

Aftermaths: vulnerable times, vanishing places, toxic erasures

Marilena Parlati and Joseph Pugliese

University of Padua and Macquarie University, Sydney

This special issue of *From the European South* stands as an attempt to sound the depths of our post-virus world. We deploy the term ‘post’ not to signify the overcoming of the virus, but to mark the virus’s ongoing transformation of, and entrenchment within, the contemporary geopolitical and cultural landscape. As we write, yet another variant of COVID-19 has emerged: Omicron. As it proceeds to work its way across both the Greek alphabet and the bodies and lives of millions of people, the name for the new variant does more than simply expand the pandemic lexicon. It evidences the capacity for a lethal more-than-human agent, a virus, to mutate and to override and escape human attempts to domesticate, neutralise and eliminate it. Cast in this context, we suggest that COVID-19 carries an emblematic charge that metaphorically embodies different agents of lethal power: colonialism, racism, racial capitalism and ecocide – to name but a few of the most pressing and relevant viral forces at work in the global landscape. If one thing is clear in the contemporary context, it is that none of these toxic agents have been effectively overcome. Like the virus, they appear to have an infinite capacity to mutate, take hold of their hosts and thereby continue to consolidate their hold on power.

In pursuing the thinking through of the coextensiveness of a virus with other toxic agents, we suggest that COVID-19 has worked in tandem with colonialism, racism, racial capitalism and ecocidal regimes to amplify existing unequal relations of power and biopolitical exposedness and vulnerability, specifically for people of colour, for black and indigenous people, for women, refugees, prisoners, and innumerable other-than-human entities. As the spokespersons of a number of African nations have observed, the emergence of Omicron in the southern African context and its virtually immediate spread to Western nations underscores two things: how the practice of hoarding and withholding vaccines by the West works to consolidate existing asymmetries of power in terms of wealth, health and the biopolitical designation as what counts as life worthy of preservation; and how epidemiological forces of auto-immunity effectively breach and override the very self-protective measures and borders mobilised by the West in its ongoing attempts to secure its insular wealth, health and privileges.

In the post-virus global landscape, regimes of toxic erasure and selective memories have not only worked to efface pre-existing fault lines of exposedness and vulnerability, but they have often inverted the narratives so that the victims become the perpetrators. Those contesting the ecocide of global warming, for example, are scripted as ‘ecoterrorists.’ And, in the wake of the global consumption of face masks to ward off the virus, we draw attention to the millions of tons of synthetic garbage produced by the discarding of used masks. The masks themselves are often carelessly discarded and they have thus entered waterways, seas and oceans, further contributing to the mounting rubbish of plastic waste in the world’s bodies of water. Reports from across the globe evidence the lethal ensnaring of myriad forms of wildlife by these masks, as the beaks, feet or wings of various animals are caught in the hooks of the masks: a grim reminder of the vast and colonising reach of the virus.

In different ways, the articles in this special issue speak to a number of the urgent topics that inscribe the post-virus landscape. They track, for example, how regimes of settler colonialism and racism are working to consolidate the very violent relations of power that are being actively contested by those at the receiving end of institutionalised state violence. This is perhaps nowhere more graphically manifest than in the now-global Black Lives Matter movement and the white racial panics (as exemplified by the US Capitol riot) of those that are desperately attempting to hold onto their racialised power, privilege and entitlements – all garnered thanks to histories of imperialism, colonialism and racial capitalism; these are histories that bind Europe and the United Kingdom with the settler colonial states that they birthed: the United States of America, Australia, Canada, Israel and so on.

Situated in this context, we open this special issue with Bronwyn Carlson and Terri Farrelly’s “Monumental Changes: History Isn’t Always Written by the Victors.” In their article, Carlson and Farrelly critically examine the ongoing contestation and toppling of the monuments of colonialism, empire and racism that occupy key public spaces across the globe: from Australia to the UK and the EU, from South America to North America. They contextualise their discussion within the larger, now-globalised formation of Black Lives Matter and its merging of forces with pre-existing anti-colonial and anti-racist movements in places such as Australia. In their analysis of the heated debates about the toppling of racist and colonial statues, Carlson and Farrelly sardonically remark: “Statues themselves are not history – they are about history. And most of them do a terrible job of it. To remove a statue isn’t to change history, but how history is remembered” (13). They thus raise and address a number of pressing questions: “Should they be removed and destroyed?”, “Should they be amended?”, “Should we relocate them to a museum or ‘statue park’?” (14). These questions are examined in the context of contemporary settler colonial nations such as Australia, where the violent forces and effects of colonialism and race are as active and destructive as ever.

