BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE

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CHAPTER 3

INVISIBLE HARMS: HUMANS AS WASTE, TOXIC LAYERING, AND CHILDHOOD POISONING IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

Susan Levine, Alison Swartz & Hannah Andrea Rother

Introduction

It is now understood that if life itself has become the prime medium for exerting power, power in turn is fundamentally the capacity to control and redistribute the means of human survival and ecological sustainability (Mbembe, 2016:187).

Looking from a distance at the southernmost tip of Africa, the entanglement of toxic layers that conspire to produce childhood poisonings are largely invisible. Especially from the vantage point of South Africa's privileged white minority, the encompassing natural beauty of the Western Cape masks the iatrogenic effects of the racial carving up of the earth's surface and depths. Brutal forms of land dispossession during the years of settler colonialism later found legal sanctuary in the 1950s Group Areas Act. This pillar of apartheid legislation entrenched race as the single most significant factor concerning the racial distribution of populations. The Group Areas Act aimed to eliminate mixed race neighborhoods in favour of racially segregated ones through state sanctioned forced removals. These removals formed a cornerstone of apartheid policy (South African Institute for Race Relations, 1950:26). The ontology of race in relation to the social production of space is etched into the city's topography (Stallybrass & White, 125:1986) and plays a fundamental role in the toxic layering of social and environmental harms in which innumerable invisible harms are folded into the everyday lives of ordinary black and coloured citizens who continue to live in spaces of poverty.

This chapter lifts out from harmful layers of toxicity, the poisoning of children by illegal agricultural pesticides. It tells the story of how and why pesticides have been repurposed to eliminate household pests, including rodents. *Street pesticides* are used extensively, not only in South African poor urban communities but globally, to eradicate rodents destroying food sources, carrying diseases and biting children; cockroaches causing allergies and creating a stigma of uncleanness; and other poverty related pests including flies, bedbugs, and fleas (Rother, 2008; 2010; 2016). In the Western Cape Province, with its population of nearly six million people, a growing number live in low-income urban townships (Ross, 2010). Residents in both permanent and informal housing are subjected to a range of environmental harms and health-related risks associated with poor sanitation, inadequate refuse disposal, limited access to clean water, insecure housing, and pest infestation. To safeguard against diseases carried by rodents and rodent fleas, including salmonella, leptospirosis and plague, and to eliminate pests from domestic spaces, residents resort to using unlabeled and illegal pesticides referred to as *street pesticides* (Rother, 2008). In this chapter we illustrate how child poisoning from street pesticides is caught up in the toxic layering of pesticide use and exposures.

Achille Mbembe (2016) argues that under the effects of colonialism, capitalism and race, the black South African underclass emerge in the eyes of the state as 'waste'. Mbembe embeds the metaphorical use of waste within his post-colonial theory of necropolitics, in which violent processes of dehumanisation betray the fantasy of democracy in post 1994 South Africa (Mbembe, 2003). Mbembe's perspective poses a serious challenge to environmental and public health activists who rely on the state's contract to regard all human beings as deserving of bodily comforts and securities irrespective of class, race, and gender. To remedy the dangerous effects of poisonous pesticides on human populations requires the fire of political will to dismantle the shackles of poverty and inhumanity that underpin childhood poisonings. The conundrum we pose, rests on an uncomfortable scenario, namely that the harmful contamination of humans and the activist movements globally that seek to protect humans from environmental harms, draw strength from the idea that toxic environmental harms and human beings stand apart from one another in an ontological sense; they are of a different order. The underlying ideology at the center of environmental activism is that all victims of environmental harms are worthy of protection. Mbembe's framing of humans as waste troubles this

argument considerably, by exposing an alternate ideology of humans as waste, which militates against human rights campaigns from succeeding in the context of radical dehumanisation, where some humans assume the status of waste, and where abject populations are routinely regarded as surplus people, and hence, undeserving of protection from environmental harms.

In short, the etiology of childhood poisonings by illegal street pesticides is at sea in a web of toxic layers. The toxic layers within which toxic street pesticides enter private households are determined as much by economic inequality as by the proliferation of rats in poor households. The widespread treatment of some humans as waste is caught up in this web, and creates the conditions under which poor, urban, and black citizens are relegated to living outside habitable environments, at the margins. In their searing work on the historical construction of 'city scum' in England, Stallybrass and White (1986) cite Marx as an example of a scholar whose work aimed to recover 'the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass thrown hither and thither' (Marx, 1951:267 in Stallybrass & White 125:1986). The perils of waste in South Africa produce an abbreviated history of class and race oppression, and highlight the toxic layering that makes up the environmental degradation and environmental injustices of township settlements. Barcelona, which was one of the informal settlements where we conducted research with students from public health and anthropology, was built on a waste-dumping site. Due to its insubstantial base of compacted rubbish, the 'land' cannot accommodate proper sanitation systems, and is rife with rodents and other creatures drawn to the rubbish heaps.

