



THIRD WORLD APPROACHES to INTERNATIONAL LAW *Review*

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TWAILR: Dialogues ~ 19/2025

Race, Ecology, and Nature in International Law: A Dialogue with Sarah Riley Case

[Sarah Riley Case](#) talks with [Usha Natarajan](#) about the foundational link between racism and ecological harm and how to repair relations between peoples and planet. They discuss Sarah's research on recovering third world ecologies, making reparations, and reconceptualizing the human, and conclude by considering the crucial situation in Palestine.

1. Introduction

Usha Natarajan [UN]: Sarah, thank you for innumerable, illuminating, and wide-ranging chats over the years. The opportunity to publish a part of this ongoing conversation is very meaningful. Last year, 2024, marked **the first time the Earth [exceeded](#) the 1.5 degrees Celsius mark of warming** compared with pre-industrial times. 1.5 degrees Celsius is the safe warming limit agreed upon by the countries of the world in the Paris Climate Change Accord. With many rich states continuing to [increase](#) their greenhouse gas emissions, and the United States (historically, by far the world's biggest emitter) [pledging](#) to grow its fossil fuel industries and withdraw from the Paris Accord, it is important to revisit some of the reasons why international law has failed to mitigate global environmental harms that are occurring on an unprecedented scale, and what we can do about it. As we have both discussed and written about over the years, the root causes of these harms lie in the intertwining of racism and extractivism in the history of European empire. Before we get into our

discussion, I provide a brief introduction to race and ecology in international law for those unfamiliar with the subject.

A pithy phrase that I regularly employ in my environmental justice work is that **the way people treat each other is inextricable from the way we treat our environment**. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the past five centuries of European colonialism, genocide, slavery, apartheid, and racial discrimination have also produced climate change, mass extinction, desertification, deforestation, and polluted air, water, and lands. While the violent processes of empire building are far from unique to Western Europe, this most recent manifestation of empire with its commitment to industrialization and capitalism on a global scale has unfortunately produced a uniquely violent impact on human relations and the natural world on a scale unparalleled in human history.

International law has played a key role in this process because international law is a product of European empire, invented as means of universalizing European interests as putatively global norms. International law was born in the colonial encounter, justifying the first European corporations' access to non-European lands, resources, and labor. As part of enabling and managing efficient European exploitation of resources and peoples globally, international law has evolved by continually subordinating the legal position of the non-European to that of the European. Twenty years ago, Tony Anghie's canonical [text](#) on this topic traced these imperial biases from their origins through to the present day in the way that contemporary international lawyers understand sovereignty, human rights, development, good governance, and so on. That is to say, **the modern discipline of ostensible sovereign equality and universal human rights is underpinned by this much more formative assumption that only Europeans have the capacity to decide what sovereignty and humanity look like**.

Just as international law helped to normalize European understandings of sovereignty and humanity, it also universalized the European Enlightenment commitment to dominating and exploiting the natural world to maximize economic productivity. Indeed, **the ability to tame nature and make it economically productive was a prime characteristic of sovereignty and humanity**, with those perceived by Europeans as being unable to do so (or doing so at lesser degrees than desired by Europe) relegated to lower legal statuses. In this manner, the exploitation of non-European peoples and of the natural environment are wedded in the roots of

our discipline, in international law's conceptualization of what it means to be a sovereign and what it means to be a human.

The pernicious outcomes of such a marriage are that **the western world has relied upon international law to evade responsibility and accountability for its racism as well as for its environmental harms.** International law helps structure a system of global apartheid where the rich and powerful can accumulate wealth on a massive scale while ensuring that the harmful human and environmental consequences of their enrichment are felt by the poor alone. Without minimizing the crucial role of non-western elites past and present in this process of western wealth and power accumulation, the division between rich and poor globally remains heavily racialized until the present day, with most wealth still concentrated in the global north and most poverty in the global south. Thus, for those interested in combatting social and environmental injustice, it is imperative to appreciate the foundational connections between these two types of harms.

This somewhat rapid and cursory overview is merely by way of providing the reason for this dialogue and explaining this topic's increasing contemporary relevance. It serves as a jumping off point for a conversation on race, ecology, and nature that can add more nuance and specificity to this story and posit some solutions for healing peoples and the planet together. **In terms of identifying ways to escape these twin harms of racism and extractivism, I draw on three themes from our shared interests: (i) recovering third world ecologies, (ii) making reparations, and (iii) reconceptualizing the human. I finish with the longstanding question of Palestine** to bear witness to, and to call to an end of, the immense violence that Israel is inflicting on Palestine through settler colonial and genocidal laws that intertwine racial and environmental harms.

