

Maria Thereza Alves  
Marwa Arsanios  
Eduardo Carrera R  
Sebastian Cichocki  
Fernando García Dory  
Léuli Eshrāghi  
Ayesha Hameed  
Mônica Hoff  
bell hooks  
Jagna Lewandowska  
Nomusa Makhubu  
Svitlana Matviyenko  
Samaneh Moafi  
Marina Naprushkina  
May-Britt Öhman  
Samanta Arango Orozco  
Daniela Ortiz  
Ana Teixeira Pinto  
Elizabeth A. Povinelli  
Peta Rake  
Maristella Svampa  
Françoise Vergès  
Cecilia Vicuña  
Jaime Vindel  
Munem Wasif

Edited by Hiuwai Chu, Meagan Down, Nkule Mabaso,  
Pablo Martínez, and Corina Oprea

Cover image:

**Otobong Nkanga, *Whose Crisis is This?* (2013)**  
Acrylic on paper, two parts, 29.7 × 42 cm each.  
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# CLIMATE

Our Right to Breathe

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# CLIMATE: OUR RIGHT TO BREATHE

## Editors' Introduction

This book is a collection of essays and artistic contributions in response to the two main challenges we face on a global scale, and so, too, within the arts ecosystem: the accelerated collapse of the biosphere under climate change and the increasingly crushing dynamics of a toxic political sphere. Aware that much of the transformation needed to reverse increasingly dire scientific forecasts about our environment must take place on a planetary scale and in the material sphere, *Climate: Our Right to Breathe* is informed by an urgency to imagine common strategies for active solidarity. At a time when several planetary boundaries of the Earth system have already been surpassed, creating feedback loops of intensification, the essential role of the arts must be to speak up and make space for collective action, care, and imagination—which are so often endangered by politics of isolationism and exclusion—as well as for the speculative construction of just, eco-transition-ready paradigms that shrug off the logic of capitalist expansion.

In recent years, L'Internationale has carried out a series of programs and publications related to the ecological question,<sup>1</sup> understood as a complex issue that has to be approached from a scientific perspective, while also requiring a reading of the political climate and related cultural productions. In that sense, *Climate* responds to the need to continue articulating thoughts that challenge the traditional division of disciplines from the intersection of art, activism, and social sciences—by “staying with the trouble,” as Donna J. Haraway would say—while also attending to the political and material conditions of the present. We consider both museums and artistic practices to be critical vehicles for debating, promoting, and imagining new worlds to come.

We have seen significant progressive discourses regarding the right to a healthy environment, which first appeared as a concept on the international stage five decades ago at the 1972 Stockholm

Conference on the Human Environment; however, it took almost as long for the right to a healthy environment to become integrated into over 150 legal frameworks around the world. 1972 was also the year that a seminal text of the environmental movement was published, *The Limits to Growth*, a report commissioned for MIT by the Club of Rome, and whose main author was Donella Meadows.<sup>2</sup> Since that time, the inability of the capitalist system to redirect material activity and reduce the extractivist practices that surpass the physical limits of the biosphere, which the report rightly revealed, has become even more evident. The apparent impossibility of reversing the ideological fixation on perpetual growth—a condition that is both material and cultural—has ensured the reproduction of stagnant, nihilist imaginaries. We can confirm that the world that was drawn at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, with complex political, institutional, and technical operations that allowed the planetary expansion of a model based on growth, exploitation of resources, and accumulation, is still active. Thus, a so-called developed world was constructed in confrontation with a so-called underdeveloped one, instantiating a binary that was further used to justify neocolonial practices such as employing debt and financialization and technical and energy dependency for the benefit of a Western-centric expansion of the concepts of freedom and democracy.

The limitations of environmental law stem from the fact that legal systems consider the natural world as property that can be exploited and degraded, rather than as an agent with its own rights to exist and to flourish. The transition toward a new generation of environmental law is apparent in several new legal mechanisms that incorporate and defend the rights of nature and recognize law in the natural world. In March 2017, the Whanganui River in Aotearoa/New Zealand became the first river in the world to be granted legal personhood—an outcome for which the Indigenous Māori began to petition the British colonial government in 1870. The Māori have long cohabited with the river in accordance with the proverb *Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au* [I am the river, and the river is me]. This way of seeing the natural world carries with it the interconnectedness of all living and non-living entities, and is integral to many Indigenous worldviews. In *Our History Is the Future*, Nick Estes, a citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe and professor of American studies, portrays the Standing Rock struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline of recent years as an inheritance of the Oceti Sakowin's long legacy of anti-colonial resistance.<sup>3</sup> Standing Rock is not only the greatest Indigenous-led movement in