Mbembe argues that the spectacle of abject poverty in postcolonial Africa calls into question the 'banality of power' (Mbembe, 1992:1). Obscenity, vulgarism, and the grotesque are performed so regularly in the everyday, that the predictability of routine forms of dehumanisation produce a certain malaise. Warwick Anderson (2010) also comments on the excessive and grotesque consequences of power as a distinctive feature of the post-colony. Donna Goldstein and Kira Hall (2015), in their groundbreaking research on toxic layering in connection with the potential effects of industrial toxicity on the health of teenagers in New Jersey in the United States argue that "toxic layering...generates audience fatigue, becoming banal" (Goldstein & Hall, 2015:641). We ask if childhood poisonings might rupture the banality of power by offering up a convincing body of evidence that crystallises the foulness of corporate toxicity in the midst of entrenched poverty, corruption, and social abandonment.

We are mindful that reporting on the bodies of poisoned children could be interpreted as objectification, that is, of ethnographic observation serving as a springboard for the theoretical contemplation of poverty rather than the bedrock upon which an activist agenda is built. The collaboration attempted here, between anthropology and public health, has not always been easy to navigate, but we believe that such a collaboration is one way to move theory and thick description into the critical realm of engaged scholarship, whereby the articulation of the toxic layers that make up South Africa's fledgling democracy may contribute to a wider critique of corporate and state interest in capitalist value at the expense of shoring up interest in the value of every human life. In our attempt to theorise a landscape of layered waste, that which contributes to childhood poisonings, we acknowledge the contingent relationships between poisoned environments and humans who are relegated to occupy these environments by virtue of being regarded as humans who do not produce value, and hence, are treated as one more layer of waste.

Waste in this sense, is the political other to capitalist value. In a country with intense unemployment and underemployment, the unemployed classes do not easily comprise a population whose bodies can be regarded in the Marxian sense, as raw material for producing value. The political other to capitalist value lies beyond the pale of exploited labour, or even beyond surplus labour, or even beyond the reduction of humans to the raw material that enables industry to prosper.

Mbembe makes the point that the South African Freedom Charter and the 1994 Constitution form a utopian archive, but that challenges to the democratic project are not only ongoing, but undermined by enactments of necropolitics. He argues that under the effects of capitalism and race discourses, some humans have been treated as waste:

Here, under conditions of slavery, colonization and apartheid, brutal forms of dehumanization have raised, in the starkest terms possible, the political and moral dilemmas of human difference. A racially exclusive ideological discourse in the heyday of conquest and occupation, 'humanism' was predicated on the belief that a difference of colour was a difference of species. Race in particular did not simply become a crucial, pervasive dimension of colonial domination and capitalist exploitation. Turned into law, it was also used as a privileged mechanism for turning black life into waste a race doomed to wretchedness, degradation, abjection and servitude. (Mbembe, 2016:1)

Extending Franz Fanon's classic work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), Mbembe theorises the implications of dehumanisation for colonised subjects, and the planet. Through crafting an intellectual genealogy of humans as waste in Africa, Mbembe teases out a sociological history of human degradation, also found in Fanon's writings on wretchedness (Fanon et al., 1963). We can also find in the literature, Ferguson and Kristeva's work on abjection (Ferguson, 1999; Kristeva, 1982), Foucault's summoning of servitude (Foucault, 1977), and the explication of how oppressed classes globally are regarded and treated as "disposable people" (Bales, 2012) (Giroux, 2006). Other variations on this theme include the pernicious notion of "surplus people" (Platzky & Walker, 1985), "discarded people" (Desmond, 1971), "garbaged" bodies (Scanlan, 2005), "wasted humans" (Bauman, 2004), and "waste populations" (Beck, 2009). Hudson McFann's (2015) short essay on humans-as-waste draws further, on the work of James Ferguson (1999) who he regards as offering "a particularly instructive elaboration of Kristeva's (1982) notion of abjection, defining it as a process of being not only "'thrown aside, expelled, or discarded,' but also 'thrown *down* – thus expulsion but also debasement and humiliation'" (Ferguson in McFann, 2015). The association of 'thrown down' populations with vermin, cockroaches, dogs, and other animals testifies to the historical reproduction of semantic and material debasement. This rough collection of metaphors, together with Michel Foucault's writings on biopower and state racism (Foucault, 2008), Agamben's *homo sacer* (Agamben, 1998) and "bare life" (see also Ross, 2010) creates an impasse that demands Mbembe's central question concerning what it would take to build a democracy that retrieves the human from waste (2003).

This chapter builds on research by Hanna-Andrea Rother, a leading scientific researcher in the School of Public Health and Family Medicine at the University of Cape Town. She discovered that highly toxic agricultural pesticides, including organophosphates (e.g. chlorpyrifos and methamediphos) and carbamates (e.g. aldicarb), are the pest control of choice in low-income communities in Cape Town (Rother, 2008; 2010; 2016). Her attention to the silent public health problem of street pesticides grew from her research in local townships where carbamate pesticides, such as aldicarb, were sold by street sellers at taxi ranks, train stations, and open-air food markets. To deepen and expand her study of illegal street pesticides, she recruited a team of anthropology students to work alongside students in public health. Using a mix of qualitative and quantitative field methods, students

from both departments conducted household surveys, enacted photo elicitation projects, observed and photographed the environmental mesh of relationships between indoor and outdoor social spaces, as well as documented stories of childhood poisonings. With our students, we developed a rich archive of texts and images that exposed the social forces that shape both the selling, purchasing, and use of street pesticides.

