

# Decolonizing allegory and anti-imperialist critique in the *longue durée* of extractivism

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## Abstract

A re-thinking of the critical vocation of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* is long overdue. The British Commonwealth of Nations that was first established in 1949 has continued to provide a neo-colonial framework for Britain and its former dominions (particularly Australia and Canada) to extract raw materials, capital, and labour from former British colonies and commodity frontiers within settler colonies. For this reason, the British Commonwealth of Nations may be understood as a zombie-like system of extractivism, in which a moribund imperial power stumbles on by draining the postcolonial world of its lifeblood. Against the obfuscation of this system by the term “Commonwealth literature”, I suggest that one of the critical tasks of anti-imperialist critique in future issues of *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today* is to examine how a dynamic relationship between allegory and counter-allegory in decolonial world literatures works to foreground and contest the neo-colonial dynamics of extractivism, in order to imagine the conditions of possibility for bringing about the abolition of that system. At the core of the article is a consideration of how allegory and counter-allegory form part of the intricate allegorical machinery of two rather different cultural texts: M. NourbeSe Philip’s experimental poem *Zong!* (2008) and William Kentridge’s animated film *Mine* (1991). By giving form and meaning to the history and legacy of anti-systemic movements against racial extractivism, decolonizing allegories such as *Zong!* and *Mine* also demand a rethinking of predominant materialist approaches to modern allegory.

## Keywords

allegory, counter-allegory, decolonization, extractivism, modern world-system

In his essay “Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist” (1991/1983), Salman Rushdie argued that this contested term was “a chimera” (63), a “literary ghetto” (68), and “an ungainly name for the world’s younger English literatures” (65–66). He also suggested

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that this phantom category obscured the translations of texts across and between South Asia and Latin America. His conclusion made a slightly different point, which now seems axiomatic for contemporary scholars of world literature: that “‘Commonwealth literature’ should not exist, and that Eng. Lit. was always a world literature, which is proliferating in every conceivable direction” (1991/1983: 70). Rushdie’s criticisms of “Commonwealth literature” may seem both obvious and dated to a contemporary reader; however, if we consider the context in which the essay was written, we can begin to see how the essay gestures to a materialist understanding of world literature, even though Rushdie does not approach “Commonwealth literature” in that way. As a Booker-prize winning literary celebrity, and a secular libertarian, who is also a beneficiary of the global literary marketplace, it is unsurprising that Rushdie does not pursue the materialist implications of his observations further. And yet, the terms in which Rushdie expresses his criticisms of “Commonwealth literature” bear a certain resemblance to the concerns expressed by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) that world literature is symptomatic of a rapidly expanding network of international capital that seeks to establish new markets across the globe, and to extract raw materials from the remotest zones — concerns that have subsequently been refined by Franco Moretti and the Warwick Research Collective (among others).

To claim that the questions Rushdie raises in his essay about the challenges of comparing writers, literary forms, and styles from very different geographical areas within the so-called Commonwealth are better approached in terms of the methods and vocabularies of materialist critique is not in itself remarkable. That Rushdie’s critique of a non-existent Commonwealth literature is symptomatic of a terminal crisis within a British imperial cycle of accumulation is further borne out by his critique of British imperial nostalgia that was specific to the “Raj Revival” films of the 1980s. By starting with this brief reappraisal of Rushdie’s essay, I want to suggest that the curious persistence of “Commonwealth literature” can be read as part of an allegory for a system of racial extractivism that has its origins in the *longue durée* of British imperial hegemony. Extending Jen Preston’s account of racial extractivism in the settler-colonial context of Canada (2017), I suggest that different forms of racial extractivism can be found in colonial spaces from the slave ship and the plantation to the South African gold mine; what’s more, the legacies of these practices of racial extractivism form part of the social, cultural, and ecological fabric of the postcolonial world. While the British Empire is widely regarded as a thing of the past, the persistence of extractive forms of imperialism in semi-peripheral and peripheral zones that benefit private companies, some of which are located in the old imperial core, draws attention to continuities between the imperial past and empire today. The British Commonwealth of Nations that was first established in 1949 is sometimes regarded as a benign network of informal relations between countries that once formed part of the British Empire, but it has also provided a neo-colonial framework for Britain and its former dominions (particularly Australia and Canada) to extract raw materials, capital, and labour from former British colonies and commodity frontiers within settler colonies. For this reason, the British Commonwealth of Nations may be understood as a zombie-like system of extractivism, in which a moribund imperial power stumbles on by draining the postcolonial world of its lifeblood. Against the obfuscation of this system by the term “Commonwealth literature”, I suggest that one of the critical

