, ruins, and even distant mountains, while animals perished by the millions, and billions of human beings were condemned to breathe polluted air. We understood that breathing had become a privilege. These disasters brought to mind the explosion of the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal in 1984, the accident in the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986, the explosion of the AZF plant in Toulouse in 2001, the abandonment of the African-American community in New Orleans to the destruction of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the worst nuclear disaster in Fukushima in 2011, the women burned alive in the Rana Plaza fire in 2013, racialized land and communities devastated by the pesticide chlordecone in the West Indies, the destruction produced by the gold industry in Guyana, the nickel industry in Kanaky. There was no respite from the violence—the apartheid regime in occupied Palestine, the dismembered, mutilated, burned-alive bodies, women raped and murdered every day, black and brown men thrown in jail came along with the announcement by scientists of the staggering acceleration of the consequences for human life of climate change caused by capitalism, which will first hit the poor and the racialized.

The entanglements of oppressions, which have been analyzed by activists and scholars in the Global South and by decolonial artists and activists worldwide for a while already, are now coming to the fore. The struggles for full humanness must be led by holding together many threads and elements. Black feminists and feminists in the Global South have long said that the category 'women' is too narrow, too biologically

based, too colonial and racialized to be able to describe their multifarious oppressions and that their liberation cannot be contained within Western feminism.

Poetic Acts

It is among racialized and black women in often neglected spaces in the peripheries that I have found the most creative leaps of imagination. In Martinique, on this land ravaged by a state crime—the French state allowed crop-dusting with the pesticide chlordecone in the island decades after it had been banned in France—that led leading to the pollution of soil and subsoil, of rivers and seas, and of humans. For years, the people of Martinique have been fighting for recognition and reparation. In 2018, Martinican feminists protested against the pollution and state racial violence by intersecting health, colonialism, racism, sexism, violence, environmental crimes, relations between women and men, intergenerational solidarity, and resistance. 'Start the fire, put the mess in order,' chanted members of the group #Pebouchfini. They stood behind a banner: 'Yesterday enslaved, Always exploited, Today poisoned, Women Say Enough!' By adopting the rhythm of popular songs—a voice, a choir—they chanted, 'A healthy land/ (in chorus) That's what we want!/ Healthy men, in every way/ (in chorus) That's what we want!/ Healthy women/ (in chorus) That's what we want!'[2] 'Healthy men in every way' because women recognized that men have been damaged by the secular violence of enslavement and colonialism, and that they perpetuate this violence against women and children and against each other. They reject the Western feminist analysis of violence—victimized women/brutal men—even though they acknowledge that men's murderous violence targets women because they understand good health as being human in the world, by embracing the 'human' vs. the 'Man,' (the white Christian male) as philosopher Sylvia Wynter has argued.[3] Women put into practice her remark,

> Humanness is no longer a noun. Being human is a praxis.[4]

2 From the film by artist Florence Lazar, *Tu crois que la terre est chose morte*, 2019.

3 McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter*, n.p.

4 humanworlds-festival.com/being_human_as_praxis/.

Health is not the 'good health' of neoliberal logic, which rests on the dialectical and asymmetrical relation between the white male performing body and the racialized female exhausted body. Indeed, his performance rests on her exhaustion, on the extraction of her life force. The owner of the performing body (white and male) is expected to demonstrate his willingness to spend long hours at the gym and in the office, to work late at night and during the weekend, this capacity being the sign of his success, of his adherence to the dominant order, his exhaustion the proof of his triumph over the basic needs of mere mortals. He performs neoliberal masculinity in a proudly under-rested body perpetually speeding through many tasks. The owner of the invisible body is female and of color. Her exhaustion is the consequence of the historical logic of extractivism that built primitive accumulation and capital—extracting labor from racialized bodies. This was made clear again during the lockdown in some cities—'essential work' was done by black and brown women, exposed to the virus but having no choice other than going to clean, to take care, to serve; and done by black and brown men driving, delivering, cleaning, while the bourgeoisie could meditate on 'the essential.' People said they went to work with 'fear in their stomach,' that they had to deal with greater aggression caused by anxiety and fear. It looks like we were witnessing the governments' dreams of docile, domesticated, and privatized lives. Bankers, financiers, businessmen, capital advisors, behind virtuous declarations about a paradigm shift prepared massive restructuring, increased surveillance, and control and the rise of what Naomi Klein has called the 'Screen New Deal'—growth of the online health surveillance and control industries, education and diagnostics, privatization of health systems...

