

<http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/toxicity.html>

## Toxicity

2017-10-16 11:49:06

By Danny Hoffman

### *1. Toxicity names forces for which there is no remediation.*

Ibrahim is a tour guide in the Senegalese capital, Dakar. His carefully crafted tour takes you around the city. But it builds steadily to what is clearly, for him, the grand finale. And indeed, what Ibrahim most wants you to see is a marvel: the Monument to the African Renaissance. 160ft high, it is the tallest statue in Africa. It sits at the highest point in the city. Built by North Koreans, it is a Socialist Realist fantasy: a bare chested, muscle bound man lifting a baby in one hand and squeezing a half-naked, diminutive woman with the other. Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade commissioned the monument, and although funded by the Senegalese state, his family takes a third of all proceeds from ticket sales. Even members of Senegal's parliament call the Monument a \$27 million crime, and the results a monstrous waste.





It is impossible to photograph the Monument to the African Renaissance. It is colossal. There is no place from which to capture its enormity or its absurdity. The foreign tourists and local schoolchildren who climb the steps of the monument cannot be positioned to give it scale. But Ibrahim is helpful here. He points out details that give the Monument to the African Renaissance meaning. Look at the woman, he says. She is pointing downward, straight to Gorée Island, Senegal's most famous slaving port. She is, Ibrahim says, pointing to Senegal's past.

*And look at the baby. He is pointing upward. He is pointing toward the future. He is pointing directly to ... New York.* Ibrahim pauses for effect. And then, with an expression that is impossible to read, he says it again. *New York. He is pointing to New York.*

Waste is an old topic in social theory. What the philosopher George Bataille called "the accursed share" (1991) and anthropologist Mary Douglas "matter out of place" (1996) is integral to how we function as social beings. Trash defines the limits of the acceptable and unacceptable, and what we define as waste [defines who we are](#). [Labelling certain bodies and populations "trash"](#) is the weapon of racial hierarchy and racist economic orders. Labelling practices wasteful or polluting is the foundation of economic exclusion, [the appropriation of resources](#), and [the criminalization of populations](#). Making and disposing of waste is, one might say, the foundation of both politics and capital.

But what about the toxic? It seems a different order of term. A poison beyond matter-out-of-place, something more than the by-products of an existing order. Is there need for a term that names what cannot be reclaimed? A thing that produces nothing, that destroys without creation?



Africa may not be unique in this regard, but there does seem across the continent an imperative to name a space beyond remediation. Forces that do not simply reinforce the existing order, however unequal or unjust. But a poison that cannot be processed with existing tools and strategies. The toxicity of slavery as an undressed wound. The toxicity of an African leadership [whose cynicism is absolute](#). The toxicity of a politics that [pits squatters and gleaners against environmentalists](#). The toxicity of an African Renaissance that can only be imagined as a monstrous finger pointing toward New York.

## *2. Toxicity transcends material and metaphor.*

Three men paddle a canoe through the slow waters of the St. Paul River in central Liberia. It is late in the day, the farm work done. From a stick raft, they will spend the next hours diving to the river bottom, hauling gravel, panning for diamonds and gold.

It is a common occupation for men in this region. In the constellation of villages that surround Bong Mine Town, there is no salaried work. The Liberian war closed the German-owned iron ore mine that gives Bong Mine its name. Small scale agriculture provides a subsistence living but little more. So the men of the villages scratch the earth and dredge the rivers. Their tools are simple: shovels, screens, bags, water, and bodies. But the work is made easier with machines that spew petrol and diesel, poisoning the river and thundering with constant, deafening sound. Mercury, when they can get it, makes the process even more efficient. But it, too, sickens the miners and everyone around them.

The iron mines also polluted and eroded the landscape, but the company

town had schools and shops. The company exploited their labor, but it paid on time and provided for their basic needs. If they needed it, they in turn had at their disposal the tools of workers everywhere: the strike, the go-slow, work-to-rule campaigns. [As resource extraction industries have done across the continent](#), the iron ore mine shaped the landscape of central Liberia and sculpted the social imaginary of modernity and belonging for generations of Africans laborers. One of the young men tells me that his strongest childhood memory is of family outings to the long-closed ice cream shop.

Artisanal mining in the ruins of the iron ore mines is, by contrast, a toxic affair. Under the best of circumstances it breaks the men's bodies down fast. Accidents are common. [Mercury pollutes](#) the waters and lives in the crops, the fish, and the miners' bodies. Fuel flavors the water in which the men work, children play and bathe and everyone drinks. The breathing apparatuses are crude and dangerous; they can burst a lung or suffocate a miner stuck under the murky waters of the St. Paul.