1 Numerous L'Internationale projects have influenced our thinking around this book. We are grateful for the inspired work of our colleagues on *CLIMAVORE: Seasons Made to Drift* (an exhibition and public program at SALT, Istanbul, 7 April–24 October 2021); “The New Reaction: Antidotes and Synergies” (a public program at MNCARS, Madrid, 18–20 November 2020); “Considering Monoculture” (a conference organized by M HKA and VAM at deBuren, Brussels, 27–28 April 2020); “Towards a New Eco-Social Imagination: Narratives and Transitions in the Face of the Crisis of Civilization” (a conference at MACBA, Barcelona, March 2020); “Internationalism After the End of Globalisation” (a conference at MSN, Warsaw, 25–26 October 2019); and “Petroleo” (a conference at MACBA, Barcelona, March 2017). We further acknowledge our co-editors and feature editors at L'Internationale Online for their contributions to the publications *Architectural Dissonances* (2021); *Class and Redistribution* (2021); *Degrowth and Progress* (2021); *Austerity and Utopia* (2020); and, *Living with Ghosts: Legacies of Colonialism and Fascism* (2019), each of which contained concepts that grew into this book.

2 Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth* [1972] (New York: Universe Books, 1982).

3 Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso Books, 2019).

4 See also Kyle Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* (2018): 224–42.

5 Achille Mbembe, “The Universal Right to Breathe,” trans. Carolyn Shread, *Critical Inquiry* 47.S2 (2020): 61; doi.org/10.1086/711437. Mbembe's text converses with the writings of Frantz Fanon, who saw breath as a site of colonial violence and a symbol of occupation. For Fanon, breath was simultaneously an indicator of epistemic occupation, “an observed, an occupied breathing” that shaped the “dependency complex” that justified colonization—and the reason to rebel against it. See his *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 55.

North America in the twenty-first century; it is also the continuation of Indigenous peoples' fighting for 500 years to abolish settler colonialism. Estes notes that this extended practice of decolonization poses a prevailing challenge to the profit-driven powers menacing sustained life on the Earth while offering a way out of climate devastation and colonial violence.<sup>4</sup>

\*

Breathing is more than a mere biological need. As **Françoise Vergès** writes in her opening contribution to this book: “making the right to breathe a revolutionary demand means dismantling the racist economy of exhaustion and suffocation.” Drawing a through-line across different temporalities and understandings of breath, Vergès documents the colonial violence exerted on all forms of life—from seven million people dying from air pollution to lives stolen by police and state-sanctioned violence.

Achille Mbembe's recent essay, “The Universal Right to Breathe,” has further influenced our thinking on the “commonality” of breath. For Mbembe, modernity has been characterized by an incessant and “interminable war on life,” whose contemporary scale of deprivation now menaces all.<sup>5</sup> To open with *our* right to breathe is to

open with the conditions of the breathless; to shed light on the correlations between climate change, colonial, and neocolonial ferocity, and structural inequities caused by transecting schemes of repression; and, to magnify the experiences of those facing ecological collapse. Critically engaging with contributions that denounce the constructs and relations between colonial exploitation and climate change, this book witnesses and interrogates these too-often-silenced amplitudes.

**Otobong Nkanga's** work *Whose Crisis is This* (2013) guides us into the spirit of the book. Through the poetic mapping of rooted bodies, through the movement of systemizing entangled land assets, Nkanga's image opens up for many of the matters of the publication: the climate emergency, the extraction and circulation of resources, and sustainability. Four interrelated sections—"Commodification, Energy, and Extraction"; "Land and Food Sovereignty"; "Toxicity and Healing"; and, "Shelters"—situate the practice of artists and thinkers in relation to inherited and contemporary forms of socioenvironmental violence in very different contexts and places. As racialized capitalism cannot be separated from ecological disaster, and as vulnerable communities are forced to endure the worst effects of the climate crises, intersectionality is a vital part of environmentalism and ecological thinking. Postcolonial, decolonial, and critical race studies come together with ecofeminisms and artistic research and practice to advance the claim that, due to the causal role of racialized and gendered hierarchies in these environmental catastrophes, it is necessary to confront the "racial blindness" and gender ignorance of the allegedly universal human subject of climate.<sup>6</sup>

The first section of this book, "Commodification, Energy, and Extraction," examines how colonialism and the West's concept of modernity have given rise to and continues to perpetuate extractivist operations that have always meant profit for a few and devastation for many, resulting in ecological collapse and extreme social and economic inequalities that are inherent to capitalist economic structures. It opens with **Ana Teixeira Pinto's** exploration of concepts including chronopolitics, thermodynamics, conversion, and entropy, wherein the time of modernity is instrumentalized to influence societal behavior, and nature is converted into culture and industry in a human-centered world. **Jaime Vindel** goes back to the nineteenth century to trace the advent of fossil aesthetics as an undercurrent of Western industrial modernity. Examining images, narratives, and cultural projections that served to legitimize and expand colonial systems of dispossession, accumulation, and a productivist understanding of the Earth, Vindel

6 Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

conveys how a nineteenth-century imaginary of endless resources and progress continues to haunt our present and seriously compromises our future as a civilization.

The dependency of European economies on fossil fuels and the geopolitics of energy have been laid bare since Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, most notably in the rise of oil and gas prices and their continued importation from Russia by the same countries that have condemned its atrocious acts. Investigating the dire consequences of this ongoing war, **Svitlana Matviyenko** writes about the weaponization of pollution through nuclear terror, the hazard of decomposing bodies, and explosives that cause the degradation of soils and unleash toxic construction particles into the atmosphere, evidencing pollution as a silent form of territorial occupation with long-term ecological devastation.

