

The Future Claimant's Representative: On the Task of the Museum in the Time of the Planet

Ian Baucom

The planetary crisis of climate change we are facing does not come from a historical nowhere. It comes from distinct material histories of the colony and post-colony. To recognize these historical origins of our planetary moment is not, however, adequate to the challenge of our times. It is just an opening to a following set of questions. Among them, these: if it is the case that we come to the planetary present from the postcolony's historical shore, then how do we think not only about that historical past and the claims it makes on us, but also about our climate-changed planetary future and the claims that future makes on us? If the planet is in crisis because of the history of colonialism, then how are we best to entangle ourselves with that future, its scales of time, its struggles for freedom? As we consider the daunting challenges of how to respond to those calls of historical and planetary responsibility, how might the university and the museum take on that new form of responsibility to be, at once, the critical interpreter of the colonial and postcolonial past and present and of the planetary future they have wrought?

I'm just starting to think about those questions – but here are a few propositions in response:

~~ The future is something we are already colonizing.

~~ The future and those who will live in it are already coming to us as an accelerated version of the colony and the postcolony, damaged and wrecked by what we do now.

~~ Even as it is already coming, that future – and those who will live in it – has no legal standing, no structure of formal protection or recognition, at least by the laws of sovereign nations.

~~ Instead, the future climate-changed planet, and all those who will live in it, comes to us as abjected and disposable.

~~ Coming so, the future, and all who will live in it, come to us like a colonial subject before imperial power.

~~ As the future comes at us so, one of the key tasks of critical thought and practice now is to understand how to situate ourselves in relation to that already-arriv-

ing claim of the future's subalterns, much as we have learned to situate ourselves toward history's claims and history's subalterns.

~~~~

As I've begun to think about those propositions, there is an enigmatic figure I've become aware of that might provide one avenue of response: the 'Future Claimant's Representative'; a legal character who the court appoints in mass-tort claims – say in a lawsuit against an asbestos manufacturer, when the court knows that while the damage of the asbestos has already been done, some of its victims are too young to yet fully experience its violence in their bodies. So, someone is appointed, now, to speak for them: the *Future Claimant's Representative*.

While recognized in bankruptcy procedures against corporations profiting from the mass use of hazardous materials, the future claimant's representative has not yet been recognized either in constitutional law or international law. That attempt is being made across a range of legal actions worldwide but thus far without definitive success; largely, as the legal theorist Randall S. Abate has observed, because while courts have been willing to recognize that some non-human actors (primates and rivers among them) and some discrete future human subjects of particular toxins have legal standing, the courts have not yet acknowledged the legal standing either of the planet as a whole or of the future as a category in itself.

Nevertheless, Abate argues, with each incremental advance, 'it is no longer a matter of whether this legal revolution will occur, but only a matter of when and how'.

That is hopeful, and to be advocated for. But if that advocacy is to succeed it will need to rely on more than the efforts of juridical actors. It will depend on expanding a conception of the future claimant's representative into the spheres of critical practice and the arts, to the work of the university, and of the museum.

Before offering some thoughts on what that might entail, a cautionary note from the legal discourse. As Frederick Tung puts it, while the figure of the *Future Claimant's Representative* can be understood as providing a vehicle through which a subaltern future may speak into our present, it nevertheless requires 'careful scrutiny'. And that, he writes, is because 'the [Future Claims Representative] is in essence an agent without a...[client]. She [or he or they] is not answerable to her ostensible beneficiaries. ...Given the pressure on [competing] claimants to settle... [a contested matter] [One] might understandably question whether this mechanism can be expected truly to provide zealous representation for future claimants...[T]heir losses are not "vivid" but abstract and prospective, while the losses of competing [living] claimants are real. [The apparent future beneficiaries] may [thus] have enormous individual and collective stakes in [their representative's] agency but a complete inability to assure the faithfulness of their agent.'

This is chastening.

As I've indicated, I *am* inviting us to consider our agency as this form of agency. I am asking what we might gain from considering one of the tasks of the museum and the university to be *both* the *past's* and the *future's* representatives. But as I do so, I want to underline these cautions, which articulate the classic double cautions of representative agency that Edward Said brought before us in highlighting Marx's dictum from the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louise Bonaparte* as one of the key problematics of *Orientalism*: 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.' If the future comes before us as something we are already colonizing, something denied the ability to represent itself, then, even as we imagine what it might mean to be that abjected and precarious future's representatives, we will need to ask these dual questions of representation – further developed by Gayatri Spivak – once again:

~~From the mimetic register of representation (Spivak's *Darstellung*): Can we find ways to make that future something other than abstract, prospective, statistically predictable? Can we apprehend it – in its own vernaculars – as something urgent and vivid?

~~And turning to Spivak's political register of representation (her *Vertetung*): even if we can make that urgent future singular and vivid – will we, in consequence, hold ourselves faithful to being the agents of the enormous individual and collective stakes we are offering to represent?

~~Weighing the losses – of manoeuvre, of consumption – that the 'living' present may need to make if we are to entangle the project of our freedom *with* and *toward* the freedom of a future from which 'we' are not distant, *will* we faithfully represent that 'living' future? Or – discouraged by the sheer enormity of the task – will we shrug, hold our eyes down, and turn away? Will we wrap up the negotiations (the next Paris or Edinburgh or Cairo summit) as practically as possible? Will we 'settle'?