2. Recovering Third World Ecologies

To begin with the crucial TWAIL task of narrative construction, much of your research [traces](#) the processes whereby **the stories of some peoples and places become so marginalized by the dominant culture that they are rendered unspeakable.** You uncover and retell some of these narratives about third world states and peoples and climate change in international law, and more specifically regarding the crucial role of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in climate law. You [quote](#) the Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Motley: 'We were the ones whose blood, sweat, and tears financed the Industrial Revolution. Are we now to face double

jeopardy by having to pay the cost as a result of those greenhouse gases from the Industrial Revolution?' Could you talk about why the recovery of third world ecologies is important and the insights you gained in undertaking this task?

Sarah Riley Case [SRC]: Thank you for this question that is dear to my work, Usha, and for this conversation which, as you say, extends from many others we have had. I appreciate you starting us off with the importance of narrative to marginalized traditions such as TWAIL, and I would add Critical Race Theory, Black Studies, Indigenous critique, perhaps some mainstream accounts, such as Foucault's genealogies of social deviance. From my perspective, it is meaningful to tell stories that are unspeakable, as you say, drawing on Spivak, whose [concept of the subaltern](#) describes those whose speech is unintelligible to hegemonic forms of political community.

Of course, Spivak affirmed that the subaltern does speak, though some will not grasp the words. The subject who inspired these insights, her great-aunt, [spoke resistance](#) in British India during the 1920s by taking her life, rather than kill another, when the anticolonial movement that she belonged to charged her with an assassination. I see historical construction as a responsibility in this sense of refusing erasure, which Spivak demonstrates by telling her aunt's story.

There is another sense of responsibility that narrative inspires in me as well, namely, given the global dispossession that persists since the project of European manifest destiny (not the first or last imperial project, as you note, but the most universalizing, taking shape today under complex forms of racism, sexism, anti-queerness, settler colonialism, postcolonialism ...), I would hope that certain stories can be [reparatory](#). History, as a praxis, might describe how [the past haunts the present](#) and implicitly demand redress, and thus honesty may be reparatory, which is something that you have [observed](#).

My family is from the Caribbean on my father's side, and I have wanted to tell stories that are familiar to me about Caribbean anticolonial struggles, and so that is how I came to follow the efforts of islanders to thwart climate change. You mentioned the 1.5C temperature limit. Getting governments and corporations to agree to this limit was an initiative of islanders, entailing considerable efforts of Caribbean advocates who fought to inspire the powerful with a desire to reconceive our relationships as human beings and with the earth – or, rather, the seas – which they believed might inspire solidarity.

It has become well known that 1.5C symbolizes avoided harms to the most precarious, including islanders and island ecologies, whereas the wealthy might withstand relatively lenient limits to climate change. Thinking at a deeper, cosmological level, this measure signifies a radically redistributive humanism. Here, the life of one person caught in Hurricane Beryl, or the life of coral reefs, is no less valuable than the life of the wealthy, making redress to stop the rising tides (of water, poverty, war ...) imperative.

Islanders drew on Pan African and anticolonial principles of non-domination to this effect, notably under the campaign for a New International Economic Order, where jurists, such as Mohammed Bedjaoui, imagined [humans as a species in an ecological field](#) with responsibilities to the world. Islanders also distinguished themselves from postcolonial states that perpetuated imperialism, such as major oil producing states and those that annexed decolonizing territories.

Although, I must say that subaltern visions should not be recounted uncritically. Reparatory histories nurture intuitions about how to care partly by revealing contradictions among the virtuous that reflect the ethical dilemmas of being human in modernity (island states *have* [pursued seabed mining, oil and gas](#), among other forms of exploitation). Staying for a moment with this sensibility, of imperfection, it is also important to note that anticolonial projects *have* made their way into mainstream international law, for example through the doctrine of [*erga omnes*](#) evoked in the Chagos case and the ICJ proceedings on climate change that islanders initiated (and in many cases and General Assembly resolutions since the decolonization era, such as those for [Palestinian liberation](#)). Mainstream international law is therefore [not only Western](#), although this narrative can be true in the sense of dominance and edifying. [Third world](#), [Indigenous](#), [Pan African](#), [worker](#), and other coalitions have sometimes succeeded in advancing liberatory agendas, but, not without compromises, meaning that, at the very least, people use international law for [critical struggle](#).