tasks of anti-imperialist critique in future issues of *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today* is to examine how a dynamic relationship between allegory and counter-allegory in decolonial world literatures works to foreground and contest the neo-colonial dynamics of extractivism, in order to imagine the conditions of possibility for bringing about the abolition of that system. In this essay, the term counter-allegory is used to describe the formal strategies that writers and visual artists have used to counter the transformation of people and nature into commodities — a process that imitates allegory's logic of representation, as we will see.

At the core of the article is a consideration of how allegory and counter-allegory form part of the intricate allegorical machinery of two rather different cultural texts: M. NourbeSe Philip's experimental poem *Zong!* (2008) and William Kentridge's animated film *Mine* (1991). By giving form and meaning to the history and legacy of anti-systemic movements against racial and patriarchal extractivism, decolonizing allegories such as *Zong!* and *Mine* demand a rethinking of predominant materialist approaches to modern allegory that try to map the totality of the modern world-system. An exemplary case in point is Fredric Jameson's (1986) attempt to develop a materialist account of "Third World" cultural production that situated questions of cultural form and meaning in relation to a structural transition in the modern world-system from an era of European imperialism to a neoliberal economic order that is "headquartered in the United States" (Lazarus, 2011: 165). As is well known, critics of Jameson's essay have tended to focus on his "sweeping hypothesis" that "all Third World texts are to be read as national allegories" (1986: 69). Against these prematurely dismissive critiques, Imre Szeman (2000), Nicholas Brown (2009), and Neil Lazarus (2011) offer a more considered assessment of Jameson's essay. On their readings, Jameson offers a dialectical approach to "Third World" literary texts as complex objects that imagine the nation as a utopian horizon for political change, and see the "Third World" as a (semi)peripheral zone in a modern world-system dominated by the economic and military hegemony of the United States.<sup>1</sup> To make sense of this dialectical approach, it is necessary to recognize that Jameson understands allegory as a four-dimensional model — an idea he first elaborates in *The Political Unconscious* (1981). Jameson takes this four-dimensional model from the history of biblical exegesis, via the thought of Saint Augustine, Aquinas, and Dante (among others). In Jameson's account, the medieval system of allegory was part of a broader social mission: to assimilate "the Old Testament to the New" and to rewrite "the Jewish textual and cultural heritage in a form usable for Gentiles" (Jameson, 1981: 29). A distinctive temporal hierarchy subtends this movement from the literal to the allegorical, moral, and anagogic levels of early medieval Christian allegory. The literal meaning of an Old Testament story is set in the past; the allegorical meaning of that past story is then connected to a New Testament story in the present; Christian believers draw a moral allegory from that initial allegorical reading that guides individual conduct in the present; and a final anagogic meaning, or prophecy, relates these previous readings to Christian history in the future. The end point or *eschaton* of Christian allegory is a final judgement in which believers ascend to heaven. This is not to suggest that Jameson is concerned with medieval allegory or theological questions *per se* or that this linear temporal model should be taken as a normative model for all world literatures; the point is rather