After cataloguing the myriad ways in which these forces of violence continue to impact Indigenous Nations and communities, Carlson and Farrelly emphatically note that: “To ignore” this contemporary history of ongoing violence and destruction “is not an option, because it also ignores who has the right to determine whose history is being privileged, and whose history is being lost” (14). Following their tracking of the ongoing violent effects of colonialism in the context of Indigenous Nations, Carlson and Farrelly open a vista that gestures towards hope, a hope animated by the unfolding global protests to topple the monuments of colonialism, empire and racism: “History isn’t only written by the victors. The fact that protest can change the meaning of colonial commemorations, even when their protectors manage to keep them *in situ*, is proof of this” (19).

In her article, “Quiet Activism Through Dharug Ngurra: Reporting Locally Grown – Not from the European South,” Jo Anne Rey offers yet another vision of hope in the face of the destructive eco-genocidal forces of colonialism and empire. She opens her article by delineating the global scale of the current ecological crisis, a crisis mastheaded by anthropogenic-driven climate change:

As nations flail ignominiously (some more than others) in uncoordinated response to rapid global systemic climate challenges that threaten air, water, earth and fire systems, segments of the so-called ‘Australian’ government persist in ignoring the pending catastrophe despite major physical warnings across the various systems and despite scientific alerts. (25)

After enunciating this urgent note of warning, Rey proceeds to articulate a vision of ‘quiet activism’ grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and experiential practices that, over millennia, have continued to offer exemplary templates for the care of Country and the consequent flourishing of both human and more-than-human life. In the course of her article, Rey outlines the transnational valency of this vision of “localised ‘quiet activism’ in Australia” and crucially underscores how

[f]or localised ‘quiet activism’ to truly be effective [...] it needs First Nations peoples’ perspectives. Afterall, in the context of the continent called ‘Australia,’ localised ‘quiet activism’ that can respond effectively to climate change and challenging catastrophes (such as the mega-fires of 2019-2020), is also known as caring for Country by the First Peoples and has been undertaken for more than 65,000 years. (26)

Jo Anne Rey directly speaks to one of the key topics of this special issue – global movements to instantiate acts of decolonisation in Europe, the UK and across their former and contemporary colonies. For Indigenous and other colonised peoples, the noun ‘Europe’ and its adjectival qualifier ‘European’ are steeped in past and contemporary histories of colonialism, empire and genocidal violence. In her article, Rey draws attention to these problematics. She stages a felt refusal to be assimilated, and thus neutralised, by the ongoing colonial power relations of these terms. She unfolds a compelling ethico-political Indigenous vision that offers

the only viable template for all our futures, as it provides “ways of knowing, being and doing that quietly activate respectful Presence, Place and People. Together, we [Indigenous people] have the web of Interconnectivity, that is at the heart of sustainable resilience, wellbeing, and futures” (37-38).

In their paper, Thor Kerr and Shaphan Cox also address some ways of dealing with the aftermaths of colonial history in the context of very recent discussions on renaming places and monuments in the Walyalup/Fremantle area. Their specific scientific interest coincides with their own political involvement and intervention in the collective public debate on the renaming of the city civic centre, Kings Square, now Walyalup Koort. Kerr and Cox suggest that while these debates are a fundamental step in the refiguration of national and local senses of communal belonging, they cannot obliterate – nor must they be supposed to do so – the persistence of “colonial relationships and practices of dispossession” (42). These have been made undeniably visible in light of the Australian government’s recent rejection of the Uluru Statement of the Heart on constitutional reform. The authors adopt the educational strategies proposed by Alderman and Rose-Redwood (2020), for a different geographical context – but which may be used at a wider global level as well. Those authors imagine classrooms – rather than locally-rooted public debates – as “toponymic workspace” (42). For Kerr and Cox, a constructive critique must take into due account the “‘affective entanglements’ of place names” in relation to social actors who have too long and too often been excluded from the very act of naming (44). Following Alderman and Rose-Redwood, the authors claim the necessity of assessing the ‘procedural justice’ inherent in policy making and traditional naming strategies, with the goal of contributing to the acknowledgement of the historical, geographical and cultural histories that inscribe landscapes such as Walyalup Koort – whose Indigenous histories predate the colonial state. They suggest that the Walyalup Koort debate is a “working model for communities to follow and improve upon by including substantially more Indigenous visual culture, language and stories within the toponymic workspace” (52).