To be clear, *street pesticides* refer specifically to those that are sold by street vendors in unlabeled containers, or inside recycled juice, water or alcohol bottles resulting in an invisible harm. The invisibility of the harm is evident when both children and adults mistake the poisonous contents inside these unlabeled containers as being safe to consume. The poison is rendered invisible when mixed with water or food. Aldicarb for instance, was produced for commercial farming, but through currently unidentified trade networks, sold to vulnerable populations as a powerful rodenticide. In itself a major consumer harm in the toxic chain of food production, the chemical has been repurposed to meet local needs for inexpensive pest killers known as rodenticides. Aldicarb is an acutely toxic pesticide, and can be lethal when ingested (WHO, 2010). In South Africa, the active ingredients in street pesticides are not registered by the National Department of Agriculture under Act 36 of 1947 for domestic uses due to their extreme acute toxicity. They were however, registered for agricultural use in food production at the start of this research 2008 (Rother, 2008). Street pesticides are easily accessible and affordable (between less than ten cents and \$1.80) in urban townships where the need for pest control is highest. The demand for inexpensive and effective ways to eliminate pests keeps street pesticide sellers buying, diluting and reselling agricultural pesticides. Aldicarb, which is a nematicide used in agriculture to kill nematodes and mites (e.g. for potato, strawberry, citrus production), is sold in strips of tiny black pellets. Commonly sold street pesticides tend to have one or a mixture of a few active ingredients, including methamidaphos, chlorpyrifos, cypermethrin or aldicarb. According to the WHO Classification of Acute Hazards (2010), these substances range from being extremely hazardous to having limited acute hazards under normal use conditions. Potential chronic health effects from exposure to these pesticides include those that are neurotoxic, reproductive toxic, dermatotoxic and may cause cancer (Roberts & Routt Reigart, 2013; Rother, 2008).

The end result of this invisible harm is that an increasing number of children are poisoned by street pesticides (Balme et al., 2010; Rother, 2008). Between 2003 and 2019, colleagues at Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital (RXH) identified

poisonings due to illicit pesticides sold as street pesticides. They assessed the number of incidents in which the statutory requirement of notification to the local health authority was met. Balme et al. (2010) identified 311 incidents of acute pesticide exposure or poisoning at RXH. This figure represented 11% of all pediatric exposures and poisonings seen over the six-year period.

Their research found that the number of pesticide incidents increased annually, and that 278 (91%) children were under six years old and 164 (54%) were males. The most common groups of pesticides were 203 cholinergics (including organophosphates and carbamates), 35 anticoagulants, and 45 unknowns. Two hundred and eleven child pesticide poisonings (referred to as symptomatic incidents) required admission, 121 of these to the High Care or Intensive Care Unit (ICU).¹⁰¹ Medical records, critical for assessing the largely invisible public health crisis, provide an entry point through which to address the historical and political layers that contribute to childhood poisoning.

Toxic layering and invisible harms

Goldstein and Hall set the stage for our ethnographic work on 'toxic layering' and 'invisible harms.' In their research on the "tourette-like epidemic" among high school girls in Le Roy, New Jersey (2015:641), they demonstrate how the media favoured mass 'hysteria' as an explanation for the girls' condition rather than any possible environmental factor.

Concerned about the exclusion of possible environmental harms, Goldstein and Hall argued that "methods in laboratory-based science are rarely able to link individual industrial toxins to human harm, much less toxins in combination (Ibid.)." Further, they write that "in this late industrial era, when suspicions of toxicity are pervasively mediated but rarely proven, the public has become increasingly aware of science's inability to provide resolution regarding harm claimed from nuclear, industrial, or agricultural waste" (Ibid.).

1 The median length of stay in hospital was three days and six cases (2%) resulted in deaths. The large group of cholinergic exposures and poisonings (203) required 195 (96%) admissions; 120 (59%) to High Care or ICU. Of the 44 street pesticide exposures and poisonings, 33 were cholinergic poisonings and 21 required High Care or ICU. Eighty-seven (41%) of 211 poisonings requiring notification were recorded at the local health authority; all were instances of cholinergic poisoning (Balme et al., 2010).

Unlike our case where the relationship between pesticides and poisoning is clear, Goldstein and Hall offer a model of toxic layering that foregrounds the inability to pin blame on specific toxic products, and produces the kinds of loop-holes that the producers of toxic chemicals latch onto. Notwithstanding the difference in our case studies, the model of toxic layering provides a multisemic framework for holding the complex social and political layers that underpin childhood poisonings as they unfold here.

The difficulties associated with poor living conditions are most acutely experienced in the informal settlements that characterise the heavily populated 'margins' of Cape Town's urban landscape (Smit, 2006). Living in such conditions, like those in which our primary informants occupy, exposes them to a number of health risks, including those associated with various kinds of pests, including rats, cockroaches, fleas, bed bugs and flies (Bonney, Kampen & Sweeney, 2008). There is an excess of undesirable intimacy in these spaces to such an extent that the living conditions and poor service delivery foster high levels of pest infestation experienced in low socioeconomic residential areas in comparison with wealthier socioeconomic areas. The use of pesticides to eliminate pests is a common control method, and their negative effects on health are notable (Roberts & Routt Reigart, 2013; Tolosana, Rother & London, 2009).

