

The domestic geopolitics of racial capitalism

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epc**Pavithra Vasudevan** 

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Abstract

In this paper, we analyze the racialized burden of toxicity in the US as a case study of what we call “domestic geopolitics.” Drawing on the case studies of Badin, North Carolina, and Flint, Michigan, we argue that maintaining life in conditions of racialized toxicity is not only a matter of survival, but also a geopolitical praxis. We propose the term domestic geopolitics to describe a reconceived feminist geopolitics integrating an analysis of Black geographies as a domestic form of colonialism, with an expanded understanding of domesticity as political work. We develop the domestic geopolitics framework based on the dual meaning of domestic: the inward facing geopolitics of racialization and the resistance embodied in domestic labors of maintaining life, home, and community. Drawing on Black feminist scholars, we describe three categories of social reproductive labor in conditions of racialized toxicity: the labor of keeping wake, the labor of tactical expertise, and the labor of revolutionary mothering. We argue that Black survival struggles exemplify a domestic geopolitics of everyday warfare against racial capitalism’s onslaught.

Keywords

Environmental justice, Black feminism, social reproduction, Black geographies, decoloniality

Life’s work in the shadows of empire

Roberta Simpson¹ lives in West Badin, North Carolina. Roberta worked for Alcoa, Inc. (formerly, the Aluminum Company of America) in their Badin smelting plant from

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1976 to 2003. Working at Alcoa was an inheritance of danger and discrimination:

My daddy had seven children that he had to feed . . . He spent 44 years down there. They never gave my father a mask. The whites had the best jobs. There was a thing down there called a bull gang. That was the slang term for that nasty job. I never knew what my daddy had to go through until I was hired . . . And I, too, started in the bull gang. You're setting a big, black carbon. It weighs over a ton. And runnin' fire. I never seen runnin' fire in all the days of my life. And it was so hot! The women had to protect their bodies. We would get burned.

Capitalism is predicated upon a racialized hierarchy of gendered bodies and accompanying racialization of space: a heavily polluting aluminum smelting plant, crucial to US 20th-century industrialization, employed Black laborers in the most physically demanding and hazardous jobs and dumped lethal industrial waste adjacent to the Black residential area. Roberta has struggled to keep herself and her community alive. Whether fighting for safety measures and dignity in the workplace, or for government accountability and hazardous waste remediation outside of work, survival has involved constant strategizing of how to leverage limited power against the impossible odds of an uncaring government colluding with a multinational giant. For communities of color living in capitalism's toxic "sacrifice zones" (Lerner, 2012), "life's work," the gendered labor of social reproduction (Mitchell et al., 2004), is characterized by daily negotiations with death-dealing structures that complicate, and exceed, the already challenging demands of obtaining food, maintaining a household, and sustaining community networks.

Meanwhile, in Flint, Michigan, four years after news broke of widespread lead poisoning, children's safety remains a concern for caregivers wrestling with conflicting information from government officials and scientists. In 2016, eight-year-old Mari Copeny, "Little Miss Flint," wrote to then-President Obama, asking him to visit. Copeny and her mother, Lulu Brezzell, have raised over \$350,000 through donations and fundraisers to provide residents bottled water (Suggs, 2019). Their activism makes visible the often-hidden labor of survival in zones of "organized abandonment" (Gilmore, 2008)—the uncelebrated, mundane, and tedious work of hauling, unwrapping, and distributing water, reading reports, attending hearings, navigating broken trust and frustration, considering flight, and enduring.

Despite unique histories, rooted in the South and the Rust Belt respectively, Badin and Flint share characteristics that are tragically common among predominantly Black communities in the US: a greater likelihood of premature death (Gilmore, 2002), due in part to the racialized concentration of lethal industrial waste, reflecting state neglect and collusion with industry (Holifield, 2001; Taylor, 2014). Environmental racism is a constitutive element of "racial capitalism," a Black radical theorization of how capitalism develops through the proliferation of social hierarchies based in the devaluation of racialized people (Gilmore, 2002; Pulido, 2016; Robinson, 2000). Racially disproportionate exposure to toxicity is a material manifestation of capitalism's "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011), which erodes the environmental conditions sustaining life. However, Badin's sacrifice and Flint's abandonment are neither incidental nor accidental. Racial zones of toxicity and abandonment are the shadow geographies of empire. Celebrated for their productivity during industrialization, their subsequent economic decline and rising concerns about contamination reflect a process of ruination (Stoler, 2008) that we argue is *symptomatic of a colonial relationship with the US imperial state*. Rendered materially and symbolically surplus, these territories are erased from national imaginaries of progress; such sites of production that have been sacrificed for the so-called "national good" point to the ways that "imperialism as a way of life

[animates] the architecture of sociopolitical relations at home as well as abroad” (Sundberg, 2015: 210). Yet life endures in the shadows of empire.

We draw on the analytic framework of “Black geographies” (McKittrick and Woods, 2007) to examine social reproductive labor in Badin and Flint. Black geographies illuminate how Black people’s experiences and knowledges are cartographically and systematically marginalized, despite their centrality to the uneven development of capitalist modernity, rendered “as invisible/forgettable, at the same time as the invisible/forgettable is producing space” (McKittrick and Woods, 2007: 4). Chattel slavery’s illogic, equating Blackness with non-humanity, is perpetuated in contemporary capitalism, “[casting] Black geographies as empty and threatening, open to occupation, and subject to surveillance and assault” (Bledsoe and Wright, 2018: 4). The association of Black geographies with waste (Wright, 2018) enables iterative processes of capitalist accumulation through technologies of development, dispossession, and debt (Harris, 2019). However, rather than merely reiterating anti-Black material violence and erasure, the Black geographies analytic reimagines socio-spatial relations through Black lived experiences. Following McKittrick’s invitation to conceptualize Black geographies beyond the colonial plantation logics that structure them, we understand scenes of Black suffering not as a catalog of death but of “the struggle *against* death” (McKittrick, 2013: 14). In Badin and Flint, surviving colonization demands a dizzying range of labor: bearing witness to premature deaths; learning scientific language to explain inexplicable harm; and assuming responsibility for community welfare. Such practices to sustain life and enable futurity in necropolitical conditions constitute a *geopolitical praxis*: strategies engaged by domestic populations to defend their bodies, homes, and communities from the unspectacular, yet insistent, everyday onslaught of an imperial state.