Artistic practice is a compelling form of activism in the case of **Daniela Ortiz**, whose work focuses on and denounces the repercussions of European colonialism. Through illustrative storytelling, the series of paintings, *Muqui* (2022), is a manifestation of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist resistance that calls out the exploitation of land and dispossessed populations through the tale of a Muqui gold miner that wreaks vengeance on European oppressors.

In her analysis of neo-extractivism in Latin America since the turn of this century, **Maristella Svampa** discusses eco-territorial struggles and new forms of social movement emerging in the region, within shifting political climates and in response to neoliberal policies that have appropriated and commodified nature and the commons.

In Sweden, the Indigenous Sámi community has been active for over a century trying to protect its way of life and the environment. **May-Britt Öhman** discusses recent struggles of the Sámi in the face of a "green"—or, as she calls it "ungreen"—energy push from the government for large-scale wind power production plants that would cut across ancestral Sámi territory, disrupt the biosystem, and threaten the Sámi culture and livelihood of reindeer herding.

The following section, "Land and Food Sovereignty," addresses the role of land rights and agroecology movements with regards to the possibility of environmental management on a human scale—as opposed to large-scale, intensive monocrop production.

The contributions look at seed conservation, land access, and subsistence farming in localized agricultural and rural communities. In the face of the vast expropriation of land and the destruction of its generative characteristics, collaborations between activists, artists, and thinkers fighting to establish or restore the common governance of resources, such as land, seeds, and food, on the basis of their sustainable use and informed by respect for their more-than-human beneficiaries, have the potential to be transformative.

In “Beyond the Naturalist Phantasmagoria, the Pastures,” **Fernando García-Dory** considers the history of national parks and mountain landscapes. Interested in sustainable forms of rural living, he confronts how such aims have been objectified and effectively undermined in the past—whether for the sake of profit, the quest of the sublime, or the veneration of “the pastoral” by tourism. Against this background, he proposes a new ruralism, a kind of neopeasant movement, and introduces his own Shepherds School as one hopeful example. Harmonizing the interaction between humans, nature, and food systems is the practice of many artists working with seeds, permaculture, and gardening. Their work offers ways to explore how biology and culture mediate how we approach and interrelate with the land, sometimes converting public spaces in an expanded and renewed form of Land art.

Artist, filmmaker, and researcher **Marwa Arsanios** offers a two-part contribution, consisting of an essay and an interview. “A Letter Inside a Letter: How Labor Appears and Disappears” focuses on embodied knowledge, localized subjectivities, and the manifold risks involved when women are denied the possession of land due to religious and patriarchal structures. Here, she draws parallels between issues of land sovereignty in Colombia and Lebanon, linking counterpart struggles that traverse continents. This generates new characteristics for feminism: an a-centric, transnational, and postcolonial movement running at the intersections between race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Arsanios’s subsequent interview with **Samanta Arango Orozco**, an activist and former member of Grupo Semillas [Seed Group] in Colombia, further underscores the need for relationship building in land-based research. Speaking from within the community of rural activists, Orozco shares profound insights in the specifically local political and economic violence. While describing the ongoing territorial displacement and systematic disruption of food security, she also outlines the changes people can achieve when they come and work together. Arsanios employs a specific method of knowledge

7 Forensic Architecture is a multidisciplinary research agency consisting of architects, software developers, filmmakers, journalists, artists, scientists, and lawyers. Founded in 2010 as a research project at Goldsmiths, University of London, the group creates architectural models, films, and 3D renderings which are then used as forensic evidence in exhibitions and legal cases.

8 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

production and authentication employing art historical and feminist discourses through image production in order to map and introduce voices and new analyses.

In an entirely visual sequence, **Munem Wasif** examines the latent traces of British colonialism in contemporary agricultural practices in Bangladesh; in particular, the ongoing production of indigo and jute crops at odds with the (re)instigation of local knowledge and Indigenous farming. Produced collaboratively with the Bangladeshi non-governmental organization UBINIG in 2019, the work places Wasif’s cyanotypes of rice in a visual dialogue with archival photographs and documents from a communal seed bank.

**Nomusa Makhubu** illuminates the intricate connections between food, “histories of power,” and the geopolitics of “land and labor relations” that are exhibited in the moving-image work of Nigerian-born artist Zina Saro-Wiwa (and in the poetry of her father, Ken Saro-Wiwa). For Makhubu, “food in Saro-Wiwa’s work [...] is also about nostalgia, disconnection, detachments, alienation, and estrangement that surfaces in personal narratives and collective histories”—specifically, those of the social imaginary and cultural practices of the people of Ogoniland, in the Niger Delta region where oil exploitation is ongoing.