During the confinement, what black feminists, global southern, materialist, or racialized trade unionists had made clear for decades. i.e., that racialized women form the foundation on which societies build their comfort and operate unequally, was finally admitted by academics, journalists, and elected officials, and therefore, publicized. In Brazil, the United States, Singapore, or France the bourgeoisie had to admit that their well-being and their feminism, when they professed one, depended on the work of racialized women. Their world

appears for what it is, a filth that disappears thanks to hygienic concerns that they pretend is natural to them, unlike poor and racialized communities that neglect their environment and their habitat because of their laziness. The notions of cleanliness and dirtiness are far from neutral, there is no equality in access to water, soap, ecological habitat. Water is inaccessible to migrants, people on the street, prisoners, people in the Global South.

Women who clean, whether they live in Maputo, Rio de Janeiro, Riyadh, Kuala Lumpur, Rabat, or Paris, speak of the very little time they sleep (three to four hours), of the long hours devoted to their commutes, and of the work they have to do once they return home. Women who perform caring/cleaning jobs all talk about being *exhausted*. The *economy of exhaustion* has a long history in the modern world: it started with colonial slavery, mining human energy to death; the Industrial Revolution adopted this logic, exhausting the bodies of white workers and children until they finally obtained a reduction of work hours and hard physical labor thanks to the exhaustion of racialized bodies in the colonies. Liberal and neoliberal countries still rest on mining to exhaustion the bodies of migrants and people of color (processes of racialization also occur in the countries of the Global South—Filipinas and Indonesian women cleaning/caring are racialized in Southeast Asia, as are Thai and Malagasy women in Beirut; one even hears wealthy Africans in Dakar speak of their 'African' domestics). Behind the male neoliberal performing body stands a 'phantom' body that enables his limitless performance. Even when a married white woman does her own housework and takes care of her own kids, the work of women of color must not be overlooked: they clean the spaces where white mothers do their shopping, buy their groceries, go to the gym, drop off their children at daycare. This racial and gendered construction rests on a long history of the exploitation of black women in particular, of their bodies and souls. I do not mean to make a rigid distinction between cleaning and caring. Cleaning is about caring, and caring about cleaning: black women who care for children and the elderly, and clean their bodies also take care of the environment by cleaning human waste and rubbish.

The bodies of black women have long been commoditized, made into capital; their exploitation is inseparable from primitive accumulation, from social reproduction (as so many black feminists have shown), and from the new need for a clean world in which the neoliberal economy can function.

So, when Rachel Kélé, a black woman who is one of the cleaners on strike since July 17, 2019 at the Paris Ibis Batignolles hotel, declares in the same breath that the Accor Group (owner of the Ibis chain), that the subcontracting company which employs the cleaning women and the clients have no respect for their work, that they have to make ready 30 to 50 rooms a day at the rate of one room every 17 minutes for a salary of 800 to 900 euros per month, that it is because they are racialized women that they are 'invisible,' that they suffer from not being able to offer their children the education they desire and the gifts they deserve, she demonstrates the importance of bringing together feelings, emotions, and facts to describe as closely as possible the violence that targets black cleaning women.[5]

I see a connection between the 2018 Martinican feminists' protest and the action on May 22, 2020, of young black Martinicans of the group Mawon who pulled down two statues of Victor Schoelcher in Fort de France, Martinique.[6] Two young black women went online to tell the police, the judge, and the State that no investigation was needed since they publicly claimed the act. 'Schoelcher is not our savior,' they declared. They had chosen May 22 because on that day in 1848, the enslaved Romain beat the drum to gather the enslaved so they would end slavery without waiting for the Paris (April 27, 1848) decree to arrive in the island. The French president, MPs and intellectuals in France and Martinique severely condemned the act. Historians debated the legitimacy of honoring only the enslaved, as the young black Martinican women were asking, because, they argued, Schoelcher also had a role in the abolition of slavery.[7] These young black women went against the norm, against respectability, they dared to disturb the false harmony of the French republic. They imagined a world free of the white savior syndrome. Isis Labeau-Caberia, a Martinican sociologist, declared that

5 'Ils pensent que nous sommes leurs esclaves… et y'a pas de respect.' AJ+ France.