We propose the term *domestic geopolitics* to describe a reconceived feminist geopolitics integrating an analysis of US anti-Black racism as a form of “internal colonialism” (Hamilton and Ture, 1992/1967), with an expanded understanding of Black women’s social reproduction in “the afterlife of slavery” (Hartman, 2007: 6) as political work (Hartman, 2016; James, 1997; Sharpe, 2016). Our conceptualization of domestic geopolitics integrates the dual meanings of domestic: governance within a state’s territorial bounds *and* the intimate sphere of social life that constitutes the home, family, and community. In developing the concept of domestic geopolitics, we first outline why internal colonialism is significant for understanding Black relations with the US state in general and its specific relevance to racialized toxicity. We then review feminist scholarship on social reproduction, centering Black women’s labor to redefine the domestic as a sphere of political praxis. Domestic geopolitics is the political work undertaken by racialized peoples living within imperial states, whose strategies of survival are a refusal of their structurally consigned disposability; the labor of caring for and preserving life in such necropolitical conditions is a matter of “self-preservation, and this an act of political warfare” (Lorde, 1988: 131). By drawing attention to the domesticity of geopolitics, we suggest that the operations of and resistance to internal colonialism are intimately entangled in global empire; it is the forgetting of these intimacies of empire that enables a deceptive façade of liberal humanism retrenching colonial divisions of humanity (Lowe, 2015).

We contextualize our analysis in two sites of industrial ruination,² indicative of how environmental racism manifests in the shadows of US imperial power. The first, Badin, North Carolina, is an example that community leader Morris describes as “not even hidden racism”: in this segregated company town, Black residents have disproportionately suffered from toxic exposure by a heavily polluting aluminum plant without government oversight. The second, Flint, Michigan, is a former industrial hub where municipal disinvestment and state abandonment resulted in widespread lead poisoning. While an in-depth

examination of Badin and Flint's significance for US empire is beyond this article's scope, we highlight key aspects of each site's relation to empire. We iterate domestic geopolitics through three forms of geopolitical praxis that we elaborate below: the labor of keeping wake, the labor of tactical expertise, and the labor of revolutionary mothering.

In reading Black feminism alongside analytics of empire, we argue that anti-Black abjection and the work of survival are best understood by considering how "colonial divisions of humanity—settler seizure and native removal, slavery and racial dispossession, and the multiplicity of racialized expropriations—are imbricated processes, not sequential events," ongoing and continuous (Lowe, 2015: 7). We expect other studies could utilize the domestic geopolitics framework for examining other modes of, and resistance to, imperial violence that functions through internal colonial logics, including cultural production, police violence, and disease. Here, we focus on environmental racism as one mode of the geopolitics of oppression and resistance that we read through the dual meanings of the domestic.

Domestic geopolitics

The racial empire's internal colony

Feminist geopolitics complicates the locus of politics, revealing how state, territory, and belonging are (un)made across disparate sites and multiple scales including bodies, families, neighborhoods, cities, and transnational networks (Massaro and Williams, 2013; Pain, 2015). This scalar shift creates an opening to examine population governance *within and across* states' territorial boundaries as equally a matter of geopolitical concern. Race, indigeneity, class, nationality, and gender intersecting with territorialization (Casolo and Doshi, 2013; Fluri and Piedalue, 2017; Zaragocin, 2019) link *domestic* oppression with *global* political economies, seen for example, in how municipal policing interventions to address intimate partner violence reiterate global masculinist security discourses (Cuomo, 2013). We encourage greater cross-pollination between feminist geopolitics and theorizations of racial capitalism, building on the argument, which emerged through the Black Power movement (Hamilton and Ture, 1992/1967), that Black communities are governed as an "internal colony" of US empire (Blauner, 1969; Gutiérrez, 2004; Pinderhughes, 2011). While anti-Black governance may be examined through the lens of the racial state (Goldberg, 2002), the "internal colonialism" analytic more clearly explicates how intra-national violence is an aspect of global colonization.

Geopolitical discourses and technologies of warfare are neither symbolic nor hyperbolic for domestic racialized populations. Black communities are subject to a "domestic geography of perpetual war" (Cowen and Lewis, 2016) through technologies of development, dispossession, and debt that reproduce chattel slavery's illogics (Harris, 2019) in ever-expanding modes of carceralization (Shabazz, 2015) and necropolitical governance (Mbembe and Meintjes, 2003). In Philadelphia, young Black men targeted by the state's "war on drugs" continue occupying public spaces despite the inherent dangers as "an ongoing nationalist effort to maintain the city as a coherent territory in the face of aggressive forces of fragmentation" (Massaro, 2015: 372). US brown populations associated with Muslimness are implicitly assumed to be foreign (Husain, 2019) and framed as enemies of US empire, as terrorists, divisive threats to cohesion, and signifiers of cultural decay (Puar and Rai, 2002; Silva, 2016)—a post 9/11 intensification of Orientalism converging with a longer history of anti-Black surveillance (Browne, 2015). The architectures of domestic and global imperialism are linked not only through racist discourses, but through material infrastructures. In Hurricane Katrina's aftermath, government contracted relief workers

criminalized Black residents purportedly to restore calm (Giroux, 2006); these very security forces profited off imperial incursions abroad, killing innocent Iraqis (Adams, 2013). To recognize empire's workings in its shadow geographies is to recognize the US economy's orientation toward militarization even in "peacetime," and the continuities of warfare abroad and structural violence at home (Loyd, 2011).