Rother has proven the causal relationship between agricultural pesticides and childhood poisonings in the Western Cape, and she has advanced numerous immediate interventions to combat these poisonings through awareness campaigns, efforts to properly label illegal street pesticides, and the provision of alternative rodent killers including rat traps and organic solutions to bed bugs and flies. These public health interventions are critical, and yet the historical inequalities that set the stage for poisoning trauma are complexly folded in with the layers of waste that attracts rodents to specific areas in the western cape. In short, race and class oppression finds its material moorings in the waste of old bed springs, moldy mattresses, medicine packages, plastic bottles, torn shoes, cereal boxes, stagnant bacteria filled puddles, plastic bags, and other domestic waste that is left to accumulate in heaps of hospitable mounds for rodents to prosper. Thus, residents in urban townships bare a dual burden of disease from exposure to pests and toxic pesticides (Rother, 2010).

Although acute pesticide poisonings result in, for example, drooling and runny nose, stomach pains, nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, weakness, muscle twitching, headaches, confusion, and death in severe cases, an additional concern are the long-term health effects (Alavanja, 2004).

The layers of the illegal circulation of agricultural products, which are repurposed to kill off the vermin and insects that move between rubbish heaps and insubstantial porous homes eventually meet on a gurney at the Red Cross Children's Hospital in the bodies of children who are particularly susceptible to developmental and neurological effects as a result of physiological and social vulnerabilities (London, 2005). Street pesticides commonly used in the informal settlements are increasingly available and affordable, particularly in peripheral urban settlements. The small bodies of poisoned children are woven into a pernicious web of violent social force. Read from within this web, it becomes clear that the meanings and expressions of crisis are multiple, complex and dynamic; shifting and changing. When a child is poisoned by a pesticide, its effects are not isolated, but instead radiate through their bodily systems, causing multiple symptoms. Pesticide poisoning, as well as the poor contexts in which it occurs, blurs bodily boundaries, where children's health is over-determined by intersections of hunger, pollution, poverty, immature biology, and shifting arrangements of care. Child pesticide poisoning exists in a crisis filled landscape.

Alison Swartz, in her honours thesis in Anthropology (2008), probed the causes and consequences of 9 childhood poisonings.² Located in an urban township, she observed women waiting at a bus stop, which was positioned against a ribbon-like stretch of fruit and vegetable stalls where children played with deflated balls and scruffy dogs. She observed how alive the streets were with the movement of people. Reminiscent of the late anthropologist Elaine Salo, Swartz showed how the streets were primary sites for social interaction (Salo, 2004). Boundaries between the street and home were as fluid as the permeable bodily boundaries described here. Minibus taxis sped past, sagging with passengers, hip hop music reverberating from them, a man hanging out of the window calling for more passengers. The closer one got to individual houses, the more chaotic the scene

2 Three of the nine children that Swartz met in RXH were poisoned when they drank from bottles containing pesticides that were being kept in cleaning cabinets below the sink. These were just at the right level for small, curious hands to open them and take a sip of what they recognised as either water or milk.

became. More people walked in the streets, which were narrower and filled with pot-holes and untarred sections. The dilapidated cars coming from the broad open space of the highway squeezed into the settlements. There were pockets of different housing structures; some shacks fashioned from bits of wood, metal and plastic stand never quite upright, against the next haphazard structure. Rubbish, people, street sellers, dogs, laundry hanging on drooping washing lines consume fields of vision. Rows and rows of locked toilet cubicles, some with numbers painted on them, all covered in graffiti lined one of the main roads.

Nosipho Kaya's story reveals how living in situations of poverty leads to the dissolution of boundaries between inside/outside and public/private activities (see also Ross, 2010). The intimate space of home can be imagined as a threshold, too easily transgressed. Imagined as a place of refuge from the outside, Nosipho's home in Crossroads failed to meet her expectations of home, especially at the moment when her twelve-year daughter Thandi accidentally drank poison from a bottle that was placed next to her bedside table thinking it was water. To keep her home clean and free of rodents, Nosipho bought street pesticides bottled in blue plastic containers from a taxi rank for R5 (approx. 37 cents). The pesticide looked like drinking water. Nosipho's thirsty daughter drank from the bottle, which was placed in the bedroom on top of a small cupboard. The poison was literally invisible. Here we see a striking example of toxic layering at play: not only was the poisonous liquid disguised as water, the situation also points to a broader challenge in the township context – that of inadequate access to safe drinking water. Unlike in homes where there are multiple sources for fresh and safe drinking water including indoor taps, outdoor taps, and sometimes labelled bottled water, options for safe drinking water in urban informal settlements are limited (Smit, 2006). Access and competition for the limited amounts of safe drinking water in urban townships underpin the years of civil unrest around the poor delivery of municipal services in township areas. Water is symbolically a pure liquid, and some of the street pesticides described in this chapter are translucent liquids that look like water. Instead of being pure and safe to drink, these substances are highly toxic, which is the reason that children who consumed them ended up in RXH with acute organophosphate poisoning. In addition, because these pesticides are sold in bottles that usually contain substances that are thought of as pure and safe to drink, like water and fruit juice, they are easily misread and consumed, particularly by children. These pesticides therefore occupy a slippery symbolic position as they are highly toxic but masquerade as the pure, safe substance, water.

