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Patrick Lyons, Françoise Vergès

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Abstract: In this interview, guest editor Patrick Lyons discusses the concept of racial capitalism with Françoise Vergès. The interview begins with a question concerning Vergès’s relationship to Robinson’s *Black Marxism*, and after a detour through her political biography, addresses subjects including the status of racial capitalism in contemporary French politics, the global concept of the “Racial Capitalocene,” the politics of race, gender, and waste in Vergès’ current work, and racialized police violence.

Patrick Lyons: Part of the inspiration behind this special issue is the long-belated translation of Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* into French. I would like to start by asking you how this book, or Robinson’s thought more broadly, has influenced your own work. What is your relationship to this text?

Françoise Vergès: Cedric Robinson has finally been translated into French this year, but it is true that for decades, the few of us who used the notion of racial capitalism had to explain every time what we were talking about.

I came upon *Black Marxism* through Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s and Robin Kelley’s work. Then I read Cedric Robinson. What was central for me was Robinson’s genealogy of racialization—that Europe was racialized before organizing colonial slavery. I used to associate the invention of whiteness with colonial slavery. I did not agree with the argument that racism was invented to divide the working class, but I thought that colonization needed whiteness. If I had paid more attention to Article 1 of the Code Noir, I would have noticed that the purification of the slave colony required the expulsion of non-Catholics, hence of Jews. Whiteness in the slave colony was antisemitic and anti-Black.

PL: Can you speak a bit about the academic landscape regarding the study of the relationship between race and capitalism in France currently, in particular under the Macron government’s educational regime?

FV: I cannot speak for the French academic world, of which I have never been a member. What I can say is that the relationship between race and capitalism, which was long marginalized, is now more accepted in the public debate especially among young activists.

In France, a counter-offensive has been launched, which echoes the U.S. one, against “race theory,” “gender theory,” decolonial thought and “*wokeism*.” It even comes from the government. For instance, on February 14, 2021, on

the set of CNews (close to Fox news), Frédérique Vidal, minister of Higher Education in Macron's first mandate, denounced "Islamism-Leftism" as a phenomenon that "gangrenes society as a whole" and to which "the university is not impervious."¹ Two days later, at the National Assembly, the Minister confirmed her intention to entrust the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) with "an assessment of all the research" carried out in French universities. The aim was to "distinguish between what comes under academic research and what comes under militancy and opinion." The CNRS refused to initiate that research, and the academic world protested. In 2023, we learned that there never was an investigation, but the damage was done. In secondary education, the obsession with long dresses and the width of bandanas supposed to indicate allegiance to Islamism (whatever that notion means) has become standard. French academia is very hierarchic: either you belong to its caste, and your work may be considered, or you don't, and your work is either ignored or looked at with contempt. However, there has been a lot of progress in the last decades, and young scholars have been doing great work, but again I am not an insider.

PL: As an outsider to French institutions, as you put it, can you say a bit about your academic trajectory, and how the study of the historical interrelations of race and capitalism became a guiding feature of your critical project?

FV: To answer your question, I must give some biographical information, which I am always reticent to do because it inevitably looks like a straight line, whereas my trajectory has been built through serendipities, opportunities, and encounters in which friendship has always been central. There was rarely a 'plan,' one thing led to another, or something interrupted a project, or I made a choice that put an end to a trajectory.

I came late to the university. Or rather, I abandoned the university twice before returning to academia in the USA. After narrowly obtaining my baccalaureate in Algiers (I ended there for my final year in high school for different reasons), I went to the university of Aix-en-Provence for a double BA, in Arabic and in Chinese. I did not like France and went back to Algiers. Going back to Reunion did not even occur to me; there was no way I would go to a university dominated by French white men. After a year in Algeria, doing different things, I arrived in Paris and registered in Arabic and Chinese at Paris 7. (I remember Julia Kristeva in my Chinese class, I supposed she was preparing for her travel to China.) Anyway, I never got that BA; I left after not even two years.

