

Decolonising the COVID-19 pandemic

On being in this together

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At its inception, the COVID-19 pandemic was described as something inherently new, capable of crossing and erasing the economic, racial, gendered, and religious divides that stratify societies around the world. However, the ongoing pandemic is not new or egalitarian, but fuelled by, and fuelling, crises already under way on a global scale. In this article we examine on the one hand the relationship between the pandemic and still-active formations of racialised and gendered power, and on the other the pandemic's inextricability from a dispersed and uneven planetary emergency. As the environmental historian Jason W. Moore notes, this emergency disproportionately affects 'women, people of colour and (neo)colonial populations' (2019: 54), and the effects of COVID-19 are similarly unevenly allocated.

Introduction

In the initial reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a concerted effort to describe it as something inherently new, and capable of crossing, and in the process erasing, the economic, racial, gendered, and religious divides that stratify societies around the world. Arguably, however, the ongoing pandemic is not new or egalitarian, but fuelled by, and fuelling, crises already under way on a global scale. In this article, we examine the relationship on the one hand between the pandemic and still-active formations of racialised and gendered power, and on the other its inextricabil-

ity from a dispersed and uneven planetary emergency. As the environmental historian Jason W. Moore notes, this emergency disproportionately affects 'women, people of colour and (neo)colonial populations' (2019: 54), and the effects of COVID-19, as observed by the international development researcher Jude L. Fernando (2020), are similarly unevenly allocated. For example, data recently released by the United States and United Kingdom exemplify the racialised distribution of coronavirus mortality in the Global North (CDC 2021; ONS 2020), while studies in developmental geography show that the virus's secondary effects are concentrated with particular intensity across formerly colonised regions of the world (Carmody and McCann 2020: 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic thus follows the pattern Paul Farmer identifies as operating across previous global health crises (1996), and the effects of the pandemic reveal how what he terms structural violence is built into the socio-economic relationships constitutive of our contemporary world order. From this perspective, the pandemic provides even more evidence that capitalism is a multiscalar system of 'uneven and combined development' (Trotsky 1967/1923–33; Deckard *et*

al. 2015), in which the wealth and security of certain regions depend on the impoverishment and precarity of others. Over the five centuries during which capitalism has dominated transnational relationships, this dynamic has operated through colonial expansion and patriarchal oppression, so that (ongoing) inequality cuts along axes of racialised and gendered power. In the context of COVID-19, and of earlier health crises, this means that those already disenfranchised by the system will pay the highest price both in terms of infection and mortality rates, and in terms of secondary economic suffering.¹ Viewed in this way, the COVID-19 pandemic, despite its far-reaching and profound consequences, appears less like a novel experience to the global community and more like business as usual under conditions of global capitalism. Indeed, so far, the pandemic has progressed much like any other epidemic, following the mores established by a white, capitalist, and patriarchal world order. The structural violence it energises thus appears to set it apart from Ebola or the swine flu pandemic of 2009 only by virtue of its tremendous scale.

And yet, while the COVID-19 pandemic is essentially similar to many of the global (health) crises that have preceded it, it is also importantly different, and not only because of its global spread. As we will outline in more detail below, COVID-19 can be understood, along with other crises unfolding in the earth's biosphere, as evidence that the extractive and exploitative processes through which capitalism works

are currently failing, and that – unlike in earlier moments of capitalist crisis – there is today no possibility of durably recuperating them (Moore 2015). Taking the point, made by Moore and others, that climate change is capitalogenic (rather than anthropogenic), Fernando understands the COVID-19 pandemic as a powerful indicator that the planet has entered what he terms the Virocene: *'a distinct epoch that demands fundamentally rethinking the relationship between humanity and nature at the global level'* (Fernando 2020: 637, italics in the original). Understood as the harbinger of this epoch, COVID-19 is not just terrible evidence of pervasive, uneven, and combined structural violence, but also an event produced by extractive capitalism at a point in history when the planet is approaching a state of exhaustion.