Nosipho used this mixture of pellets and water to keep her home free of cockroaches. She lived in a government-built house with her four children and grandchild. Swartz photographed a blue wall in her small lounge area, which was splattered with concrete grey patches where it looked as if the blue paint had come off. "Cockroach poison from the spray bottle," explained Nosipho, pointing at the marks on the wall. The poison had 'eaten' the paint off the wall, much in the same way as the poison had 'eaten' the inside of Thandi's gut and lungs. Like other women interviewed, Nosipho expressed her frustration with the pests in her house, and said the pests were just 'too much'.

Nosipho's employment was irregular and insecure. In Lower Crossroads where she lived, her shack, made up of corrugated iron and bits of collected wooden planks, was flanked by a gradual, sandy slope decorated with rubbish and patchy yellow grass. Built on a sand embankment, we had to duck underneath a laundry line, pass an outdoor toilet and communal water tap to access the house. There was no running water inside, hence the need for Nosipho to keep bottled water for drinking in her home, which she collected from a communal tap. Unused and discarded building debris littered her yard and the neighboring plot. A concrete toilet cubicle stood at the base of this slope. Her children's faded clothes hung on washing lines that easily wrapped around her home. The front room was about 20 meters squared, and without any internal walls was divided in two by some wooden cupboards and a dilapidated crockery display cabinet. The left-hand side of the room was used as a kitchen in which a small table rested in the center, with a two-plate stove precariously balanced atop some more cupboards. The other half of the room served as a sitting room.

Marcy, another key participant in this study, explained how her three year-old son drank 'the cockroach poison.' She said, "There are bad cockroaches... We are living next to dumps and it affects our places. We are fed up with cockroaches." In Khayelitsha, which is the largest urban township in Cape Town, waste removal is an unreliable service, which results in piles of rubbish being dumped near to homes. The fierce winds of the Cape also carry it throughout the whole township, sometimes getting caught in fences and windows, or against individual homes. People attempting to maintain their homes, where pests dissolve the boundaries between that which is meant to be outside or inside, seek out pesticides to restore cleanliness, or as Mary Douglas might have framed it, a sense of household "purity" (Douglas, 2003). Where intimacy is intensified by the insubstantial barriers

of makeshift homes cobbled together with sheets of zinc, cardboard, old wooden planks, plastic sheets, random bricks, and other found material, the daily injustice of poverty renders individual poisoning episodes as inextricably linked with economic obstacles faced on a daily basis. While childhood poisonings are not the preserve of the poor, the scales tip heavily towards marginal populations who remain on the front lines of service delivery failures and protests (Trevor Ngwane, 2011).

Mandy³ was a 4-year-old inpatient at the RXH. Her exposure to organophosphate poisoning (OP) was loosely connected with her father's death and the fact that after his death, Mandy's mother Erica no longer had a "plek" (place; term often used instead of home or house). Erica remarried, and her new husband offered her and her four children a place to stay in a small, prefabricated wooden house, known as a 'wendy house.' The wendy house was located in the backyard of his relative's double-storey brick house. Inside, an average sized lounge suite overwhelmed the tiny living space, leaving little room for movement. A bare light bulb was pegged to blue plastic sheeting, which lined the makeshift ceiling. Upon the carpet covered shelving, a display of various crockery items and vases were neatly set out. Like Nosipho's home, the interior space suggested an intensity of care in cultivating an orderly domestic space, where, within the permeable walls Erica pursued the preservation of life.

In her bed at the RXH, Mandy's small hands were bound in bandages to ensure that she would not hurt herself in case of a seizure, or disturb the drip that snaked its way across her face and into her nose. The medical folder that rested in the basket at the foot of her cot indicated that she had OP. Erica's face was drawn with exhaustion as she sat next to her daughter. It was lunchtime and Erica was hungry, but she had no money for food. As every minute counts in cases of OP, she did not have time to bring food from home. Other women in Mandy's ward included the mothers of children from eight months to twelve years of age, all of whom were being treated for poisoning. The mothers sat anxiously, speaking about their affliction as a single event folded in with multiple layers of misfortune. The mothers' stitched their children's suffering into the broader fabric of exclusion and deprivation, sometimes to such an extent that the poisoning event itself was rendered less of a crisis than the political economic conditions that produced it.

3 All of the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

The other children in the poison unit had not been exposed to OP poisoning, but had come into contact with Aldicarb, including an eight month-old baby boy. According to his mother, who attended to him closely for the five days he spent in the Renal Ward of the hospital, the boy had not even consumed the Aldicarb itself. Instead, he had sucked on the packaging, a small crumpled piece of plastic that had contained the pesticide before it was discarded on the floor of his shack. Another mother of three year-old twins, one of whom had eaten some maize meal containing Aldicarb that was placed on the floor for the rats, described her fear that her son's body was going to bulge and distort itself in the same way that rats poisoned with aldicarb do before they die. These women all explained how they mixed the small black granules of aldicarb with maize meal or bread and put the mix in containers on the floor for the rats and mice to eat. The temptation, however, to eat these mixtures due to hunger was immense for the curious children. Small children have notable hand-to-mouth behavior, as well as occupying a lower altitude than adults to the ground. Altitude to the ground has been noted by scientists working on childhood poisonings as a major risk for children in highly toxic environments (Weiss, 2000). According to Bernard Weiss from Environmental Medicine at the University of Rochester in New York, children are especially vulnerable to poisonings as they occupy a distinctive ecological niche in the world. He argues that the spatial ecology of childhood means that children spend much more time on floors where toxic residues fall. Coupled with their exploratory behaviour, Weiss (2000:377) argues that "children literally lead a hand-to-mouth existence". Entangled with low childhood altitude, we found that all the children in critical care were managing hunger through these exposures. After consuming maize meal laced with Aldicarb left under her bed, Thandi, an eight year-old girl explained, "I was hungry."