~~~

With those questions and cautions in mind, a few words. To return to the question of what it might take to apprehend the climate-changed future of the planet as vivid rather than abstract: key to that task is the idea that the image of the future is a mirror of the image of the past precisely to the extent to which the future reflects the becoming-planetary of prior global conditions of *life-without-standing*. Or, much more simply: if we want to know what the future will look like, look to what life has historically been made to be when it is held to have no protection, no right. I suggested earlier that the future climate-changed planet comes to us as something abjected and disposable; that the future, and all who will live in it, comes like a colonial subject before imperial power. How so? And in what form?

By initial way of answer, let me turn to Eyal Weitzman and Fazal Sheikh's investigations of the intersection between coloniality, race, environmental re-engineering and what they call the 'aridity line' in the remarkable work they have pursued on the

Israel/Palestine 'Conflict Shoreline'. Collectively, their work suggests that the planetary mirroring of prior logics of colonialism, race, biopolitics, and governmentality is now proceeding under a logic of *environmentality*.

The race line, the colour line, the enemy line, the biopolitical line, the line dividing those who governmental power will currently 'make live or let die', is now being reconstrued (and fraudulently de-racialized) as an environmental line; a line drawn between the green zone of flourishing cities, and economies, and the line of the desert; a line between sustenance and the unsustainable; the line between the productive and the arid. As Weitzman and Sheikh's work on Israel/Palestine and the Negev shows, however, aridity is not a natural condition, it is produced.

Fig. 1: Fazal Sheikh, from *Desert Bloom*, part of the *The Erasure Trilogy*, Steidl, 2015. © Fazal Sheikh.



The aridity line is not inherent in nature. It is manufactured as a practice of *environmentality*: a practice of producing deserts (or drained watersheds, or desiccated rivers) to cultivate farms, gardens, hyper-cities, and factories; pushing populations behind the drought line, and then finding – because they are discovered there, in the arid zone they have 'failed' to cultivate – that the people in these climate-ruined geographies (which map almost entirely onto the maps of empire and colony) lack 'standing' as potentially productive contributors to the green zone, the Schengen zone, the European cities on the northern shore of the Sahel and the far-side of the cross-Mediterranean passage, the green-lawned American suburbs beyond the

Rio Grande; that the people of the arid zone have no right to cross the line to the green zone; and can be let die – in the desert, the river, the Mediterranean drowning waters.

That is a new grammar for an old story – a new way policing the movement of populations – where the aridity line putatively replaces the race line, while merely reinforcing it (and where environmentality becomes just the newest form of governmentality). But even as thinking the phase-shift from governmentality to environmentality does not fundamentally alter our understanding of the present and its modes of power, it has some larger consequences on our understanding of the future. For it is not only the millions of lives currently held to be without standing that the emerging logics of environmentality abandon.

Under the codes of that logic, *the future itself* – with the atmosphere changes, soil erosion, agricultural collapse, and desertification we are visiting on it – is also, already, living beyond the aridity line. Or, to make an image of it: *the future is the Negev*, and the Sahari, and the Sonoran desert zones, and all the future poor seeking to cross the aridity we are making. As the future is the becoming-planetary of the drowning waters of the Mediterranean, and the Rio Grande, and the flood plains of Pakistan if we do not act now.

~~Which implies that if we are to learn how to be the representative claimants for those future refugees – border-crossing from the future into our present organizations of power – that we must begin by building our contemporary and future commitments to a ‘we’ far beyond our current lines of green life and arid life; by opening ourselves to the widening future deserts and deepening drowning pools we are already making.