I was an activist in antiracist movements, very active in the Reunionese migrant workers organization in France, went to women's groups, to anti-imperialist protests, to occupied factories, did some public political performances for the right to abortion.... I also went back regularly to Reunion and to Algiers. I was strongly into anti-imperialist activism. By the late 1970s early 1980s, I became very much involved in the Women's Liberation Movement's group "Psychoanalysis and Politics," organizing its protests and meetings, writing in its weekly, traveling to international feminist meetings (Spain, Columbia, Copenhagen...), and traveling to collect testimonies of women living under dictatorship (Chile) or smuggling the first feminist samizdat out of the USSR, which were published in the collection "Femmes de tous les pays" at *des femmes* publishing house. Meanwhile, I continued to write for anticolonial and anti-imperialist brochures and to be in contact with different migrant groups. All this to say, in a very quick summary, that it was when I was in the USA that I finally went to university and got a BA, an MA, and a Ph.D. I had not even gone to the USA for this. I was not even supposed to stay. I had gone to San Diego in October 1983 to accompany someone, and I stayed until 1995. Until 1985, I worked as an exploited underpaid cook/gardener/cleaner/secretary, in other words a "femme à tout faire," for a rich French lesbian couple. I was an illegal, and there was already a strong racist movement against the "brown invasion" from Central and South America where the U.S. was supporting dictatorships and wars against the Marxist opposition, the armed resistance, the peasants. . . . I left San Diego before getting arrested and deported and because I did not see any reason to continue to be exploited that way. After different chapters whose details are not relevant here, the U.S. consulate in Tijuana gave me the authorization to enter the country on July 14, 1986.

I registered at San Diego State University in January 1987, for a double BA in Women's Studies and Political Science, which I obtained summa cum laude in 1989. During my studies at SDSU, I obtained some grants that paid for my studies and got some help. I also started to publish in U.S. academic journals. Some of the women teaching in Women's Studies became my friends and have remained so to this day. I did my Ph.D. in Political Theory at Berkeley, which I obtained in 1995.

I arrived at university already with a political, cultural, and anticolonial feminist education and experience, obtained while living in different cultural and political contexts (Reunion, Algeria, France, Mexico). I did not learn about race and capitalism at the university, but the university gave me the opportunity to learn more about oppression, domination, and resistance in other contexts and to have great and stimulating conversations with faculty and students. I

loved my time there; I made many friends and African-Americans, Latinx Americans, feminist and queer leftists taught me a lot. I was lucky to find professors ready to hear about a small island in the Indian Ocean and its anticolonial struggle of which they knew nothing, and to guide me through complexities and theories. Throughout my years in the USA, I remained an activist, went to protests, and traveled to El Salvador and Panama to collect women's testimonies about rape and torture by armies supported by the CIA and the U.S. government. Since I lived and studied there, I wanted to understand the country, the way its racism worked, and I learned more about the struggles I had read about as an adolescent in Reunion: the Black Panther Party, the anti-imperialist movement, the working class, the different feminisms.

I had already written about race as a freelance journalist and as a journalist, but I never signed these texts because it was political not to sign, to insist on collective thinking. When I started to write in the language of academia, I adopted a form of writing that sought to be theoretical *and* close to the ground. I did not always succeed, but I think that I am getting better at it. I write about something when I need to understand how consent to exploitation and domination has been built and how resistance has undone that consent.

I would never have gone to the university in France. I must add that writing in English has allowed me more freedom. True, it is another imperial language, but it gave me the freedom I would never have had with French. Even though I was very good at school in French *dissertation* and spelling, French was too much connected with colonial teaching and French supremacy.

PL: A few years back, you wrote a piece for the *Futures of Black Radicalism* [edited by Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin], on what you called the “Racial Capitalocene” where you refer to approaching the study of the “Anthropocene” “à la Robinson.” How does this approach shift our understanding of the Anthropocene?

