Helene Strauss

'Dangerous, Ugly Air': reckoning with atmospheric and photosynthetic injustice in *Dying for Gold*[1]

> Straw spun to gold, water turned to wine, photosynthesis is the link between the inorganic realm and the living world, making the inanimate live. At the same time it gives us oxygen. Plants give us food and breath.
>
> Robin Wall Kimmerer[2]

Long before Covid-19 ruptured the planetary respiratory commons, the global extractive industries started to lay waste to the conditions needed to sustain long-term environmental, social, economic, and bodily health. In South Africa, the mineral revolutions resulting from the discovery of gold and diamonds in the late nineteenth century set in motion a respiratory crisis, at once atmospheric and embodied, that continues to hide in plain sight. Even though struggles over the #RightToBreathe have been brought into renewed focus by recent global events, including the murder of George Floyd in 2020, racial capitalism's assault on South African airways long predates our current moment. For well over a century, South Africa's gold mining companies, bolstered by the machineries of environmental and state racism, have been knowingly subjecting miners to hazardous dust – not to mention extreme psychic and physical stress – that resulted in a pulmonary pandemic of genocidal proportions. This history exemplifies the foundational entanglement of environmental and colonial plunder, which saw the toxic burdens of extractive pollution disproportionately displaced onto the bodies of Black mine workers.

These realities have been largely invisibilised in South African public cultures of post-apartheid reconciliation-slash-nonracialism-slash-neoliberalisation. In fact, as a growing chorus of critical voices has been insisting since at least 2012, when a group of striking miners were massacred at the Lonmin Platinum mine in Marikana by the South African Police Services – the most deadly attack by the security forces of the state on its own citizenry since the end of apartheid – post-apartheid nation-building projects have largely served to camouflage, entrench, and even deepen forms of racialised dispossession of which industrial mining has long been the most grotesque example. As Deena Dinat suggests in his recent re-reading of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as a nation- and subject-making project instrumental in the normalisation of new techniques of subject management and postcolonial capital accumulation, "[t]he TRC's own attempts to establish a national history of South African race and racism worked paradoxically, denouncing and confining racism to the past, while allowing for the structures of racial capitalism to be neatly folded into the discourses of the new South Africa."[3] In many ways, the health consequences suffered and lives lost through mining have been rendered ungrievable within these post-TRC infrastructures of governmentality, with the figure of the mine worker emerging both as the idealised post-apartheid citizen given the ANC-led government's valorisation of Black wage labour, and as a melancholic figure, whose ongoing losses and hardships have no place in the narrative of the new nation.[4]

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[1] Paper forthcoming in *Ruptured Commons*, edited by Veronica Austen and Anna Guttman. Published by Benjamins for their International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures (FILLM) Studies in Languages and Literatures Series, 2024. **Please do not circulate.**

[2] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 344.

[3] Deena Dinat, "Subjects of History: Reading South Africa after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2022), 28.

[4] Franco Barchiesi, *Precarious Liberation: Workers, the State and Contested Social Citizenship in Postapartheid South Africa* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2011).

These state-sanctioned erasures notwithstanding, the coeval mining of rock and Black labour has increasingly emerged into resistant public and creative cultures as sites of reckoning for reasons that include the gradual heightening of awareness of the historical entanglement of social and ecological destruction as these unfold in an accelerating planetary climate crisis. Dubbed "mine dump aesthetics" in a recent diagnosis by Chris Thurman, the creative mediation of mining and its anti-Black legacies of exploitation and environmental degradation has become increasingly prominent in South African audio-visual culture and film, as well as, to a lesser extent, in literary fiction.[5] While many of these aesthetic interventions have focused on the platinum industry following the Marikana massacre, a growing body of creative cultural texts has started to explore the *longue durée* of mining's ongoing rupturing of the terrestrial, subterrestrial, and atmospheric commons.[6]

Building on a steadily growing corpus of cross-disciplinary inquiry on respiration and the inequitable distribution of access to breathable air, this chapter considers the contribution that the documentary film *Dying for Gold* makes to exposing and disrupting the South African mining industry's racially differential production of "atmospheric violence as a mode of proliferating toxic debilitation."[7] As theorists of Black respiration in contexts including the US and South Africa have pointed out – in analyses spanning the transatlantic slave trade, contemporary police brutality, colonial occupation, resource extraction, and patriarchy – breath and breathlessness have long indexed socialities of both racial injustice and life-saving Black "aspiration."[8] These socialities find exemplary expression in the experiential histories of South African mining and its aesthetic activist mediation, as my analysis of *Dying for Gold* demonstrates. I start, in what follows, by outlining some recent contestations over risk-free air in order to locate my reading of the film along a historical continuum of regenerative phytochemical relationships that continue to be severed by extractive violence. I argue that *Dying for Gold* crafts possibilities towards decolonial atmospheric reckoning through which plant ecologies and human health might be re-linked.

Photosynthetic Injustice

Two contemporary scenes of environmental struggle help to frame the argument that I develop in this chapter about the rupturing of the South African respiratory commons. The first is the landmark victory in March of 2022 in the so-called #DeadlyAir case, launched jointly in 2019 by the environmental advocacy groups groundWork and Vukani Environmental Justice, and represented by the Centre for Environmental Rights. The

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[5] Thurman points out that South African audio-visual culture's burgeoning interest in mines and mine dumps is not yet reflected in literary fiction, in which mining remains a mostly "allusive, elusive presence." Chris Thurman, "Mines and Mountains: Mine Dump Aesthetics, Marikana, and Contemporary South African Fiction," *Research in African Literatures* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 41. In contrast, mining has, for some time now, preoccupied a considerable number of photographers and visual artists, including Janine Allen-Spies, Louis Chamane, Ernst Cole, Jerry Obakeng Gaegane, Ilan Godfrey, David Goldblatt, William Kentridge, Mohau Modisakeng, Santu Mofokeng, Zanele Muholi, Andre Rose, Thabiso Sekgala, and Jeannette Unite.