With this in mind, we highlight in this article how the structural violence that characterises global society, especially during moments of crisis, is connected to a material history that has treated not just people, but land and all multispecies life as a plunderable resource. We thus seek to draw attention to how racialising and gendering discourses are inseparable from those which objectify extra-human nature, and to how these narratives – hegemonised and mobilised within global formations of power – license the treatment of certain lives and environments as exploitable or expendable, and so produce in turn material states of socio-ecological degradation and vulnerability. Joining with current conversations in – among others – postcolonial studies and political ecology, we address COVID-19 in the context of these socio-ecological inequalities, drawing on accounts of planetary emergency that take the 'Capitalocene' as the paradigm for analysis (Malm and Hornborg 2014; Moore 2015, 2016, 2019). Neglecting the

1 As noted also by mainstream media, while the COVID-19 pandemic shut people out of jobs and produced global poverty of a scale not seen during this millennium, the world's richest people increased their fortunes by trillions of dollars (Neate 2020).

intertwining material histories of colonial, patriarchal and environmental exploitation out of which the pandemic erupts makes it impossible to resolve both the COVID-19 crisis and the others with which it is linked. We thus argue that the attempt to erase the pandemic and the entangled crises it has accelerated, but not spawned, can only be successful if the racialised and gendered socio-ecological relationships that underpin both economic precarity and the climate emergency are addressed. In postcolonial and decolonial parlance, such an effort is termed *decolonisation*. This involves the dismantling of the Eurocentric command of land itself, but equally of Eurocentric ways of knowing and understanding the world.

The myth of equal vulnerability

When the new coronavirus – SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 – attained pandemic proportions in the first half of 2020, the initial reaction from media and scholarship included attempts to portray the virus as a leveller of racial, gendered, and economic divides. Across the drawing of a rainbow taped to the inside of a window at the prime minister's residence, 10 Downing Street in London, the words 'we are in this together' were written (Dettmer 2020). The journalist Johanna Ross argued in April of 2020 that coronavirus 'is indiscriminate' (Ross 2020), and in an editorial of the journal *Business & Society* published in July 2020, Hari Bapuji and his co-authors claimed that 'susceptibility to the virus reveals how equal we are, despite the differences in our age, education, wealth, and many other characteristics. The virus does not spare anyone who comes in contact with it. While the effects of the virus may vary, what appears fairly certain is that individuals are equally vulnerable' (Bapuji *et al.* 2020: 1068). This understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic

not only misrepresents the actual effects of the virus on different human bodies, it also ignores the crises it is energising.² As the virus has continued to spread, and as societies and economies shut down, it has become clear that while the virus can indeed infect most bodies, the exposure to and outcome of infection are conditioned by underlying inequalities. Furthermore, various attempts to manage the virus are affecting different communities across the world in drastically different ways. While people belonging to affluent societies in the Global North have received state-of-the-art medical treatments from the beginning of the pandemic, and as governments in this region began bailing out businesses and private economies, people living precarious lives across the multiscalar soci-

- 2 By the summer of 2020, it was already clear that the elderly were much more severely affected by the virus than young people, and that the fatality rate was higher among men and among people with pre-existing medical conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and obesity. The virus was also spreading much more rapidly in the Global North, in Europe and the US, than in postcolonial parts of the world such as Africa, India, or Asia. This development seemed to suggest that the people who suffered the most from the virus were those in the Global North who had built the existing and unequal system that we interrogate in this article, but these are also the people with the most substantial economic and medical resources, and they are the first to get inoculated now that vaccines capable of preventing illness have been developed. Now (summer of 2021) that new variants of the virus are spreading in Africa and Asia, and when statistics show that South American states have, so far, been the most severely affected (Costa *et al.* 2021), it is becoming clear that the most economically vulnerable are also the people most severely affected by both the pandemic and its secondary effects.

eties of the planet struggled to mobilise against the health and – particularly – the economic consequences of the pandemic (Carmody and McCann 2020: 1–2).³ Oxfam warned in early 2020 that the pandemic may push 500 million people into poverty (Oxfam 2020), and the UN World Food Programme concluded that the number of people at risk of starvation might double during 2020 (FSIN 2020).

There is a disconcerting and undeniable gendered and racial element to this glaring disparity. Emerging research on the pandemic shows that women and children, who may be more resistant to the virus, are considerably more vulnerable than men to the associated economic and environmental crises. With less control over their economic situation, and a more tenuous hold on the labour market and on housing, women are the first to suffer from the ongoing economic depression (Madgavkar *et al.* 2020). Women also experience more psychological and work-related stress at home (Gausman and Langer 2020) and during lockdowns women and children are more frequently the victims of domestic and sexual violence

3 As described by *The New York Times*, several African countries possessed no ventilators at all at the beginning of 2020 (Stein *et al.* 2020) and the strategies for keeping away from the virus – home confinement, regular washing, the application of hand sanitizer, and so on, remain impossible in many regions of the Global South, where homes are crowded and shared, where there is no running water, and where people do not have health insurance or unemployment benefits that make it possible to pay day-to-day costs while staying home from work.