In our view, naming the different modalities of violence that continue to impact Indigenous people in the context of settler colonial states, Carlson and Farrelly, Rey, and Kerr and Cox all consistently bring into focus how these violences operate recursively so as to facilitate the desired outcome of eliminating the Indigene from the settler colonial landscape. It is a tribute to the academic rigour of the journal, *From the European South*, that it has engaged with these debates in a spirit of robust and uncompromising scholarly dialogue and engagement and that it has offered our contributors a scholarly platform to initiate genuine acts of decolonising critique.

In the context of another settler state, Lucia Abbamonte and Raffaella Antinucci contribute to the debate with “Edusemiotic Pathways in an Iconic Museum Text – The African American Experience,” in which they adopt an edusemiotic approach to investigate the

National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), inaugurated in Washington in 2016, and its educational policies aimed at de-normalising many traditional “histories of the exploitation of slavery and racial subjugation” (57). The Museum has deliberately set for itself the task of unmasking the innumerable forms racism and racial (and gendered) exploitation that have been constitutive of settler American history, but also of enhancing “new racial literacies” (56). The amazing volume of its resources has been made available via its own topographical and architectural setting, its very rich on-site exhibitions but also via its open-access policies, which provide fundamental support to the many educational programmes and campaigns the museum hosts and supports. Since Covid-time has unhappily started to dismantle any sense of planetary ordinariness, the digital collections have indeed continued to promote awareness of what the authors define as a “constructive attitude for positive change” (56). For Abbamonte and Antinucci, in fact, the NMAAHC has successfully managed to mobilise its visitors’ critical attention thanks to a very carefully planned communication strategy, whose “synergy between its artefacts and the accompanying verbal explanations and comments [...] resemiotize[s] apparently innocuous items as the products of forced labour or means of oppression, and endeavour[s] to promote societal change” (57). The “edusemiotic” approach that the two authors adopt helps them focus on the “embodied foundations of learning” (58), on the necessity of disentangling its processes and assumptions and on the opportunities this long-awaited institution in the United States offers in order to foster a meaningful dialogue with the past and with its painful and bitter aftermaths.

In her paper “Palestine and the Figure of the Palestinian in Lebanese Diaspora Literature,” Jumana Bayeh leads us along a different trajectory through another still open global wound, in her investigation of the unending legacies of the Nakba, and the ways in which the Palestinian question can be seen through the cultural lens of the Lebanese diaspora. She explores a few narrative examples from contemporary diaspora fiction with the declared intent of verifying the multiple means by which “Palestine illuminate[s] the writerly sensibility of authors whose lives have been altered or even determined by migration and border transgression” (84). Bayeh chooses to tackle the topic of this special issue by facing the displacement of Palestinians, and later delving deeper into what she considers “the Nakba’s continued tragic impact in a significant location of Palestinian exile, that of Lebanon” (78). In her view, these long-resilient exiles – in such complex multiethnic, multilingual and multi-religious spaces – have long been and still are marginalised and culturally exorcised by the Lebanese. Writers such as Elias Khoury, Mai Ghousseub and Rashid al-Daif were closely “tied to the Palestinian cause and contrasted sharply with the treatment of Lebanon’s Palestinian refugee population in the 1970s, 1980s and beyond” (78). Yet, Bayeh reminds readers about the fraught issue of the *Tawtin*, due to which the Palestinians are refused naturalisation, but which has often sparked hot debates on the envisaged mortification of Palestinian ‘identity’

that Lebanese citizenship might entail. The author contends that the predicaments of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have not truly been dealt with and fully acknowledged, specifically in relation to the September 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, in which many Palestinian civilians were murdered by Christian Maronite and Israeli military forces, and whose spectral load awaits address and, hopefully, some form of redress. And yet, in Bayeh's view, Palestine, its loss, the excruciating plight of its people even in Lebanon, also resonate in Lebanese diaspora narratives, which are often concerned with migration and the civil war, as in the case of *De Niro's Game* (2006) by Rawi Hage. For Bayeh, this novel proves that Palestine is not only a historical and geographical reference, but it becomes instrumental in exposing "the weak foundations on which the Maronite imagined identity is built" (81).

