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Biomaterial interventions towards social justice: Life, transformation, liberation

Guest edited by Profs Leora Farber & Alexandra Kokoli

Please note: deadline has been extended to 15 May 2025



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When Dan Hicksⁱ (2021) argued that the statue of Edward Colston, British enslaver, politician and 'philanthropist', should remain "sunk forever into the mud", he wasn't merely defending the actions of the Black Lives Matter protesters who threw it into Bristol harbour, but also entertaining the possibility that aquatic micro-organisms might help finish the job, by metabolising – and thus breaking down – the artistic and architectural infrastructure of white supremacy.

In a more complex and less obviously iconoclastic move, in the North of England, British artist Jasleen Kaur with collaborators Alina Akbar, Nasrine Akhtar, Rizwana Ali, Shakra Butt, Rahela Khan and Bushra Sultana, washed the statue of Quaker, industrialist, progressive politician and philanthropist John Bright with yoghurt, to ostensibly cleanse it – Bright actively opposed fundamental labour reform, including the elimination of child labour – but to also seed it with diasporic bacteria from a local Asian dairy. Their work *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan* (2021) grapples with absences and misrepresentations of their South Asian diasporic communities in the civic collections and archives of Rochdale, Lancashire, a city whose profitable textile industry was built on colonial extraction of South Asian goods, technologies and migrant labour. In the filmed performative acts of *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan*, Kaur and her collaborators discuss Julietta Singh's book *No Archive will Restore You* (2018): while the book's title is proven painfully true, they find solace, solidarity and strength in themselves and each other – the "embodied, illegitimate archive[s]"ⁱⁱ that they are – as well as in the nourishing and purifying live culture of yoghurt.

The restorative potential of biomatter is activated in Ja'Tovia Gary's *Giverny Suite* (2019), a cinematic poem and three-channel installation with objects, that advocates for the safety and bodily autonomy of Black women. The *Suite* stems from a residency at Giverny Gardens, made famous by Monet and rendered into the definitive icon of Impressionism by the industries that continue to merchandise canonised artistic movements. Gary reframes and repurposes the gardens of Giverny, flanking her installation with altars to Yoruba deities offering protection to women and promoting creativity. The videos juxtapose the gardens with street scenes from Harlem, where the artist asks women whether they feel safe; French Colonial-style domestic interiors, evoking "the comforts found in many Southern Black grandmothers' homes, including the artist's own", while simultaneously bearing the marks of colonialism; footage of black activists and survivors of police violence; and black women artists in performance, including Nina Simone and Josephine Baker. "Healing is at the root of the work," Gary explains. "Making art is a transformative process that transmutes pain or trauma into something beautiful, useful, functional, instructive."ⁱⁱⁱ The lush Gardens of Giverny gradually become untethered from their art historical over-determination, to instead foreground intersectional feminist demands about black women's right to safety, comfort and respite, and to ask, reprising and inflecting Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), what conditions are 'the most propitious to the act of creation'. Likewise, South African artist, Nolan Oswald Dennis's seminal work, *CEION* (2022) features books made of fibre-based paper, onto which passages from Audre Lorde's seminal essay 'Sister Outsider' are printed

in Sesotho. Seeds of South African wildflowers are embedded the pages. These essay-flower assemblages are cultivated in a series of light, temperature and humidity controlled modules connected by a hand powered water reticulation system. Viewer-participants are prompted to water the pages, so that the apparatus and growth of the plants are sustained by their relation to the public following a set of care protocols. These heterogeneous examples outline a network of practices that seek to explore and mobilise allyship and collaboration between humans and other living matter towards mutual benefit and potentially liberation.