Racialized toxicity illustrates how industrialization's structural violence may constitute internal colonialism. The degradation of industrial production zones is justified in terms of the "national good"—whether explicitly geopolitical, as with Badin's wartime aluminum production, or implicitly so, as with Flint and the automobile industry's importance to US economic power. Such nationalist discourses enact a territorial imaginary that erases racialized people from the national body, even as they are "confined . . . to zones of death and sacrifice *in service to white futurity*" (Smith and Vasudevan, 2017). The sacrifice demanded for the nation-state may be literal, as in the irradiation of Indigenous peoples through nuclear test sites, an internal colonialism that extends militarization into everyday life³ (Taylor, 2014). Industrial toxicity may be productively understood as "imperial ruination," what people are "left *with*: what remains that blocks livelihoods and health; the aftershocks of imperial assault; the social afterlife of degraded infrastructures; distressed sensibilities; and the things by which one is assailed and assaulted by their very presence" (Stoler, 2008: 348). Chemical residues absorbed from polluted environments, the physiological and emotional stresses they engender, and their subsequent intergenerational transmission suggest a deeply embodied territorialization of coloniality (Zaragocin, 2019).

Reading empire through ruination is to recognize that racialized geographies are purposefully underdeveloped for extraction, that ruins are not an aftermath, but an ongoing element of capitalism's spatial dialectic (Purifoy, 2019). Toxins serve as a vehicle through which anti-Blackness is infused into everyday life, bodies, and spaces via intimate pathways (Vasudevan, 2019), perpetuating the naturalization of racialized geographies as damaged areas, as though Blackness itself contaminates the earth (Wright, 2018). Thus predominantly Black spaces become signified as toxic and blighted, masking the very structural forces that engender their underdevelopment (Lipsitz, 2011; Muhammad, 2010). However, ruins are also the site of "*refusal* of the life-degrading presence of the infrastructures of state racism" (Chari, 2013: 137). In following the layered meanings of the word domestic, we tilt the stage to examine not only how empire domesticates racialized populations, but how the domestic becomes the terrain of refusal.

Everyday struggles of body, home, life

Feminist geopolitics reveals the domestic as a geopolitical arena: states produce insecurity for marginalized populations by targeting everyday life, and communities enduring conflict restructure intimacy, kin, and care to sustain home (Clark, 2016; Fregones, in Rokem et al., 2017). However, domestic space is sharply differentiated by internal colonialism's racialized territorialities. Poor Indigenous women and women of color living in toxic landscapes are additionally burdened in every aspect of social reproduction—from childbearing, to elder and childcare, to the provision of safe food and water, to the maintenance of social relations (Di Chiro, 2008/1965; LaDuke, 2015/1999). We argue that this social reproductive labor is *geopolitical*, drawing inspiration from scholars who attend to labor, socialization, and racial violence particular to Black women's experiences, to redress the erasure of Black women from historiographies of political struggle (Farmer, 2017; McCutcheon, 2019; McGuire, 2010).

The hearth of the US racial empire, maintained by Black women's racialized, classed, and gendered labor, is embroiled in a history of struggle. In the efforts of enslaved women who "judged the plantation a viable site from which to wage war and engage in the process of emancipation" (Glymph, 2013: 492), and in the organizing campaigns of waged household workers (Nadasen, 2015), we trace a lineage of racialized oppression and resistance that calls for repoliticizing the domestic. For Black women, exploited to reproduce empire, the domestic signifies a parallel space of struggle, that of *nurturing their own homes, families, and communities* amidst the violence of internal colonialism (Davis, 1972). In the early 20th century, following mass migration to the North, Black women's clubs organized neighborhood campaigns to address unsafe living conditions in overcrowded cities (Mann, 2011). This eco-feminist lineage persists in contemporary environmental justice, concerned with "the survivability of individual bodies, particular communities, national cultures, and the earth itself" (Di Chiro, 2008: 280). In sustaining sociality and personhood in excess of the demands of imperial reproduction, Black women have ensured the persistence of "remaindered life," that is, "subaltern pathways of social and self-formation that remain beneath the threshold of visibility of raced subjects" (Tadiar, 2015: 156).

Roberta's history of fighting racial capitalism are a starting point to consider how feminist political geography *and* environmental justice scholarship might be strengthened by engaging with Black feminist theorizations of the domestic. We argue that Black social reproductive practices constitute an embodied form of geopolitical praxis, an unacknowledged engagement with the imperial state's necropolitical governance of Black life (Smith, 2016). We identify three categories of labor as strategies of domestic geopolitics. The *labor of keeping wake* refers to practices of caring for, attending to, and registering deaths in the community, a secular ritual of valuing lives in death that are sacrificed in life (Sharpe, 2016). The *labor of tactical expertise* addresses how racialized people, living with double consciousness (Du Bois, 2008; Fanon, 2008/1967), must translate the lived experience of racial violence into scientific and legal discourses legible to the state. The *labor of revolutionary mothering* (Gumbs et al., 2016; James, 1997) describes the responsibility of nurturing communal life in the face of persistent death as a creative force of worldmaking. In the next sections, we describe the context of everyday life in Badin and Flint, abandoned as surplus populations by a state intent on facilitating racial capitalism, followed with a discussion of the labors that constitute domestic geopolitics' challenge to the racial state.