~~Which also means that if we are to be truly, urgently, hospitable, it will depend on being hospitable both to abjected life abandoned now and by opening our politics, economies, universities and museums to all the coming lives we are already throwing beyond the arid and drowning lines of the decades and centuries to come.

~~~

Which leads me, in conclusion, to a body of art vividly tracing a path to such an opening. The aridity line, the siege line, the race line, the colour line, the enemy line currently encamping the future – what is their alternative? Can we cross those lines into the besieged future and offer that future our hospitality – possibly even our reparation? *Perhaps* – as the contemporary South African artist Igshaan Adam’s work suggests – less in response to an abstract demand that we *must* do so, than by following an embodied *line of desire* rendering vivid a planetary urge of freedom.

The most comprehensive overview of Adams’ project comes from his 2022 show at the Art Institute of Chicago entitled *Desire Lines*. Born in 1982, in the ‘so-called-coloured’ Apartheid-era township of Bonteheuwel on the Cape Flats, he works with

fibres, coloured plastic beads, shards of glass and detritus collected from the climate-desiccated terrain surrounding Bonteheuwel. He gathers throwaways from the sides of the itinerant pathways the people of Bonteheuwel have walked into the ground as they head between their alleys of hard-brick houses and zinc-and-corru-gated-carboard shacks and brace the hike to the 'taxi' stands on the side of the N2 motorway that will carry them to their jobs in Cape Town. Gathering these wandering discards, Adams weaves those bits of glinting rubbish into the wool skeins of large tapestries, up to twenty by thirty feet in diameter.

*Fig. 2: Igshaan Adams 'Bonteheuwel / Epping' (detail) 2021. Wood, painted wood, plastic, bone, stone and glass beads, polyester, and nylon rope, cotton rope, link chain, wire (memory and galvanised steel) and cotton twine, 495 x 1170 x 325 cm. Courtesy of the artist and blank projects. © Igshaan Adams.*



Fig. 3: Igshaan Adams 'Bonteheuwel / Epping' 2021. Wood, painted wood, plastic, bone, stone and glass beads, polyester, and nylon rope, cotton rope, link chain, wire (memory and galvanised steel) and cotton twine, 495 x 1170 x 325 cm. Courtesy of the artist and the blank projects. © Igshaan Adams.



The names of the works resonate. One, titled in English, is *When Dust Settles*. But most play up and down the registers of Cape Afrikaans, the language that has separated life after life – the ‘white’ from the ‘black’ and the ‘so-called-coloured’ – but a language Adams has nevertheless held to and that his work re-weaves as something more than white and dividing; as, also, a brown language; a language of ‘Bruin Mense’ merging histories together.

His tapestries weave those skeins: defying an audience to exclude him – or anyone – from that Cape history. One tapestry is called *Stoflike Oorskot (Earthly Remains)*; another *Spoorsny (Tracking Footprints)*. Earth, footprints, dust. Tracking, settling, remaining. A history and a commitment. We have been here, for long time. Track our footprints. You cannot deny them. Turn the earth for our remains and the beauties we have made. They are everywhere. Track our history. We will remain. We will continue to weave ourselves into what is ours, and yours, and everyone’s. That is what we hear in his titles – in that sparkling brown Afrikaans Adams has claimed.

And then – more demanding – are the tapestries themselves. Viewed from a distance they look like GIS renderings of the earth’s surface, satellite photographs of a deserted landscape shaded in greens, and browns, and blues (like woven interpretations of Weitzman and Sheikh’s *Erasure Trilogy*, with which they are deeply in conversation) with here or there a pattern of lines cut across the terrain, a trace-work of

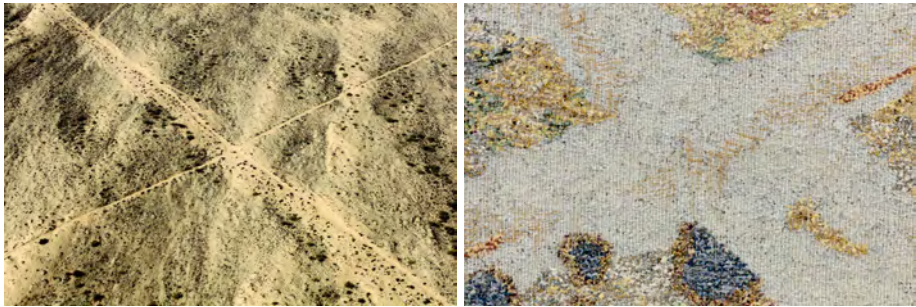


intersecting paths that a people cut into it. Not just the recent residents of the Cape peninsula, but, further back still, the original inhabitants of these increasingly desertified spaces: the *Khoe-Sān*; first indigenous minders of this place, who wrote their walkways, histories, and wonders into this terrain, over long time – resiliently furrowing their record into the ground of this tip of Africa.

Fig. 4: Fazal Sheikh, from *Desert Bloom*, part of the *The Erasure Trilogy*, Steidl, 2015. © Fazal Sheikh.

Fig. 5: Igshaan Adams' *Bonteheuvel / Epping* 2021 7 Detail / Courtesy of the artist and blank projects.

© Igshaan Adams.