[6] Uhuru Phalafala's poetry collection *Mine Mine Mine* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2023) is a particularly breath-taking mediation of the legacy of gold mining and migrant labour as it has settled across generational lines in the poet's own body.

[7] *Dying for Gold*, directed by Catherine Meyburg and Richard Pakleppa (Breathe Films, 2018), 1:38:43, DVD. Hsuan Hsu, *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics* (New York: NYU Press, 2020), 12.

[8] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 108-113. Of the many creative cultural workers whose mediation of breath one could cite here in the South African context, poets such as Koleka Putuma, Uhuru Phalafala, Danai Mupotsa, and the audio-visual artist Gabrielle Goliath, stand out. In the North American context, Kimberly Bain's recent PhD project titled "On Black breath," is particularly noteworthy.

applicants in the case demanded that the South African government be legally obligated to clean up toxic air on the Mpumalanga Highveld to meet health-based ambient air quality standards and to uphold the Constitutional rights of residents to an environment that does not harm their health.[9] A recent study revealed that more than 5000 South Africans living in the coal belt region die annually from respiratory and related diseases resulting from poor air quality,[10] and the judgment in the #DeadlyAir case – the first time the South African state has been found to be in breach of constitutional rights resulting from air pollution – sets an important precedent for the future of environmental activism and government accountability in the country.[11] Yet Forestry, Fisheries and Environment Minister Barbara Creecy has disappointingly been granted leave to appeal the High Court ruling on the grounds that it "limits her discretion and authority" as environmental minister.[12] Creecy's claims to the contrary notwithstanding, the decision to appeal parts of the judgment, as groundwork director Bobby Peek points out, risks delaying urgently needed cleanup action in the Mpumalanga Highveld, which the South African government first identified as an air pollution hotspot more than 18 years ago.[13]

The second, is the proposed uprooting of over 109 000 indigenous trees in the South African Limpopo province to make way for the recently approved Musina-Makhado Special Economic Zone (MMSEZ), a multi-billion-dollar South Africa-China bilateral economic initiative zealously championed since 2017 by President Cyril Ramaphosa.[14] Located in a part of Limpopo's Northern Vhembe district that includes the environmentally-sensitive Unesco Vhembe Biosphere Reserve, this Special Economic Zone is earmarked for a mega steel-manufacturing development powered by new coal strip mines and a mega-dam planned for the Limpopo River.[15] The intended metallurgical zone – set to become the largest yet in South African history – is guaranteed to decimate the ecologies sustaining human and non-human inhabitants alike, and to devastate social and embodied health at a scale even greater than that experienced to date in the Mpumalanga Highveld. Efforts to halt this initiative are at the center of the "Living Limpopo" Campaign, tasked with raising awareness of the threat that the planned MMSEZ poses to the biodiverse Vhembe area, the Limpopo River, and to communities in the area. As Earthlife Africa Director Makoma Lekalakala points out, the

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[9] "Major court victory for communities fighting air pollution in Mpumalanga Highveld," *Centre for Environmental Rights*, March 18, 2022, https://cer.org.za/news/major-court-victory-for-communities-fighting-air-pollution-in-mpumalanga-highveld. For the full judgment, see https://cer.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TRUSTESS-JUEDGMENT-DATED-18-MARCH-2022-1.pdf

[10] "The cost of coal in SA: dirty skies, sick kids and 5000 deaths a year, according to leaked report," *News24 Business*, November 4, 2021, https://www.news24.com/fin24/economy/south-africa/the-cost-of-coal-in-sa-dirty-skies-sick-kids-and-5-000-deaths-a-year-according-to-leaked-report-20211104

[11] "Analysis: Why the #DeadlyAir High Court judgment matters," *Centre for Environmental Rights*, April 13, 2022, https://cer.org.za/news/analysis-why-the-deadlyair-high-court-judgment-matters.

[12] Lameez Omarjee, "Deadly air: Creecy seeks appeal, but it won't 'delay' clean-up efforts," *News24 Business*, April 12, 2022, https://www.news24.com/fin24/economy/deadly-air-creecy-seeks-appeal-but-it-wont-delay-clean-up-efforts-20220412. Lameez Omarjee, "Deadly Air case: Creecy granted leave to appeal," *News24 Business*, March 20, 2023, https://www.news24.com/fin24/climate_future/environment/deadly-air-case-creecy-granted-leave-to-appeal-20230320.

[13] Omarjee, "Deadly."

[14] Sheree Bega, "Plan to uproot 100 000 trees in Limpopo 'sacrilege,' says baobab expert," *Mail and Guardian*, 20 March, 2021, https://mg.co.za/environment/2021-03-20-plan-to-uproot-100-000-trees-in-limpopo-sacrilege-says-baobab-expert/. "The Industrial Scale Threat." Living Limpopo, accessed June 23, 2022, https://livinglimpopo.org/mmsez. See also the 'Quick Fact File' included on the Living Limpopo webpage, as well as other pertinent information regarding the Living Limpopo campaign. Though the relocation of some of the trees slotted for uprooting is also planned, the feasibility of the relocation initiative has not been established.