A question that emerges from telling stories of Third World approaches to ecology under international law is therefore 'To what end?'. Critical struggle may be valuable as an accounting of the past and for invoking freedom. Yet, mainstream international law is still predominantly liberal and there are limits to disciplining oneself with the [master's tools](#). The 1.5C guardrail was breached this past year, as you say, and many who are marked by the afterlives of slavery and colonialism are bound to [sacrifice](#)

[zones](#). The words of Mia Motley that you invoked make this connection when she implies that transatlantic slavery lives on in the hurricanes that the descendants of enslaved people suffer.

3. Reparations

UN: Coming now to the question of reparations, you have [observed](#) that international law scholarship usually treats ecological and racial reparations as separate issues, but climate justice advocates – especially those from climate-vulnerable states – are increasingly conjoining their call for reparations for slavery and colonialism with their call for reparations for climate change, emphasizing the causal interconnections. In so doing, they provide crucial insight into the meaning of reparations: that climate reparations do not merely demand a just redistribution of wealth, but additionally a redistribution of authority and knowledge-production so that everyone will live in ‘a future free of imperialism’.¹ **Reparations are often thought of as a means of looking to the past, but your vision is deeply forward looking.** Importantly, you situate reparations amid ‘broader liberatory visions of the global south’ to underline that these visions are so much more than reactionary responses to imperialism, but rather are inspired by ‘self-assured traditions of abolition, independence, Pan-Africanism, and regional solidarity’.² Would you perhaps elaborate how your understanding of reparations intertwines anti-racism and ecological wellbeing, and why this is a helpful way to understand reparations.

SRC: I am thankful for this question too, Usha, and, again, I am compelled to begin with stories. This is because I had always known something about reparations from my upbringing – as an African descendent call for redress, grounded in desires for abolition, cultural resurgence, and overall wellbeing, given transatlantic slavery tore Africans from our lifeworlds. For a long time, I did not know that the word reparations also denotes an international law remedy. I largely taught myself international law and, when I finally encountered this use it was through Anghie’s description of [Nauru’s claim against Australia for ecological damage](#). Nauru’s case was settled and undecided, while to me the call for reparations had value. I also read Darlene Johnson’s writing on [Indigenous languages and protocols of reparations](#), which she described as rebalancing relations when Indigenous international laws of reciprocity are violated. She proposed that Indigenous reparations might guide Canadians in making amends.

¹ S Riley Case, ‘Looking to the Horizon: The Meanings of Reparations for Unbearable Crises’ (2023) 117 *AJIL Unbound* 49, 53.

² *Ibid*, 49.

For me, then, reparations had signified [what Julia Dehm and I later came to articulate as](#) ethical co-habitation in a world fraught with imperialism and ecological harm. When I learned that reparations also referred to a remedy for violating mainstream international law, this doctrine seemed constraining. Liberal international law is widely purported to bar the justice that subaltern people claim, as you noted, and yet this definition of reparations emerged from a European lifeworld no less constitutive than any other. This reality is imperial, as [it secures white supremacy](#) in what language signifies and who can live well.

So, I have sought solace in how communities and social movements define reparations for themselves, which I believe interrupts imperialism by [looking to the bottom](#), as Mari Matsuda said. From this standpoint, reparations can be immanently transformative when they redistribute authority to define reparatory justice (cultural revitalization, housing, democratic decision-making, monetary relief, ending fossil fuels ...). In this sense, beyond material redress, which will be wanting, the call for reparations is itself a reparatory *critique*.

Ecological and racial justice concerns, as you have said, are often at the heart of such calls. Black and Indigenous activists have for a long time made these connections, and you eloquently described reasons why: [the fact that](#) racial dispossession and the exploitation of the earth were born of the same imperial past and remain indissociable under racial capitalism. Sylvia Wynter's thought provides a generative understanding of this haunting of the past in the present. She has traced how the present order of knowledge, and thus our material reality, [came to be](#) almost universally liberal through the spread of European categorical thinking (evolutionary, economic ...) that justified slavery and colonialism by classifying the human species into different *races* and ecologies into *resources*, subjecting both fictitious 'natures' to systems of valuation and exploitation for white supremacy.

