

DEATHSCAPES AFTERLIVES

(part 2)

Edited by Marina Gržinić

Preamble

Continuing the narrative initiated in Part 1 of the Deathscapes project, Part 2 unfolds within the pages of Art and Documentation, echoing the thematic trajectory outlined in the seminal volume "Mapping Deathscapes: Digital Geographies of Racial and Border Violence" (Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, eds., Routledge, 2022).

PART 2 CONSISTS OF THE FOLLOWING CONTRIBUTIONS:

The short introduction by editor Marina Gržinić sets the stage for an exploration of the aftermaths of deathscapes within the context of the European Union. Gržinić's commentary underscores the significance of engaging with these narratives from an artistic, cultural, and philosophical standpoint, emphasizing the imperative of confronting the war in Ukraine and the status quo of Europe and the European Union.

A dialogue on occupied Kashmir is facilitated by the insightful perspectives of Iffat Fatima and Goldie Osuri. Their exchange serves as a powerful testament to the enduring legacies of colonialism

and resistance, shedding light on the multifaceted dynamics of oppression and resilience.

Antonio Traverso's visually evocative essay transports us to the landscapes of Chile, offering a visceral discursive, and photographic exploration of memory, trauma, and political upheaval. Through a captivating interplay of images and words, Traverso invites us to bear witness to the scars etched upon the Chilean terrain, serving as a haunting reminder of the enduring consequences of state violence.

Marziya Mohammedali's reflections on photography and absence provide a poignant meditation on the complexities of capturing loss and longing through the camera's lens. Mohammedali challenges us to grapple with the elusive nature of memory and how images can both illuminate and obscure our understanding of the past.

Finally, Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes offers a poetical exploration of grief, resilience, and the human capacity for hope in adversity. Through Woldeyes' poignant poems, we are reminded of the enduring power of art to bear witness to the profound complexities of the human experience.

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Yirga Gelaw WOLDEYES

“TO GROW ROOTS AND SEEDS”: POETIC REFLECTIONS ON PLACE AND BELONGING

Simone Weil said that “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul.”¹ My poems reflect on this struggle for belonging. To be a refugee or immigrant, to have those labels attached to oneself, is to live with a sense of permanent displacement or “otherness”. The desire to belong means that refugees and immigrants seek multiple avenues to be rooted and secure. However, many of them are deeply colonial.

In “ቀስ ብለህ ተራመድ / *Walk Slowly*,” we follow an immigrant black man who celebrates Australia Day with the old statues who dance at Boundary Road, attempting to participate in a ritual that might mark him as “belonging” to his new home. Old statues represent the colonial history of Australia and Boundary Road represents the limit of its identity.

Historically, these roads were not meant to be crossed by Indigenous Australians after a certain time in the day. The roads served as borders between the insider and the outsider.

Today, statues that honour colonial officials who took part in the destruction of Indigenous life still stand in our public spaces, and Boundary

Roads are still listed on our maps. Places hold memory, and they have the power to make us remember. They can reinvent us, teach us, and give us identity. They can also make us forget, as they become seemingly benign parts of the environment that we refuse to reflect on.

When old statutes dance while the rest of us, including immigrants, celebrate with them, the indigenous birds run away in search of a peaceful place. Murry Island, the home and resting place of Eddie Mabo, represents that relatively safe space. A wise owl, representing Indigenous wisdom and knowledge, gently advises the man to remember that participating in these celebrations does not mean he belongs. Till he is able to connect to the true spirit of the place, he is asked to walk slowly. This poem is a gentle reminder that participating in rituals based on Indigenous people's oppression and dislocation will never address an immigrant's own feeling of dislocation. It is also a comment on the fact that while Indigenous people have experienced a form of dislocation from their own lands and traditions, similar to refugees and immigrants, they are still on their land and that land has other names, stories and histories.

“ከጥንቱ ዛፍ ጥላ/ *Under the Oldest Tree*” extends this reflection, looking at how one can get all the institutional or state symbols of belonging but still remain a stranger to the place where one lives. It reflects my own experience of living in Australia for over fifteen years. My late grandmother advised me to connect to the *kole*, which in rural Ethiopia is understood as the spirit of a place. One must connect with the *kole* in order to belong, and that normally occurs through respect and connection to elders and history. Growing up, I witnessed people gathering under the largest, oldest tree in my town to seek advice from elders. One did not seek belonging or comfort in the state or institutions; one sought it through connection with the community, led by the guidance and wisdom of our *shmagales* (old people).