The second novel Bayeh's argument pivots around is Amin Maalouf's *Ports of Call* (1999), which narrates the partition of Palestine and the many betrayals and obliterations it engendered. By engaging with Palestine and suggesting possibilities for co-habitation, Maalouf's text "illustrates how a Lebanese diaspora novel both recuperates the toxic erasure of Palestinians," but also "affords insights into alternate pathways to address the Israel-Palestine conflict" (87).

The creative section of *FES 10* hosts a poem by Sara M. Saleh, "Live from Gaza," which also eloquently delineates how settler violence is repeatedly played out in the context of the Israeli state's serial wars on Palestine. "Live from Gaza" strongly resonates with Bayeh's insightful investigations on the Palestinian question and works as a poetic act of urgent war reportage. Through the fractured syntax and the machine-gun bullet-pointing of words and phrases, Saleh conveys with electric, telegraphic urgency the loss, destruction and death inflicted on Gaza in the wake of the latest Israeli military assault. Across the itinerary of a poem that graphically traces – through spacing, parataxis and ellipsis – a landscape harrowed by war-inflicted trauma and destruction, she counter-mobilises the very terms deployed by the media and international governments to neutralise the forms of systemic violence deployed by the Israeli settler state against Gaza and the larger occupied Palestine territories. In the process, her poem effectively unmasks the real victims that fall prey to these serial assaults. Saleh concludes her poem with a memorial roll call of the names of the Palestinian dead:

In memory of Muhammad-Zain al-Attar

In memory of Amira al-Attar

In memory of Islam al-Attar

In memory of Suheib al-Hadidi

In memory of Yahya al-Hadidi

In memory of Osama al-Hadidi (94)

In naming the dead, Saleh refuses to reduce the Palestinian victims of Israeli state violence to anonymous numbers and statistics. The graphic trailing off this roll call opens to the horror of

a toll without closure, even as the evocative final words and letters of the poem work to embody the gaping wound of this open-ended loss *in* the writer and reader: “In me [...] I” (95).

The concluding article of this issue is an opinion piece, “Caught in the Crossfire,” by Neilab Osman. Osman writes from a Western nation context as a second-generation immigrant whose parents fled one of the iterative wars that have harrowed Afghanistan. Her piece emerges out of the unfolding violence and chaos left in Afghanistan in the wake of the complete withdrawal of US and allied forces from the country – following decades of war. The withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan was conducted without putting in place consolidated measures to make sure that the people most at risk in the country – including women, girls, ethnic minorities such as the Hazara and LGBTQI+ people – would not be left exposed to possible reprisals by the Taliban, who immediately took control of the country. Osman explains that, even in the wake of the dangers posed to her relatives by this regime, fleeing the country was not viewed as a desired option. In the words of Osman’s Khala Nahid, she “didn’t actually want to leave” (98). Osman stages two critical manoeuvres in her piece: she draws on the voices of her relatives living in Afghanistan to give testimony to their experiences; and she uses these testimonies to contest and undermine the Eurocentric visions of Afghanistan “as a dirt-ridden and unliveable country” and the stereotypical framing of refugees and asylum seekers as opportunistic ‘migrants’ (98). As Khala Nahid emphasises in her testimonies, refugees and asylum seekers are reluctant to leave their home countries and only do so when their lives are at risk.

Faced with the increasingly dangerous situation that her relatives were confronting in Taliban-governed Afghanistan, Osman details her desperate attempts to try to secure humanitarian visas for them, while facing the most intractable of bureaucratic obstacles thrown at her by the Australian government: as she ironically remarks, “the process is almost *in-humanitarian* in its current design” (99). Osman’s article emerges as of one piece with the activist tradition driven by the urgent question of ‘What is to be done?’ or, in her own words, “What should we do?” (100). She delivers multiple answers to this question and the answers all pivot on the centrality of social justice activism: “For me, activism serves as beacon of hope” (101). In the context of a post-virus landscape inscribed by war, global climate change, a mutating pandemic, institutionalised racism, resurgent neo-colonialisms and ever-virulent forms of racial capitalism, we conclude our Introduction on this sanguine note.

Marilena Parlati and Joseph Pugliese