Everyday life in imperial ruins

Badin, North Carolina

I promise you, every inch of that soil and the area around it, is contaminated. They owned all the property, all they had to do was go dump it in the woods... When the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources did the interview to try and locate all of these sites, they never came into the West Badin community to ask anybody about anything. So what does that tell you?... It's not even hidden racism. (Morris Tension, CCWBC meeting, 1.19.16)

Badin, North Carolina, was a segregated company town of industrial giant Alcoa, where primary aluminum was smelted from 1917 to 2007. In and around Badin, toxic remnants of nearly 100 years of smelting constitute a material archive of capitalism's injustices sedimented into the landscape (Pulido, 2000). In one sense, as Morris suggests, the effects of

race are not hidden. Badin typifies environmental racism: unevenly distributed hazardous waste that disproportionately burdens a marginalized population excluded from political decision-making processes (Chavis, 1994; Holifield, 2001). Black workers were consigned to the dirtiest jobs in the plant without any protective gear until the 1970s, municipal and industrial waste were deposited for over 60 years in a landfill in West Badin, the Black residential area of town, and Black residents, dependent on subsistence hunting and fishing, were more vulnerable to environmental contamination. Amplifying explicit discrimination, toxic pathways operationalize racism at a molecular scale, complicating perceptions of and attempts to prove injustice (Vasudevan, 2019). Thus territorialized ecologically and corporally, racism condemns Black residents and workers to a generational transfer of lethal chemical exposures.

Badin is a key node of racial capitalism in the global geopolitics of aluminum production. From plant construction to closure, Badin's story encapsulates a history of racial devaluation in the 20th century, even as aluminum production enabled the US rise to geopolitical dominance. In Badin, among the earliest US aluminum smelters, profitability was enabled by the disposability of Black bodies. Industry histories emphasize the availability of cheap hydropower as the key variable in locating plants, disregarding the significance of a seemingly endless and inexpensive supply of Black laborers. In the "New South," former plantation elites reconsolidated economic power following abolition and Reconstruction by actively exploiting racial divisions within low-wage workforces to develop new industries (Billings, 1982; Woods, 2017/1998). Black workers were incorporated into industrialization's promise of a hopeful future as manual laborers, subjected to the smelting furnace's extreme heat and toxic environment (Vasudevan, 2019).

In direct contrast with Black abandonment in Badin, Alcoa benefited from a relationship of mutual reciprocity with the US government. In his 1961 farewell address, President Dwight Eisenhower's cautionary note about the "unwarranted influence" of government by the "military-industrial complex" was likely referencing the consolidation of power by Alcoa, the US military's sole source of aluminum material and technological expertise through World Wars I and II (Sheller, 2014). Alcoa integrated vertically and expanded globally in concert with US imperialism, by purchasing vast holdings including bauxite mines, factories, and dams to power production, while planting its executives and investors in key foreign service positions (Sheller, 2014). Badin's erasure from Alcoa's fable of geopolitical prowess and modernization exemplifies US racial capitalism's hierarchy of valuation in which corporations are designated personhood and Black people disregarded as property (Adams, 2007).

Badin today is embroiled in contestations over aluminum's toxic residues, entrapped by state neglect and industrial abdications. Black residents formed an organization in September 2013, the Concerned Citizens of West Badin Community (CCWBC), to redress their exclusion from environmental regulatory processes and to address health disparities. This emergent struggle, in the aftermath of active production, testifies to residents' realization of their disposability amidst celebratory accounts of productivity and progress, in itself an act of geopolitical resistance.

Flint, Michigan

When lead enters the body, it infiltrates all of it: the nervous system, the brain, the liver, the bones; no bodily system is spared. For children and developing fetuses lead contamination of the brain and nervous system at any level is clinically unacceptable... In Flint, Michigan,

all children under the age of six—nearly 9000 in total—are now being treated as if they were exposed to lead due to the contamination of the town’s water system. (Ranganathan, 2016: 17–18)

Nine thousand children potentially poisoned by lead, their capacities compromised for life, is not, as Ranganathan observes, incidental to the functioning of capitalism, nor does it need to result from intentionally racist “bad actors” to be understood as an attack on a population that is 57% Black and 42% poor. This violence extends settler colonialism and anti-Blackness through racial liberalism, which “fuse[s] technologies of racial domination with liberal freedoms to represent people who are exploited for, or cut off from, capitalist wealth as outsiders to liberal subjectivity [and] for whom life can be disallowed to the point of death” (Melamed, 2006: 2; Ranganathan, 2016). Flint’s reproductive catastrophe (Grossman and Slusky, 2017) points to a profound devaluation of Black bodies, life, and futurity. It is a biopolitical action against Black and poor people that threatens generational damage. It is a theft of time from those who drive around collecting gallons of water for cooking, drinking, and bathing their children. Flint’s catastrophe gives new meaning to “life’s work.”

In April 2014, the Emergency Fiscal Manager turned to the polluted Flint River to cut costs. Residents immediately complained about taste and color (Pulido, 2016) and general motors (GM) stopped using Flint River water, which was damaging machinery. The contamination was itself caused by GM’s factories (Craven and Tynes, 2016), and racial capitalism’s politics of infrastructural abandonment (Gilmore, 2008; Pulido, 2016). In 2015, Flint was found in violation of the Safe Drinking Water Act (AP, 2017). Local, state, and national officials dragged their feet, obfuscated data, and tried to discredit researchers, only declaring a state of emergency after a 2015 study demonstrated a doubling in the percentage of children with high lead levels. The crisis had led to a “horrifyingly large” increase in stillbirths, miscarriages, and a parallel decline in fertility (Ingraham, 2017). In 2017, water was declared safe, but many continue using filters and bottled water. Flint resident Jeneyah McDonald describes: “I don’t know any way to explain to a 6-year-old why you can’t take a bath anymore every day, why you can’t help mommy wash the dishes anymore. So I told him it’s poison, and that way he’ll know I’m serious.” (All Things Considered, 2017). Reports suggest that Flint children’s exam scores have plunged, whether from lead levels or the disruption and stress caused by the crisis (Riley, 2018).