Sign in Cape Town, South Africa, calling on people to stay home, but also recognising that this may not be an option for everyone.

(Roesch *et al.* 2020). While there are sizeable communities of poor, white people in Europe and the United States, most of those living in poverty and risking starvation (both before and during the pandemic) belong to marginalised ethnicities. Rather than triggering attempts to bridge the economic and health gap that separates these communities, this racial disparity has energised racism globally. Research thus notes a disturbing rise in xenophobia (Devakumar *et al.* 2020), termed by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres a ‘tsunami of hate’ (Guterres 2020), following in the wake of the virus.

Towards the end of this article, we will consider how movements for racial justice such as #BlackLivesMatter offer powerful critiques of, and correctives to, radically oversimplifying and widely disseminated accounts of COVID-19 which tap into the logic of prejudice and discrimination. For now, it is important to note that endemic disparities in how the pandemic is lived in different parts of the world by people of different ethnicities, ages, and genders cast

the notion that ‘we’ are in this together in a very different light. The concept of a universal ‘we’ promoted by politicians, media and some scholarship in the Global North rhetorically erases first the existence of what Farmer has termed ‘structural violence’ (1996, 2004) in health care, and then the millions of people who are subjected to such structural violence on a daily basis. In other words, the same economic divides that structure societies on both global and local scales, and the same institutionalised racism and sexism that determine the quality of people’s social lives, also regulate their access to health care, in particular during crises when health resources are scarce.

With this in mind, observing that its effects are dispersed and uneven is just a first step towards attempting to understand the COVID-19 pandemic. To manage this global crisis, it is necessary to recognise the economic, political, social, and cultural forces out of which this drastic, uneven dispersion has arisen, as well as these forces’ role in exerting structural violence across the planet. However, in doing so, it is also essential to note that the COVID-19 pandemic itself is not simply an inevitable natural event affecting the poor more harshly than other social groups; it is the global and devastating effect of a fundamentally unsustainable and extractive relationship to the planet and to the various species that inhabit it. In other words, the pandemic must be understood as a feature of the Capitalocene. The concept of the Capitalocene is important in no small part because it makes space for a more nuanced and productive sense of solidarity and togetherness than is allowed by the myth of an equal susceptibility to the virus. The Capitalocene provides a picture of the global present in which the connections between disparate forms of social and environmental oppression become

visible (a point on which we will elaborate in a moment). It thus makes possible ‘the work of coalition-building’, as this has recently and influentially been theorised by Emma Dabiri (2021: 26). Different from the concept of ‘allyship’ currently circulating through activist and public discourse, coalition-building is a strategy for social and environmental justice that, ‘by linking our struggles together’ produces ‘a vision wherein many people can see their interests identified and come together for a common good’ (pp. 25–6). As Dabiri emphasises, such work is especially crucial at a moment where conversations around social action – particularly in the context of social media – tend increasingly to operate in lexica that inadvertently reify and entrench the categories of identity constructed to serve the needs of capital accumulation (p. 14). We will return to Dabiri’s illuminating analysis in due course. In what follows directly below, we join with the premise of her argument, and suggest that to understand, and to seek to resolve, the COVID-19 crisis in all its dimensions, the pandemic must be positioned within a long and capitalist history where marginal peoples and non-human multispecies life forms have been perceived and treated as extractable and plunderable resources.

The climate emergency and COVID-19

Scholars across the environmental sciences and humanities have highlighted the pandemic’s inseparability from the unfolding planetary emergency. The appearance of COVID-19 can be understood, along with – for example – rising temperatures and sea levels (and their effects), as one element in the wider transformation of the earth’s biosphere. This transformation is not accidental, but results from the ongoing intervention of (certain) humans. As David Selby and Fumiyo Kagawa write,

‘Unrelenting urbanization, mining, logging, development of transport infrastructure and “slash and burn” agricultural expansion ... have the effect of corraling wildlife into ever-closer proximity to human communities’, and this ‘facilitates the transmission of pathogens from wildlife’ (Selby and Kagawa 2020: 18). The emergence of the new coronavirus from a ‘wet market’ in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019 precisely exemplifies this form of ‘zoonotic spillover’ (Malm 2020: ch. 1). The contagion originated in bats and jumped to humans via another species (pangolins are one possible candidate). What underlies these developments, Andreas Malm shows, is large-scale deforestation enacted across South-east Asia by multinational companies. The ensuing loss of biodiversity counteracts the ‘dilution’ of pathogens across species, with the effect that they are channelled directly towards humans. ‘It is unrestrained capital accumulation that so violently shakes the tree where bats and other animals live’, Malm summarises: ‘Out falls a drizzle of viruses’ (2020: ch. 1).