Artisanal mining on the St. Paul isn't new, but its political economy has changed since the closing of the iron mine. The minerals that the earth yields now are unpredictable. They don't support the infrastructure of a company town. The village school functions intermittently, and when it does it is crowded and poorly staffed. The local chiefs deal with a wandering workforce of young men who drift between mine sites, chasing rumors of big yields and new discoveries. In lieu of paychecks and predictability the miners place an all-in bet, staking bodies and lives on a gamble that – if it succeeds – will radically alter their futures.

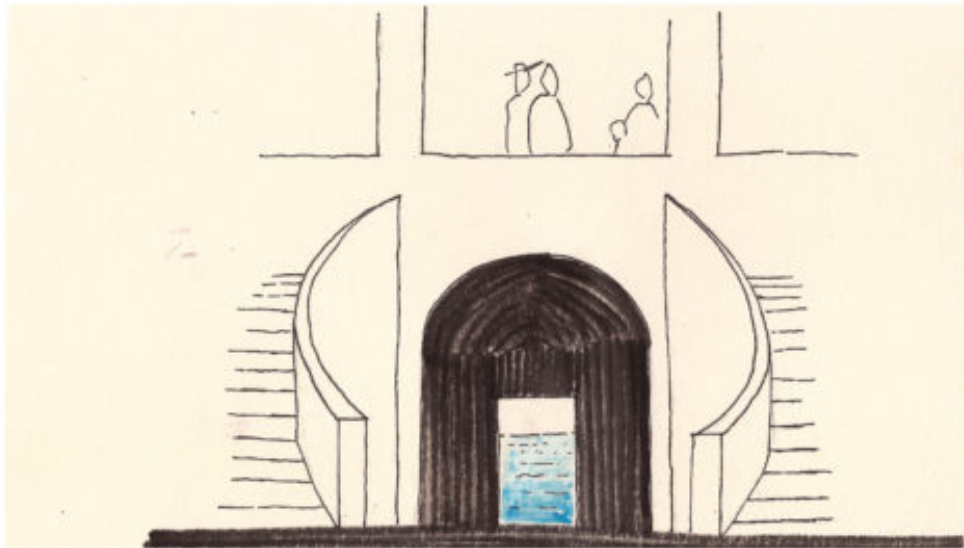
Because the stakes are high and the material stuff of gold and diamonds is so easily stolen, there is little trust on the mines. The river is full of stories of miners who cut friends' breathing tubes the moment they discover a gem or a rich gold deposit. Landowners and claim holders sit for hours on the river bank, alert for signs of theft. "Mining is guerilla war," is a common refrain, and the stories of brothers stealing from brothers, lovers pilfering the days' yield, long-time friends murdering one another over small bits of stone are as common as the stories of miners who become sick and injured and destroyed by the work. (See, by contrast, the deeper history of West African mining in [Robyn d'Avignon's contribution to this series](#)).

[To say that toxic matter is ontologically unfixed](#) is to say that something may not be toxic under all circumstances, at all times or to all those who come in contact with it. But to say that the toxic is ontologically indeterminate also means that it erases the distinction between material and metaphor. Is a thing poisonous to the human body? To the planet?

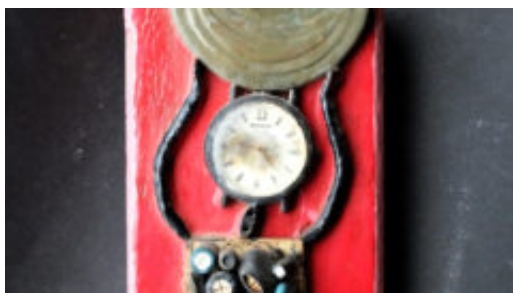
Poisonous to the social fabric? The redundancy of these questions may be in part what defines an [African Anthropocene](#).

3. *To inhabit a toxic landscape, one must grow impossible new organs.*

The Door of No Return is the symbol of Senegal's Gorée Island. Though relatively unimportant as a site in the trans-Atlantic slaving economy, it has become the signifier of slavery's original wound. Senegal's tourist economy depends to a large degree on one small opening in one small structure on the easternmost edge of the Atlantic, [a tiny framed view of the open sea](#).