The crucible of this globalizing process was the [plantation](#), which cruelly debased select human beings (races) and stripped myth from the earth (resources). The plantation system entailed mass commodity production for supply chains that we still live with. It [modelled capitalism](#) for the European factory. These structures, in shifting forms, still fuel greenhouse gases and dispossess subaltern people around the world, with the complicity of formerly and still colonized elites whom, [Fanon feared](#), would foreclose the possibility that decolonization could usher in a new humanity.

Workers condemned to servitude, people residing in chemical alleys, communities without clean water, people dwelling in storm-vulnerable shanties, prisoners suffering abject conditions worsened by heating Wynter calls the present conjuncture an '[unparalleled catastrophe for our species](#)', also reflecting the fact that, while racial apartheid persists, on many levels the past in the present threatens everyone, which the [Los Angeles fires](#) throw into relief.

As [Fanon intuited](#), neither colonized nor colonizer can be free without shedding their relation. This is why I see reparatory justice as not only looking to the bottom for guidance (for example to islanders) but, fundamentally, as a praxis of care ([a Black feminist praxis](#)) that prefigures a horizon beyond all forms of imperialism. This reparatory praxis, of gesturing toward, has no progress narrative, no clear future or end.

UN: I have a second somewhat-related question regarding reparations, which touches on your current research, some of which is taking place in Jamaica. We reconnected in Kingston last year when you were visiting the University of the West Indies, and you talked about **the messiness of reparations demands when they come from a postcolonial state**. Daily life in Kingston today remains intimately shaped by the history of colonialism and slavery. Everyone still lives amid deep social and natural rifts that have not been entirely healed in more than six decades of statehood. Indeed, many of these fissures were deepened by post-independence development pathways that produced skyrocketing environmental destruction, inequality, and violence, and increasing segregation between the rich and poor. Sadly, this situation resonates all too well across the postcolonial world from Africa to Asia to Latin America. Could you explain why it is important to situate third world reparations claims amid their full complexity?

SRC: This is a necessary question that again raises the responsibilities of academics in narrative construction. The question also acknowledges a sense of disbelief in reparations being claimed by many postcolonial states, not because First World government and jurists deny that reparations are due, but because of the dilemmas that reparatory justice poses if we take seriously a language of reparations that is anti-imperial.

For me, the elision of reparations from below with those claimed by postcolonial states under mainstream international law provokes an unease – partly because liberal legalism has the capacity to deradicalize its antagonisms, as I mentioned

before in referring to the master's tools, and because, as you invoked, the very states calling for reparations often internally reproduce the (neo)liberal structures that Wynter traced.

The fact that proponents of Caribbean Community reparations describe their efforts as a *movement*, while this reparations claim is state-based and grounded in international human rights law, underscores this elision between Global South states and subalternity. The elision is of course not foreign to TWAIL, which is apparent in the language, that I have also reverted to at times, of [third world states and people](#).

The elision can be productive, I think, when it exposes a dissonance arising from the fact that many anticolonial nationalists who led independence struggles *did* have radical visions of independence, and postcolonial states *are* subordinated in the international order, although many reproduce(d) misery. Consider [Latin American states that are subordinated internationally, while they are settler colonies](#) marked by racialization and economic hierarchy, repressing Indigenous and poor communities, not to mention Black communities that are erased from regional narratives.

And so, the partnership [announced in 2023](#) between the Caribbean Community and the African Union to demand a global reparations fund compels reflections on reparations for disenfranchised people living in the wake of anticolonial struggles that, however liberationist in spirit, and however structurally constrained, mimetically retrenched racial capitalism, often through [elite capture that was racialized within](#).

Many thinkers are contending with these contradictions in the Caribbean. Last year, Melanie Newton gave a [keynote lecture](#) at my university that situated the Caribbean Community reparations claim amid state condoned industries that displace Afro-Indigenous communities. Scholars and activists denounce the mining and fossil fuel production that were [integral to the development plans](#) of anticolonial nationalists, such as Eric Williams, which are [being expanded](#) with First World corporations. The work of [Deborah Thomas](#) tells truths about mass police killings and incarceration.