This point – that COVID-19 should be understood as a consequence of capitalist development – represents a specific permutation of a wider argument, made by Malm and others (Malm and Hornborg 2014; Moore 2015, 2016, 2019), which posits that we are living in the Capitalocene: the age in which capital is the major force shaping the earth’s systems. Such a perspective contests the now widely held conclusion that current transformations to the biosphere indicate our entrance into the Anthropocene, in which the activity of humans generally has become a geological agent. For Jason W. Moore, a key issue with this latter interpretation lies in what he terms its ‘consequentialist bias’ (2016: 82): a focus on the nature of current planetary shifts, which comes at the expense of rigorous analysis of the processes

that have actually produced these changes.

The Anthropocene makes for an easy story. Easy, because it does not challenge the naturalised inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production ... It reduces the mosaic of human activity in the web of life to an abstract, homogenous humanity. It removes commodification, imperialism, patriarchy, and much more from the problem of humanity-in-nature. (Moore 2016: 82)

Generalising and ahistorical, the blanket category of the Anthropos is thus a blunt conceptual tool for understanding the provenance of the current emergency. Like the early response to the pandemic, it proposes that we are all in this together, on equal terms. It thus downplays the reality of how the crisis is unfolding in ways that render certain people, types of non-human life, and regions disproportionately vulnerable. If the Anthropocene account acknowledges these inequalities at all, it does so – in Moore’s words – as ‘after-the-fact supplements’, rather than causal indicators (Moore 2016: 82).

More disturbingly still, Vishwas Satgar notes that ‘an Anthropocene-centred approach affirms a neo-Malthusian racism in relation to the climate crisis’ (2018: 48). In other words, the assumption that culpability is evenly distributed across all of humanity opens room for arguments that hinge on the concept of overpopulation, and concomitantly for a sinister emphasis on population control. Approaches of this kind, as Satgar points out, inevitably blame ‘the most populous [developing] countries ... for the climate crisis ... while failing to appreciate the disproportionate

impacts on particularly [the] black working-class' (p. 49). Significantly, Rob Wallace and his co-authors have identified a similarly Malthusian logic at work in early, *laissez-faire* responses to the coronavirus that called for 'herd immunity' (Wallace *et al.* 2020: 4). The racialisation of mortality that has become clear in the wake of this concept's widespread disappearance from official pandemic strategy seems to confirm Satgar's point, revealing who specifically would have been sacrificed in the name of its intended demographic outcome. Herd immunity thus exemplifies how the assumption that 'we're all in this together' obscures the situation in which racialised socio-economic inequalities shape the pandemic's effects across a given population. At the same time, the manipulation of this discourse in the initial phase of the pandemic also exposes how the notion of equal susceptibility to the virus actually implies a participation in the *production* of uneven vulnerability: to the extent that herd-immunity discourse can be understood as an effort to prioritise 'business as usual' – to limit pandemic-specific expansions to national health infrastructure, to ensure the continued operation of production and consumption – such narratives can be read as one prop in the arsenal of an economic system that depends on the expendability of certain lives.

Race, gender, and nature in the world-ecology

In contrast to the narrative of anthropogenesis, the Capitalocene analysis – especially as this is articulated by Moore – begins by acknowledging the uneven allocation of socio-ecological vulnerability along intersecting axes of race, class, gender, and (global) geography. Moore argues that these inequities are the effect of the fundamental alliance between the system of cap-

ital accumulation, which – since the sixteenth century – has linked regions of the globe together through relations of production and consumption, and the Eurocentric epistemic tradition consolidated during the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment (Moore 2015: ch. 1). Racism, heteropatriarchy and the objectification of the extra-human biosphere are, in this account, hard-wired into the logic of capital. Rather than supplementary after-effects, such ideological constructs have served to make the world legible accumulation, and are in this way the precondition for its successful operation.

To understand Moore's intervention, it is helpful to position his account of capital as a 'world-ecology' in relation (2015: ch. 1), on the one hand, to Immanuel Wallerstein's formative analysis of the capitalist world-system (1974), and on the other to what Anibal Quijano calls the 'coloniality of power' (2000: 533). For Wallerstein, the origins of the modern world-economy lie in the long sixteenth century, with European expansion into the Americas. During this period, colonising Europeans extracted the fruits both of New World lands, and of a colonised and enslaved workforce, and channelled these back to Western Europe, thus facilitating the development, further expansion and rise to global hegemony of this region. This trans-oceanic relationship inaugurated the capitalist world-system as a capitalist economy – the same world-system in which we still live. As Wallerstein writes, 'it is a "world" system not because it encompasses the whole world, but because it is larger than any juridically-defined political unit. And it is a world-economy because the basic linkage between the parts of the system are economic' (1974: 15).