[15] Lauren Liebenberg, "Disastrous environmental costs aside, the Musina-Makhado SEZ makes little economic sense," *Daily Maverick*, June 12, 2022, https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-06-12-disastrous-environmental-costs-aside-the-musina-makhado-sez-makes-little-economic-sense/.

planned MMSEZ is destined to do irreparable harm to "pristine land and water resources, which local communities rely on for sustenance, health (through use of medicinal plants), livelihood, cultural and spiritual heritage."[16]

These two cases have mostly failed to make national and international headlines, but they powerfully convey extractive colonialism's long-standing privileging of forms of environmental violence destructive to the atmospheric interdependencies required for planetary regeneration.[17] The "life-giving breath of trees," to borrow eco-critic Ursula Heise's phrasing, accounts for little in Western world-as-resource metrics that numerous decolonial and indigenous environmental theorists, including Robin Wall Kimmerer cited at the start of this chapter, hold historically liable for the still-unfolding shattering of ancestral partnerships between people and land, and of the stories that nourish these partnerships.[18] Amitav Ghosh, in his recent book *The Nutmeg's Curse*, reiterates the case for reading the current climate crisis as the corollary of modernity's disenchantment of the world, and its severing of the historically sacred relationships between people and nonhuman ecologies. Much scholarship associated with the so-called new materialist, new animist, or anthrodecentric turns, in fact seeks to revitalise – or learn from – worldviews that counter the extractive materialisms of global capital.[19] In South Africa, feminist and indigenous scholars including Bernedette Muthien, June Bam, Sylvia Vollenhoven, and Yvette Abrahams have long advocated for this crucial "rematriating" work of restoring sacred relationships between people and place.[20] Abrahams describes the work of decolonisation, for instance, as the painstaking labour of undoing the harm of extractive European farming methods which, from the earliest days when founding colonist Jan van Riebeeck recultivated indigenous land with European seed, "created the violence of poverty from abundance."[21] As Abrahams explains of her efforts to decolonise her own garden: "I have been busy for 13 years and it might take another five before I can call this garden mature, fruitful and, in spirit, something like the garden Van Riebeeck dug up and burned."[22]

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[16] "Musina-Makhado Special Economic Zone (MMSEZ) appeal dismissed despite flawed process," *Centre for Environmental Rights*, July 12, 2022, https://cer.org.za/news/musina-makhado-special-economic-zone-mmsez-appeal-dismissed-despite-flawed-process.

[17] Following Max Liboiron, I use the phrase "environmental violence" here in an effort to scale up from a discussion of harm and victimhood only, towards attending to the structural manifestations of the "permission-to-pollute system," and so to investigate the sources of violence: "Describing structural violence allows interventions to occur on the right scale to impact salient relationships." *Pollution is Colonialism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021), 86, 88.

[18] Ursula Heise, "Keynote Talk: Ursula K. Heise (University of California)," YouTube, streamed live, May 22, 2021 at the International Conference on "Literature and Botany," 44:05-44:49. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxbgyS97lzE. Heise draws here on the work of Peter Wohlleben on the slow breathing of trees and the centrality of the respiratory processes of trees to the future of human survival.

[19] For an overview of key debates, see Sam Durrant, "Critical Spirits: New Animism as Historical Materialism," *New Formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics* 104/105 (2021): 50-76.

[20] Bernedette Muthien, "Rematriation: Reclaiming indigenous matricentric egalitarianism," in *Indigenous Women Re-Interpret South Africa's Past*, eds. Bernedette Muthien and June Bam (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2021), 51-83. The landmark edited collection from which Muthien's essay cited here is taken is the first "book written by, with and for indigenous Southern African women from matricentric societies" (as it is stated in the book abstract).

[21] Abrahams, "Krotoa's Gardens," 275.

[22] Abrahams, "Krotoa's Gardens," 275-6.

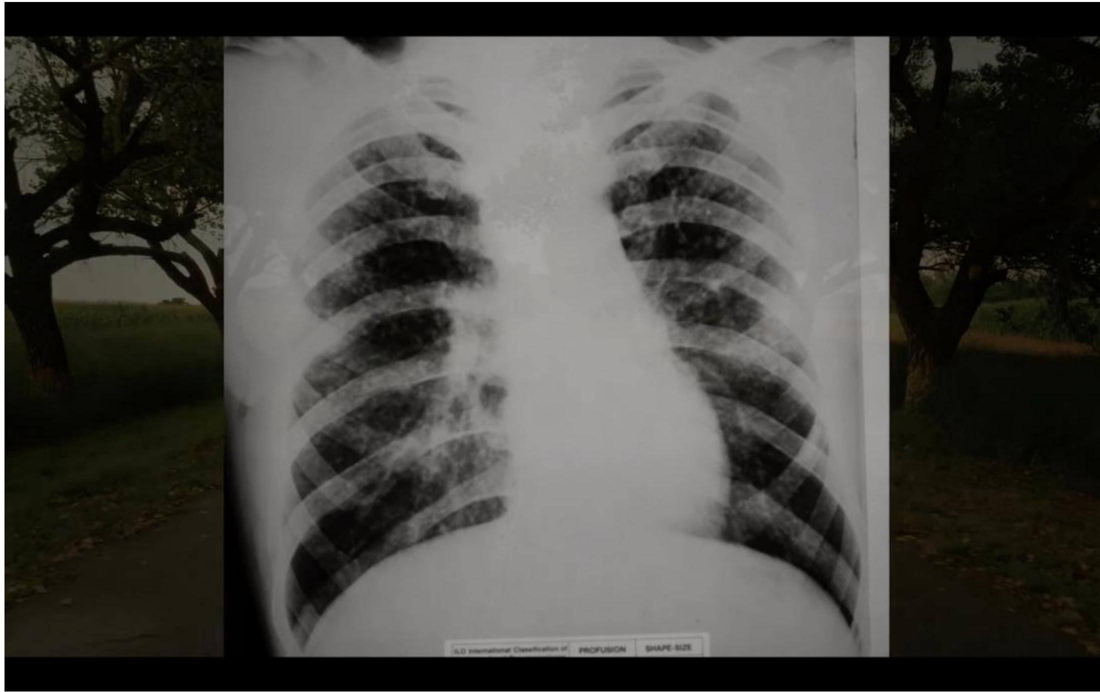

Fig. 1 Still frame from *Dying for Gold*.