You too have written about the failures of decolonization to renounce Western colonial lifeways, focusing on the costs to ecologies arising from the guises of [development](#) and [human rights](#). In somewhat of a parallel, David Scott has described Caribbean reparations politics that rely on international human rights, and that are monetary, as a 'new development funding strategy', querying if they are 'meant to do

anything more than underwrite the chronic political impoverishment of the neoliberal regimes that now command nation-states in the Caribbean'.³

Now I have [written elsewhere](#) that the call for reparations from the Caribbean Community is meaningful regardless of outcome, because it exposes First World dominance. Hence, my references to Motley, who is nonetheless engaged with financial institutions that are clearly oppressive. And I take it that Scott, despite his clear-eyed skepticism about international human rights, sees value in Hilary Beckles, the head of the Reparations Commission, initiating a reparatory history in his book, [Britain's Black Debt](#), because it redescribes the past and demands redress. Crucially, Scott suggests that such a history could open a rereading of a 20th century anticolonial inheritance – that of Eric Williams, CLR James and others – in terms of what redress demands at our present ['post-revolutionary'](#) conjuncture.

Melanie Newton's use of the term 'mess of a colonial legacy' captures the nuance and care that Scott offers, while her aims might differ. [Newton explains](#) that the language of the 'mess' acknowledges the legacies of the past *and* is 'a source of optimism about the futures that Indigenous and African diaspora populations can forge for themselves'. This acknowledgement does not undermine reparations demands coming from Caribbean states, although it nurtures intuitions that honesty, humility, self-assurance and, hence, non-domination are reparatory. To answer your question then, about the complexities of postcolonial redress, I might return to David Scott when he muses, 'Perhaps what is needed is to rethink both reparation and sovereignty in relation to one another'.⁴

4. Conceptualizing the Human

UN: As we have both explored in our work, international law structures human exploitation in racialized ways that parallel how law structures exploitation of the natural world, with vast swathes of the racialized populations of the global south treated as surplus, expendable, and akin to waste. Today's multifaceted ecological crises are rooted in insatiably accumulative ways of life that are indissociable from racism. One of ways that you explore for law to transcend dominant epistemologies is through **a new conception of the human, drawing on the work of the Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter, whom you have cited above.** In your [recent](#) and current research, you explore how African peoples dehumanized through slavery

³ David Scott, *Irreparable Evil: An Essay in Moral and Reparatory History* (2024) 300.

⁴ Ibid, 261.

rehumanized themselves when they resisted indignity and degradation through escaping not only slavery but also capital exploitation. You build on Wynter's writing on the Maroons, Rastafari, and Revivalists of Jamaica as examples of this reinvention through braiding together African and non-African knowledges; and you are reflecting on such lifeways that Black people across the Americas claim for themselves, which you call reparatory.

Additionally, on a somewhat tangential but related point, in conversation with me you recently said that NourbeSe Philip's poem [The Ga\(s\)p](#) narrates a similar idea about reparation – that of Black people breathing for themselves, their descendants and ancestors. Would you elaborate on what this means to you, and how this may speak perhaps to **the many profoundly liberatory and radical ways that Black thinkers conceptualize 'praxes of being human'**, to use Wynter and McKittrick's term, perhaps touching on some of the ecological dimensions of what it means to be human?

SRC: What it means to be human in the face of ecological catastrophe – and the past that got us here – is essential to our conversation. When I first began reading your work years ago, I was struck by your description of the overrepresentation of Eurocentric modes of production and consumption, which you characterized as having [spread through colonialism, then decolonization](#), leading to a global drive for industry that is unsustainable. Wynter's genealogy of the present is aligned with yours, because she attributes the emergence of our 'climate-destabilizing free-market capitalist economic system' to the near universal reach of a liberal conception of the human.⁵ That you and I are exchanging in English is an expression of this conception of the human, which not only the wealthy reproduce, but the global bourgeoisie, mimetically.

In one sense, this question of being human therefore returns us to the last one about the mess of a colonial legacy. On another register, the question of being human points to reflections on how the species as a whole has become implicated in structures of oppression – although, people will be positioned differently in respect of oppression and will have [ambivalent desires](#).

⁵ Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, 'Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Given Humanness a Different Future: Conversations' in Katherine McKittrick (ed), *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (2015) 22.

