

Toxic Goodness I
Discussant Remarks
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The organizers of this series of panels have invited us to ruminate on the problems of solutions to toxicity, the dark side of technologies that claim to be for the "greater good" but whose "goodness," as they put it "is largely built on toxic colonial and capitalist foundations that are rendered invisible through sustainability discourse."

This 'toxic goodness' is in evidence in each of the papers: Emma Schroeder introduces us (me) to the Appropriate Technology movement of the mid 20th century, where, as she says (in one sparkling gem of a sentence), "The promise of ecological technologies carried with it the colonality of white domesticity." Katie Ulrich puts us in touch with the materiality of sugarcane in Brazil and Louisiana, that signal colonial and slave commodity Sidney Mintz describes in *Sweetness and Power*. In efforts to address harmful ash from burning the plant's wasted leaves, Katie points us to the way that technologies to make those leaves productive are touted as modern and sustainable, but in fact reproduce

the extractive logics embedded in sugarcane's violent history. And Gebby Kenny takes us to Lake Erie's watershed in Ohio, where efforts at agricultural stewardship perversely entail a budgetary model of ecosystems which imagines rivers, wetlands, and farm fields as partible, fungible, and manufactured manipulables--things like 'pipes' or 'trash bags' that can be sorted and articulated. This arrangement turns out to have a ghost inside--the history of settler colonialism that haunts its mechanized, rationalized vision of ecology in unruly swirls of legacy toxicants.

There were a number of moments that jumped out at me as telegraphing the way these dark sides hide in plain sight within the shining halo of technoptimism that fuels each of these technologies.

In Emma's paper, a mainstream magazine characterizes the charismatic figure of a mother "who laid down for a tan while tending the Ark's garden bed as a purveyor of 'bikini diplomacy'." Emma points out that this is part of the reassuring confirmation of heteronormative whiteness that makes the AT movement more palatable. It confirms white masculinity as anchored in dominion and white femininity as thoroughly domestic, passively sexual yet sufficiently maternal. But "bikini diplomacy" also (at least to my mind) incidentally positions the AT movement (despite its anti-Vietnam war roots) snugly within a broader muscular and militarized moment of mid-century techno-optimism. Bikini diplomacy brought to mind the Bikini atoll for which the bathing suit was named in 1946

when the US began a decade of nuclear testing in that atoll over which it claimed dominion. The image of the white woman darkening her skin as a sign of leisure while wearing a sexualized bathing suit named for imperial ruination becomes an odd kind of diplomacy indeed when refigured in this way. Or maybe not so odd. Maybe it is exactly the recursive reproduction of colonial raced and gendered domesticity that Emma points us too, where the US' colonization and bombing of the Bikini atoll and displacement of its Indigenous inhabitants is echoed in the utopian Ark of Appropriate Technology--the ark of course being the signal salvific technology Judeo-Christian masculinity, its reproductive order, and its dominion over nature.

Gebby, takes up Beth Povinelli's invitation to shift from ontological to historical in our understanding of the 'rolling ancestral catastrophes' of colonialism and slavery, allowing us to apprehend high flow water events in the Lake Erie watershed as not just complex material flows, but also palimpsests. Drawing on my own experience living on another great lake, I imagine the storms that cause these events are increasing in frequency and force, refusing to grant any distance between an anthropocenic present, and the toxicity of ongoing colonial intervention into the land, particularly agriculture whose forms of exhausting cultivation are so central to both the inaugural projects of colonial settlement and slavery and to the ongoing maintenance of settler colonialism. The disturbing vision of wetlands as trash bags, and its corollary colonial imaginary of a land 'away' which polluters are entitled to access and use as a

waste sink, makes abundantly present the dark side of the perkily named H2Ohio program.