As an industrial center for the automobile industry, Flint was imbricated in the machinations of empire. The “quintessential manufactured object,” indeed, one that has driven theorizations of manufacturing paradigms (e.g. Fordism/post-Fordism), the automobile is also a primary driver of environmental resource-use (Sheller and Urry, 2000), entangled with US imperialism. Simultaneously, Michigan automobile factories were a key site of Black labor struggles that understood domestic racialization in global anticolonial terms (Petersen-Smith, 2019). Auto imperialism, whose entanglements in oil drive military intervention abroad, manifest as environmental racism domestically.

Race is a key strategy by which capital produces a variegated landscape for extracting value, the illiberal means through which private property and individual freedom become naturalized in white (male) land-owning bodies (Derickson, 2016b; Harris, 1993; Ranganathan, 2016; Robinson, 2000). Depopulation and abandonment driven by deindustrialization led to Flint becoming more poor and more Black: 70% white in 1970, Flint today is 30% white (Pulido, 2016). Associated with Blackness, Flint’s people have become a surplus population (Pulido, 2016). Rather than indicating the conditions of anti-Blackness

that produced the crisis, Flint's poisoned water further embeds it in Blackness, adhering to the white bodies as well who remain within its boundaries.

How can we understand the life's work that Black communities in Badin and Flint must undertake to survive racialized toxicity in the shadows of empire? In the sections that follow, we read social reproductive labor in Badin and Flint through Black feminist scholars. In attending to community deaths, interpreting suffering for a state that has repeatedly abandoned them, and nurturing life when they have been positioned for death, we argue that Black survival strategies exemplify *a domestic geopolitics of everyday warfare* against racial capitalism's onslaught.

The praxis of domestic geopolitics

Labor of keeping wake

Reflection from Vasudevan's fieldnotes:

When I first browsed through Tillie Rae Wallace's scrapbooks, I did not realize I was reading obituaries. Nestled between family photos and newspaper clippings, yellowing scraps from the *Tarheel Alcoa*, Alcoa's monthly bulletin, profiled workers who had joined the company's 25-year and 30-year service clubs. Beneath headshots, short columns revealed neighborly tidbits of employees' daily lives: "Mr. Bruton, currently a truck driver, is a Mason and an Elk"; "Mr. Colson, a Methodist, enjoys hunting and fishing." I later learned that Black workers refer to Alcoa's seniority clubs as "the death group." In interviews, I heard story after story about the deaths of Black men who worked at BadinWorks. Raymond, an Alcoa for over 30 years, estimates that 85% of the Black men who worked at Alcoa died unjustly and prematurely from toxic exposure. Initially mistaking Tillie Rae's stories for nostalgic living room recollections, I now recognize the scrapbooks as a testimonial to the pervasiveness of death in slavery's afterlife.

Life's work under racialized violence is about valuing death as a fact of life, an inheritance of chattel slavery. In Jamaica's sugar plantations, death rites were crucial social reproductive spaces, where enslaved people could articulate communal and familial connections and affirm the social value denied to people in life (Brown, 2008). Black diasporic life is lived "in the wake" (Sharpe, 2016: 17–18) of slavery, with its multitude of meanings: "the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness." In West Badin, "wake work" (Sharpe, 2016) takes many forms. In community meetings, residents conduct roll calls, naming friends and family who passed away too young, and those still alive, who bear marks of their battle for survival in lungs that struggle to breathe and hearts that threaten attack. Death is everpresent, and generations of prematurely dead appear routinely in conversations and community spaces as ghostly figures,⁴ questioning declarations of progress or the possibility of futurity.

Though Tillie Rae is the *de facto* community historian of West Badin, she is not alone. An older generation of women compiled scrapbooks with obituaries, like others collect treasured recipes. At one community meeting, three (now adult) women talked about their mother, aunt, or grandmother collecting obituaries. In a community dialogue that followed a presentation of oral histories, Glenda, now in her 40s, had a profound realization of the scrapbooks' significance:

My great aunt has about four or five albums of just obituaries of African American men who have died from Alcoa...every now and again she would add to it, and

I wondered . . . But [listening] to what you all have been speaking about and then thinking [back] on the album that she collected—she said, “Baby there’s all these men, all these men who have died”—and it’s amazing, I believe I’m probably not the only one that *hasn’t* heard the story like that, *in that retrospect*. (italics, our emphasis)

In Glenda’s *retrospect*—vision gained from looking back—gathering obituaries gains new meaning amidst community conversations about toxicity’s impacts. The scrapbooks punctuate celebratory accounts of Black contributions to aluminum production, revealing the constraints that bound an older generation of workers from speaking openly about the hazards of industrial work. Raymond was warned not to “go off at the mouth, or we would get the plant shut down.” Residents often describe work at Alcoa as an opportunity for advancement, reflecting the very recruitment discourses Alcoa employed. Scrapbooks contain a domestic archive of the unspoken realities of industrial life, signaling the burden generations of women have borne in attending to premature deaths.

When Nakiyah Wakes moved to Flint in 2014, she suffered two miscarriages and immediately noticed changes in her son, who received 50 school suspensions. Speaking in Cedric Taylor’s documentary *Nor any drop to drink: the Flint water crisis*, she says, “I do not trust the water and . . . I probably will never trust the water again. I’ve lost all trust in our government—federal, state, I have lost trust in everyone” (Taylor, 2018). As Rankine (2015) writes, “the condition of Black life is one of mourning,” and, “there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black,” and then begins a litany of reasons for Black death, ending, “no living while black.”