FV: Being interested in slavery and colonialism means being interested in the ways ‘nature’ and the environment have been shaped by these racial regimes of exploitation and extraction. I saw what colonialism does to bodies, land, forests, and the sea in Reunion. I am not saying that I understood everything when I was a child and an adolescent, nor that I am advocating ‘untouched nature,’ but colonialism brought a certain ugliness with it: roads, plantations, ports, and cities are built to facilitate extraction and exploitation. Nature and humans are to be tamed and disciplined. The feelings and perceptions I had then became the terrain upon which theorization was later possible. The large

plantations and the human, cultural, and political geography of Reunion all spoke of how slavery, colonialism, and (post)colonial modernization have shaped the island. The modernization that the French State imposed in the 1960s and 1970s, and that sought to counter the anticolonial communist movement whose demand was “democratic and popular autonomy,” was colonial. The island had to become ‘French’ and for that, the environment had to change: descendants of slave owners sold their land to big corporations, which maintained the same approach to agriculture and the land but also created larger plantations, increased the amount of pesticides in the soil, and impoverished small farmers to push them to sell their land. The sea’s shores were transformed to satisfy the French idea of a tropical island and its program of “sea, sex, and sun.” French expatriates soon transformed themselves into ‘protectors’ of nature against a black, brown, and poor population who of course had no idea of how to protect nature. The Reunion middle class was partly seduced by that approach and lobbied for the creation of a natural park, which meant as elsewhere strict control of its inhabitants. I must say that in the anticolonial communist movement, many have been for the French type of modernization, but resistance exists.

Everywhere I went, I saw the same thing: a productivist hubris, the desire to shape nature to the will, the growing power of engineers who have boyish science fiction dreams of moving mountains, diverting rivers, making the desert bloom...

Witnessing from up close a volcano beginning to erupt and experiencing the pure force of hurricanes gave me a deep respect for ‘nature.’ Add to this the incredible beauty of the island that educated my love for the ocean, plants, trees, birds, a beauty that I experienced walking for weeks in the mountains where maroons had lived. I am telling this to explain that I had observed how race and capital destroy the environment before I read theories on the Anthropocene, which interested me right away. But before, I had read about the ways in which slavery and colonialism not only destroyed the environment but also stole indigenous knowledge, how botany has been an important science for colonialism. I had also talked and written about how one could follow imperialism and resistance by following bananas, and by pulling many threads, one could trace a historical and cultural cartography: CIA and banana republics, bananas and racist advertisements, race, gender, and bananas with Josephine Baker and Juanita Banana, banana and agrobusiness and the pesticides that have contaminated Martinique and Guadeloupe for generations, banana and Monsanto, bananas and science, but also bananas and rituals, bananas and cooking, bananas and fashion.² I had also

worked with artists for the 2012 program *Tropicomania: The Social Life of Plants*,³ and for a museum project in Reunion Island (2002–2010) I had done research on trees and plants and French colonialism. I can also say that the first time I traveled to oases (in southern Algeria), I was considerably impressed by their architecture, their collective distribution of water, the way millenary knowledge has led to the cultivation of different plants together. In other words, I was ready for the Anthropocene, but right away it was clear that the notion was problematic. ‘Humanity’ was not the culprit, racial capitalism was.

I read the different theories, the “plantationocene,” Donna Haraway’s Chthulucène, Jason Moore’s and Andreas Malm’s Capitalocene.⁴ I proposed “Racial Capitalocene” in the spirit of Cedric Robinson because if capitalism is racial, how would its ‘new age’ not be racial? Racial capitalism has created an irrespirable and uninhabitable world for billions of people. Literally. Its economy suffocates the planet, rivers, animals, plants, humans... There is a global crisis of breathing. And with the climate catastrophe it has produced, the planet is also becoming uninhabitable. The environment was racialized and made dispensable. Extraction exhausts human bodies, the earth, the deep sea; it sucks life energy until the premature death of humans, forests, oceans. . . .