The poem goes on to note how, in Australia, it is possible to become “a citizen to the system but a stranger to the land”. The system is set up so that refugees and immigrants are often only exposed to white Australia. Indeed, if immigrants want to succeed, they must conform to this colonial system, as is reflected in the lines “millennia of roots / under my feet / to belong, I walked over them”. In my own lived experience and in my research, I have found that true belonging cannot be found, as the poem says, “in institutions, in papers, in books”. It also cannot be found in a system that classifies anything non-white as “other”. This poem reflects on an immigrant’s earnest desire to belong, but not knowing how to achieve that when the system turns one away from Indigenous Australia, a place where the *kole* truly lives.

My final poem, “የኖንታ ባርያ/ *Your Slave*,” is a departure from this theme, but speaks to the need to document these ongoing quests for freedom and belonging through art. It is inspired by the life of Frederick Douglass, as presented in Isaac Julien’s exhibition *Lessons of the Hour* at the Perth International Festival (*A Thousand Words*, 2022). Douglass was a famous American abolitionist and statesman who lived from 1817/18 – 1895. The poem opens with Douglass “lecturing the trees that grew up on black bodies”, and goes onto the say

that the slave master was himself a slave. Whenever we think of slavery or colonialism, we often look at the enslaved as victims of violence and lament the ways in which they are being dehumanised and oppressed. The standard lens with which we view them, even if sympathetic to their condition, is the lens of the oppressor. We see and identify them with their wounds and sufferings while we identify the oppressor with his force and strength. The oppressor is always seen as a human that commits violence. His acts are sometimes theorised as reflections of the human condition, digressions from moral conduct, or acts of despotic violence that are necessary to move civilisation forward. In this way, the slave master may be seen as violent and cruel, but not as a dehumanised being.

To be free from slavery or colonialism is to live like the master or the coloniser. The poem challenges this view by drawing the meaning of being human from values that have nothing to do with power or violence. To draw the meaning of humanity from force and physical strength is to destroy its beauty and spiritual meaning. It is to offer one’s being for the creation of a materialist world that ultimately enslaves all of us.

This is because, as Aime Cesar maintains, “out of all the colonial expeditions that have been undertaken, out of all the colonial statutes that have been drawn up ... there could not come a single human value.”² The poem draws humanity from values that are being crushed by the oppressor: the spirit of ancestors or “ancient lights”, the beauty of wildflowers and “wonderous insects”, love of mothers to their babies, and the boundless freedom the air and the sea give to the eagle and the fish. This relates to Amie Cesar’s suggestion that we must also understand how colonialism decivilized the civiliser: “First we must study how colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism.”³

When we see the slave master using the eyes of the slaves, he represents a beast enslaved by greed and cruelty; he is a monster that “flung

babies from their mother’s breast”. What possibly could redeem him is when and if “he sees himself through eyes that irrigate his plantation”. The poem ends on the observation that the master is “a slave who digs on black bodies / to grow white cotton / for you”. Here, I am inviting the reader to consider how their very lives are built on slavery and oppression. We will find what humanity means when we see the world and ourselves through the eyes of those who suffer.

Readers will note that the poems are written in two languages: Amharic and English. I have been a poet in my native language of Amharic since I was a child, and have only started translating the works recently. Something is always lost in the act of translation, so I always provide the Amharic originals. Art cannot speak to one’s true lived experience if it requires the filter of translation, and so there needs to be a larger commitment in the arts to finding spaces for non-English speakers to offer their works to one another. Belonging and connection are often rooted in language, and so I offer my poems in both, hoping they can speak meaningfully to both Amharic and English speakers.