Hanna-Attisha, the Iraqi-American pediatrician who served as one of the whistleblowers during the Flint crisis writes, “If you were going to put something in a population to keep people down for generations to come, it would be lead . . . It’s really science-fiction comic-book stuff, like the X-Men, except the victims aren’t getting superpowers. Their powers are being taken away.” In the wake of the unfolding water crisis, residents have their own analysis of what happened—and what is next. Lendra Brown, who suffered the effects of lead poisoning, accuses, “They are killing us . . . they killed us. We are an invisible people . . . and we don’t matter,” (Taylor, 2018) *and yet*, Brown seeks to *make herself matter*. At a 18 February meeting, Brown was vocal, signing onto a lawsuit and encouraging others to do so as well, to demand financial recompense: “I think that if you hit them in their pocket that what hurts a person . . . calling them names and all that . . . doesn’t get us anywhere” (Borowy and Kuschinsky, 2018). The damage of state neglect has occurred, as Brown notes in a shift in tense: “they are killing us . . . they killed us.” Assessing this damage, she strategizes that financial demands have material effects, she turns to the lawsuit as a way to mark this damage, rather than let it go unremarked upon.

Wake work is recognition of slavery’s ongoing afterlife in the present, a rejection of teleological narratives of progress contradicted by pervasive unjust death. Inherited from West Badin’s female elders, the scrapbooks offer a veiled message to younger generations. To accept the offering, the *labor of keeping wake*, is to understand one’s own place in a lineage of premature death. Black domestic workers organizing in the 1930s and 1940s for example, understood and narrated their own exploitation as a continuity of slavery (Nadasen, 2015). The generational inheritance of Blackness is not only premature death, but traditions of wake work.

Roberta fought to get masks for Black workers, who lacked basic protections from the fumes and dust that enveloped them:

My dad, had a towel in his mouth. But we complained. So we got masks . . . Because when you pull those carbons out, it was gaseous, and all around those carbons were gases. So when I got there in '76, it was gaseous to me too. But I knew there was a better solution.

When Roberta joined Alcoa as an employee in 1976, she found herself fighting for what her father *could not say*, despite knowing that he was being killed by work. Wake work is a fight for generations past as much as a struggle for alternate futurities. In turning to death, we are cautious not to naturalize Blackness as death. Rather, we wish to highlight that attending to death is another form of life's work, a *refusal of unwitnessed death* (Sharpe, 2016). The labor to make meaning of deaths in empire's shadows is a geopolitical praxis that resists colonial logics of presumed disposability in life and erasure in death. Given an afterlife in the present, death ruptures the ordinariness of life to allow for transformation.

Labor of tactical expertise

Racial capitalism's violence occurs when a morning shower necessitates impossible options, when daily life is reshuffled through uncertainty. Drive around town to secure enough water bottles, spend 30 minutes opening them to bathe your child safely? Leave town to impinge on a relative's hospitality? Or close your mouth, shower quickly, and hope for the best? Reverend Rigel J. Dawson describes this emotional labor: "You wonder what you're stepping into when you're getting into the shower and just trying to make it as quick as possible . . . That uncertainty really kind of plays on you after a while; it wears you down" (Goodnough, 2016). Residents are told that their rashes and itchiness are not due to the water, but they had been previously misled about the safety of the water:

"It was like fire ants biting me," Ms. Garland, 42, said, describing how she felt after bathing at home. "I scratched so hard I had bruises on my arms and legs."

"Some people still say, 'Are you sure it's not psychosomatic?'" Ms. Garland added, tears welling in her eyes. "When you can't shower and you've got to find somewhere to go and your car's not working and you're thinking, 'I can't sell this house,' it all adds up, and it's very frustrating." (Goodnough, 2016)

Social reproductive labor is amplified through the need to parse information and to develop intimate awareness of a complex scientific and political terrain. In Badin, residents encounter an obstinate silence regarding the level of toxicity they live amidst. Corporations like Alcoa actively promote the "nonproduction of knowledge" (Roberts and Langston, 2008: 632) by limiting accessible information. For residents with illnesses, making available information useful is further complicated by the difficulties of tracing chemical pathways through mobile bodies and multiple sources of pollution in toxic landscapes. How to fight for life where the terms of struggle are so uncertain?

As a "material handler," responsible for sorting and dumping hazardous waste, Raymond was exposed to chemicals without protection, where "we could barely breathe, but the environmental people were saying we weren't exposed to anything." To counter Alcoa's repeated denials of occupational hazards, Black employees began searching out hidden records to document specific chemicals used in the plant. Raymond discusses the

research he conducted to counter Alcoa's claims of innocence regarding occupational hazards:

I made MSDS⁵ sheets, went around to the departments, and took notations of all the materials. When I reported what I found, it was like a nightmare to them: "Where did that come from?" I found things with skeleton heads all over the plant.

As documentation became increasingly crucial, Alcoa began requiring non-disclosure statements from workers whose jobs involved access to files, like Raymond:

When I first went in there, they had me sign papers saying that I wouldn't talk about it, wouldn't share what I saw. Sometimes I would be in there by myself, would find people's names that I knew what [work] they did. I would see guys I knew, that died that were exposed to radiation, so much that they didn't even know how it affected them.

Roberta and others "started slipping material out of the plant," accumulating physical evidence of negligence. Surviving in an industrial riskscape demands a particular *labor of tactical expertise*; to translate embodied experiences into evidence legible to the state requires education in complex and inaccessible scientific, technical, and legal discourses. To prove harm, Badin's residents have developed an intimate familiarity with aluminum smelting's hazardous by-products, including asbestos, coal tar pitch, fluoride, cyanide, polychlorinated biphenyls, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons. CCWBC leaders are learning to navigate a complex political landscape involving state and federal agencies, researchers across institutions and disciplines, environmental and legal nonprofits, and private lawyers, variously specializing in toxicology, epidemiology, hazardous wastes, water contamination, civil rights law, environmental regulations, and workplace safety. Yet residents continue to wonder if their own and family members' illnesses are caused by toxic exposure, and bemoan the lack of medical evidence to validate their experiences.