Capitalism produces tons and tons of waste that it dumps near poor and black and racialized neighborhoods and in countries of the Global South, waste that will never go away but will contaminate and pollute for generations. Capitalism poisons the planet. Capitalist billionaires’ dreams come from their reading of Ayn Rand, seduced by her ‘theory’ of (white) egotistic man, who imposed his strong will on illiterate, stupid, weak popular mobs. These billionaires and their acolytes in governments have read too much racist science fiction in which two-thirds of the black planet is annihilated so white supremacy and patriarchy can be fully restored, and a blue-eyed, blond-haired planet is the ‘new world.’

I see agrobusiness as the heir of the plantation: stealing indigenous land, impoverishing small farmers to steal their land, imposing monoculture, creating private armed militia to terrorize small farmers, workers, and union activists, assassinating, raping, torturing, and threatening. Plantations of coffee, sugar, tobacco, bananas, and cacao are marked by slavery; they poison the soil, the bodies; women miscarry; cancer is prevalent (palm oil plantations have followed the model, working conditions in big farms are exploitative). Agrobusinesses, like plantation owners before, have the support of states, international organizations of commerce, banking, property laws... They often support far-right parties, anti-migrant policies, while exploiting them. It is a

gendered and racialized world, of rich patriarchs who go to Sunday morning mass and order lynching at lunch.

PL: In ways, your work on racial capitalism goes well beyond Robinson's initial theorization. For one thing, your focus on gender. Can you say a bit about how race and gender interact in your work? I am thinking of an article on work on racialized and gendered cleaning labor, "Capitalism, Waste, Race, and Gender."⁵

FV: I insist on the question "Who Cleans the World?" because I think it is totally marginalized in environmental theories. Racial capitalism produces waste, wasted lands, wasted lives, and, to function every day, it needs black and brown women to clean its domestic and social spaces. Endlessly. Every day. The healthy and performing white male/female body of late capitalism is made possible because a black/brown woman cleans their space, takes care of their needs. Slavery and colonialism traced a racial/gendered border between 'clean' and 'unclean,' and in the name of cleansing for better health they destroyed, expelled, killed. These notions are still with us, of people as pest, as threatening public health, as bringing disease. We saw it again with COVID-19.

For me, it is not so much that cleaning women are invisible, it is that their work must be underpaid and undervalued, and that their work had to be racialized. We don't want to think about their work when we enter any social space. Thinking about it would force us to think about the ways in which society stands on their back and that without them, the city would not open.

I have since expanded the question to Who cleans the accumulated mess of racial capitalism? Where does it dump its waste? How does racial capitalism maintain racial/gendered borders between 'clean' and 'unclean'? How has the notion of cleanliness evolved? If the fossil industry has taken us to where we are, what has been the role of accumulated waste in climate catastrophe?

PL: Finally, could you say a few words about the current political situation in France—Marcon's forced-through pension reforms, the police murder of Nahel Merzouk, and not least, public uprisings in response, first to the drive of capital, and then to the persistence of racialized state violence. What is your perspective on these events, and the French State's repressive response, especially as Paris prepares for the 2024 Olympic Games?

FV: We have to understand that the French bourgeoisie has long been engaged in a conservative counter-revolution aimed at rolling back all social laws won