that medieval Christian allegory provides a conceptual framework for understanding the dialectical form of modern allegory, particularly its mode of treating one allegorical level as if it were a vehicle for another. In a related commentary on Jameson's thought, Nicholas Brown makes the Hegelian undertones of Jameson's dialectical use of medieval Christian allegory explicitly clear in his suggestion that the "specifically missionary purpose" of Christian allegory is to subsume other belief systems and narratives into "the anagogic truth of Christian allegory" (2009: 26). Such a system of subsumption may provide Jameson with an analogous hermeneutic model or "allegorical key" for interpreting the subject's complex relationship to ideology and the history of capitalist modernity. Yet this system also raises further questions about the ghostly remainders of "other belief systems and narratives", and their capacity to counter both "the anagogic truth of Christian allegory" and the modern world-system to which it gives narrative form and coherence.

What Jameson does not quite say in *The Political Unconscious* is that the social mission of Christian allegory also provides a secular conceptual framework for understanding how non-capitalist societies and cultures are subsumed into a profoundly divisive and unequal modern world-system. Jameson develops this point in later essays such as "Modernism and Imperialism" and "Third World Literature". In the former essay, Jameson notes how English writers such as E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf fall back on tropes of the sublime in an attempt to imagine the unrepresentable totality of the imperialist world-system in the early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> In the latter essay, Jameson suggests that the figure of the literary cannibal in Lu Xun's fiction exemplifies a different kind of allegorical key to that which he finds in the canonical texts of European modernism. If the subsumption or "cannibalizing" of the Third World and the extraction of raw materials that such a process entails are relegated to a symptom in the formal structures of canonical European modernism, they are made manifest in what Jameson calls the "generic discontinuities" of "Third World" allegory. In a reading of Ousmane Sembène's satirical representation of Hadj, the corrupt bourgeois figure of Sembène's novel *Xala*, Jameson notes how this figure was once imprisoned "for his nationalist and pro-independence activities" before becoming "a middle-man between European multinationals and local extraction industries" (1986: 81). Jameson reads Sembène's juxtaposition of collective forms of social life, such as polygamy, and capitalist relations as a further instance of literary cannibalism. This reading takes on a more complex allegorical dimension when the narrative reveals "through a remarkable generic transformation" that Hadj sold off a large piece of tribal land in exchange for money to fund his various marriages. As Jameson puts it, the "representational space of the narrative is lifted to a new generic realm, which reaches back to touch the powers of the archaic, even as it foretells the utopian destruction of the fallen present in the mode of prophecy" (1986: 84).

Jameson's allegorical reading of the generic discontinuities at play in *Xala* gestures towards a dialectical understanding of decolonizing allegory that exceeds his unsatisfactory conclusions about "Third World" national allegory. The movement between "the archaic" and the prophetic framing of the "fallen present" counters the temporal order of capitalist modernity. The voices of the dispossessed peasantry in *Xala* who confront Hadj and require him to submit to a "ceremony of ritual humiliation" is not just an allegory of the material conditions of the periphery after it has been subsumed into a modern

world-system by a comprador class that serves the interests of international capital and the local extractive industries of the semiperiphery. These dispossessed voices also express a utopian desire for an alternative world, even after the ideals of decolonization have been betrayed. Since the utopian content of this alternative world is projected towards a horizon that is always in the future, it is not clearly defined; yet the use of archaic ritual in *Xala* sheds light on the anti-systemic function of tropes and figures from indigenous thought and anticolonial folk culture in decolonizing allegory. Jameson's tantalizing reflections on the ways in which the utopian truth content of "Third World" national allegory both mediates and contests the relationship between local extractive industries and international capital are certainly apposite to the task of anti-imperialist critique, with which *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today* is concerned. Yet Jameson is not alone in drawing such connections.