To challenge racially disproportionate workplace exposures, Roberta used herself as a test subject to track discrimination. Noticing that white women were frequently transferred out of dangerous jobs, but Black women never seemed to "qualify," Roberta began applying for every open position. When white women were hired for a safer and better-paid Shop position she had applied for, Roberta used the union contract negotiated with the company to push back:

I couldn't understand. We were more educated than any white female in there, but they were getting those jobs. And again, I had my [test] paper. We passed, we passed! I took it to my union brothers and sisters, and I said, why can't we go to the Shop? . . . I just held them to the union book.

Here, we suggest that this labor of tactical expertise, by which Black organizers translate the lived experience of racialized toxicity into discourses legible to the state, constitutes a form of social reproductive labor. Tactics like gathering documentation, creating a paper trail, learning the intricacies of what evidence counts, and testing the system's unspoken rules present a geopolitical challenge refusing sacrifice. However, this work intensifies risk to those who assume responsibility for collective survival, as we suggest below.

Labor of revolutionary mothering

Roberta's paid work exposed her to innumerable carcinogens and chemicals. Beyond these "ordinary dangers," Roberta's life is a litany of the ways she has had to "raise sand" to stay

alive. Roberta embodies a lineage of Black women whose survival strategies “[blur] the line between biological mothering, community mothering, and political activism” (Daniel Barnes, 2016: 52, citing McDonald, 1997). In maintaining racialized life amidst incessant violence and active familial destruction, Black “revolutionary mothering” (James, 1997) has reorganized kinship in queer utopic terms, nurtured covert and overt forms of resistance, and created autonomous spaces sustaining political activity across generations and traditions (Davis, 1972; Gumbs et al., 2016). Gumbs (2016: 19) writes of the revolutionary mothering of Black and brown children is that “the queer thing is that we were born at all,” in “a world that that says that we should not be born, and that says ‘no’ to our very beings everyday, I still wake up wanting you with a ‘yes’ on my heart.” Overturning the gendered binary of mothering discourses, Gumbs (2016: 20) rethinks mothering as an act of queer creation, insisting that, “the mothering of children in oppressed groups, and especially mothering to end war, to end capitalism, to end homophobia and to end patriarchy is a queer thing.”

As “the custodian of a house of resistance” (Davis, 1972: 89), Roberta has kept the fight alive for decades. In the factory, she challenged discrimination by fighting for better jobs routinely denied to Black employees. Through the union, she fought for masks, fitted shoes, uniforms, and improved working conditions. She fought against the union when white co-workers rallied, parading swastikas, confederate flags, and guns. Her documentation of Alcoa’s cover-ups provided evidence for over 200 occupational injury lawsuits. In later years, as West Badin residents began noticing an increasing number of inexplicable illnesses and deaths among family members who had never worked in the plant, Roberta gathered information on cancer incidences by surveying each house in her neighborhood. In 2013, she co-founded the CCWBC to address health and contamination concerns. In addition to learning about environmental and civil rights law and policy, for the past four years, Roberta has fought with the town to take their concerns seriously, repeatedly attending Badin Town Council meetings to raise West Badin’s concerns.

Gina Luster, a Flint Rising and Water Warriors organizer, relates that in 2014, she “started going to meetings and asking what the hell was going on,” when she started losing weight, losing hair, and “felt like [she] was 95 years old.” Though worried about her five-year-old daughter, her concern was not constrained by kinship. In an apartment complex of 500 people, she reflected that she felt:

... the fire under me to be an advocate for the forgotten folk, not only in the building where I live but for the undocumented immigrants. Nothing was in Spanish, so we started knocking on doors. They were telling us that their family and friends in their country of origin were calling and sending letters saying that the water is poisoned. They were right and had no idea. This was all the way up until 2016. (Becktold, 2018)

Luster proceeded to organize outreach, a labor of tactical expertise that involved learning and educating others about water management. Luster embodies a future-oriented politics that begins from her own domestic sphere—concerns about her daughter’s post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and declining grades, a once active daughter who, “didn’t want to go outside anymore or ride her bike”—yet extends beyond her own kin: “This is a city of a hundred thousand people that got poisoned, and we’ve only got 6000 new pipes in place... every kid still has not been lead tested.” Luster’s aim is for

every pipe [to be] replaced—not just the service lines, but inside folks’ homes, too, because your hot water heater has to be replaced, your inside plumbing has to be replaced... Until Flint can

be self-sufficient again, and we are on our feet and have our own water distribution plant here so that the Flint folks can trust the water, I don't think we can really move forward.

However, revolutionary mothering bears tremendous costs. Roberta has been labeled a “troublemaker,” even by some family and community members, many of whom remain silent out of fear or loyalty. For her lifelong commitment and self-sacrifice, Roberta has been rewarded with patronizing dismissal, threats against her and her family, and rejection by town, company, and co-workers alike. My interview with Roberta and her sister Frances ended with Roberta describing an incident where she suspects a screw was loosened in the equipment, intending injury:

They were tryin' to hurt me because I spoke up... I was bleeding and I didn't know how bad it was... And then I got to thinkin'. Now if anything ever happen to me down here, I told one of the guys I work with, don't move me until my sisters and brothers get down here... I was getting fearful cause I didn't know why they were doing it, you know... I had to raise my granddaughter. And I didn't want anything to happen to her. Nor any part of my family. It was tough working down there. (Crying). And I can't hardly take it because I don't like when people trying to... [Pause]. I'm done.