**Samaneh Moafi** also engages with environmental devastation through the lens of military conflict and her work with the investigative agency Forensic Architecture.<sup>7</sup> She tells a story of toxic clouds that, once mobilized, over different geographies and lengths of time, take possession of the air we breathe: tear gas, used to clear protestors from metropolitan intersections; the petrochemical discharges that suffocate racialized communities; the smoke from illegal forest-clearance fires, herbicides, and chemical fallout.

The subsequent section, “Toxicity and Healing,” probes social and environmental disasters and the racialized surveillance of food and social landscapes across Indigenous territories. As Rob Nixon has problematized in his seminal book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, most environmental degradation happens out of sight, that is, it not only unfolds over long periods of intergenerational time

but also usually lacks the spectacular impact of a sudden disaster.<sup>8</sup> It is in this sense that we must insist and ask: “But out of sight for whom?” By grounding the question in the knowledge and testimonies of communities who are exposed to life within toxic environments, it is possible to begin to untangle the dominant configurations of power and policy that maintain—and too often aim to conceal—the unequal and unjust topographies of contamination—which are nothing else than the truths and legacies of colonization.

An epic poem by **Maria Thereza Alves**—titled “The Umbragiade,” to refer to the shade (*umbra*) of trees, protective against heat and destroyed by colonial settlers—brings forth the voices of members of the AMAAIC (Association of the Movement of Indigenous Agroforestry Agents of the State of Acre) who together protect forested areas of Indigenous lands from environmental violence in Brazil. **Elizabeth A. Povinelli** surveys the Indigenous damage, cultural erasure, and ecological crises that colonialism has wrought in Northern Australia. By focusing on two films by the Karrabing Film Collective (of which she is a founding member), *The Family & the Zombie* (2021) and *Alice Henry and the Chronicle of the Collapse of the Western Plateau* (2023), her text traverses worlds of toxicity, alternating between the contemporary now, in which Karrabing members struggle to preserve their physical and ceremonial connections to ancestral lands, and a future inhabited by ancestral beings living in the aftermath of poisonous capitalism and “white zombies.”

In “Unuy Quita,” we encounter **Cecilia Vicuña**’s liquid universe of scarcity and abundance. On the one hand, water is life, medicine, healing. On the other hand, it can evoke contamination—oftentimes invisibly so. By asking the dirty water of the poem, *who filled you with filth?*, she emphasizes grieving, mournful silence, and death. Liquidity is also present in **Peta Rake** and **Léuli Eshrāghi**’s conversation on their Blue Assembly project which includes excerpts from Eshrāghi’s poetry, dedicated to transoceanic forms of reciprocity, creativity, and care in times of planetary health crisis. In “Against Nature: *Cuy(r)* Ecologies and Biodiverse Affectivities,” **Eduardo Carrera R** considers the work of certain artists and their kinships, in the spirit of Andean ritual. The essay also challenges various binaries, including those of human/nonhuman and queer/natural.

In the increasingly long, hot summers of “Fortress Europe,” the usual functions of some public institutions and administrative buildings in the south of the continent are expanding to serve as “climate shelters”—places where the most vulnerable people go to

alleviate the ravages of heat waves. Museums, due to the climate-controlled conditions necessary for the preservation of the works of art and other objects they conserve, could provide particularly suitable protection to life and health, as well as to heritage. The escalating hostility of the urban contexts in which museums are often found is due not only to high temperatures and drought, but also to the increase in biopolitical control during the pandemic, and to the presence of the extreme right and political fundamentalisms. In addition to air-conditioning, the hospitality and care museums have to offer should surely extend to the fostering of imagination and free thought. If the climate crisis is civilizational, the museum itself is a key artifact of civilization. Hence, the museum must eschew any ambition toward universalizing, salvific policies, avoid any form of protective paternalism, and instead dwell on particularities, centering other possible forms of production, organization, and wealth-redistribution—not only in terms of visibility or “representation,” but also in material, relational, and governance terms.

The contributions in the final section, “Shelters,” show how the care offered by art institutions must transgress the limits assigned to the museum mission—not least since museum holdings are, in many cases, the result of dynamics of violence and dispossession. The section opens with two poetic and provocative voices. **Mônica Hoff** contributes a performative text on the question whether it is actually possible for the art world to decolonize, act with justice, and adequately address ecological collapse while still relying on those Western intellectual tools that have erased other epistemologies and cosmovisions. In a long list of pressing questions Hoff un.masks important structural paradoxes, including: “How to rethink museums without rethinking the structural racism that shaped them and guides their existence?” **Ayesha Hameed**’s poem “songs for petals” reflects on protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act in India, and its prehistories. The poem traverses the ocean, violence, history, and struggle to call for the need of rights and the defense of the living.

**Sebastian Cichocki** and **Jagna Lewandowska** express their concern for the future by confronting the challenges for a situated curatorial practice in the face of planetary disruption. Taking the exhibition *The Penumbra Age: Art in the Time of Planetary Change* (2020) at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw as their case study, they focus on art practices that engage with climate change and forms of solidarity, care, and empathy. Where Hoff proposes the necessity of unlearning and revising long-held assumptions about the power

of cultural work and artistic production, Cichocki and Lewandowska question the extent of climate-change denial by underscoring the need to also un-see, and then see differently, the entire social organization and entitlement that has been normalized in the so-called developed world.