by the (white and non-white) working class's struggles. The bourgeoisie still has not digested the fact that Arabs, Blacks, Asian, queer, revolutionary and decolonial feminists, antiracists, gays, and peoples in overseas territories are speaking and making their voices heard, challenging the national narrative, meritocracy, and the idea that the Republic treats its citizens equally, that racism is a matter of lack of education. We should not underestimate their fear that supports the brutality of its armed militia, the police. We see this counter-revolution arising all around Europe. In France, there is also always an attempt to restore a past glory of a 'greater' France; all presidents, left and right, aimed towards this. It is a moment of "white bourgeois reconstruction," if I may say. All of this—the brutal repression of the Yellow Vests and of all protests, the attack on 'Islamism,' 'woke ideology,' the criminalization of movements (the accusation of 'eco-terrorism' against environmental movements like "les soulèvements de la terre," 'whitewashed' feminism, the unpunished murders of Arab and Black people (mostly men), the neoliberal measures, the "en même temps" ideology ("at the same time"), Tony Blair's strategy of triangulation, borrowing from the Left and the Right) that has become standard politics, the rise of racist far-right parties, the anti-refugee politics and the ideology of the "great replacement" (proposed by a Frenchman, Renaud Camus), which has spread worldwide and had fed racist and sexist mass murderers—must be brought together to analyze what is happening. And of course, there must be some historical analysis on the colonial genealogy of police violence and on the police as an armed institution protecting the white bourgeoisie. In *La domination policière*, Mathieu Rigouste, an expert on the French police, showed that there is nothing accidental about police violence.⁶ It is rationally produced and regulated by the State, and the theory and practices of the French police are deeply rooted in the colonial system. Between the North African brigades in the shantytowns of the interwar period and the anti-crime brigades (BACs) in today's "cités," the same mechanism is reproduced and restructured. The aim is always to maintain order among the colonized from within, to contain the territories of socio-apartheid. The development of 'non-lethal' weapons—Flash-Ball, Taser—has also propelled a veritable private coercion industry. I am also thinking of Paul Rocher's *Gazer, mutiler, soumettre*, Didier Fassin's *La force de l'ordre*, the collective *Cases rebelles' 100 portraits contre l'état policier*, and Claude Serfati's *L'état radicalisé: La France à l'ère de la mondialisation armée*.⁷ So documentaries, blogs, articles, trials, and books in the last decades have brought to light the systemic racist violence of French police. The denial of State racism and of structural racism has been challenged. The idea that racism is the result of a lack of education, an idea the institutional Left

long promoted, holds no longer. And current liberal antiracism and its politics of diversity (“coloring the casting”) is also being denounced for what it is, window dressing.

If Nahel Merzouk’s death resonated so much and triggered so much legitimate anger, it was because those who revolted knew it could have happened to any of them. Eleven-year-old kids are stopped and searched by heavily-armed policemen because they are Arab and Black! They see to what kind of school they are sent, what awaits them in the future—becoming deliverers, garbage collectors, low-paid workers—and where the State makes them live—in buildings where the lifts do not work most of the time, with poor parks, overly expensive public transport, no access to good health services. They see their parents mistreated by the administration, broken or made sick by their work. On TV, they see rich white men speaking about them as if they were not quite human; they hear white bourgeois feminists criticizing their ways of living, giving them lessons about being a good lover, father, brother, criminalizing the masculinities and femininities that are not bourgeois; they see their mothers, sisters, friends who wear the veil being insulted and demeaned. If they go to any city center, they know that they are not welcomed, that the public space is class- and race-segregated, an unwritten norm of course, but nonetheless effective. They can enter these neighborhoods, as guards, deliverers, street cleaners, but only at certain times and certainly not to wander. They see white men driving to their neighborhoods to buy drugs but who are never arrested. The drug market is, we know, organized along usual business rules, where corporations who destroy lives and environment function yet are never indicted, or barely.

Nahel Merzouk’s murder resonated because it came after so many killings of Black and Arab men, but also of women, killings that were not punished. Their families relentlessly raised public awareness and consciousness of police violence and its impunity. They have done a fantastic and very courageous job, investigating, protesting, calling on journalists, lawyers, politicians, and some of these slowly changed the way they were looking at the police.

Nahel Merzouk was killed because the policeman used a decree voted under the socialist president Hollande in 2017 giving in to pressure from far-right police unions that gave the police the right to use their arms in case of stop and search. Macron is not innovating in terms of neoliberal racial capitalist politics that require repression and criminalization but accelerating them. Sarkozy (right) and Hollande (socialist) had already prepared the ground, though we should go back much earlier and not forget Mitterrand’s turn to economic austerity measures in 1983 that consolidated neoliberalism

in France, which were taken as a betrayal of his party's politics but were not. The French bourgeoisie and billionaire CEO's want to roll back social laws that were the result of struggles. Governments (left and right) have understood that a civilizational, bourgeois, white feminism will support a neoliberal defense of women's rights. A Left feminist who sits in the National Assembly even dared to say that the latest social revolts (the ones following Nahel Merzouk's murder) were a case of a macho rivalry between cops and young Blacks and Arabs.