The focus of this special edition is on the roles that biomatter plays in the pursuit of social justice and liberation among, and between humans and other life forms. As colonial scholars from Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon to Walter Dignolo and Achille Mbembe argue, the key issue underpinning what Françoise Vergès calls the ‘Racial Capitalocene’^{iv} is justice for the billions of black and indigenous lives that have been commodified, quantified and extracted using a geological approach to ecosystems, knowledge and relations. Achieving climate justice as a form of social justice necessitates shifting the geo-logic of capitalist colonial science, used to justify colonial relationships with humans and more-than-humans; living and non/living matter and nature and culture relations, towards indigenous forms of knowledge which foreground ecocentrism.

Our interest lies in creative work in which biomatter and biomaterials are deployed in ways that challenge the dynamics of westernised knowledge systems that pivot on power and control. These include those hegemonic forces that have shaped relationships with humans and living and non/living matter;^v nature and culture; life and death. By fostering experiential, bodily approaches to creative practice with the more-than-human based on equality, empathy, respect and care, such work expands the repertoire of decolonial practice that prompts social, economic, environmental and political transformation.

We invite academic papers and creative reflections that explore the theoretical, curatorial and artistic possibilities that biomatter offers in the pursuit of social justice, decolonisation and the biopolitics of liberation.

Some of the questions we hope to mobilise in this special edition include:

- How can biomaterials and biopolitics be recruited in the work of undoing the foundational hierarchies of western epistemologies and challenging “monohumanism”^{vi} – namely the universalist project of liberal humanism that centres the rights and interests of white supremacist heteropatriarchy?
- How do artistic and curatorial practices make space for bio-cultures to participate as collaborators in the important task of redefining and defending the rights of all life on earth and elsewhere?
- How are artists critically and creatively deploying biomaterials to reimagine and reshape current and future ecologies from a decolonial perspective?
- How can artists “intra-act”^{vii} with bio-cultures to provide creative possibilities for eroding enduring histories of humanist thinking, colonialism and capitalism and their roles as agents of destruction in relation to the eco-sphere?

- How can creative engagements with the more-than-human create new frameworks for interdisciplinary – and even interspecies – collaborations?
- How are artists combining interdisciplinary collaborative approaches with indigenous forms of knowledge to address urgent environmental and political concerns?
- How are creative practitioners developing creative strategies where the life-sciences and art operate synergistically towards the re-visioning of ecologically sustainable futures?
- How can socially engaged, activist and community-based creative interventions be mobilised towards achieving climate justice?
- How are creative practitioners examining the relationships between biomaterials and their biotic environments in ways that prompt synergistic, symbiotic and entangled relationships between the human and the more-than-human?
- How are artists and curators drawing on queer ecologies to shift paradigms away from binary, rigid and heteronormative ways of understanding sexuality and gender in relation to living organisms?
- How are artists and curators engaging with biomedical ecologies across diverse disciplines across the arts, humanities and medical science to shift westernised and patriarchal powers and politics of disease?
- How can artists and creative practitioners work with microbes (bacteria, viruses, mycelium) to affect macrocosmic change and transformation on a microscopic level?
- How are artists and creative practitioners developing new, eco-centric biomaterials or repurposing existing ones for creative and functional applications?

We welcome abstracts of no more than 500 words. Abstracts can be supported with no more than two captioned images. We will also consider abstracts for a limited number of creative submissions such as poetic reflections, photo-essays and narratives. Unlike the academic articles, these will not be peer-reviewed.

Please send abstracts to:

Leora Farber: leoraf@uj.ac.za and Alexandra Kokoli: A.Kokoli@mdx.ac.uk by **15 May 2025**.

Authors whose abstracts have been accepted will be notified by **end-May 2025**.

Accepted articles will be subject to revision and acceptance by the peer-reviewers and editors.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.
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- ^v Radomska, M. 2016. 'Uncontainable Life. A Biophilosophy of Bioart'. PhD thesis submitted to Linköping Studies in Arts and Science, no. 666, Department of Thematic Studies – Gender Studies:35.
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- ^{vii} Barad, K. 2003. 'Post Humanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter'. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28(3):801-831.

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