ቀስ ብለህ ተራመድ / Walk Slowly

ከጥንቱ ዛፍ ጥላ / Under the Oldest Tree

አሮጌ ሃውልቶች በከተማው ያሉ
ባውንደሪ መንገድ ዳንስ ይደንሳሉ።
ወደሰማይ ፎቆች እጃችን ነስንሰን
ሃሌ ሉያ ስንል እንኳን አደረሰን
ካካቡራ ወፎች በአካባቢው ያሉ
ወደማሪ ወደብ ይበረግጋሉ።

when old statues in the city
dance at Boundary Road
we stretch our hands to the skyscrapers
we sing Hallelujah, happy holidays!
fireworks drive kookaburras to Murray Island

ትንሽ እልፍ ብሎ አንድ ጉጉት አለ
ገላው በጨረቃ የተወለወለ
ወደሱ ስጦጋ እኔን እንዲህ አለ፡-
“ያንተን መልክ ቢመስልም የዚህ ምድር ቀለም
ትውፊትና ወጉ በደም ስርህ የለም፤
ስሙን እስክታውቀው ይህን ጥቁር መንገድ
በሰውነቱ ላይ ቀስ ብለህ ተራመድ።”

I approach an owl
polished by the moon
it says to me
your look resembles the colour of this land
yet its lore does not run in your veins
till you learn the name of this black road
walk slowly on its body

አያቱ ስትመክረኝ፤
እንድትቀበልህ ይሄድህባት ቆሌ፤
ካገርህ ርቀህ ባዳ እንዳትሆን ሁሌ፤
ከአድባሩ ዛፍ ካሉት ያገር ሽማግሌ፤
ከእግራቸው ስር ወድቀህ -
ትከሉኝ በላቸው ከጥቁሩ መሬት ላይ፤
ስር ስደድ ወደታች ዘር አፍራ ወደላይ።

My grandmother told me,
‘do not remain a stranger
go to the elders
who sit under the oldest tree
fall before their feet
ask them to plant you in their soil
the kole will receive you
you will grow roots and seeds.’

እንደተመከርኩት ከመጣሁ በኋላ፤
“ሽማግሌዎቹ ከጥንቱ ዛፍ ጥላ፤
የሚሰበሰቡት ከቶ ወዴት ይሆን?”
አያሌሁ ብጠይቅ -
“ሳትጠይቅ ለመኖር መቻልህን አመስግን”፤
ብሎ መለሰልኝ ነጩ ባለስልጣን።
እኔም ሆንኩትና -
የመሬቱ ባዳ የሰራቱ ዜጋ፤
ወዳለፈው ታሪክ እጄን ብዘረጋ፤
ሁለት መቶ አመታት ነኩቼ ተመለስኩ፤
መኖሪያ ተሰጠኝ ፈተናውን አለፍኩ።

so I asked where the elders meet
under the oldest tree
officials told me to be grateful
to live without asking
I became a citizen to the system
but a stranger to the land
I stretched my arms to the past
but only touched two centuries
took a test and earned a place
millennia of roots
under my feet
to belong, I walked over them.

የእልፍ አመታት ስሮች ከእግራ ስር እያየሁ
ዜግነት ለማግኘት ዘልያቸው አለሁ።

fifteen years passed
I am still searching for the kole
not finding it in institutions
in papers
in books
I know there are elders
under the oldest tree
I am starting to ask
what test must I take
to become a citizen of the soil
where must I dig
to find millennia of roots
what must I do
to be worthy
to be planted in their soil
to not remain a stranger
to grow roots and seeds

አስራ አምስት አመታት አለፉ እንደዋዛ፤
ቆሌዎን ስፈልግ፤ ከየመጻሕፍቱ፤ ከተቋማት ታዛ።
ያገር ሽማግሌዎች አውቃለሁ እንዳሉ፤
ከጥንቱ ዛፍ ጥላ የማይነጠሉ።
መጠየቅ እሻለሁ የፈተናውን አይነት፤
ለማግኘት እንድችል ካፈሩ ዜግነት።
የቱ ጋ ልቆፍር?
የእልፍ አመታት ስሮች ከተጋደሙበት?
ከቶ ምንድን ይሆን -
ከአፈራቸው መሃል የምተከልበት?
እንግድነት ቀርቶ -
ስር የምሰድበት
ፍሬ ‘ማፈራበት’።