In a brief discussion of the relationship between allegory and the modern world-system, Elizabeth DeLoughrey writes of how "allegory is known for its embeddedness in history (time), its construction of a world system (space), and its signification practices in which the particular figures for the general and the local for the global" (2019: 5). DeLoughrey's sweeping claim raises further questions about the role of allegory in representing specific historical experiences of extraction in peripheral or semiperipheral zones of the modern world-system that are particularly germane to the revised aims of this journal, as defined in this landmark issue. Why is allegory a privileged mode of representation in the "construction of a world system"? Does the use of allegory in decolonial literature and visual art merely register the uneven historical processes of conquest and domination by which particular non-capitalist societies and cultures have been forced into this world system, as some scholars have suggested (Lazarus, 2011)? Or might the complex form of allegory also offer a dialectical image of a future possible world in the wake of the deprivations of imperialism? If future scholarship in *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today* is to examine how decolonial literatures can offer a critique of empire today, the allegorical methods of materialist criticism offer an important conceptual tool for understanding how literary texts mediate the forces of capitalist modernity that define the relationship between the imperial past and the present.

DeLoughrey's brief reference to Fredric Jameson's work offers a productive starting point from which to begin to address these questions. Citing Jameson's account of allegory as a concept that can help us to grasp the totalizing geopolitical concept of a modern world-system, DeLoughrey suggests that Jameson's concept of the geopolitical unconscious can also facilitate an understanding of the totality of the Anthropocene. There are a number of important elisions in this argument, which require further elaboration. First, it overlooks the precise meaning of the modern world-system. For the historical sociologists Immanuel Wallerstein, Terence Hopkins, and Giovanni Arrighi, a world-system refers specifically to an unequal relationship between a core, a periphery, and a semiperiphery. World-systems analysis examines how states with strong sovereignty have been able to extract cheap labour and raw materials such as energy and food from peripheral or semiperipheral areas with weaker autonomy, in order to expand their accumulated capital. This capitalist world-system developed and changed through historical waves or systemic cycles of accumulation, contraction, and terminal crisis. Giovanni Arrighi (1994) traces the beginnings of the modern world-system back to a Genoese cycle of

accumulation in which a capitalist class headquartered in Genoa financed the Spanish trade in silver extracted from the Americas and the Portuguese trade in Indian Ocean spices (1453–1648). This cycle was gradually superseded by a Dutch cycle of accumulation in which Amsterdam financiers used surplus capital from the Baltic grain and timber trade to establish joint stock chartered companies in the Indian Ocean region (1580–1784). A British cycle of accumulation followed the Dutch cycle, using profits from British investment in Atlantic slavery to fund an industrial revolution, to expand its overseas empire, and to establish an international financial system (1740–1929). With the decline of Britain's economic hegemony after the First World War, the United States inaugurated a new economic cycle of accumulation that started in the late nineteenth century, but was consolidated after the Second World War through the establishment of a new financial system and international order (from 1870 to the present). Arrighi's argument turns on a rethinking of Karl Marx's general formula of capital accumulation (MCM') in *Das Kapital*, where M denotes money capital, C denotes commodity capital, and M' denotes an expanded mass of money capital with interest gained from profits or surplus value. For Arrighi, this formula does not just depict the logic of individual capitalist investments; it is also a recurrent pattern of world capitalism, in which epochs of material expansion alternate with phases of financial expansion. These alternating phases constitute what Arrighi calls a systemic cycle of accumulation. Arrighi also emphasizes that systemic cycles of accumulation do not proceed in a linear order; on the contrary, each new accumulation cycle combines with the previous cycle that it also succeeds. Systemic cycles of accumulation have a dynamic and nonsynchronous temporality precisely because they combine aspects from earlier and later cycles. The core, peripheral, and semiperipheral dynamics of these accumulation cycles have become even more complex, discrepant, and multi-scalar, particularly in the late neoliberal phase of world-historical capitalism, where the economies of Western Europe and North America appear to be in decline. Despite this decline, the legacy of these earlier cycles continues to shape the broad contours of extraction in the semiperipheral and peripheral zones of North America, the Caribbean, West Africa, and Southern Africa. At the same time, anti-systemic movements have interrupted accumulation cycles in ways that challenge the hegemonic power of capitalist states and institutions, while foregrounding the ways in which the extraction of raw materials from commodity frontiers have been enabled by particular colonial and neo-colonial histories of race-labour exploitation. One of the abiding concerns of the research project of which this essay forms a part is to examine how the literature and visual art of decolonization makes the legacy of these anti-systemic movements intelligible.