For her part, **Marina Naprushkina** demands a “future for everyone” and is inspired by evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis’s scientific concept of symbiogenesis—the recognition of a radical interdependence and ecological coexistence among diverse organisms. Care without rights is charity, Naprushkina says. But, in sharing her experience of creating an independent artistic space for refugees in Berlin, as a freelance artist and migrant mother, working and “becoming by living together” with others, she shows how care can indeed become an emancipatory practice. This practice can and should challenge the boundaries of the nation state, and will likely transform its participants in the process.

The book ends with “Touching the Earth,” a reprint of a seminal text by the late **bell hooks**. In the process of thinking about and editing this publication, it became impossible to disentangle the discourse on climate and toxic politics from its colonial grounds. The deprivation of nature for capital accumulation is tied to the forced exhaustion and destruction of communities and peoples that belong to the exploited lands. By including this historical text in the collection, we—the editors of *Climate: Our Right to Breathe*—wish to honor hooks’s words that stress the vital connection between living bodies and the Earth:

Such work is unifying, healing. It brings us home from pride and despair and places us responsibly within the human estate. It defines us as we are: not too good to work without our bodies, but too good to work poorly or joylessly or selfishly or alone.

Following the logics inherent to this work, it is possible to reconsider how we relate to the Earth, at every scale.

— **Hiuwai Chu, Meagan Down, Nkule Mabaso, Pablo Martínez, and Corina Oprea**

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*Climate: Our Right to Breathe* continues the L'Internationale tradition of publishing edited readers in the framework of certain research cycles: *Glossary of Common Knowledge* (2018); *The Long 1980s: Constellations of Art, Politics and Identities* (2018); *The Constituent Museum: Constellations of Knowledge, Politics and Mediation* (2018); *What's the Use? – Constellations of Art, History, and Knowledge* (2016); and, *L'Internationale: Post-War Avant-Gardes Between 1957 and 1986* (2012). Moreover, this book has been edited with an eye to the future: it opens the next research phase for the expanding coalition, which will focus on climate-conscious art production. Special care has been afforded in selecting a small-scale, ecologically-aware publishing atelier, K. Verlag. To produce this publication, we have been attentive to the environmental impacts of the format and design, and focused on the use of an FSC-certified paper and reducing paper waste.

**Françoise Vergès** is a Reunionnais theorist, independent curator, antiracist decolonial feminist, with a long life of activism and different jobs. She has written on Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, colonial slavery, colonial psychiatry, anticolonialism, racial capitalocene, decolonial feminism, or the (impossible) decolonization of the museum. In 2015, she cofounded with five other women the non-profit *Decolonize the arts* and the university Decolonizing the Arts (until 2021). She has written films on Maryse Condé and Aimé Césaire (with whom she published *Resolutely Black*). Vergès works with artists and curates workshops and performances with artists and activists of color (the most recent one entitled “Creating Antiracist Feminist Refuges and Sanctuaries” was organized for the 12th Berlin Biennial in August 2022). Recent publications include: *A Feminist Theory of Violence* (2022); *A Decolonial Feminism* (2021); *De la violence coloniale dans l'espace public* (2021); and, *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism* (2020).

# BREATHING: A REVOLUTIONARY ACT

**Françoise Vergès**

## The Right to Breathe

Almost all of the global population (99%) are exposed to air pollution levels that put them at increased risk for diseases including heart disease, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cancer and pneumonia. WHO monitors the exposure levels and health impacts (i.e. deaths, DALYs) of air pollution at the national, regional and global level from ambient (outdoor) and household air pollution.

— World Health Organization, 2022<sup>1</sup>

When I read this information, and when I learned that between six point seven and nine million deaths per year are estimated to be caused by air pollution,<sup>2</sup> I wanted to understand, from a decolonial feminist anti-racist and anti-capitalist position, what such a sustained attack on breathing meant. When I learned that these deaths could be attributed to both indoor and outdoor pollution, which causes cardiovascular diseases as well as cancer; when I learned that air pollution kills far more people each year than Covid-19, and about as many people a year as smoking,<sup>3</sup> I started to look at climate disaster from the focal point of air pollution. That is, the impact of the burning of fossil fuels, industry, and wars and militarization on the air.

Racist and capitalist politics of *unbreathing* reflect Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism as: “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, air pollution produces a

toxic deadly environment in “distinct yet densely connected geographies”<sup>5</sup>—the geographies of poverty, of Indigenous, Black, and non-white communities in the Global North and South.

There is no alternative to unbreathing. If I cannot breathe, I die. The lungs of humans and animals, as well as the “lungs” of forests, plants, and oceans, have long been under assault. Now, across the globe, breathing has become a privilege of class and race. The Global South cannot breathe. The respiratory nature of Covid-19 infection, combined with severe structural inequalities affecting access to healthcare and vaccines, have further exacerbated the crisis of breath that many live within. The consequences of climate disaster contribute to this uninhabitable world. At the time of writing, in April 2022: parts of India and Pakistan reach fifty degrees Celsius, the Philippines suffers the destruction of another strong hurricane season, and floods devastate the Durban region of South Africa.