The planned uprooting of Limpopo's indigenous trees and their surrounding micro- and macro-ecologies to make way for industry reproduces this longer history of harm of which Abrahams writes. Industrialisation's toxic environmental costs, here made visible by the unsparing destruction of photosynthetic regenerative capacity that might otherwise have been able to mitigate some of these costs, have long been normalised by South Africa's extractive industries. I draw attention here to the #DeadlyAir case and the "botanicide" planned for the MMSEZ in part because these struggles over breathable air are echoed in *Dying for Gold*, a film that anchors its aesthetic politics explicitly in the interdependent animacies of carbon dioxide, oxygen, phytochemistry, pathogens, silica dust, and related air-borne particulate matter.[23] Placing ailing lungs and botanicide in the same frame as inextricable corollaries of extractive capitalism recalls Stacy Alaimo's much-cited work on "trans-corporeality," a term that signals the constitutive relationship between human materiality and the more-than-human world, or Michelle Murphy's concept of *alterlife*, defined as "the condition of being already co-constituted by material entanglements with water, chemicals, soil, atmospheres, microbes, and built environments, and also the condition of being open to ongoing becoming."[24] Jean-Thomas Tremblay likewise highlights these material entanglements, but foregrounds respiration as an exemplary site of trans-corporeal interchange through which bodies emerge as "epiphenomenal to the atmospheres they breathe."[25] For Tremblay, attending to particulate "ecologies of interconnection and

[23] June Bam, "Feminism-cide and epistemicide of Cape herstoriography through the lens of the ecology of indigenous plants," in *Indigenous Women Re-Interpret South Africa's Past*, eds. Bernedette Muthien and June Bam (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2021), 109. Bam reads histories of botanicide in South Africa alongside the many other '-icides' that blight the 'herstory' archives of San and Khoena-descendent women: "linguicide (erasure of language), culturicide (attempted erasure of culture), feminism-cide (attempted erasure of feminist knowledge through total reliance on the masculine colonial archive) and epistemicide (loss of knowledge)" (103).
[24] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2. Michelle Murphy, "Against Population, towards Alterlife," in *Making Kin Not Population*, ed. Adele E. Clarke and Donna Jeanne Haraway (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018), 118.
[25] Tremblay, *Breathing*, 14.

interdependence" brings airways into view as "a sensory realm where bio- and necropolitical forces operating on the population scale are embodied."[26] Though somewhat tangential to Tremblay's reading of the 'aesthetics of breath,' "the chemical centrality of photosynthesis for the future of human life," as Ursula Heise points out, "is now beginning to translate into […] new forms of fiction and film and performance that seek to translate the breath of trees into narrative, stories that might contribute to both human and nonhuman survival in present and future environmental crises."[27] Even though the activist aims of *Dying for Gold* lie primarily in the immediate demands for compensation and healthcare for ailing miners (about which more shortly), the documentary nevertheless prompts consideration of the interdependence of decolonial racial justice and phytochemical health. It does so by foregrounding the extractive rupturing of the mutually regenerative relationship between vegetative photosynthesis and the (non)human respiratory commons, and, by extension, of the need for a relational reckoning with both the human and nonhuman effects of atmospheric chemical violence.[28]

Debilitating Enclosures

Part of a larger activist campaign for just compensation for sick miners, *Dying for Gold* is billed as "the untold story of the making of South Africa," made "in memory of 5 million miners and their families from South Africa, Mozambique, Lesotho, Swaziland, Tanzania, Namibia and Angola."[29] Jointly directed by Catherine Meyburgh and Richard Pakleppa alongside a large filmmaking and archival research team, and produced by their aptly-titled independent film production company Breathe Films, the film places the politics of respiration at the center of its attention and aesthetic activisms, and has much to tell us about the closure of the commons caused by the policies of South African mining cartel – the Chamber of Mines – and its efforts to recruit Black labour since the discovery of gold in 1886. The film exposes these policies to have had nothing less than genocidal consequences over the past century and a half, and to continue to ravage the bodies of over 500 000 miners dying of silicosis and tuberculosis as we speak.[30]

As explained at various points in the film and on the film's website, the South African State and mining companies have for 120 years failed to enforce Laws – in place already since 1903 – to protect miners from toxic dust and to provide adequate medical services for miners who fall ill. Although in 2018 a class-action lawsuit initiated already fourteen years earlier yielded an out-of-court commitment from gold mining companies to set aside R5 billion for compensation claims over 12 years, the struggle for justice for mine workers is far from over, as many ill and impoverished miners have been waiting in vain for the compensation promised. Some have already passed away before they could be compensated. Ongoing pressure on the mining industry and the state continues therefore to be needed to meet the demands at the heart of the film's activist agenda, namely for speedy and equitable