In reading Katie's paper, I began to think that what linked these three presentations was not toxicity per se, and perhaps not even the techno-optimism of 'goodness' that the papers call into question. Rather than a critique of virtue, Katie's paper suggested a critique of value might be the better frame. Katie, I think, makes two key points about the shift from toxic ash to hopeful leaves. One is that the plant itself, not just the processing of it, must be transformed by this new and seemingly 'modern, productive, sustainable' technology. The other is that we should not see the extraction of additional sugar from the plant's leaves as an obvious good.

After all, the imperative of extraction, and its bad relations--bad land relations, bad social relations--fuels the engine of toxicity that we know as racial capitalism. Katie's attention to the specificity of the sugarcane, and her invocation of the memories of those who grew up sucking its sweetness from the cane and not the leaves, also made me want to think more closely about what exactly people hope to extract from the leaves of these transformed plants. Once answer is, of course, sugar. But another answer is value. And not just any value, surplus value, that profitable excess that lubricates capitalism, including the massification of agriculture that today shows up as algae blooms in Lake Erie, and which owes much, perhaps even everything, to the enslaved labor that

allowed sugar to be so highly profitable that its surplus value could accrue to white capitalists in the 19th Century, profiteers of slavery, and could be passed down for generations as a concentrated legacy of unequal wealth.

It feels worth noting here that some of the land that was once sugar plantations along Louisiana's Gulf Coast, land that was both devalued by exhaustive agri-capital extraction and made home by concentrated Black communities in the aftermath of slavery, became a hotbed of petrochemical production and is known today as 'Cancer Alley.' The racial geography of petrochemical toxicity is inextricably linked to the colonial geography of nuclear toxicity--a geography that links the Bikini Atoll to Dine Bikeyah, Navajo land into which the US carved over 1000 uranium mines between the 1950s and 1970s, to the Congo, from whence was mined the Uranium that fueled the US bombs built in Los Alamos and dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to the Black Hills where Lakota people continue to resist uranium mining today.

The gendered colonial domesticity of ecological technology that Emma describes comes into full relief here, in this palimpsestic geography. The cuts necessitated by "Your home [as] your biosphere," its proprietary dominion, its mastery over nature, its echo of the assertion that 'a man's home is his castle'. If colonialism is one of the things that makes this slogan's fantasy possible, another is the idea that middle-class domestic practices, practices thoroughly shaped by capitalism and its distinction between production and reproduction

can be the very same practices that enable 'sustainable economies'. What, Emma allows us to wonder, could those economies be if the patriarchy of capitalism had not been reckoned with? What would be their relation to racial capitalism if they don't come along with the revolution of good relations?

In various ways, then, all three papers point us to racial capitalism as the lodestar around which the technologies of toxic goodness orbit. When Katie asks us to slow down at the logic of extraction, she allows us to see the absurdity of extraction being proposed as the solution to slow violence and waste. Within the racial capitalism of sugarcane, waste must be made productive, which is to say, profitable, which is to say that here the opposite of waste is not degrowth, or even efficiency, but profit. In Gebby's paper, the H2Ohio budgetized ecology is doomed to repeat the sins of the watershed's toxic colonial past, in part because it cannot recognize the faults of its colonial present, as it still clings to the hope that toxicity can be displaced, making just a little more space for 'self-devouring growth' (as Julie Livingston calls it). And in Emma's paper the goal of a 'sustainable economy' (presumably something other than, or after, capitalism) linked to the gendered order of social and biological reproduction that is bound to capitalism (or so says Engels in on the origins of family, private property, and the state).

In the face of the self-righteous, hubristic techno-optimism that fuels these supposedly salvific technologies, these papers critically observe the way good

technology is entangled with shady race and gender politics, and dark histories of state and structural violence. In reading them, I wondered not so much about better technological solutions (that is the trap we're trying to get out of), but about a sociotechnical imaginary that was not so dazzled by 'good' technologies that it couldn't perceive their non-innocence, a sociotechnical imaginary up to the tasks of degrowth, reparations, and landback. A sociotechnical imaginary up to the task of good relations.