Though its regional variables shift, the form of economic linkage exemplified by Europe's early relationship with the New

World is replicated across the history of the world-system, which – into the present – is unified around ‘the division of labour which is constituted within it’ (Wallerstein 2004: 23). Importantly, however, that initial connection exemplifies with particular clarity the violent inequality which has been built into the global connective tissue: the surplus carried back to Europe from the early American colonies is the direct effect of indigenous genocide, dispossession, displacement, and indenture, and of the enslavement of millions of African people. As Moore puts it, referring to Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation, this scenario demonstrates how capital operates by keeping the majority of its costs ‘off the books’ (2016: 92).

Also discussing unequal exchange in the early world-system, Quijano influentially argues that what validates the colonial theft of indigenous lands and the exploitation and murder of indigenous and captive African peoples is the invention of racial categories – grounded in pre-existing, hetero-patriarchal accounts of gender – to designate a supposedly biological inferiority. ‘The idea of race, in its modern meaning, does not have a known history before the colonization of America’, he writes; ‘race was a way of granting legitimacy to the relations of domination imposed by conquest’ (Quijano 2000: 535). Quijano’s point is that, because racialising discourses co-develop with and are necessitated by transnational relations of capitalist accumulation from the outset, race and gender are woven into the fabric of the capitalist world-system, which to generate surplus capital always requires the existence of an exploitable or expendable population. To conceptualise this inextricability, he offers the term ‘coloniality of power’ (p. 533): unlike formal colonialism, which concludes in the mid-twentieth century, coloniality refers to the

racial principle that is baked into the logic of capital, and has – since the instantiating division of labour – served to identify lives that might be harnessed for little or no cost, or (to adapt Foucault’s biopolitical formulation) might be exposed to death in the interests of profit.

In his delineation of the Capitalocene, Moore expands the zone of exploitation and expendability on which the world-system depends to include both the *work* of (certain) humans and the *energy* of the extra-human biosphere (Moore 2016: 92). Capital is thus not only a way of organising uneven *social* relationships on a global scale, but more properly ‘a way of organizing nature’ (p. 85), where ‘nature’ includes human activity. The world-economy is thus, for Moore, a ‘world-ecology’ (p. 85), and this analysis brings the coloniality of power to bear on extra-human territory. Like Quijano, Moore identifies a structural association between Eurocentric knowledge and the operation of capital; he emphasises, however, that the categories of race and gender which are imposed to legitimise the exploitation of certain lives share an epistemic root with the concept of nature as a resource to be exhausted. The capitalist world-ecology thus relies on an operative division between nature and humanity where most human beings were ‘either excluded from Humanity – indigenous Americans, for example – or were designated as only partly Human, as were virtually all European women’ (p. 87). A similar thought is articulated at length by Sylvia Wynter (2003), who argues that the invention of race in the Americas provides the subject-object model which grounds the physical and biological sciences. Moore’s point is that if racial categories serve to construct certain people as less than human, then these discourses also postulate a domain outside ‘Humanity’

proper. This domain, he argues, is extra-human nature, and its positioning beyond the realm of society serves – like imposed racial and gendered identities – to validate its appropriation by capital. From the perspective of capital, writes Moore, nature is always ‘Cheap Nature’ (2016: 81): a (human) resource to be exhausted for the ends of profit. Thus, he summarises, ‘the binary nature/society is directly implicated in the colossal violence, inequality and oppression of the modern world; and the view of Nature as external is a fundamental condition of capital accumulation’ (2015: ch. 1).