And then, in Adams' tapestries – in the careful mix of all the flotsam he's woven in – there are the signs of the others the Cape has gathered: Malay, Dutch, English, Xhosa, Zulu, Cantonese, Jewish exiles and emigrés, Yoruba, Tswana, Shangaan, Moroccan, Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, anarchist, capitalist, mine-worker, union; all mixing and merging their paths and history on this landscape, at the southern tip of Africa: a place where history's dust rises and settles; a place of history's remains and future; a place of history's footprints and converging paths:

~~When Dust Settles

~~Stoflike Oorskot (*Earthly Remains*)

~~Spoorsny (*Tracking Footprints*)

The purpose of those paths—as Adam's title for the Chicago show reveals, is desire.

Apartheid constrained movement. Desire released it. Apartheid boasted. Desire won. Across his work, Adams has been plotting the paths of those meandering, connecting lines of historical desire; gathering desire's abandoned things and perfume bottles and protea petals and funeral notices and rave party tack-ups and civic-gathering notices and kwaito flyers – all spilt along those paths of walked-desire the people the Cape Flats have written, from Apartheid to now.



There is a history of policing and a theory of *freedom-through-desire* animating his weave. The policing is obvious. Apartheid and its police patrolled, arrested, imprisoned, and tortured Bonteheuwel, for decades. Post-apartheid poverty punishes it still. The freedom-as-lived-desire is less obvious. Until it becomes obvious. It has something to do with his renewed attention to the 'practice of everyday life'. Don't invent a whole new system from abstraction. Pay attention to what people actually do when they desire to be free. Learn, again, and anew, the practices of everyday life. How people walk. Where they pause to eat, and drink, and laugh, and pray. Follow the desire lines of everyday life. Trace its spontaneities, wandering a township, a *spoorsny*. Or, as Adams has re-imagined it in another work from his show: follow the determined, back-and-forth-forth pace of an 'ouma' cooking pap, pressing the foot-stepped memory of her life into her kitchen's linoleum flooring day after day after day. Weave a tapestry from the example of that walked linoleum.

Fig. 6: Igshaan Adams 'When Dust Settles' 2018 (detail). Vinyl flooring, installation view at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg. Photography by Mario Todeschini. Courtesy of the artist and blank projects. © Igshaan Adams.



*Fig. 7: Igshaan Adams, 'Ameen', 2018. Beads, various ropes, twine, cotton offcuts, tea, blue oxide, dye, detergent, 270 x 240 cm. Courtesy of the artist and blank projects. © Igshaan Adams.*



And now do what Adams has done and pull back from all those local lines of desire.

Record Bonteheuwel's walks and paths of disobedient freedom and make a planetary, satellite image of them, woven into tapestry, opening their pathways beneath a set of sculpted, floating, dust-clouds.

Imagine the planet traced by countless, endless, of those desire lines; beginning perhaps at the southern tip of Africa, traversing the continent, walking from the Cape through Namibia, Angola, Cameroon, Niger, Guinea-Bissau, Morocco; arriving not just hungry but desiring and future-imagining; animated by a determined, bodily, life-risking commitment to freedom; continuing across all obstacles; over the Sahel; to a dinghy; risking the Mediterranean; heading to Marseille, or Bologna, or Paris, or London, or Barcelona, or Leiden, or Amsterdam to remake, again, those cities; to remind Europe of what they know (as the United States must also know): that they are not the centres of the world but northern peripheries of the global south.

With that in mind, think Adam's *Desire Lines* as a trace-work and tapestry of that future. Not just a map of the abandoned but a map of the agents of the future; the map of the ones who will not give up on the idea of freedom; the map of the ones teaching us what it means to truly desire freedom: across every line of divide; across every apartheid; across every Kalahari and Sahel and Sonora and Negev and Rio Grande and Mediterranean; across every line of enmity; across every line of governmentality, environmentality, aridity, and drowning.

Imagine that our task is not in some impossibly abstract, data-limited, or court-ordered obligation to be, *bureaucratically*, the future claimant's representatives on behalf of an abstract idea of freedom, but to understand that those future's representatives are already among us, coming toward us, *urging* us to walk a line of desire into a new planetary future they are making. Are we ready to welcome them? To alter our present for them? To re-imagine our universities and museums for *and with* them? In doing so, can we re-articulate the university's and the museum's projects of restitution as not only a *compensatory* act for the past, and *care* for the present, but, also, as a *creative* project for the future?