As a materialist history of the modern world economy, world-systems analysis is not primarily concerned with literature and visual art; yet it does acknowledge the importance of culture in mediating the core-periphery-semiperiphery dynamics of modern capitalism, and its systemic cycles of accumulation. In the para-textual front matter of the first volume of *The Modern World-System* (1974), Immanuel Wallerstein reproduces a section from Jost Amman's large single-page engraving *Allegorie van de handel* (*Allegory of Trade*) (1585). This print combines images of classical figures, scales, accounts books, ships, warehouses, and the interior of German merchants' counting houses to visualize the practice of double-entry book-keeping in the thriving



sixteenth-century Dutch port city of Antwerp. The choice of Antwerp as a perspective from which to view an oceanic world of international trade that recedes into the vanishing point of this engraving clearly establishes a geographical connection between Antwerp and the rest of the world. As an early modern form of cognitive mapping, *Allegorie van de handel* complements Wallerstein's own attempt to map the totality of shifting social and economic relations that defined the early history of capitalism. It also illustrates how allegorical tropes and figures were used to instruct merchants in the importance of book-keeping to the accumulation of capital. Despite its attempt to visualize the totality of early modern trade, however, *Allegorie van de handel* does not represent the means by which wealth is accumulated in the core. Since the world of the periphery lies beyond the frame of the print, the extraction of cheap labour and raw materials also lies hidden from view. The visual relegation of the periphery to a vanishing point in *Allegorie van de handel* raises broader questions about the ideological function of allegory. Why is allegory's metaphorical mode of signification particularly well positioned to mediate the combined and uneven development of capital accumulation across time and space? As a form of mediation, does allegory always necessarily reinforce the ruling relationships between dominant and subordinate social classes in core, peripheral, and semiperipheral societies that it also makes intelligible? Or might the multidimensional symbolic language of allegory also provide writers and visual artists with a powerful, dialectical form capable of challenging such relations?

By sidestepping an engagement with world-systems analysis, then, scholars such as Elizabeth DeLoughrey miss the opportunity to examine how allegory has been used to mediate, efface, and sometimes even to challenge the systemic relations between the extraction of cheap labour and raw materials in the periphery or semiperiphery of the world-system and the accumulation of capital in the core. DeLoughrey's approach to allegory and the Anthropocene in island literatures of the Global South draws extensively on Walter Benjamin's scattered and somewhat tantalizing references to allegory and the ruins of nature in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* (1928). While such an approach is certainly thought-provoking, DeLoughrey's rather superficial account of the relationship between allegory, the world system, and the Anthropocene elides how the history of the capitalist world-system is, at one and the same time, a history of capitalist world-ecology and racial extractivism. The development of cash-crop agriculture and the extraction of raw materials from commodity frontiers on the periphery of the modern world-system form a crucial part of the history of the modern world economy, as scholars including Jason W. Moore, John Bellamy Foster, and Michael Niblett have variously argued. The historical development of capitalism, argues Jason W. Moore, was dependent on an ecological surplus of cheap nature, cheap energy, and cheap food, as well as cheap labour. In commodity frontiers such as the sugar plantations of the Caribbean and the Americas, capitalist monocultures simultaneously degraded both the soil and the enslaved human labour power that they exploited. This degradation exemplifies the logic of what John Bellamy Foster calls a metabolic rift — a concept metaphor he takes from Marx to describe the simultaneous exploitation of nature and human labour that capital-intensive agriculture and industry demanded (Bellamy Foster, 1999). What Bellamy Foster's account of the metabolic rift implies but does not explicitly make clear is how the accumulation of capital that takes place in commodity frontiers such as the sugar

plantation was made possible by a system of racial extractivism, which entailed the human trafficking of enslaved African people across the Atlantic on an industrial scale.