The hospital ward for poison victims was filled with moving bodies; doctors, nurses, cleaning staff and care-givers, all expertly negotiating the limited space between the cots and the machines that beeped and telephones that rang above the hum of voices. Stillness in those spaces could only be found by fixing one's eyes on a child confined to their bed, or on one of the women who sat beside them. In this setting, children's bodies became sites of pain and discomfort, of weakness and poor motor control, but also sites where invasive medical equipment intervened as a drip snaked across a small face, or small hands were bandaged. Even the

momentary separation from a mother in the unfamiliar space of the hospital was often unbearable for children. It was in these hospital wards, spaces of both pain and rescue, that each toxic layer came into sharp relief.

Are public health interventions enough?

We would briefly like to note here that when speaking with a representative from Bayer about the toxicity of Aldicarb, we were told that the pesticide was never intended for household use, and that the best way to prevent childhood poisonings like the ones just described was to arrest the street sellers rather than ban the product. In response to this idea, Rother argued that Aldicarb no longer met the United States “rigorous food safety standards” and was said to pose “unacceptable dietary risks, especially to infants and young children”(Cone, 2010). Marla Cone, chief editor of Environmental Health News in the US reported that:

Manufacturer Bayer CropScience agreed to stop producing aldicarb, a highly toxic insecticide used to kill pests on cotton and several food crops, by 2015 in all world markets. ... Tuesday’s announcement comes 25 years after a highly publicized outbreak of aldicarb poisoning sickened more than 2,000 people who had eaten California watermelons.

In the South African context, where toxic agricultural chemicals are re-packaged as household rodenticides, the situation became difficult to regulate and is, as we have argued, bundled together with layers of social harms. As a result, in 2012 the registration for aldicarb in South Africa was withdrawn and formulation of aldicarb, as well as sales, ceased. In spite of its new illegal status, aldicarb continues to be readily available for illegal sales by street sellers (Rother, 2016).

The layering of invisible harms requires a layering of interventions, beginning with making the invisible, visible. Starting with the most immediate level of harm for children, Rother has been at the forefront of researching alternative and affordable methods for rodent infestations acceptable to community members (Roomaney, Ehrlich & Rother, 2012). Four hundred rat traps were distributed to nearly 200 households in the study site in order to assess whether the demand for aldicarb could be thwarted with a less toxic alternative. Although the City of Cape Town has attempted to implement rat-traps on a larger scale, impeding factors of objections to drowning rats as cruelty to animals have crept in. Thus reducing child poisonings has lost in relation to protecting rats from being drowned. These

measures, while critical in the short term for preventing incidents of childhood poisoning, must be bolstered with pressure to remove environmental toxins – in this case – agricultural pesticides from circulation.

Concluding argument: toxicity and the workings of humans as waste

Our argument has been that while practical public health interventions are critical, they by-pass the political economy of childhood poisoning in the Western Cape, which includes the rendering of people themselves, as invisible harms and waste (Mbembe, 2016). Until civil society recognises the inhumanity of shacks, romanticised in photography books like *'Shack Chic'* (Fraser, 2002), and by increasingly bizarre forms of poverty tourism in the Cape, the conditions under which rats become a danger will endure. The flinging of human waste at cars on the roadways is one of the most desperate attempts among ordinary South Africans to make their suffering acknowledged. The challenge lies in simultaneously addressing the toxic layering and historical entanglements of pesticides, human waste and the ideology of humans as waste. The constructs of invisible harms and toxic layering offered by Goldstein (Goldstein & Hall, 2015) has provided us with a powerful hermeneutic for identifying the seen and unseen environmental harms through detectable, embodied maladies.

We have also argued that the unique nature of pesticides is that all are toxic and all are produced with the intention of unavoidable human and environmental exposures. They are legislated and used in a government-defined framework of 'acceptable risks'. Street pesticides, however, are a prime example of the layered toxicity of pesticides that, in this case, result in unacceptable invisible harm and risks. The inherent toxicity of pesticides is required in order for these products to kill, control, and repel pests. An unavoidable consequence of the intended toxicity of these products is the unintended negative consequences (i.e. unintended toxicity). This includes, for example, self-harm with pesticides, poisonings from street pesticides, and environmental contamination. Residual toxicity is a further layer, that is, an outcome from the intended toxicity of pesticides. For instance, residues from some highly toxic pesticides remain on the produce for consumption, from intended uses in the environment. As a neurotoxin, the chronic effects cause invisible harm, especially to children, which can lead to permanent brain damage

resulting in developmental and behavioural disorders. These disorders include Attention Deficit Disorder and Hyperactivity, learning difficulties that are often undetectable, disadvantaging poor families even further.