6 facebook.com/MawonTV/. See also: Pinel-Fereol, 'La destruction de statues de Victor Schoelcher justifiée par des militants mais condamnée par des figures martiniquaises.'

7 Loriaux, 'Pourquoi des militants ont détruit des statues de Victor Schoelcher (et est-ce justifié?)' See also: Le Monde with AFP, 'Deux statues de Victor Schœlcher brisées par des manifestants en Martinique.'; Sat, 'Statues de Schœlcher brisées en Martinique.'

the negative reactions were 'symptomatic of two evils that plague Martinican society: on the one hand, its inertia in the face of a still long-lived colonial heritage; on the other hand, the growing gap between an aging and gentrified society and its youth demanding social change'[8] and the historian Fola Gadet said that the youth were shaking a deadly respectability, 'They show you the stars and you look at their finger. They show you the architects of their history, you watch the falling statues. They clearly say what they want without hiding. You don't see their courage.'[9] Hence, rather than the tearing down of the statue of the slave trader Edward Colson on June 6 in Bristol, which marks for the media, scholars, and activists the beginning of the global movement of decolonizing public space, the fall of the Victor Schoelcher statues was an act with more meaning for a conversation about continuous systemic racist violence. Indeed, Schoelcher was neither a slave trader nor a slave owner, he was a nineteenth-century French republican who wrote anti-slavery books and fought for the end of slavery and he was behind the decree making the abolition of slavery in the French colonies final and definitive in 1848.[10] Targeting Schoelcher brought together past, present, and future in the rewriting of European history from a decolonial antiracist position. Indeed, the decolonial temporality of repair cannot be linear from past to present, as it addresses an entangled temporality of past, present, and future, of a past which is not yet repaired, of a present we are trying to repair, and of a future we know is already being wasted by racial capitalism. Schoelcher represents a past that, on the one hand, offered absolutely no repair for the crimes, damages, and wounds of enslavement and, on the other, facilitated and justified post-slavery colonization, a present which is still organized by race, inhabited by the colonial past. A present of racism without race, of black lives that still do not matter, and of the rewriting of harsh, dangerous, and formidable anti-slavery struggles as a generous gesture by white philanthropists. Schoelcher symbolically announces a future in which racial capitalism in its neoliberal clothes would preserve its hegemony. Thus the women's act cuts deep into the history of European abolitionism and the ideology of white saviorism, which still dominate European perceptions of itself, of its civilizing mission and of Anti-Blackness. It brings to light what Philomena Essed has brilliantly called 'everyday racism,' the recurrent, systematic, and familiar practices rather than the exceptional incidents of overt racism.[11] By pulling down Schoelcher, young black Martinican women were tearing the veil of the politics of deadly respectability and assimilation and their false promises of equality in a world structured by racism, inequalities, and injustices. Pressuring antiracists to remain polite, soft-spoken, and deferential is a norm of deadly respectability. Young black Martinicans know very well where respectability has led their country: to greater dependency, paternalistic relations, and poverty. In Martinique, as in other French overseas territories—these remnants of the first colonial empire built upon slavery or post-slavery colonization—health and education are neglected, the rate of unemployment has been high for decades, their environment is polluted, the message of successive French governments has been 'the future is elsewhere,' and integration in the European Community has brought new problems. The May act of tearing down the statues of Schoelcher harks back to the 2018 feminist protest against pollution. Both denounce the coloniality of power, both show that health is not just about having hospitals and vaccines but also about making the world livable. The statues of Schoelcher created an inhospitable city, a city marked by white abolitionism erasing the struggle of the enslaved; chlordecone has made the island inhospitable by killing rivers, lagoons, plants, animals, and humans.