The list of murders is long, very long. We could start in the 1970s, but that would mean adopting the narrative that there was a time when the institution was 'republican,' that is, respecting people's rights. It would mean forgetting both the brutal repression in the overseas departments from the 1950s to the 1970s, and in France during the Algerian war of independence (1950s-1960s) when some police stations served as sites of torture or when the police drowned hundreds of Algerians in the Seine on October 17, 1961. And of course, for decades now, the unpunished murders by policemen of Black and Arab men, mostly young but not only.

The facts of these events are well known, and yet the attitude of the police, and its impunity, have not changed much. The work of street journalists has also been instrumental. Despite threats or being beaten by the police, they have recorded and filmed examples of police violence and investigated (Taha Bouhaf, David Dufresne among others). Without Jean Paul Einaudi, we would not have known as much as we do about what happened on October 17, 1961.⁸ Without the work of Daniel Kupferstein, we would know much less about the murders of seven men (six Algerians and one Frenchman) and the wounding of around a hundred demonstrators—more than forty by bullets—on July 14, 1953.⁹ Then there are those who revealed the responsibility of the French government and its special forces in the "Ouvéa Island massacre" (Kanaky-New Caledonia) when in 1988 nineteen Kanak militants were killed. Jean-Marie Tjibaou, leader of the Kanak Independence Movement, declared then, "The [colonial] plunderers refuse to recognize their subversive lead. From the moment they stole our country, they have tried to eliminate everybody who denounces their evil deeds. It has been like that since colonialism began."¹⁰

Police violence is a weapon in the hands of the bourgeoisie and the State. The fact that during the Yellow Vests' protests, so many whites were maimed and mutilated showed that the State would not allow any challenge to its order. In the aftermath of the Yellow Vests and of massive protests against Islamophobia, anti-Blackness, forced-through pension reforms, rising living costs, the organized death of public services (hospitals, schools, post office,

and so on), the brutal response of the government reminded me of the ways anticolonial revolts were demonized through massive propaganda about the “barbarism” of non-white societies, the rage and the fear of the settlers. I was also reminded of the ways in which the bourgeoisie reacted to the Paris Commune, with such cruelty, and how writers like Flaubert, George Sand, and others condemned the *communards*. I saw similar things this year. Macron and Darmanin judged the death of Nahel Merzouk “regrettable,” but they qualified that word very quickly, either in the same sentence or later, talking of police fatigue, their hard work, the fact that they ‘serve’ the Republic, giving to the police the mission of protecting the State rather than society. The police institution is now in the hands of far-right unions.

The propaganda that follows social revolts contains some familiar elements. An insistence on ‘blind’ destruction: “why do these people burn what we have done for them?” By focusing attention on images of burnt-out cars and smashed shop windows, the vast majority of the media opted for a security response, while leaving the socio-economic and ideological determinants of the violence aside. Social antiracist revolts arise for no other reason than the pleasure of stealing and destroying. The media give examples of meritocracy to show that despite all odds and obstacles, some children of migrants have succeeded, becoming bankers, actresses, doctors, scientists, even ministers. It is just about pulling yourself by your bootstraps; the old and stupid saying, “where there is a will, there is a way.”

The goods they take and the buildings they burn supposedly proved their lack of political consciousness. There is this idea that what is political must be framed and worded in theories that are familiar to academics and intellectuals. The trust in the State’s capacity to make things right—and this trust exists also among the racialized classes—unfortunately does not take into account the long and difficult and relentless effort that must be made to hold the State accountable.