Octavia Butler portrays this modern condition in her novel, *Kindred*, as the protagonist Dana, an African American woman of the 1970s, is thrown into the antebellum South to save her ancestor, the child of a plantation owner, whose lineage – Dana's lineage – he will secure by inflicting sexual violence. Butler reveals how harms of the past persist in Dana, since her ancestor's wrong allowed for her existence, and Dana is compelled to help him. However Dana tries to maneuver ethically through her time travels (trying to instill in her ancestor a sense of empathy ...), she cannot escape the space-time warp that she is bound to. She cannot resign to it either. Dana finally returns to the present, after her lineage is secure, while *fighting* off her ancestor's last attack, on her person. Dana's jump to the present nonetheless results in injury to the Black woman's body: 'I lost an arm on my last trip home'.⁶

This narrative helps to grasp our common *implacancy* in structures of oppression, including Dana's no less subordinated position as a Black woman. *Kindred* also helps to acknowledge that for anyone to escape the past *unscathed* would require *total* transformation. However, total transformation, an end of the world as we know it, is impossible, or at least impossible to imagine within our bounded capacity. So, for Denise Ferreira da Silva, reflecting on *Kindred*, transformation might really entail *demanding the impossible – pursuing more* than what is on offer.

For Wynter, transformation might then signify a *heretical* break with dominant ways of being human. Wynter is inspired by a position 'after Man', toward a 'horizon of humanity', where ecumenical ways of being human, as a *praxis* – our collectives, languages, myths, rites – proliferate without stratifications that narrate some as less-than-human and expendable ('*We-the-ecumenically-Human*', 'an "*intercommunal*" *community*'). Her thought recalls for me Glissant's *poétique de la Relation*, a partial description and an aspiration, where peoples coexist within the totality of this world, without grasping to extract from others, although cultures will naturally syncretize and differentiate over long periods (... *une poétique de la Relation, selon laquelle toute identité s'étend dans un rapport à l'Autre*).⁷ Each of these accounts reminds me of your thinking as well, when you challenge mainstream narratives about what it means to live well across the Third World.

I am reflecting upon such lifeways among Black diaspora, as you say, partly through Wynter's *writing around the moment of West Indian independence*, when a stark disjuncture became apparent between, on the one hand, syncretic, often land-

⁶ Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (2003) 9.

⁷ Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (1990) 23.

based, praxes of being human that have persisted since slavery – among Rastafari, Maroons, Revivalists – and, on the other hand, an elite class of anti-colonial nationalists. I wonder if the former ‘*stateless* societies’⁸ might illustrate [non-revolutionary breaks](#) with the order of knowledge, as African people sought to rehumanize themselves from the degradation of slavery and capitalism – acknowledging that [rehumanization is a process](#), not a romanticized people (race) free from violence (that the Maroons aligned with British slaveowners provides an example).

The capacity to embody ecumenical genres of the human, [Wynter tells us](#), *is possible* because the nature of our species is not race and resource, but *bios* and *mythoi*. This is to say that human beings are bound to each other and the natural world ecologically *and* we recount stories about who we are, what the good life is. It is within our uniquely hybrid nature to speak worlds into existence!

Black people have for centuries been cast as [non-human](#) and, drawing on Wynter and Fanon, I believe it is important not to renounce the uniqueness of being human in the face of our ecological materialism or our destructive ‘anthropocentrism’. These thinkers embrace, rather than discard, our human capacity for storytelling, which precedes knowledge about what it means to be biology and may return [myth to the earth](#). After Aimé Césaire, Wynter calls for a Science of the Word, ‘a rhythmic interplay between nature and narrative ... offering a species perspective on humanity (different and relational kinds and ways of being, different and relational stories about who and what we are and how we came to be)’.⁹

And so, NourbeSe Philip’s poem [The Ga\(s\)p](#) conveys for me how – while there is a debt to be discharged for genocidal violence – people, Black people, all people, can and must *give ourselves reparation* by retelling what it means to be human. Philip evokes circular breathing in the poem. An act of radical hospitality. Where we each received breath in the womb (in circumstances including Dana’s). With our first gasp at birth, we then breathe for ourselves, we breathe for our ancestors, and ‘each breath we take is a fragment of the larger breathing and breath of the universe’.¹⁰

5. Race and the Environment in Palestine

⁸ Wynter and McKittrick, 22 [emphasis in the original].