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[26] Tremblay, *Breathing*, 158, 8.
[27] Heise, "Keynote," 44:26-44:38.
[28] I draw here on the notions of "chemical violence" and "atmospheric violence," respectively outlined by Michelle Murphy and Hsuan Hsu. See Michelle Murphy, "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 4 (2017): 496, and Hsu, *Smell*, 12.
[29] "The Film and Screenings," *Dying for Gold* trailer, accessed June 30, 2022, http://www.dyingforgold.com/film. *Dying for Gold*, 00:03:10 to 00:03:13.
[30] *Dying for Gold*, 00:03:10 to 01:35:33. Rosalind Morris cites the following official corporate statistics: "between 1911 and 1994, 69000, mostly black, miners were killed and more than a million injured in South African mines. This number does not include those who have died or been severely impaired by illness caused by conditions in the mine: the victims of phthisis or silicosis, tuberculosis, and other lung diseases" ("The Miner's Ear," 103).

compensation, for just administration, and for just legal reform, without which, the "industry will literally get away with murder when the settlement period lapses after 12 years."[31]

Alongside these immediate activist goals, *Dying for Gold* also engages in a larger project of historical revision. The film digs deep into South African film and mining archives to reveal the centrality of cinema – as well as other technologies of colonial scientific modernity such as trains, medicine, and maps – to entrenching the ideological and economic infrastructures of dispossession that brought about South Africa's uniquely racist iteration of the metabolic rift identified by Karl Marx in 19th century Europe.[32] Through the successive inclusion of scenes from a range of 20th century propaganda and narrative films involving South African mining, the film is crafted as an exercise in archival retrieval aimed explicitly at exposing the complicity of the South African film industry -- and white South Africa more broadly -- in the exploitation of miners to this day. This counter-history is woven through the talking-head testimonies of some of the miners presently involved in the ongoing struggle to hold the mining industry to account.[33]

The film opens with a slow panoramic tracking shot over a green landscape, giving way to the panopticon-like structure of the Evander Gold Mine compound, giving way to gutted industrial earth. As the aerial view progressively closes in on the earth, the following testimony is spoken in voice-over by Chabedi Moiketsi, who sadly passed away in 2019, shortly after the film was released: "Mining is a prison. If you have survived mining, you have survived prison." Discussing the deprivations and punishing schedule of underground work, Moiketsi adds: "An underground man struggles because he doesn't see the sun […] You can imagine how much time people spend underground while inhaling that dangerous, ugly air."[34] These visuals and words are then echoed in the growing aural assault that exemplifies the mining experience, an experience described by Rosalind Morris in her landmark essay "The Miner's Ear" as "the sounds of catastrophe: sirens, rumbling, explosions, a gush of water where only a dripping should have been heard, coughing, the burble of fluid in the lungs … or too much silence".[35] As the camera nears the gallows frame of the mine shaft tower, the accompanying sounds crescendo to a *fortissimo*. The camera then cuts to black as the titles start to roll to the accompanying clang of the cage door slamming shut. As the viewer is carried deeper into the bowels of the earth down the mine shaft, the claustrophobic sense of fear and enclosure intensifies, revealing a hellish underworld of rumbling rock that functions as a fear factory of sorts, to stretch Pumla Dineo Gqola's term for the production of female fear within patriarchy to the context of racial extractivism.[36]

[31] "Justice for Miners Campaign," *Dying for Gold* website, accessed June 30, 2022, http://www.dyingforgold.com/campaign.

[32] I draw here on John Bellamy Foster well-known reformulation of Marx's understanding of the relationship between the closure of the commons and capitalism's severing of humans from the interdependent metabolic processes of the natural world. Foster cites Marx's claim, in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, for instance, that "Man (sic) *lives* from nature, i.e., nature is his *body*, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man's physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is part of nature." Cited in John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 72.

[33] "Justice for Miners."

[34] *Dying for Gold*, 00:00:07 to 00:01:43.

[35] Rosalind Morris, "The Miner's Ear," *Transition* 98 (2008), 96.

[36] Pumla Dineo Gqola, *Female Fear Factory* (Cape Town: Melinda Ferguson Books, 2021). The analogy is admittedly somewhat strained, given the gender dynamics at work in Gqola's formulation. Yet there would be value in exploring, in a longer project, the ways in which fear worked as an affective infrastructure for the extractive reproductions of racial capitalism, and, by extension, in considering how the affective history of migrant labour and its attendant rupturing of black family life came to shape the distinctively violent South African brand of patriarchy.

The film's opening and title sequence reveal, in microcosm, the multisensorial pedagogy through which viewers are drawn into what Peter Abrahams, in his classic 1946 novel *Mine Boy*, described as the "the rumbling noise and the shouting and the explosions and the tremblings of the earth" that made men gasp for breath,[37] or what Benedict Wallet Vilakazi famously called forth, in his 1945 protest poem "Ezinkomponi," with the following lines, signaling the monstrously entangled animacies of miner and machine:

Thunder away, machines of the mines,
Thunder away from dawn till sunset;
I will get up soon: do not pester me;
Thunder away, machines. Heed not
The groans of the black labourers
Writhing with the pains of their bodily wounds,
The air close and suffocating
With the dirt and sweat of their bodies
As they drain their hips till nothing is left. [38]

Mining's gradual seepage into "lungs holding within them the violent infrastructure of extractive colonialism,"[39] as these texts reveal, has long been a hallmark of the creative mediation of South African mining, and is echoed in *Dying for Gold* in repeated references to mining's unjust distribution of dangerous air. As miner Liao Manyokole explains alongside visuals of men walking deeper into mine drifts, "You're sweating before you get there, As you walk, you encounter a bad smell […] There are also unbelievable rocks… and also frightening mine machines, really putting me in danger. I console myself… But… There's still that thing… that scares me from the back. It feels like your lungs, your intestines … no, no… it's difficult in the mines."[40] The 'thing … from the back,' it is revealed, is the terror of silicosis as an ever-present threat.