The State must show that the revolts had no political objective, just kids who wanted to consume and get the latest model of sneakers. There were thousands of people arrested, with immediate prosecution. This, and magistrates (mainly white and bourgeois) treated the defendants with racial and class contempt, delivering very harsh rulings—months in prison for being caught stealing candies. And there were more deaths by police violence still during the protests. And there have been deaths since, and mutilations.

In a necessary book, *Beaufs et barbares: Le pari du nous*,¹¹ my comrade, the activist and thinker Houria Bouteldja, argued for an alliance between “*beaufs*” (poor whites) and the barbarians (the descendants of migrants, the “indigènes”

in French colonial vocabulary), by showing their common interests even though their affects can differ. It is important, she says, to elaborate a white dignity that is not weaponized by the far right. She writes that we should not forget that the bourgeoisie, while sub-contracting racism to the *beaufs*, is fascinated by the ‘banlieue,’ transforming it into a site for art centers, movies, and fashion. Indeed, we need to challenge the weaponizing of whiteness, the feeling of poor whites of being deprived of what matters to them, while contesting colonial/imperial whiteness. Houria is right. That is the challenge.

In that context, and in a European context of rising authoritarianism, of far-right parties entering governments, of anti-refugee and anti-migrant politics (the European Community giving millions of euros to anti-Black governments in Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya), of panic about gender theory and race theory, and of Africans demanding more forcefully their freedom from French intervention and meddling, Macron would like to restore his reputation with the 2024 Olympic Games. It looks totally absurd. The Games are totally out of sync with everything else: climate disaster, North/South divide, the condensation of planetary wealth into the hands of a few, greater inequalities, racism, war in Europe and in many other places across the world. The Olympic Games have always been instruments of gentrification, which is what is happening around Paris. There have been deaths of non-white workers in the construction sites, and I have met women who were wounded while working as cleaners on these sites and were still, months after, waiting for compensation. Behind the exploits, the fight for better representation of non-white and trans athletes, there are always other issues: who built the stadiums and other venues, who cleans, who feeds, who can afford, who will benefit afterwards? And what do these games say about extreme nationalism, sports as neutral practice, sponsors, and privatization? Games leave huge debts that are then paid by the people. They add to pollution and waste, they depend on the fossil industry and on funding by billionaires and brands.

We have to hold many struggles together, support struggles that are locally grounded, reinforce trans-national solidarities, respect the ways people organize their struggles, fight for autonomy, develop a strong antiracist, anti-capitalist, anticolonial, anti-imperialist environmental movement that respects indigenous claims.

PL: In closing, can you say a bit about your newest book, *Making the World Clean: Wasted Lives, Wasted Environment, and Racial Capitalism*? From its title alone, it would appear to mark the synthesis of many of the topics you have already mentioned.¹²

FV: Growing up in Reunion, I saw how ‘nature’ was fabricated by slavery, colonialism, and postcolonial capitalism. The creation of a natural park, the selling of a ‘tropical nature’ to tourists, the advertisements to bring more tourists (the island of *métissage*), the destruction of local practices and the imposition of French modernity, the power of agro-business that is the direct heir of the plantation economy—all this, and more, made me aware, quite early, of the extent of racial capitalism’s capacity to destroy. I also understood how cleanliness was captured by colonialism, not just hygiene, but what must be clean and how, and how that cleanliness was connected with a white and bourgeois conception of beauty, order, harmony, and good living.

In this book, I suggest adding a question to the huge intellectual production around the environment in which philosophers, geographers, sociologists, scientists, feminists, indigenous activists and thinkers, and artists are offering a large array of approaches to the climate disaster produced by racial capitalism. And that question is “How will we clean the accumulated waste that centuries of exploitation and extraction have produced and yet refuse the norms of white bourgeois colonial cleanliness?” I am not sure the title *Making the World Clean: Wasted Lives, Wasted Environment, and Racial Capitalism* will remain, but indeed it indicates something of an attempt to go further with the question “Who cleans the world?”