The economy of extractive exhaustion of bodies and minds is compounded by the economy of suffocation. Exhaustion and suffocation are consubstantial with slavery, colonialism, and capitalism, which mined, and continue to mine, Black and Brown bodies, lands, rivers, and oceans until they have no life energy left. What remains is an uninhabitable and irrespirable world, whose politics of unbreathing deplete its populations, albeit unequally. These are what Dionne Brand has described as “the corpses of the humanist narrative.”<sup>6</sup>

Even before being born, children in the Global South and in poor, Indigenous, Black, and non-white neighborhoods in the Global North are more vulnerable to premature death. Studies have found “air pollution linked to harm to children while they are still in the womb”:

The Southern California Children’s Health study looked at the long-term effects of air pollution on children and teenagers. Tracking 1,759 children who were between ages 10 and 18 from 1993 to 2001, researchers found that those who grew up in more polluted areas face the increased risk of having reduced lung growth, which may never recover to their full capacity.<sup>7</sup>

Children exposed to air pollution in the womb are born with more respiratory disease and less resistance to further respiratory and cardiovascular disease.

The afterlives of slavery and colonialism affect breathing. There is a link between the last words uttered by Eric Garner, when put in a chokehold by an NYC police officer — “I can’t breathe” — words

- 1 World Health Organization, “Air pollution”; [who.int/data/gho/data/themes/theme-details/GHO/air-pollution](https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/theme-details/GHO/air-pollution). DALY is the acronym for “Disability-adjusted life year.”
- 2 Estimated by the World Health Organization and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation’s Global Burden of Disease study, along with a more recent study by *The Lancet Planetary Health* journal. See Max Roser, “Data Review: How many people die from air pollution?”, *Our World in Data* (25 November 2021); [ourworldindata.org/data-review-air-pollution-deaths](https://ourworldindata.org/data-review-air-pollution-deaths); and Richard Fuller, Philip J. Landrigan, et al., “Pollution and health, a progress update,” *The Lancet Planetary Health* (17 May 2022); [thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196\(22\)00090-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196(22)00090-0/fulltext).
- 3 Tyler Cowen, “Air Pollution Kills Far More People Than Covid Ever Will,” *Bloomberg* (10 March 2021); [bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-03-10/air-pollution-kills-far-more-people-than-covid-ever-will](https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-03-10/air-pollution-kills-far-more-people-than-covid-ever-will); “Pollution kills 9 million people a year, new study finds,” *Deutsche Welle* (18 May 2022); [dw.com/en/pollution-kills-9-million-people-a-year-new-study-finds/a-61833303](https://www.dw.com/en/pollution-kills-9-million-people-a-year-new-study-finds/a-61833303).
- 4 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 28.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Dionne Brand, *The Blue Clerk* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), verso 16.3.
- 7 American Lung Association, “Children and Air Pollution”; [lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/who-is-at-risk/children-and-air-pollution](https://www.lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/who-is-at-risk/children-and-air-pollution).

that have since become the resounding slogan of the Black Lives Matter movement—and the sense of this phrase when said in relation to poor air quality caused by indoor and outdoor air pollution, and its concomitant breathlessness.

The politics of unbreathing are historically racist, tied to capitalist industrial growth and environmental degradation. In the nineteenth century, cities in the Global North were heavily polluted—London was known for its contaminated smog—but today, with much industrial production outsourced to China, India, and countries in the Global South, and with these countries’ development, it is Southern/Eastern cities that have dangerously high levels of air pollution. What has become a pressing issue for countries in the North/West, meanwhile, is how to keep externalized pollution from reaching its “clean” areas.

How then do we turn the right to breathe into a struggle that is decolonial, feminist, queer, anti-racist, pro-Indigenous, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and internationalist? The right to breathe is a call for revolutionary action.

## De-Poisoning Practices

Deliberate and long-standing politics of poisoning by states throughout the world—with their economic ties to the arms, cattle, chemical, and

clothes industries, among many others—require us to imagine *de-poisoning* practices, and what these might involve.

What is taken for granted in the Global North or West—running water, electricity, rail travel, open schools and hospitals with staff and medication, cheap fashion, avocados in winter—is the exception rather than the rule. It is a way of life made possible by a regime of exploitation of the many. The “good life” reserved for the few requires, in Christa Wichterich’s words, a “transnational care extractivism,”<sup>8</sup> organized so that women of the Global South compensate for a crisis of care in the Global North (care for children and the elderly, the labor of cleaning and cooking, sex work), while their own needs, and those of their families, are not respected or fulfilled. Lives are wasted for the comfort of a few.