⁹ Katherine McKittrick, Frances H O’Shaughnessy & Kendall Witaszek, ‘Rhythm, or On Sylvia Wynter’s Science of the Word’ (2018) 70:4 *American Quarterly* 867, 867.

¹⁰ M NourbeSe Philip, ‘The Ga(s)p’ in Myung Mi Kim and Cristanne Miller (eds), *Poetics and Precarity* (2018) 39.

UN: In terms of undoing legal structures that wreak harm on racialized peoples and the natural world, we have discussed third world and Black ecologies, the meaning of reparations, as well as radical reconceptualizations of what it means to be human. I want to finish with some reflections on Palestine, not only because it is a situation perpetually close to both of our hearts and minds, but because it is a sad daily reminder of how imperial laws continue to racialize nature and naturalize race in parallel mutually reinforcing hierarchies.

Shourideh Molavi's excellent recent book, *Environmental Warfare in Gaza*, analyzes, among other things, how racialization and the exploitation of the natural world have operated to oppress Palestinians since the British Mandate, continuing and mounting existentially under Israel's illegal occupation. She describes how the British had categorized some of the plants used by Palestinians in their daily life as weeds, as invasive and natural enemies to the productive use of the land, which the British sought to eliminate and replace with a market-driven agroindustry. Similarly, Israel has demeaned Palestinian land relations and environmental practices as hindrances to enlightened social progress in terms of what Israel claims to be proper agricultural and urban land use. Such imperial narratives are specifically settler colonial in that they have been and are used to justify the dispossession of Palestinian life and land. The plants that are a nuisance and the people analogized with them must be eliminated, and then replaced by those plants and settlers who lay claim to more truly belonging and fitting into this landscape because settlers can better civilize and tame nature to fit themselves, making a garden out of a wilderness. Such **radical reconfiguring of who is invasive can only be imposed through extreme and genocidal violence**, a type of violence familiar in the European settler colonies of the Americas, Africa, and Australasia. Analogously, we see for instance in the Caribbean today many deforested areas redecorated with imported shrubs from other parts of the world in the service of rabid western touristic appetites. Imported shrubs better cater to western imaginaries of what exotic tropical beauty is supposed to look like, and this practice reinforces the exploitative, largely foreign owned tourism sector that many people of the Caribbean depend upon.

So much of our conversation over the last year has invariably begun and ended with Palestine, which in my mind and in my work is deeply intertwined with questions of environmental justice. How do you see these parallels materializing in your own work on race and on environmental justice, not just in your scholarship but also in your teaching and daily academic praxis? This is something that we have been having

an ongoing conversation about with each other and with our broader community of praxis in terms of the most tactical ways of making change when it comes to resisting the violence to people and planet that we are surrounded by, one of the most visceral instances of which is Israel's longstanding occupation of Palestine and the current annihilation of the Gaza Strip.

SRC: It is difficult for me to broach this question because Israel's occupation and genocide in Palestine are unbearable. Indiscriminate violence against people in order to resist Israel's violence is unbearable. And, as I write, I am again trying to advocate for learners distraught from the war to the best of my abilities within the constraints of a First World university. So, this question returns me to concerns about implacancy and the possibilities for being human under conditions of dominance, which we all contend with imperfectly. But, I will start where you did with [Molavi's book](#).

Beginning the book, as Molavi did, with an illustrated classification of botanicals under the British Mandate of Palestine, recalled for me precisely what you and I have been discussing throughout this conversation about the spread of [Euro-American epistemologies that justified mastery over people and ecologies](#) through hierarchically arranged categories of nature that have become nearly universal. I cannot help but find botanical drawings beautiful in their shading and detail, and because plants are innocents. Yet it is plain to see the liberal scientific and economic thinking of botanical drawings from the 17th to the 19th century, such as those classifying weeds for removal in Palestine.

Throughout this period, Euro-American romantics were involved, globally, in practices similar to botanical classifications, such as travel log writing, scenic painting and conservationism, which can be understood as having [actively constructed ecologies into landscapes](#) – where a 'landscape' is not immanent but 'an object of investigation and a site of intervention', in Molavi's words.¹¹ These aesthetics therefore [reflected partial conceptions of nature and colonial expansion ongoing at the time](#).