Child pesticide poisoning is over-determined by the inherent, unintended, and residual toxicity of agricultural pesticides in conjunction with forms of structural violence and apartheid's legacy of race and class, and as intimately bound up with the ideological forces of dehumanisation (Magubane, 1979). South African townships continue to be urban dumping zones, hidden from wealthier minorities by kilometers of cement column fencing, artificially engineered sand dunes, and arteries of shacks that extend well beyond what is visible from the highways. Shacks are constructed haphazardly and piecemeal with little if any solid infrastructure. Informal shack dwellings are neither counted in the official South African census nor regarded as of primary economic value or worthy of committed municipal attention. Chronic protests over the insufficient delivery of municipal services have escalated to violent confrontations between activists and the police, and contributed to a significant loss of support for the once emancipatory force of the African National Congress.

We have argued in this chapter that the persistence of pests in domestic spaces presents a layering of challenges for those caring for children. Adults want to protect their children from being exposed to pests, but in order to do so, often use highly toxic street pesticides. To safeguard against infectious disease carried by rodents, including salmonella, and to eliminate pests from domestic spaces, the women in this study did what they could to kill rats, mice and other unwanted pests, such as cockroaches and flies for in addition to their fears of contagion, the children feared the pain of being bitten by rats at night. Thus, cleanliness and childcare in the context of abject poverty is intimately linked to the purification of households with toxic poisons to kill rodents and other pests. Purification through invisible poison is a harmful and deadly paradox.

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PLATE 2

THE KIDS WEAR CROWNS OVER HERE

Efua Prah & Katlego Tlabela

'The Kids Wear Crowns Over Here'

Black Pearl Screen-print and Enamel on canvas 79,5 x 64,5 (framed) 2016

by Katlego Tlabela

Katlego Tlabela is a young South African artist based in Pretoria, South Africa who has recently completed his 4th year of a BA in Fine Arts at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art. He primarily majored in printmaking. Tlabela's work is a medley of mediums and incorporates techniques from painting, sound, photography and sculptural installations. His work ushers in a socio-political contemplative moment, reflecting his keen interest in how identities are imagined in the post-apartheid socio-political climate of South Africa and broader black studies around the continent and in the United States of America. Some of his thematic areas that he seeks to engage in his work surround the politics of blackness that speak to his passion to re-embolden black consciousness and positive representations of the black experience, past, present and imagined. Tlabela's work has been exhibited both locally and internationally from Cape Town to Brazil, Poland and Portugal. His work is recognised to critical acclaim as a young emerging South African fine-artist.

'The Kids Wear Crowns Over Here' is part of his 2016 body of work titled *NEGRO SUNSHINE*. This particular series is influenced from earlier works titled *Warm Broad Glow* (2005) and *Untitled* (2005) by African American multi-disciplinary artist Glenn Ligon, who showcases in neon lighting the words 'negro sunshine'. The words 'negro sunshine' were re- appropriated from Gertrude Stein's 1909 novella *Three Lives* in which Stein repeatedly implements the phrase to describe the Novella's main protagonists - which at that time referred to the racist stereotype of the "happy darkie".

Like Ligon, Tlabela has re-appropriated the phrase in order to create an entry point to reimagining black identity and black childhoods for a post-apartheid, decolonising audience. The texts in the series are derived and reimagined from:

Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (1991)

Drake and Future's collaborative album *What a Time To Be Alive* (2015)

Drake, *Over My Dead Body* (2011)

Glenn Ligon, *Untitled* (2005) and *Warm Broad Glow* (2005)

Eli Weinberg, *Crown Near the Drill Hall on the opening day of the Treason Trial*, Johannesburg (1956)

What is reflected in this short interview is the cadences of memory in shaping our creative present. Tlabela recalls his childhood in specific ways highlighting the selectivity of recall and the imaginative potential we undergo to recreate our identities from our prior lived identities as children.

Efua How do you remember your childhood? Does this piece speak to that memory?

Katlego I would say that *The Kids Wear Crowns over Here* (2016) speaks to my fondest childhood memories. These are memories that still linger to this day. My fondest memories are like, once I remember we drove up to Johannesburg from Cape Town, together. That was nice. Most of the memories that I can remember are the ones we made together as a family. Trips during school holidays were my favourite. We would travel to Cape Town, Durban and Limpopo where we had family. I particularly enjoyed the aquariums and zoos we sometimes visited. Everything was alright then – Mama and Papa made sure I wore a crown every day. Like Simba, I was king!

I used to liken myself to Disney characters, Simba the lion in particular! My childhood was like something out of a Disney fairytale for a while. I like to compare my childhood to a Disney fairytale because growing up, I was fortunate enough to be gifted with a set of children books and videotape movies mostly from Disney. It was what was available then and as a child, I loved Disney. There was something enchanting about the worlds it created. In most of these productions, the ideal family would be presented as a complete unit, take for example my all-time favourite, 'The Lion King'. The main character, Simba (who I have always emulated while growing up) a lion cub is fathered by his father Mufasa and mothered by Sarabi. That was the perfect relationship I consumed visually, until Mufasa died.