Against this elision of racial extractivism in some accounts of capitalist world-ecology, a consideration of the dialectical relationship between allegory and counter-allegory in literature and visual art from the semiperipheral zones of the modern world-system tell a very different story of the violent imperial history of the Commonwealth, as we will see. In the long poem *Zong!* (2008), M. NourbeSe Philip disassembles and reassembles the vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric of an eighteenth-century legal appeal made by British maritime insurance underwriters against a prior ruling, which ordered them to compensate the owners of the merchant ship, the *Zong*, for the value of the enslaved people whom the captain of that vessel had thrown overboard. The point of this anti-representational technique of writing, as NourbeSe Philip explains in the afterword to *Zong!*, is to “not tell the tale that must be told” since it “can only be told by not telling” (2008: 193–194). Rather than repeating the dehumanizing terms in which this event was recorded and subsequently represented, *Zong!* works through the double bind of trying to mourn the lives and deaths of the 132 or 133 abducted Africans who were murdered at sea without allowing the event to become meaningful or intelligible in any straightforward way. As NourbeSe Philip explains:

The poems resist my attempts at meaning or coherence and, at times, I too approach the irrationality and confusion, if not madness (*madness is outside the box of order*), of a system that could enable — the material and the nonmaterial. Or is it the immaterial? Within the boundaries established by the words and their meanings there are silences; within each silence is the poem, which is revealed only when the text is fragmented and mutilated, mirroring the fragmentation and mutilation that slavery perpetrated on Africans, their customs and ways of life. (2008: 195)

Against racial capitalism’s logic of antiblackness that attempts to transform enslaved Africans into mute commodities, *Zong!* mutilates the official historical records of the slave trade in order to counter slavery’s logic of commodification and financial speculation. Since the commodity form itself is regarded as a form of modern allegory that simultaneously renders allegory obsolete by perfecting its logic of representation (Halpern, 1997: 13), the counter-allegorical may provide a way of making sense of the anagrammatic sea of phonemes, morphemes, and word fragments that form *Zong!*. The song that *Zong!* performs is not a lyric with a determinate poetic subject; it rather takes the non-representational forms of a chant, shout, ululation, moan, mutter, howl, and shriek, as NourbeSe Philip explains in “Notunda” (2008: 207). It is precisely in this litany of dissonant aural forms that the counter-allegorical significance of the poem’s sonic ecology gradually becomes intelligible. *Zong!* works against, or counters, the grotesque transformation of murdered African people, who were enslaved and trafficked on board the *Zong*, into a speculative form of finance capital, which the owners of the ship subsequently attempted to realize in a marine insurance claim. In doing so, NourbeSe Philip simultaneously draws attention to the allegorical logic of racial extractivism that was at stake in the appellate case, while also disrupting that logic.



The mining of gold from the Witwatersrand gold reef entailed a similar logic of racial extractivism. Hundreds of thousands of black African labourers were displaced from the rural hinterlands of Southern Africa, and vast toxic mine dumps were created around the townships of Johannesburg. Against the transformation of African labour into a commodity and the devastation of South African ecology wrought by mining capital, William Kentridge's short animated film *Mine* (1991) mobilizes different allegorical techniques, including personification and metonymy, as a vehicle for anti-imperialist critique. The corpulent charcoal-drawn figure of the fat cat mining magnate Soho Eckstein personifies the extraction of gold from the subterranean world of Johannesburg. In the opening sequences of this film, a series of visual transformations take place. First, a seismic explosion underground transforms the representation of the Highveld landscape into an image of Soho Eckstein sleeping on his bed. As Matthew Kentridge explains:

[the] ground shifts and rolls, crushing and sweeping away people, buildings and machinery. Only the chimney of the refinery is left to smoulder, like a cigar balanced on the counterpane, for the ground has morphed into a bed in which Soho Eckstein, in his trademark suit, has just turned over in his sleep. (2015: 166)