Without giving too much away and angering my editors, I can say that the argument goes as follows. Waste is taken as what colonialism and racial capitalism produce, the vast amounts of wasted lands, wasted soil, wasted lives. Cleaning as the endless racialized, gendered, and class work done to take care of waste and make the world of the corporate class, the bourgeoisie, the militarized State, clean. I will look at the ways in which patriarchal racial capitalism has divided peoples and land according to its notion of clean/civilized vs. unclean/uncivilized societies and lands, the latter to be tamed, cleansed, and its people left to care for rubbish. Waste is thus not about how different cultures consider what is waste and how they organize cleaning, but about the fact that wasting is inseparable from colonial and capitalist regimes that have given value to objects obtained through wasting (gold, silver, sugar, tobacco, cobalt), upon dispossession and exploitation. In other words, extraction has always produced wasting. For instance, mining opens wide the soil, discharges tons of polluted and contaminated soil and water; it brings disease, destroys lungs, attacks reproduction, causes miscarriages, and when the mine is exhausted, corporations will find another site to waste and contaminate.¹³ A decolonial, antiracist, feminist cartography of colonial and capitalist waste will answer several questions, including what kind of waste? Produced by

whom, by what? Going from where to where? Who cleans waste? I look at the Marxist feminist theory of reproduction and propose to take labor out of the analytical frame of social reproduction (and its gendered forms) and think about it through a racialized lens of ‘environment’ as a field of structuring social relations that cannot be thought apart from the ‘environment’ as deracialized in white ecology. I ask how cleaning the planet and local sites is being imagined after centuries of damage by indigenous, Black, African, Asian, communities. This is more or less what I can say. It will be a short book.

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Notes

1. “Frédérique Vidal lance une enquête sur ‘L’Islamogauchisme à l’université,’” CNews, February 16, 2021, <https://z.umn.edu/9d07>.
2. See Françoise Vergès, “Bananes, esclavage, et capitalisme raciale,” Uriel Orlow, ed., *Les affinités des sols. Soil Affinities* (Aubervilliers: Les Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers, Shelter Press, 2019): 9–11, <https://z.umn.edu/938i>.
3. See the exhibition journal *Tropicomania: La vie sociale des plantes*, <https://z.umn.edu/938j>.
4. On these concepts, see Jason Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).
5. *e-flux*, 100 (May 2019).
6. Mathieu Rigouste, *La domination policière* (2012) (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2020, expanded edition).
7. Paul Rocher, *Gazer, mutiler, soumettre: Politique de l’arme non létale* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2020); Didier Fassin, *La force de l’ordre* (Paris: Seuil, 2011); the collective *Cases rebelles, 100 portraits contre l’état policier: Introduction* (2017), <https://www.cases-rebelles.org/introduction/>; and Claude Serfati, *L’état radicalisé: La France à l’ère de la mondialisation armée* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2022).
8. Jean-Luc Einaudi, *La bataille de Paris. 17 octobre 1961* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).
9. Daniel Kupferstein, *Les balles du 14 juillet 1952: Le massacre policier oublié de nationalistes algériens à Paris* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017).
10. “Jean-Marie Tijbaou, le rêve de l’indépendance,” TV Arte (2000), <https://youtube/szcn-nyrN16uk?si=3Gbn8UqvZJUGY7FM>.
11. Houria Bouteldja, *Beaufs et barbares: Le pari du nous* (Paris: La Fabrique, éditions, 2023).
12. Françoise Vergès, *Making the World Clean: Wasted Lives, Wasted Environment, and Racial Capitalism* (Boston: MIT Press, 2024).
13. Max Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Durham: Duke U P, 2021); Elana Resnick, “The Limits of Resilience: Managing Waste in the Racialized Anthropocene,” *American Anthropologist* (2021), <https://discardstudies.com/>; Adam M. Romero, *Economic Poisoning: Industrial Waste and the Chemicalization of American Agriculture* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2022); “Mining Waste,” https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/waste-and-recycling/mining-waste_en