By tracing the logic of coloniality that is woven into transnational socio-ecological relationships, Moore’s Capitalocene argument explains the uneven distribution of biospheric (including pathogenic) transformation in the current moment of accelerating planetary crisis. As it does this, his account also persistently emphasises how, when they are allied to power, ideas produce and maintain the material organisation of the world. Central to his approach, Moore writes, is ‘highlighting the *real historical power* of ontological and epistemic dualisms. Nature may be a violent abstraction – a concept in which essential relations are abstracted from the reality in question – but it is also a real abstraction, an operative force in the world’ (2015: ch. 1, italics in the original). As we have noted, popular framings of the COVID-19 pandemic as the great leveller precisely abstract from the uneven reality of the virus’s effects, positing a universal human subject that is everywhere equally vulnerable. Given the provenance of such discourses in seats of governmental power, and their circulation in the global media, Moore’s point should give us pause to think. If the binary of human and nature enables exploitative capitalist relations by obscuring a reality in

which race, gender, and nature are discursively produced, then discourses of equal susceptibility – which themselves depend on a suspiciously unitary and dislocated vision of humanity – might serve a similar function. Again, by concealing the gendered and racialised distribution of vulnerability in the pandemic, the notion that ‘we’re all in this together’ diverts attention away from the economic/ecological system that produces such inequities, and in this way facilitates its continual operation.

Coloniality and contagion: ‘strategies of containment’

The historical relationship between coloniality and contagion reaches back to the earliest phase of the modern world-ecology, where it is represented – infamously – by the Columbian Exchange. The term refers to the period during which Europeans first arrived in the Americas, bringing with them a range of pathogens against which indigenous populations had no prior immunological defence. ‘The list of infectious diseases that spread from the Old World to the New is long’ write Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian; ‘the major killers include smallpox, measles, whooping cough, chicken pox, bubonic plague, typhus and malaria’ (2010: 165). Estimated mortality during the first century of colonial occupation lies at around 80–95 per cent of Native American people in the region (*ibid.*), or up to 56 million deaths by the time these pathogens had reached across the entire continent (Koch *et al.* 2019). The resulting extreme depopulation exemplifies how the treatment of human and extra-human nature as a resource to be appropriated for (colonial) capital triggers the kind of unruly pathogenic shifts that Malm describes above with respect to the new coronavirus. At the same time, the colonial response to this situation, which frustrated efforts to coer-



Day labourers in Cameroon on their way to the fields in January 2021. These are people living in such precarious circumstances that they cannot adapt the strategies of isolation used to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

cively produce an indigenous workforce, shows how a racialised logic of Human and nature is summoned in a new permutation to recuperate the interests of capital: the transatlantic slave trade, which flourished between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, can be understood – as Nunn and Qian note – as Europe’s solution to the shortage of cheap labour in the American colonies (2010: 164).

Though they no longer operate in the language of bare-faced racism or patriarchy, more recent discursive framings of epidemic illness nonetheless remain legible as analogous efforts to sustain existing socio-ecological relations. In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson’s formative analysis of narrative and capitalist production, the author offers a reading of ideologies as ‘strategies of containment’ (2002/1981: 37). This formulation – especially suggestive in the pandemic context – designates a naturalising discourse, which imaginatively ‘solves’ moments of crisis by suppressing their origin in capitalist relations. The

thought sheds particular light on public-health responses to contagion emergencies, in which these are symbolically ‘contained’ through representation in narratives that strategically omit how historical violences shape the effects of illness on a population.

Many examples illustrate this, including Simukai Chigudu’s recent study of Zimbabwe’s catastrophic 2008 cholera outbreak. Chigudu shows how the built environment of Harare – a city that still retains much of its colonial infrastructure – facilitated the illness in reaching epidemic proportions:

[H]istorically produced segregation in the name of creating urban order resulted in profound social inequality and laid down the underlying physical conditions in the high-density townships – namely poor sanitation facilities, inadequate clean water provision and other public amenities, and overcrowded housing – for the potential spread of an epidemic in these parts of

the city. Such conditions can be traced as far back as the late nineteenth century, when Harare was founded as a colonial administrative centre. (Chigudu 2020: 38)

It is significant, in light of this history of inequality, that state responses to the potential return of cholera in the region highlight the personal responsibility of Zimbabwean citizens. According to one minister cited by Chigudu, the issue lies ‘in a general lack of cleanliness throughout the whole country’ (2020: 36), and not in an urban environment built by colonial agents on the assumption that certain, racialised lives are less valuable than others. The material conditions driving the epidemic disappear from view in this account, with the effect that these origins remain unaddressed at the same time as historical inequities are tacitly reaffirmed – thus the conditions are allowed to persist.