Tour guides point out the various holding cells for men, women and children. Each has a version of the story of Nelson Mandela or [Barack Obama](#) visiting the site, gazing through the small opening in the wall and confronting the toxic legacy of the traffic in human bodies.





Up the hill above the House of Slaves and the Door of No Return is a different collection of monuments. They are more ambiguous. The site was a Second World War military installation, an outpost for scanning the sea. Today there is an artists' colony in the ruins, selling weirdly beautiful creations made from trash claimed from the beaches. For the benefit of foreign tourists, the artists do little to dispel the myth of an inherent African genius for artistic creation and the hill has the feel of a mad hippy compound of auto-didacts. But many of the residents are graduates of the [Dakar School of Fine Arts](#), and they can speak with critical precision about the artistic legacies on which they draw and to which they belong. Here, too, there is space to contemplate the sea. But rather than framed by a melancholic Door of No Return, it is a view framed by a ludic embrace of recycling, a mad celebration of the creative and the absurd.



New monuments are everywhere. The French city of Nantes, once that country's largest slave port, has its new [Memorial to the Abolition of](#)

[Slavery](#). It is a moving space intended to invoke the inner holds of slaving ships.



It is, according to Nantes' mayor, "[an invitation](#) to reflect on a dark chapter in the history of our city." People trickle through the space, reflecting.



But above ground, not far away, a large and cosmopolitan group of youth assembles beneath a surreal public art project. It is a curved soccer pitch with distorted goals, a dream field that only looks correctly proportioned when reflected in a gigantic curved mirror. Together this group of French, West African, and North African youth figure out how to play their games on a wildly distorted field.



Up the Loire river at the mouth of the sea is another monument to slavery. Artist Jean-Claude Mayo's 1989 monument mixes elements intended to invoke the ribs of a slave ship. Three humanoid figures climb from the sea, symbolically invoking the stages of liberation from bondage. Like Dakar's "Monument to the African Renaissance," Mayo's sculpture is impossible to photograph. Not because of its scale in this case, but because ubiquitous seagulls disrupt the monument's silhouettes.



Across the street, a muralist has painted the massive faces of two women, one white, the other black. It commemorates nothing. One cannot photograph these gigantic monuments, either, without including extraneous elements. But unlike the monuments to the abolition of slavery, those random bits of daily life that intrude on the frame do not distract from the message of the monument. They make their own statements, giving extra layers of meaning and capitalizing on the productive, rather than destructive, potential in the absurd.





To inhabit a toxic landscape, one must become mutant, learn to grow new and impossible organs, as the theorist Fredrick Jameson once said of postmodern architecture (1991). This was also the insight in the philosopher Achille Mbembe's controversial essay on African "self-writing" (2002), in which he argued that African intellectual history lacked a way to meaningfully come to terms with the legacy of colonialism, slavery and apartheid. The dominant frameworks for dealing with the continent's historical trauma were meta-narratives that offered no useful proposals for responding to a fractured and violent present.

To paraphrase Mbembe in the vocabulary of our collective project, the present for many Africans is toxic. It is a space outside remediation, space that cannot be understood even according to the hierarchical logic of waste and productive destruction. Its toxic effects on African bodies and African subjects, as on African landscapes, is simultaneously material and metaphoric. And yet within this toxic landscape there are emergent, mutant forms. Moments of aesthetic crossing and absurd conjuncture that might, in fact, hint at uncoded modes of habitation. They are the sites not of remediation, but hopeful episodes of living differently. They work as new growths, largely unmoored from the past and, as Sharad Chari puts it [in his essay here](#), "a way of thinking of political futures that cannot quite yet be spelled out in words alone." (See also [Mehita Iqani's conversation with Francois Knoetze](#)). The present is toxic. But within it, impossible new bodies are born.

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## AMA citation

Hoffman D. Toxicity. *Somatosphere*. 2017. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/toxicity.html>. Accessed January 22, 2018.

## APA citation

Hoffman, Danny. (2017). *Toxicity*. Retrieved January 22, 2018, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/toxicity.html>

## Chicago citation

Hoffman, Danny. 2017. Toxicity. *Somatosphere*. <http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/toxicity.html> (accessed January 22, 2018).

## Harvard citation

Hoffman, D 2017, *Toxicity*, Somatosphere. Retrieved January 22, 2018, from <<http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/toxicity.html>>

## MLA citation

Hoffman, Danny. "Toxicity." 16 Oct. 2017. *Somatosphere*. Accessed 22 Jan. 2018.<<http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/toxicity.html>>