The sense of debilitating enclosure in this opening sequence is reinforced at various points in the film, most tellingly in the contrasts it sets up between scenes of white leisure and expansive Jacaranda-tree-lined streets typical of the affluent white suburbs of Johannesburg, on the one hand, and images of miners confined to compounds, mineshafts, or present-day poverty in townships or homesteads, on the other.[41] Or between the air-conditioned boardrooms of white mining magnates in their tailored suits in the Johannesburg Chamber of Mines building (shown in archival footage taken from the 1970 film *Hollard Street Story*), and the asphyxiating working conditions experienced by profusely sweating men labouring in varying stages of undress in the mines. These disparate experiential realities are sensorially heightened via striking differences in sound, cinematography, and *mise-en-scène*, through which the filmmakers notably push viewer engagement beyond the primarily ocular into the affective-atmospheric. Whereas the brightly lit, spacious corridors and boardrooms in the Chamber of Mines are cast, for example, in warm colours, long-shot framing, and accompanied by muted, echoing tones, the shadowy air in the mine tunnels, nebulous with dust and mist, is conveyed through close-up and extreme-close-up framing,

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[37] Peter Abrahams, *Mine Boy* (Oxford: Heineman, 1946), 41, 42.
[38] Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, "On the Gold Mines," trans. A.C. Jordan, *Africa South* 1, no. 1 (January – March 1957): 115-119.
[39] Murphy, "Alterlife," 501.
[40] *Dying for Gold*, 00:04:22 to 00:05:27.
[41] My understanding of debility derives in part from the work of Jasbir Puar on "the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled." See Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), xiii-xiv.

relentlessly battering the senses with the sounds of sirens, drilling, gushing water, and exploding rock.

These recurring contrasts epitomise what Hsuan Hsu identifies as modernity's differential distribution of atmospheric risk, rendered aesthetically by the filmmakers in terms of access to both breath and beauty, a duality so compellingly captured in the phrase 'dangerous, ugly air.' In his overview of the "atmospheric turn," Hsu draws, for instance, on Peter Sloterdijk's work on the "principle of air conditioning" that has prevailed since mustard gas was first deployed as a weapon in the first World War.[42] As Hsu stresses, these atmospheric manipulations are notably stratified along lines of both race and class, in turn organised topographically around access to green space and attendant environmental aesthetics: "This differentiation goes far beyond the discursive stigmatization of working-class and racialized communities as malodorous. […] Through our differently composed breaths—modulated by factors such as air filters, fragrances, access to green space, industrial emissions, and synthetic chemicals—atmosphere materially differentiates bodies, minds, and moods."[43] Common-sense assumptions about air as an earthly commons equally accessible to all, in other words, belie the many varieties of air conditioning, contamination, and containment that have, for instance, historically set the respiratory realities of mine workers apart from those of mine owners and shareholders.

By highlighting atmospheric disparities at once affective and chemical, then, *Dying for Gold* poses an aesthetic challenge to "racial and colonial atmospherics" – where aesthetics encompasses the realms of both human and nonhuman relational materiality.[44] If as Tremblay defines it, an "aesthetics of breathing trains us to focus on exchanges between bodies and milieus," and "to be receptive to a range of processes and phenomena that are related, yet irreducible, to speech and action," *Dying for Gold* attunes viewers at least in part to the intersections between phytochemistry and respiratory health.[45] The filmmakers do this, for instance, by deliberately rooting the film's symbolic scaffolding in the overlapping iconographies of pulmonology and dendrology, breath and botany, as it includes multiple screenshots of clouded chest X-rays superimposed onto a background of trees (fig. 1). The film further draws repeated attention to contrasting topographies of arboreal access, as is seen for instance, in a slow tracking aerial shot towards the end of the film when the tree-rich urban spaces historically reserved for white South Africans are explicitly juxtaposed with a similar shot across large tracts of cramped township housing, barely a tree in sight. As the camera slowly makes its way across this dusty, unadorned township space, the following voice-over commentary is offered: "We can now see the template for the South African economy that was laid down by mining. This legacy endures in the present and continues to produce vast inequality, illness, and death. As shocking as the records of the archives are, it would be too easy to only point fingers at the mining companies and the state, because all of us who benefit from this economy are complicit."[46]

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[42] Hsu, *Smell*, 7. Peter Sloterdijk, *Foams: Spheres III*, trans. Wieland Hoban, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2016), 19.
[43] Hsu, *Smell*, 8, 11.
[44] Hsu, *Smell*, 24-5. I draw here in part on my own earlier work on documentary aesthetics (see Helene Strauss, "Energy Archives: of Rocks, Rubbish, and Feminist Feeling in Aliki Saragas's *Strike a Rock*." *Subjectivity* 13, no. 4 (2020): 272–77).
[45] Tremblay, *Breathing*, 2.
[46] *Dying for Gold*, 01:31:09 to 01:32:20.