Roberta's heartbreaking story reflects the paradox Black women face as revolutionary mothers. The work of care and corporeal sacrifice that underwrites racial capitalism situates Black women in “a position that is revered and reviled, essential to the endurance of black social life and, at the same time, blamed for its destruction” (Hartman, 2016: 171). In a society built on Black death, the gendered responsibility for maintaining life positions Black women as “geopolitical adversaries,” with debilitating consequences for their own wellness and survival (Smith, 2016). The “heavy, intense and desperate” (Parker, 2015: 118) labor of fighting for communal survival amidst realities of sustained precarity results in tremendous psychological and corporeal stress for Black women (Daniel Barnes, 2016; Smith, 2016), a stealth of time and care from those fighting for a barebones survival.

Domestic geopolitics: Everyday warfare

Theorizing life's work from the shadows of empire teaches us a great deal about social reproduction in the US at the turn of the 20th century. It is easy to see the cases of Badin and Flint as isolated cases in which racialized toxicity results from the specific conditions of the segregated South or Midwestern industrial belt. However, our perspective shifts by identifying Badin and Flint as key nodes of industrial production deemed crucial to national security and success. To approach these sites through a language of internal colonialism is to understand the extraction of value from them *as imperial ruination*, fundamentally linking racialized geographies within the US with global militarism and imperialism. Toxic exposure domesticates racialized geographies, rendering residents of these sacrifice zones colonial subjects, not citizens.

We understand Black geographies such as Badin and Flint as crucial vectors of domestic geopolitics that exist in a tense dialectic of state-enabled degradation and a corresponding politics affirming life. While empire's operations are comprised by interlocking components—the bodies of soldiers, the aluminum in an aircraft carrier, the flag, the mine, the expanding auto industry requiring ever-cheaper labor, ever larger markets—their effects are experienced in everyday life, as Roberta theorizes:

You killin' us with all this stuff you dumpin' in our community and we fightin' it. We fightin' in the inside. We fightin' white girls coming in and getting the best jobs. You tell me, in a smelter,

where you can come and wear eyelashes that long, and wear make-up? And you couldn't tell if we were men or women.

Sweating and struggling in the bull gang, learning the languages of runnin' fire, chemicals, and harm, Roberta can see quite clearly how white female workers' cosmetics are markers of a racial hierarchy that designate some bodies for pleasure and others for work, some for protection, and others for risk. To document this disparity and to fight for survival, is geopolitical praxis, a refusal to willingly submit to sacrifice, answering "death with utopian futurity, to rival the social reproduction of capital on a global scale with a forward dreaming diasporic accountability is a queer thing to do. A strange thing to do. A thing that changes the family and the future forever" (Gumbs, 2016: 21).

Hanna-Attisha writes of Flint as a "struggling deindustrialized urban center that has seen decades of crisis . . . Navy SEALs and other special ops medics train in Flint because the city is the country's best analogue to a remote, war-torn corner of the world." Those who practice revolutionary mothering are *not* a proxy site for war. Their labor is geopolitical praxis: in ensuring children's survival into the future they insist on Black futurity against the state's willful abandonment. The domestic geopolitics of Black life in conditions of overdetermined death is a form of *everyday warfare*, an inheritance of the complex forms of contestation waged by enslaved women within the intimate confines of the plantation (Glymph, 2013). Layered within capital's existing structures, "[woven] into the warp and woof of domestic life [is] a profound consciousness of resistance" (Davis, 1972: 89) that reveals trenchant geopolitical insights about surviving ongoing colonization. In noting the domestic geopolitical labors of wake work, technical expertise, and revolutionary mothering, we also suggest that these lines of futuring are pathways for scholars to follow in solidarity.

While our elaboration of domestic geopolitics emerges from the specificities of US Black lives and politics, we see utility in thinking across contexts of racism and resistance. The wasting of bodies and lands through toxicity is experienced by Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people alike, reflecting the intersection of multiple racial logics (Lowe, 2015), including settler colonialism, anti-Blackness, and anti-immigrant xenophobia in the current moment. Domestic geopolitics reverberates across hemispheric divides and racial silos, in the rise of the Mothers of the Movement for Black Lives and in the "maternal activism" (Orozco Mendoza, 2016) of Argentinian mothers holding space for their missing children for decades. We conceptualize domestic geopolitics in reference and tribute to the "embodied everyday experiences [that] are already occurring and being theorized . . . by those previously considered subaltern" (Zaragocin, in Naylor et al., 2018: 204). These seemingly futile forms of labor are not simply about survival: they contain within them the seeds of "remaindered life" (Tadiar, 2015) from which to imagine and enact a decolonial world.

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Notes

- Names of Badin residents are pseudonyms.
- Empirical work for Badin is drawn from Vasudevan's ethnographic research (2015–2017), including participant observation of community meetings and oral history interviews with former workers and their families. For the Flint case, we rely on firsthand accounts in the press and secondary literature.
- While a discussion of internal colonialism's relationship to Indigenous sovereignty is beyond the scope of this paper, we suggest that *toxic exposure functions as an everyday technology of conquest* (King, 2016). The accumulation of contamination is a mode of colonial capitalist dispossession (Daigle, 2018), whereby Indigenous lands are rendered "available for appropriation" (Bledsoe and Wright, 2018: 8), paralleling the anti-Black spatial logics that underlie racial capitalism.
- Avery Gordon (2008: xvi) defines haunting as a state of being animated by "a repressed or unresolved social violence making itself known."
- "Material Safety Data Sheets" (MSDS), initially compiled by toxicologists and industrial hygienists to record "safe" limits of chemicals in biological organisms, were subsequently adopted by Right-to-Know movements, to democratize scientific research for workplace safety (Derickson, 2016a; Morse, 1998).

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