የናንተ ባርያ / **Your Slave**

ከመለጠጥሁ በኋላ ከባርነት ቀንበር፤
ወደዚያ እርሻ ቦታ አይኖቸን ሳማትር፤
አያሌሁ አጥንቶች ማሳው ላይ ያረፉ፤
ኑጫጭ ጥጥ ሆነው -
ከሰውነቴ ጋር፤ አብረው የተሰፉ።።
የጀርባን ቆዳ ከአፈሩ ጋር አስሮ
የተጋደመውን የሽቦ ቋጠሮ፤
ከሰው አይን ደብቄ ብቻን ቆሜአለሁ፤
ከጥቁር ገላ ላይ ለወፈሩ ዛፎች እንደዚህ እላለሁ፡-

እሱ ነው!
እሱ ነው፤ እኔ አይደለሁም ቀድሞ ባርያ የሆነው
አዎን፤ እሱ ነው።።
ጥንታዊ ብርሐናትን፤ አላይ ብሎ የታወረው፤
ስጋውን ብቻ አግዘፎ፤ የብረት ክምር ያረገው፤
አበቦችን እየቀጠፈ፤ ገላቸውን ፈጭቶ፤
ከልቦናው ግድግዳ ላይ፤ ቀለማቸውን ቀብቶ፤
ከጎን አድብቶ የቆመ፤ የነፍሳት ማጥመጃ ሰርቶ፤
እሱ ነው።።

እሱ ነው፤ እኔ አይደለሁም ቀድሞ ባርያ የሆነው፤
አዎን፤ እሱ ነው።።
ዘመኑን ሁሉ ለሰላምታ፤ እጁን ዘርግቶ ያልሰጠ፤
ባንድ እጁ ጥቁር መጽሃፍ፤ በቆዳ የተለበጠ፤
ባንድ እጁ ጥቁር አለንጋ፤ ዘወትር እንደጨበጠ፤
የሰንበት መስዋዕት ብሎ፤
አካል ዛፍ ላይ አንጠልጥሎ፤ በአደባባይ ያሰጣ፤
ጥቁር ቆዳ የላጠ - ጥጥ ከውስጡ ሊያወጣ፤
እሱ ነው።።

እሱ ነው፤ እኔ አይደለሁም ቀድሞ ባርያ የሆነው
አዎን፤ እሱ ነው።።
ንስርን በሰማይ ከመብረር፤ ነጻ ለማድረግ የመጣ፤
አሳን ከባህር አውጥቶ፤ ከባይ ውሃ ያጠጣ፤
እናትና ህጻናትን፤ በፍርሃት ማእበል ያራደ፤
ከእናቱ ጠት መንጭቆ፤ አራሳ ህጻን የወሰደ፤
የእርሻው መስኖ በሆኑ አይኖች፤ ራሱን እስኪመለከት፤
የጥቁርን አካል ቆፍሮ፤ ለዘላለም ጥጥ እሚያመርት፤
ዛሬም ይሁን መጀመሪያ፤
እሱ ነው!
እሱ ነው የእናንተ ባርያ!
እሱ።።

After I escaped bondage
I saw the plantation
scattered bones of cotton
woven into my skin
I hid the barbed knots
that tied my back to the soil
and lectured the trees
that grew on black bodies
I told them this:

it was not me
who was a slave first
It was him
he who cannot see the ancient lights
he who created himself
as a gigantic work of metal
he who took flowers from the field
painted the walls of his heart with colours
set a trap by the side
to catch wonderous insects

it was not me
who was a slave first
It was him
he who lived with clenched hands
one hand gripping a black leather book
the other a black leather whip
he brought his Sunday offerings
bodies hung up on trees
their skins scratched to extract cotton

it was not me
who was a slave first
It was him
he who wanted to save
the eagle from the sky
he who took the fish from the sea
to give it water in a cup
women and children trembled
as he flung babies from their mother's breast
his bondage will never leave him
till he sees himself
through eyes that irrigate his plantation
till he knows who he truly is.
A slave who digs on black bodies
to grow white cotton
for you

Notes

- ¹ Weil quoted in Liisa H. Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees." *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1), (1992): 24.
- ² Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on colonialism*. Translated by Joan Pinkham. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 34.
- ³ Aime Cesaire, 35.

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