Fig. 2 Still frame from *Dying for Gold*

These recurrent references to economic and environmental racism are further heightened in a pivotal scene that takes viewers back first to 1925, when the Native Recruiting Corporation (NRC) deliberately strategised to use the medium of open-air cinema to disseminate propaganda promising affluence and insisting on the "comfort and safety of mining," and then even further back to 1903, one year after the end of the South African War (1899-1902), when the NRC is shown to have ruthlessly conspired to destroy existing relationships to the land through a range of recruitment, taxation, and propaganda strategies.[47] Taken from the 1946 Propaganda film *Matsela*, the following voice-over accompanies scenes of spectacular vistas of green, mountainous earth traversed by a group of Black men on horseback (fig. 2), as well as of these men subsequently walking across swathes of agricultural land:

> In 1903, a Commission of Inquiry into labour needs of mining and agriculture, reflects on proposals made to ensure the supply of labour: 'We have formed the opinion, that the scarcity of native labour is due first and foremost to the fact that the African Native tribes are in possession of large areas of land. No considerable change can reasonably be anticipated in their industrial habits until a great modification of these conditions has been brought about. The imposition of higher taxes was generally advocated. The introduction of legislation modifying the native land tenure system was generally approved. The proposals put forward to improve the supply natives recommends that the existing native social system should be attacked, with the objective of modifying or destroying it.'[48]

[47] Commonly known also as the Anglo-Boer War, I prefer the more inclusive 'South African War' to draw attention to the many ways in which Black South Africans were also affected by this war, including through a substantial death toll and the loss of land that stemmed in large part from decisions made by colonial occupiers following the war.
[48] *Dying for Gold*, 00:23:39 to 00:24:45. Extract from "Commission of Inquiry," 1903.

Here viewers are given a clear sense of the mining industry's role in the closure of the African commons and in the formation of a violently disruptive migrant labour system that made it possible to shift the costs of social reproduction and the health care of sick and discarded mine workers onto distant rural communities. These disruptive processes were greatly accelerated by the passing of the 1913 Native Land Act, which made it illegal for Black people to buy land, and restricted land ownership to 7 percent of the country (later increased to 13 percent through the Native Trust and Land Act of South Africa), forcing thousands of families off their land. As South African environmental theorist Lesley Green explains, "What Marx had noted in Europe – the slow and steady expulsion of peasants from the land into a capitalist economy – was completed in a period of weeks in South Africa. Black lives were separated from forests and cattle plains; they were forced off farms, off riverbanks and seashores, out of villages, and into mines, farms and factories."[49]

Atmospheric Reckoning

The film counters this suffocating history of enclosure by redrawing relationships between miners and their extended families through the inclusion of multiple family photographs and testimonies by relatives, as well as of numerous silhouette shots of miners looking out over vast vistas of green earth and rolling hills (not to mention the larger activist project of health restoration of which the film forms a part). The film further confronts this history of separation in its refusal to detach environmental from human health, as the moving testimonies of miners are interspersed throughout with spectacles of extensive ecological devastation, including scenes of urban and subterranean 'ugliness' in cramped compound housing and in the arteries of the mines.

Fig. 3 Still frame from *Dying for Gold*

[49] Lesley Green, *Rock, Water, Life: ecology and humanities for a decolonial South Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 119.

A key example features the filmmakers' poignant meditation on the meaning of 'shares' as a unit of capital ownership, bookended by former miner Bangumzi Balakisi's reflections on his own illness, on the one hand, and scenes of gutted earth, on the other. In brief, the sequence starts with Balakisi recounting the working conditions that led to him concurrently contracting silicosis and TB, the latter resulting from the imposed microbial intimacy with fellow miners in coffin-like compounds, where they "breathed the same air." Balikisi's recollections of having "been destroyed by the mine in this way," sent back to his rural homestead unemployed, "with no opportunity to find work in other places,"[50] is followed by a carefully edited archival montage of bustling activity on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) floor. These visuals from the trading floor are intercut with footage of the arduous subterranean labours needed to smelt ore into gold, followed, in turn, by a sequence, taken from the film *Hollard Street Story*, featuring crowds of white South Africans occupying public and commercial space as the following propaganda from the film is heard: "Here, the shareholders of the nation, the people of South Africa. You and me. For industry, commerce, trade – call it what you will – lives and prospers through the shares we buy. And it is this money, yours and mine, that helps to make the wheels go round."[51] The focus then shifts to more recent scenes from the JSE, followed by visuals of large digital billboards broadcasting the latest in consumer excess, as a different voice comments: "But those of us who have no shares, where do we fit in? With our pension funds and mortgage bonds, insurances, medical aid, and savings -- funds, part of which are invested on the Stock Exchange, and so, make us indirectly shareholders, in the nation's wealth. And what a wealth, we have to share."[52] As the last of these lines are spoken, the audiovisuals transition to a mobile shot of Johannesburg's recognisable urban skyline before cutting to an extended duration aerial view across barren mine-dump earth, the dystopian hum of a siren blaring off-key (fig. 3).