In a second montage sequence, a scene of mineworkers starting a shift is cross-cut with another scene of Soho lying in his bed propped up on a large pile of pillows (Rothberg, 2019: 106). This juxtaposition of images establishes a clear relationship between the figures of labour and capital that bears some resemblance to Sergei Eisenstein's editing techniques in *Strike* (1925), as Michael Rothberg has suggested (2015: 106). Yet it is in the differences between these forms of personification as well as the visual tropes connecting these figures that the allegorical significance of Kentridge's animated film becomes apparent. We have already seen how the framing of Soho Eckstein as a greedy and affluent Randlord functions as a personification of mining capital; in sharp contrast to this figure, Kentridge depicts the cramped conditions of the mining compound dormitory, where the miners lie cheek by jowl on concrete bunks. In a surreal series of images that begins with a scene of Soho taking breakfast in bed, this figure of mining capital pushes the coffee plunger in his *cafetière*, before it travels down beneath the bottom of the coffee pot and his bedclothes to reveal a subterranean world of mining compound life and rock drilling. The movement of the coffee plunger from the bourgeois sphere of Soho's luxurious bedroom to the brutal underground world of industrial gold mining establishes a clear relationship between these ostensibly separate spaces. Yet the specific visual associations that this animated sequence of charcoal images delineate also disclose a multi-dimensional allegorical structure. The representation of disembodied heads in cramped mining compounds morphs into a mass of showering men; an illuminated spark from a drill bit tip as it strikes the rock; and an image of a rock carving that resembles the iconic diagram of a slave ship hold that circulated in abolitionist literature from the late eighteenth century onwards. By disclosing the animating power of racial extractivism, metonymy functions as an important part of Kentridge's allegorical machinery.<sup>3</sup> This use of metonymy also works to counter the allegorical transformation of mining labour into capital, which the body of Soho Eckstein personifies.

On one level, the metonymic chain of associations presented in *Mine* draws on familiar tropes from twentieth-century political discourse in South Africa. That the African Mineworkers Union compared the conditions of African miners in South Africa's gold mines with that of enslaved people in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world is a well-established case in point (Crush, 1994). What is perhaps less obvious is how this sequence of animated charcoal drawings stages the reification of African labour power in order to question the entire edifice of South Africa's mining empire. In a commentary on Plato's allegory of the cave in *The Republic*, Kentridge notes how the prisoners in the cave were "chained neck and feet", and thereby prevented from seeing both the source of the light that casts shadows of objects on the walls of the cave, and the objects themselves. "[W]ith the insistence of the restriction of the head movement", Kentridge asserts, "we are reminded of the yoke and fetters of enslaved people [...] The rows of figures lined up in the diagrams of slave ships are like the people chained and lined up in the cave, each only to see the cave directly in front of him" (2014: 26). In light of this statement, it is tempting to read the animated sequence of images in *Mine* as an attempt to articulate the lived experience of racial extractivism from the standpoint of the miners themselves. On this reading, the spark of the drill tip against the rock surface serves to illuminate the cave-like world of the gold mine, which recalls the blinkered perspective that Plato attributes to shackled prisoners — a perspective that Kentridge also relates to that of enslaved peoples, as they are depicted in the diagrams of eighteenth-century slave ships.