Ideological containment thus directly undermines the possibility of containment in a pathogenic sense and – troublingly – the same tension is visible in widely circulated narrative framings of COVID-19, of which the notion of equal susceptibility is one iteration. Examples can be drawn from both the northern and southern hemispheres, despite the different experiences of the pandemic across these geopolitical domains. In their analysis of the coronavirus crisis in the so-called ‘developing’ world, Pádraig Carmody and Gerard McCann note that, for these regions, pandemic management strategies are having an especially disastrous effect. In the Global South, the authors write, ‘lockdowns were put in place quickly, with often severe livelihood consequences given high levels of dependence on the informal sector for survival, and the general absence of widespread health, social security and public policy assistance

measures’ (Carmody and McCann 2020: 1). Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni has identified how state responses to coronavirus in Africa specifically are characterised by a problematic tendency to look northwards (2020: 370), which results in strategies that – though ostensibly universally applicable – are designed on the assumption that certain resources and infrastructure are in place. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni writes, the imposition of ‘lockdowns has hit hard on “the [African] political economy of everyday life”, which cannot survive even one day of disruption’ (p. 380). The devastating consequences of such policies for the majority of people across the continent attest, precisely, to the state mobilisation of a strategy that is grounded in the assumption of universal susceptibility: in a narrative of the pandemic that suppresses how historical realities condition the coronavirus crisis in ways that disproportionately affect certain populations. To make this critique is not – importantly – to affirm the position, often articulated from a quasi-libertarian perspective, that lockdowns amount to an arbitrary curbing of individual freedoms. Rather the thought here is that the forced arrest of economic activity in those parts of the world that lack any meaningful form of social safety net requires measures in tandem to address these underlying states of insecurity. The notion of equal vulnerability appears, thus, to be built into the lockdown as the Northern model of pandemic control, and indeed, even across the world’s affluent nations similar interventions have exposed the profound socio-economic precarity in which whole sections of the population live.

In their analysis of structural racism and COVID-19 in North America, Leonard E. Egede and Rebekah J. Walker emphasise how the racialisation of poverty – a historical situation with its roots

in the slave economy – directly underpins the racialisation of mortality in the context of the pandemic. The article notes that ‘increased exposure to COVID-19 among Black Americans is attributable to greater representation in service occupations and a greater likelihood of living in inner cities with high population density’ (Egede and Walker 2020: 2). As well as this reality, which connects to debates around the forms of high-risk but low-paid work that have emerged as ‘essential’ in the context of the pandemic, the authors also point out that ‘the history of inner cities has left Black Americans with fewer economic and educational opportunities ... [and] has exposed them to social risks associated with more severe negative [coronavirus] effects’ (p. 2). These range from a lack of health insurance, which deters people from seeking medical care, to a ‘lack of trust in the healthcare system owing to a history of mistreatment’ (p. 3).

Addressing how this racialised precarity is (mis)represented in public pandemic discourses in the United States, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva identifies a tendency towards what he calls ‘colour blind racism’, which ‘explain[s] racial matters as the outcomes of nonracial dynamics’ (2020: 1). Bonilla-Silva notes how the characterisation of essential workers as ‘heroes’ underplays the fact that such roles are disproportionately performed by people of colour (p. 3); how a focus on charity to address rising food insecurity obscures the racialisation of hunger in so-called ordinary times (p. 4); and how an emphasis on the high incidence of co-morbidities among minority ethnic groups biologises racial difference, thus concealing the fact that such co-morbidities are themselves structurally connected to socio-economic/ecological precarity (pp. 4–5). Together, these discourses serve, Bonilla-Silva argues, to reinforce

‘the idea that “we are all in this together”’ (p. 1): ‘the colour-blind racial framing of these issues limits recognizing that the problems made apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic have a structural nature’ (p. 2). The point here is that, like the examples from Africa cited above, the narrative of equal susceptibility in North America functions as a containment strategy, severing the outcomes of the coronavirus from their roots in systemic unevenness that has been cultivated in racialised, gendered, and ecocidal terms over a long and violent history. Rather than facilitating effective material strategies of pathogenic containment, these discourses thus only serve to sustain the socio-ecological relationships out of which ‘zoonotic spill-over’ emerges.

Conclusion

Over the course of our discussion here we have shown that the emergence of the new coronavirus can be understood as one element in the wider transformation of the earth’s biosphere, which constitutes the currently unfolding planetary emergency. This transformation and this emergency need to be considered as an effect of colonial and capitalist processes of human and extra-human exploitation that have always been at the centre of postcolonial studies. These processes, in turn, have relied – since the inauguration of the world-economy/world-ecology – on the assumption that ‘Nature’ is an object, and that certain lives are exploitable/expendable because they fall into this category that lies beyond the borders of ‘Humanity’ proper. The uneven distribution of the pandemic’s effects has rendered the persistence of this racialised and gendered logic peculiarly visible, attesting to the coloniality of power that operates across multiple scales in the millennial present. At the same time, however, the pandemic is also exposing the