The word “waste” usually refers to rubbish, but it is important to consider the expression “to lay waste.” Histories of slavery and imperialism, leading into colonial capitalism, have laid waste to lands and peoples. The slave trade through which capitalism was built not only destroyed the cultural and natural world of Indigenous peoples and of the continents colonized by European powers, it made some humans disposable. The slave trade laid waste to the African continent, bringing filth, desolation, and death. The slave ship too was a space of filth, feces, blood, and flesh rotted by the shackles of slavery. When a foul stench drifted onto the shore of a colony, people knew that a slave ship was coming in to dock. In this system, race became a code for designating which peoples and landscapes could be wasted.

Today, racial capitalism perpetuates a division between those who have access to clear air and water, to good hygiene, green parks, and well-serviced neighborhoods, and those without access to either healthy living circumstances or adequate healthcare. The prior group experience circumstances that support good health, and so are granted a longer life expectancy, while the latter group are condemned to bad health, susceptibility to disease, and premature death.

High-income countries collectively generate more than a third of the world’s waste, although they only account for sixteen percent of the world’s population.<sup>9</sup> Waste generated by Western imperialism or as a by-product of the consumption of privileged white people ends up being dumped on racialized people, either in impoverished neighborhoods in the North/West, or in the countries of the Global South. In this way, waste treatment is closely aligned with racism against certain communities.

The Israeli settlers who continue to drop garbage on Palestinian soil implicitly understand the relationship between

8 Christa Wichterich, “Who Cares about Healthcare Workers? Care Extractivism and Care Struggles in Germany and India” *Social Change* (March 2020), 50/1: 121–40; journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0049085719901087.

9 Approximately two billion tons of solid waste is produced globally per year. See The World Bank Data Topics, “Trends in Solid Waste Management”; datatopics.worldbank.org/what-a-waste/trends\_in\_solid\_waste\_management.html.

10 Ramzy Baroud, “Water crisis is poisoning Palestine,” *Gulf News* (30 April 2019); gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/water-crisis-is-poisoning-palestine-1.63626108.

11 Doug Weir, “How does war damage the environment?,” *Conflict and Environment Observatory* (4 June 2022); ceobs.org/how-does-war-damage-the-environment.

12 George Black, “The Victims of Agent Orange the US Has Never Acknowledged,” *New York Times* (16 March 2021); nytimes.com/2021/03/16/magazine/laos-agent-orange-vietnam-war.html.

colonization, racism, and polluting a place. With the blockade imposed on Gaza since 2007, the State of Israel leaves untreated sewage to be dumped into the sea and restricts people’s access to water.<sup>10</sup> This also produces a visual culture of contrasting images: here, a dreamy vision of Mediterranean beaches; there, overcrowding and sand as sewage-dump; white Mediterranean vs. Black-Arab Mediterranean. In the racial geopolitics of cleanliness/dirtiness, racialized waste-dumping makes clean homes and public spaces brightly visible, while dirty neighborhoods are buried and forgotten under rubbish. The racist visual culture of clean/dirty perpetuates the idea of a civilized/clean white world vs. an uncivilized/dirty black-and-brown planet.

Another significant level of contamination that should not be forgotten is that caused by imperialism—what armies leave in their wake; the countries and bodies wasted by war, invasion, and colonization. The environmental impact of wars begins long before they do and lingers long after. As the Conflict and Environment Observatory summarizes, military forces consume great quantities of resources: common metals and rare-earth elements, water and hydrocarbons. Military vehicles, aircraft, vessels, buildings, and infrastructure all require energy, and frequently this comes from low-efficiency oil.<sup>11</sup> Military bases and facilities, whether on land or at sea, for testing or training, are highly polluting, and in their environment, cancer and respiratory diseases are common. The deadly contamination of bodies and the environment by military activity is intimately tied to racial capitalism and its uneven effects on life span.<sup>12</sup> The aftermath of military damage persists for generations: one has only to think of the ongoing detriments to health caused by Agent Orange in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Imagining and practicing strategies of *de-poisoning* contributes to the struggle for the right to breathe. *De-poisoning* practices include:

Indigenous struggles for the preservation of forests or against the privatization of rivers; Indian peasants fighting against the construction of dams that damage both the natural and the cultural environment; or people around the world boycotting or protesting against the polluting industries of weapons, fast fashion, agribusiness, and on-demand e-commerce. Making the right to breathe a revolutionary demand means dismantling the racist economy of exhaustion and suffocation. The revolutionary right to breathe means asserting this vital function, which is hindered by capitalism: if we can breathe, we can talk, shout, and sing; we can express, in words, our anger, sadness, or joy. If we can speak, we must be breathing, and so, we must be living. Fighting for the right to breathe, by striving to reduce air pollution, is fighting for the right to a dignified life.

# COMMODIFICATION, ENERGY & EXTRACTION

Fire & Fuel:

Energy & Chronopolitical Allegory

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There Will Be No “Third Earth”:

Colonial Modernity, Fossil Culture & Cosmic Imaginaries

**Jaime Vindel**

Pollution as a Weapon of War

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**Daniela Ortiz**

Twenty-First Century Extractivisms

& Ecopolitical Narratives in Latin America

**Maristella Svampa**

Settler Colonialism in Ungreen, Climate-Unfriendly Disguise

& As a Tool for Genocide

**May-Britt Öhman**

Collective black self-recovery takes place when we begin to renew our relationship to the Earth, when we remember the way of our ancestors. When the Earth is sacred to us, our bodies can also be sacred to us.