As an exposé of the fiction of equity supplied by market capital, this sequence uncovers what happened when the earthly commons was transformed into market shares for a privileged white South African minority. It reveals a social order, as Nancy Fraser explains it, that "authorizes an officially designated economy to pile up monetized value for investors and owners, while devouring the non-economized wealth of everyone else."[53] In fact, the sequence provides a glimpse into some of the hidden mechanisms that Fraser identifies as needed for a profit-driven extractive economy to function – that is, the violent "backstory about where capital itself comes from."[54] Balakisi's experience, for example, encapsulates a racist history of expropriation and exploitation reliant on the ongoing seizure of the wealth and vitality of subject peoples, in turn sustained through the disavowed, gendered care work provided by rural African families. The scene of the desolate wasteland at the end, in turn, invites viewers to confront the costs of capital's annexation of nature: "Treated as costless in capital's accounts, it is freely or cheaply appropriated without repair or replenishment, on the tacit assumption that nature is capable of infinite self-restoration."[55]

The film's most pressing appeal to viewer outrage over the joint gutting of human and nonhuman vitality can arguably be found in a sequence that includes the harrowing testimony of former boxer Zwelendaba Mgidi, who used to work as the Stope Team Leader for

[50] *Dying for Gold*, 00:57:27 to 00:57:46.
[51] *Dying for Gold*, 00:58:17 to 01:00:04.
[52] *Dying for Gold*, 01:00:08 to 01:00:44.
[53] Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do about It* (London and New York: Verso, 2022), 17.
[54] Fraser, *Cannibal*, 28.
[55] Fraser, *Cannibal*, 32.

Harmony Mines before falling ill with TB and silicosis.[56] Mgidi's painful account of being hospitalised and sent back to work three times before finally being discharged for a pittance, no longer able to walk, is delivered between strained, audible breaths and palpably agonizing efforts to swallow. His words are supplemented by the difficult testimony of his wife, Noziqhamo Mgidi, recounting how she braced for his death while engaging in the daily struggles of care. He passed away in February 2018, at only 58 years old. His testimony and the revelation of his death then inaugurate a commemorative sequence that starts with a slow tracking shot along a tree-ensconced lane as South Africa's silicosis and tuberculosis epidemic is declared to have been "without parallel in human history."[57] This scene is succeeded by multiple X-ray shots of silicosis-ridden lungs accompanied by the sounds of strained breathing, in turn dissolving into ledger upon ledger of nameless deaths resulting from pulmonary disease recorded over the past century, followed by a series of successively superimposed overhead shots of countless unnamed graves at the mass grave site at the Winkelhaak Gold Mine Compound (fig. 4). The scene concludes by cutting to an image of expansive, cumulus-dotted Free State skies blanketing mine-scarred earth.

[56] The filmmakers' harrowing centering of the health struggles of Mgidi and other miners may well be accused of being "damage-centred" in their approach to mining communities, an approach that Unangax feminist scholar Eve Tuck has cautioned against specifically in the context of research practices involving Indigenous communities in the US. Though the film is not inattentive to "complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck, 416) in its engagement with miners and their families, the clearly activist aims of generating viewer outrage and – by extension, activist action – resulted in those considerations arguably being muted. As a genre concerned first and foremost with moving viewers to action, the activist documentary comes with both advantages and constraints. More is clearly needed long-term as part of the complex mediation of mining's multilayered legacies, aims that are beginning to be met by the creative cultural workers and writers mentioned earlier.

[57] Neil White, "Silicosis. What is to be done?" Theme Paper, Division of Occupational Medicine, University of Cape Town and Groote Schuur Hospital, (2004). Though, as Jaine Roberts indicates, this point is stated as White's personal opinion, the findings of subsequent studies into the prevalence of lung diseases amongst South African miners "are all consistent and sufficient to provide the evidence base for Dr Neil White's statement" (31). Jaine Roberts, "The Hidden Epidemic Amongst Former Miners: Silicosis, Tuberculosis and the Occupational Diseases in Mines and Works Act in the Eastern Cape, South Africa," *Health Systems Trust*, June 2009, 31. https://www.equinetafrica.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/ROBehs01092009.pdf

Fig. 4 Still frame from *Dying for Gold*

Read in concert, these scenes offer up an atmospheric reckoning of sorts – a reckoning, that is, with atmospheres at once affective, phytochemical, respiratory, and aesthetic – as they place mining's immense costs to human health firmly within the larger frame of a violently ruptured earthly commons. The point here is not to subordinate the film's primary activist investment, namely in the ongoing struggles of ailing miners, to primarily environmental considerations. Even as the film insists that mining's legacy cuts across vast, interdependent terrains of terrestrial, subterranean, and atmospheric injustice, its activist aesthetics plainly centers first and foremost around the ongoing struggles over compensatory justice for miners today, as well as the need for a more comprehensive commemorative public reckoning with over a century of lives lost to extraction.

As such, *Dying for Gold* is a clear example of the first step of "breathing truth to power" identified by Rupa Marya and Raj Patel in their linking of the words breathe and grieve, namely to mourn the unending losses resulting from extractive and atmospheric violence.[58] To counter the risk that this struggle be reduced simply to the kinds of healing privileged by the TRC – here refigured in medicalised terms – the next step, gestured at by the film's rooting of its respiratory aesthetics in the symbolic grammar of the tree, is to find more expansive ways to partner with and listen to those human and nonhuman agents who, as Marya and Patel phrase it, "still have contact with ways of being upon which our survival depends."[59] I return therefore to the Limpopo trees with which I started the paper in a gesture towards countering Eurocentric understandings of metabolic rift as having fully undone the kinds of non-extractive relational partnerships and knowledges of which Marya and Patel write. These knowledges are at the forefront of rematriating decolonial environmental scholarship in South Africa and elsewhere, mentioned earlier, that advocate for the honoring of the nature-cultures of which Isaac Sekwama, a resident of Limpopo speaks, when he says of the trees earmarked for uprooting that they "are woven into our culture and are sacred to us."[60] For Sekwama, land relations far exceed those prioritised within the fraudulent logic of capitalist 'shareholding.' His plea, instead, is for the continuation of mutually regenerative ways of being in common across material and species divides.

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[58] Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2021), 170.
[59] Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed*, 177.
[60] Quoted in Sheree Bega, "Plan."

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