The multidimensional perspective that the film offers as it shifts between Soho's bourgeois sphere and the underground spaces of the gold mine and back again serves to illuminate the unequal relations between these figures of labour and capital, in much the same way that the drill bit illuminates the interior of the cave. The transformation of Soho's *cafetière* into a ticker tape machine, which then morphs into the opening of a mineshaft, from where a multitude of miniature mining workers spill out onto his office desk to form a mine dump dramatizes the process of reification that abstracts the products of human labour from the people who work to produce those products. By defamiliarizing the transformation of the miners' labour into abstract numerical figures on a ticker tape or an account book ledger, Kentridge's animation invites viewers to question the process of reification at work in South Africa's gold mines. In doing so, Kentridge gestures towards the historical perspective of the miners, even though he cannot represent this. Like the masked figures in the mining compound depicted earlier in *Mine*, the faceless figures who emerge from Soho's ticker tape machine seem to withhold a secret meaning that resists interpretation. While Kentridge's shadow figures appear to disclose something ineffable about the pre-colonial world that they mask, it is precisely in their allegorical form of appearance as a personification of African mining labour that the anti-systemic implications of Kentridge's artwork become intelligible. By drawing attention to the animation of these figures by the forces of racial extractivism, the allegorical machinery of Kentridge's artwork provides a sophisticated form of political perception that counters the reification and dehumanization of African mining labour.

The allegorical re-framing of pre-colonial cultures in contemporary decolonial literary and visual artworks stands as a reminder that the utopian spirit of decolonization has not been completely subsumed by the neo-colonial forces of capitalist modernity. That "pre-colonial social, cultural and ideological forms survived the colonial era meaningfully" and "continue to survive meaningfully today, in the 'postcolonial' present" (Lazarus,

1990: 88–89) might be dismissed as a symptom of what Neil Lazarus (following Leon Trotsky) has called capitalism’s singular logic of “combined and uneven development” (Lazarus, 1990: 79). Yet the framing of pre-colonial social and cultural forms in decolonial allegory also offers a powerful dialectical image of an alternative world that counters the ecological devastation, dispossession, and exploitation that extractivism entails. To cite one brief example from contemporary Nigerian fiction, the formal juxtaposition of pre-colonial social structures and economic practices, the modern infrastructure of oil extraction, political corruption, and the rise of an informal economy based on crime and illicit oil theft in Helon Habila’s novel *Oil on Water* (2010) draws attention to the dystopian ends of fossil capitalism. The tone of the novel is as apocalyptic as the devastated eco-system it represents; and yet, it is precisely in this dystopian world that the allegorical truth content of the novel enjoins readers to imagine a future alternative to the ecological and socio-economic devastation wrought by extractive forms of resource imperialism.

To decolonize allegory is not to return to a long dead genre; nor is it merely to revive the spectre of national allegory — a mode of reading which focused on the incorporation of the labour and resources of postcolonial economies within a cannibalistic world-system. In the transition from the British Empire to a neo-colonial order, in which a comprador class aided and abetted the extraction of resources by Western-based multinationals from peripheral zones in the Global South, the allegorical codes of literary and visual culture project a dialectical image of a future possible world that entails the determinate negation of that very system. One of the urgent vocations of anti-imperialist critique is to attend to the precise ways in which the formal logic of literary and cultural texts articulates just such a utopian idea, however impossible or ineffable such an idea might seem. By examining how decolonial literature has both mobilized and transformed allegorical techniques from the past in order to foreground and contest the persistence of extractive forms of imperialism in various commodity frontiers across the Commonwealth in the present, future issues of *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today* may well provide an important forum for such ideas to be discussed and debated.

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## Notes

1. By tracing the conceptual trajectory of “national allegory” in Jameson’s work from an earlier reading of Wyndham Lewis through to his more recent critical reflections on globalization, Szeman (2000) challenges what he calls the wilful misreadings of Jameson’s essay. For Szeman, Jameson does not simply reproduce the terms of the “three worlds theory” which Ahmad singles out for particular criticism in his response to Jameson’s essay; on the contrary, Jameson’s point is that the “global economic and political system” produces the uneven development of capitalism which the “three worlds theory” attempted to describe.
2. Jameson (1988: 61–4) also finds an example of an early “Third World” modernist style in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* — a style that combines the incommensurabilities of life in the imperial metropolis and the cultural eccentricities attributed to the colony in the imperial system.
3. For a related discussion of the relationship between metonymy and allegory, see Floyd (2009: 191–2).

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