## Editors

**Hiuwai Chu** is head of exhibitions at MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, where she has worked since 2007 as assistant curator and curator. She has curated exhibitions such as *Undefined Territories: Perspectives on Colonial Legacies* (2019) and *Akram Zaatar. Against Photography: An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation* (2017). She previously worked as associate editor at Aperture. Chu is on the board of Hangar, a center for research and artistic production in Barcelona, and is a member of the editorial board of L'Internationale Online.

**Meagan Down** is an art historian and editor based in Naarm/Melbourne. From 2016 to 2022, she was managing editor of *Museum under Construction*, a series of publications on exhibitions, artists, and artistic movements published by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. A contributing editor at L'Internationale Online (2018–22), she was a co-editor, with Farah Aksoy and Corina Oprea, of the 2021 ePub *Class and Redistribution*.

**Nkule Mabaso** is a Ph.D. candidate at HDK-Valand in Gothenburg with a research looking at the contribution of women curators and thinkers from the African continent to the discourse on sustainability and ecology. She is the director of the Natal Collective, a research and publishing platform in South Africa. She has authored articles and reviews in *Artthrob*, *Africanah*, and *Field-Journal*. Mabaso works collaboratively and her research interests engage the South Africa and Afro-continental context.

**Pablo Martínez** holds a Ph.D. in art history. He researched the power of images of crowds in the configuration of political subjectivity with a dissertation focused on the funeral of the Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durruti. During the last decade, first in charge of Education and Public Activities at the CA2M, Madrid (2009–16) and as head of programming at the MACBA (2016–21), his institutional work has attempted to challenge the limits of the museum to test and imagine the possibilities of an ecosocial institutionality. Between 2011 and 2015 he was associate lecturer of contemporary art at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

**Corina Oprea** is the managing editor of L'Internationale Online since January 2019, as well as lecturer at HDK-Valand—Academy of Art and Design at the University of Gothenburg. She was artistic director of Konsthall C 2017–18, where she curated a program on decolonization in the North. She holds a Ph.D. from Loughborough University, UK, with the thesis “The End of the Curator: On Curatorial Acts as Collective Production of Knowledge,” and is a member of the curatorial team of Timișoara European Capital of Culture, 2023.

# CLIMATE: Our Right to Breathe

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Editors  
**Hiuwai Chu, Meagan Down, Nkule Mabaso,  
Pablo Martínez, and Corina Oprea**

Project Leader  
**L'Internationale**

Managing Editor L'Internationale Online  
**Corina Oprea**

Consulting Editor  
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English Editing  
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**Miri Davidson**

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**Faye Campbell**

Design & Layout  
**Christophe Clarijs & K. Verlag**

Special credits for initial editorial  
development: **Ida Hiršenfelder,**  
**Germán Labrador Méndez**

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**L'Internationale** comprises seven major European art institutions focused on a non-hierarchical and decentralized internationalism. L'Internationale's program of projects is based on the values of difference and horizontal exchange between constellations of cultural agents, both locally rooted and globally connected. L'Internationale consists in 2018–22 of the following member institutions: Moderna galerija (MG+MSUM, Ljubljana); Museo Reina Sofía (Madrid); Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA, Barcelona); Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA, Antwerp); Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie (Warsaw), SALT (Istanbul and Ankara) and Van Abbemuseum (VAM, Eindhoven). L'Internationale works with complementary partners such as HDK-Valand Academy of Art and Design (Gothenburg) and the National College of Art and Design (NCAD, Dublin).

The confederation initiated **L'Internationale Online** as a platform for research and debate on urgent matters in the expanded field of contemporary art; it is a space where commissioned texts, research, and artistic projects, as well as curated exhibitions drawing on the collections and archives of the member institutions, are commissioned—both in digital form and in print. *CLIMATE: Our Right to Breathe* is published in the framework of the four-year program cycle “Our Many Europes” (2018–22).

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In 2022, we are facing vast, mutually exacerbating planetary conditions: the accelerated collapse of the biosphere under climate change and the increasingly crushing dynamics of toxic politics. The reactionary, divisionary politics driven by ruthless forms of authoritarianism, denialism, nationalism, and other globalized forms of oppression and dispossession are also a call to action.



In *CLIMATE: Our Right to Breathe*, more than twenty-five voices from the arts and culture form an internationalist chorus that emphatically responds to a collective need to imagine common strategies for solidarity when many limits of the Earth system have already been surpassed. Because

racialized capitalism cannot be separated from ecological disaster, vulnerable and often marginalized communities are forced to endure the worst effects of the climate crises. It is imperative to work in solidarity against the uneven violence of these times. Mobilized by diverse practices and backgrounds, the contributions in this book offer both speculative perspectives on and pragmatic relays from the intersectional fight for climate justice and multispecies survivance.