unsustainability of capital's 'cheap nature' strategy: the extent to which the virus has arrested global economic relations reveals how capitalist interventions trigger unruly socio-ecological shifts, which accumulate to ultimately hamper the extraction of work/energy from the biosphere. As Moore puts it, 'today ... it is increasingly difficult to get nature – including human nature – to yield its "free gifts" on the cheap' (2015: ch. 1). If the effort to extract resources cheaply continues, pandemics – and their threat to capital's 'business as usual' – will become increasingly common. It is for these reasons that Fernando suggests we are entering the 'Virocene', a geohistorical moment that can also be understood, in Moore's terminology, as marking the Capitalocene's phase of 'terminal crisis'.

This faltering of capitalist relations should not be confused with the end of capitalist violence. The world-ecology's ideological infrastructure has historically proved remarkably adaptable in moments of crisis, as we have pointed out in relation to the Columbian Exchange, when colonizers made up for the shortage of labour-capable bodies in America by importing and enslaving people from Africa. Indeed, the containment narratives we have outlined above precisely work to stabilise existing socio-ecological structures, obscuring the way in which historical processes of racialised, gendered, and ecocidal exploitation determine how the pandemic is unfolding.

It is important to note, too, however, that the extraordinary moment through which we are living has also witnessed a remarkable upsurge of social action around racial justice in particular, and that this may in part be due to the renewed visibility of inequity in the pandemic context. #BlackLivesMatter, has gained global momentum since the killing of George Floyd by members of the Minneapolis

law enforcement in May 2020. As it has brought police violence to the forefront of political conversations around the world, this movement has also, as Bonilla-Silva points out (2020: 8), introduced the concept of structural racism into high-profile media debates, prompting public questions about the drivers of ongoing racialised inequality both in and beyond the context of COVID-19. Unlike framings of the pandemic that depend on equal susceptibility, these accounts place racial and gendered economic/ecological precarity front and centre, and it is crucial, as Dabiri argues, that this 'intersectionality of *issues*' remains squarely in view (2021: 25 emphasis in original). Addressing the upsurge of 'allyship' discourses around the #BlackLivesMatter protests in 2020, Dabiri cautions that 'much of th[is] present "anti-racist" conversation is ahistorical and ... generally devoid of ... class or capitalism' (p. 5). The result is a politics which, as she puts it, tends to 'obstruct ... the identification of affinities and points of shared interest that exist beyond categories that were invented to divide us, invented in order to more effectively oppress us' (p. 13). By contrast, she calls for analyses that recognise how categories of race, gender, and nature have been pressed into the service of capital:

The same forces that have a disregard for black life ... [and] the lives of women, are the same forces who disregard the life of the Earth itself; individuals who see themselves set apart from other people, who imagine themselves disconnected from the natural world ... [and] who see the destruction and degradation of life as a fair exchange for ... the pursuit of wealth. (Dabiri 2021: 7–8)

Attending to insights such as this one, and to similar interventions from across the formerly colonised world, is crucial at the present juncture. Any attempt to decolonise the pandemic, or address it in any useful way, must first recognise that it is not over, especially not in the Global South. While affluent nations are preparing to vaccinate people two times per year for the foreseeable future (Sullivan and Subbarao 2021), in order to manage mutated strains of the virus, the vaccination effort in the Global South has only just begun at the time of writing. Already, critics are identifying what has been called a ‘vaccine apartheid’ (Thier 2021) – another permutation of pandemic coloniality – which is appearing even as the new variants are confirming that no one nation can be considered safe until the coronavirus crisis has been addressed on a transnational scale. Similarly, the economic, political, racial, and gender crises that the virus is accelerating will destroy far more lives, livelihoods, families, schools, and futures in the Global South than in the Global North.

The message, then, is clear: ‘we’ are not all in this together. However, this does not mean that solidarities cannot be forged across the inequalities that COVID-19 has highlighted and intensified. Throughout our discussion here we have shown how, when they are contextualised in the Capitalocene, the links between disparate forms of social and environmental exploitation and oppression become newly visible. In this way, the notion of the Capitalocene provides a perspective from which it is possible to identify shared interests, and thus establish the kinds of coalitions for which Dabiri calls, and which cut across entrenched and artificial discursive boundaries. Rather than suppressing the origins of unfolding crises, such a form of togetherness would be grounded

in recognising how and coloniality produce socio-ecological inequalities, and – beginning by naming the system – would lay the groundwork for meaningful strategies of resistance and redress. ■

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