If the coupling of romanticism with imperialism can be seen in the Caribbean still today by way of the imported shrubs that you mentioned, Usha, historical plantation paintings illustrate this marriage in the *longue durée*. Such paintings depicted flora, fields, and the austere white houses of planters as idyllic landscapes, glossing over the brutal extraction.

¹¹ Shourideh Molavi, *Environmental Warfare in Gaza* (2024) 36. I am grateful to Jeffrey Kennedy who graciously engaged my reflections on landscapes while visiting the exhibition referred to in this sentence.

Palestine has likewise been landscaped into 'an object of investigation and a site of intervention' to return to Molavi. She observes, as you describe, how this occurred first under British rule, when plants significant to medicinal, cultural and spiritual qualities in the Palestinian social fabric were replaced by crops. Racialization overlapped with this ecological conversion, which Noura Erakat conveys, since, among the Mandates of the Middle East, Palestinians were deemed [unworthy of self-rule](#) due to their supposed non-productivity on the land. This [orientalizing](#) of Palestinians was inextricable from Britain's imaginary of the landscape as needing international supervision and resettlement. And the dehumanization of Palestinians continues today under international law through the perpetual status of Palestine as a *sui generis* territory, which obfuscates Israel's violence and maintains Palestinians in [subalternity](#).

Molavi's book describes how Israel's continuing control has been grounded, in this sense, in *ecological warfare*. I want to share one example, of the citrus industry, which had flourished since the 19th century within the now Gaza Strip, extending to Jaffa, and tying together a local economy. Molavi describes how the industry was, early on, more-or-less cooperative between Jewish and Palestinian farmers. But following the *Nakba* and Israel's occupation, orchards owned by Palestinian farmers were stolen. Within the Gaza Strip, the Occupation Forces then banned citrus groves (and olive and fig trees interspersed within them) along the securitized border to increase visibility, permitting low-lying plants, such as strawberries, that maintain control and lack ties to the Palestinian social fabric.

David Scott calls the destruction of lifeworlds upon which a social fabric depends an '[irreparable evil](#)' that demands redress, although the past cannot be restored. I wonder how the citrus orchards of Palestine, described before October 2023 by Molavi, might therefore compel reflections on what reparatory justice demands *now* in the wake of Israel's oblitative offensive.

In terms of my responsibilities, teaching and writing on the lands that Canada claims of Turtle Island, I am still learning how to fulfill them. I teach about Palestine as a crucible of the present order of knowledge that is [structurally connected to other places and processes of dispossession](#), including Jewish racialization and dispossession, which in many respects [Israel reinforces](#). I do so in smaller spaces, where trust has been established, or through other intentional means that, I believe, minimize risks to students and myself, without compromising honesty and care

(especially by creating openings for private exchanges). I have tried to express solidarity with students advocating for divestment and anticolonial liberation, while I will always be learning how to do so better. I have tried to be steadfast in my teaching, writing, the use of my signature However, solidarity, in my experience, may sometimes be stealthy and quiet, it involves uneasy compromises, and it is often transient and flawed.

Given this, above all, I strive for transformation that comes from nurturing interpersonal relationships. I hope that students and my peers will reflect with me on our common implacancy in the world, and on our differential positions, as well as on what it means to be human and part of a collective species – with a view to reducing violence and treating one another as equals. It is baffling to me that by restating what too many ICJ cases on Palestine have found (due to the courageous advocacy of individuals), people, many young, are treated as subhuman. Divisiveness around Palestine saddens me, and angers me, partly because it perpetuates a cycle of fixing people to categorical thinking, and makes them expendable, when human relations could be otherwise. Molavi implies this when invoking the history of the citrus economy. Her example reminded me of the opening to Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*, which describes an olive harvest before the *Nakba*:

In a distant time, before history marched over the hills and shattered present and future, before wind grabbed the land at one corner and shook it of its name and character, before Amal was born, a small village east of Haifa lived quietly on figs and olives, open frontiers and sunshine.¹²

The thumps of farmers' sticks striking branches, the shuddering of the leaves, the plop of fruit falling onto the old tarps and blankets that had been laid beneath the trees. As they toiled, women sang the ballads of centuries past and small children played and were chided by their mothers when they got in the way.¹³

Along the dusty road, the land rose in sylvan silence, charmed with the scents of citrus blooms and wild camphires.¹⁴

¹² Susan Abulhawa, *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) 3.

¹³ Ibid, 4.

¹⁴ Ibid, 8.