Barca Nostra by the artist Christoph Büchel for the 2019 Venice Biennale showed how and why victimization is still consumed and reproduced rather than challenged.[12] The 'hostile environment' created against non-white European citizens or non-citizens remains strong. To Eleanor Paynter and Nicole Miller, what was

> … critical in this story—and in accounts of precarious migration more broadly —is how the men, women, and children trapped in the boat navigated the borders of invisibility. The boat is a material trace of the limbo migrants negotiate as they flee violence, persecution, and poverty

8 Labeau-Caderia, 'La Martinique, malade de sa colonialité et de sa structure gérontocratique.'

9 Gadet, 'Le débat ce n'est pas ça!'

10 France is the only European country that had to abolish slavery in all its colonies twice. The first abolition in all colonies was in February 1794 (though slavery was abolished only in Guadeloupe). Slavery was restored by Napoleon in May 1802. On April 27, 1848, slavery was finally abolished in all French colonies.

11 Essed, *Understanding Everyday Racism*.

12 The fishing boat in which 700 to 1000 sub-Africans were packed and that sank between the Lybian coast and the city of Augusta, Sicily, in 2015, leaving only 28 survivors, was recovered from the seabed in 2016 and brought to a NATO base in Sicily where a team of forensics worked on the identification of the hundreds of bodies still imprisoned within its hull. It was installed by Swiss-Icelandic artist Christoph Büchel as 'a collective monument and memorial to contemporary migration.'

to seek protection. As a nexus of shifting transfers that alter its status across a series of geopolitical and cultural borders, the boat enjoys forms of recognition and mobility denied to its passengers.[13]

13 Paynter and Miller, 'The White Readymade and the Black Mediterranean.'

What was missing was the afterlife of European colonial past, the devolution of policing to countries of the South so that Europe can wash its hands of the worst while closing its borders, the racial politics in Europe (Islamophobia, anti-Blackness, anti-Roma/Sinti), and the criminalization of solidarity.

Every day, we see being acted what Aimé Césaire identified as the *ensauvagement* of Europe, because, quite simply 'at the end of the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, a poison has been distilled in the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds towards *savagery* (*ensauvagement*).'[14]

14 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 35–36.

Protests against the processes of *ensauvagement* in Europe are standing on the shoulders of past struggles. They are linking the multiple temporalities produced by racism—past, present, and a future as the past—in order to break the linear narrative of infinite progress that denies freedom and humanity to non-whites. Political antiracism—that sees racism as structural, systemic, expressed in many ways and thus does not frame racism as a moral flaw—seeks to reimagine what is to be *human* in the world. The decolonization of Europe means confronting the long history of race, of exploitation of non-white peoples, of the separation between lives that matter and lives that do not matter. It means rejecting the rigid borders of ethno-nationalism and revitalizing the practices of strong radical transnational solidarity. It means that we do daily exercises in imagination, that we dare to imagine a post-racist, depatriarchalized, post-capitalist world.

In June 2017, I curated a workshop with twenty young artists of color in Paris that led to a collective performance around a manifesto, the last paragraphs of which stated:

> In these reconfigurations, the figure of the Maroon, those men and women who refused the long night of oppression, strikes us as primordial. To escape, if only for an hour, a day, a night, or years, to create, against all odds, a space of freedom is the lesson they bequeath to us. Making a reified icon of the Maroon would be to betray their memory. It is a danger that looms for all figures of freedom and, before we know it, we would risk seeing this figure set in stone on the fronts of museums. We take our imperative of constantly being on the move, in motion, inventing new, free territories, from the Maroons. The night welcomes our dreams and opens up still unexplored paths. We claim the right to be unfinished and contradictory. We want to creatively redefine the visual traces of history, to explore the past to analyze the present and imagine the future. Our utopia must remain a never-achieved goal; it must instill a permanent state of curiosity.[15]

15 Manifesto written by Gia Abrassart, Bénédicte Alliot, Kader Attia, Paola Bachetta, Jean-François Boclé, Odile Burluraux, Jephthe Carmil, Gerty Dambury, Myriam Dao, Lucie Dégut, Alexandre Erre, Fabiana Ex-Souza, Nathalie Gonthier, Yo-Yo Gonthier, Antoine Idier, Marta Jecu, Léopold Lambert, Carpanin Marimoutou, Myriam Mihindou, Laura Huertas Millan, Kat Moutoussamy, Frédéric Nauczyciel, Pier Ndoumbe, Pascale Obolo, Yohann Quëland de Saint-Pern, France Manoush Sahatdjian, Melissa Thackway, Françoise Vergès, Mawena Yehouessi, and Mikaëla Zyss.

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