I imagined my parent's relationship as this version of perfect before they got divorced. I imagined everything was perfect until we moved closer to the city-centre of Pretoria, South Africa. All those things that crumble within a family started to happen - we did less stuff together, the physical and emotional abuse between my parents escalated rapidly and the warmth of togetherness did not want to step into what was once called home. We then moved to Cape Town later without my father. It was then when my mother gained her independence day by day, which was good for her in hindsight. Before that, we had a typically ideal family – a mom, a dad and quality family time. I got fetched from school every day, y'know, we did a lot of things together. I would watch a lot of Disney films and animations every day and so some of my ideals around childhood were directly shaped by the idyllic pictures created through Disney. I see that it was really a utopian picture of family. As I remember it, before the divorce, we were the perfect family.

I cannot speak to everyone else's memories. Some people would be happy with single parents, or three, or none. I don't know if my childhood was the ideal childhood for someone else. We are all different. There should not be one ideal. The media has portrayed that the ideal family is like one mother, one father but everyone's lives are so different, and this is one of the clearest lessons I keep learning from my childhood.

Efua What makes up a childhood? How does this piece relate to an idea of childhood?

Katlego I still don't think my childhood has ended now. I'm 26. I don't think there is a limit on childhood. I don't think it's easy to say what makes up a childhood because I cannot speak on anybody else but myself. Mine was made up of happy, family memories for the most part and then as I grew older, the complexities of relationships between the adults in my world affected my understanding of what happiness looked like. My recollection of my childhood is heavily influenced by my family. I think it's mostly what I miss. I miss the sense that I was part of a greater unit, that was supportive and constant. The friendships you have are always really fluid. But marriage and family is another thing. It takes a lot to rebuild when it is broken. Friendships are less like that. Like for example, there aren't any early photos of me and my father and so I miss those memories I had with him the most. What happened to me with my family takes centre stage when I think about my childhood.

The Kid's Wear Crowns Over Here (2016) is derived from Canadian rapper Drake's *Over My Dead Body* introduction of his sophomore album 'Take Care'. In the song, the rapper raps "The kids wear crowns over here and everything is alright".

I listen to Drake almost every day. It also depends on the mood I'm in. Music is a mood enhancer. The song came out in 2013, I think, but it was only in 2016 that I really listened to his song. I was making very positive work and whilst listening to his music, I connected, realising that I had been depressed at art school for years. That lyric helped me create the entire body of work in which this piece features. His music is a go-to for my creative work. I have other pieces where I reference him – there isn't only this one. My resonance to this specific lyric is directly linked to my interest of depicting children in the most positive way possible. The musical scene of 'I just can't wait to be king!' which is sung by a young Simba in *The Lion King* reminds me of Drake's lyric. In 'I just can't wait to be king!', Simba and his friend, a lioness cub, Nala and his Dodo au pair Zazu run through the pride lands while passionately singing about Simba's aspirations and impatience to be king of Pride Rock. I recall this scene as motivational, especially for a child. As a child I imagined a progressive future for myself. Both songs emulate progressive thinking for children, they provide assurance that everything in their childhood, at that moment, is as it should be but should not be the end of their potential.

The statement in *The Kid's Wear Crowns Over Here* proves to be celebrating youth culture and assuring that they are doing well with their endeavours and achievements. In addition, Drake is a big fan of Maurice Sendak's 1963 classic children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*. Max, the main character of the story, is a child who wears a crown.

This particular work was not subjective. There isn't any personal history in this work. I rather use myself as a protagonist for the audience to interact with the piece. While creating the work, I asked friends, people, the public what they would like to see in a piece of art- work. I asked them what would inspire them. It wasn't based entirely on my experience. *The Kid's Wear Crowns Over Here* is one of four black-on-black paintings created for a body of work titled *Negro Sunshine*. The tetrad of paintings features the following motivational texts:

"WE STAND TRIUMPHANTLY AS LEADERS" "WHAT A TIME TO BE BLACK"
"BLACK HUMAN BEINGS ARE GODS HIDDEN FROM THEMSELVES" "THE KIDS WEAR KIDS CROWNS OVER HERE"

The texts in the paintings are derived and reimagined from various sources including Eli Weinberg's photographic work which documented the 1956 treason trial, quotations from African writer Ben Okri, and rappers Drake and Future. In these paintings, executed with media primarily synonymous with Printmaking, execution plays an important role where some paintings are completely bold and visible whereas others require more visual interpretation.

Efua Is a particular focus on children and childhood in art common?

Katlego Children and childhood play a major role in art as most artists draw most of their influences from childhood memories. Most of the time a recollection aids the strongest and most memorable of artworks and bodies of work. Memories birth an inception of works that help us search deep within ourselves in order to continue interrogating, expressing and creating.

Memory aids us a lot in our creative expressions. Contemporary artists in South Africa definitely draw on memory. Quite a few artists use childhood memories to influence their work such as Nandipha Mntambo, Kudzanai Chiurai, Mohau Modisakeng, Dineo Sheshee Bopape, Dada Kanyisa and Kemang Wa Lehulere. I am drawn and fascinated by their works because they are honest, beautifully crafted and powerful. I have been looking at their works since high school. They are doing amazing things. They are very engaged in youth culture, particularly Kanyisa's work. *eBumnandini* (2016-2017) is one work to look at.

Efua The colour palette that you have used is interesting. Why have you chosen it to carry this sentiment of your piece?

Katlego The sentiment of this piece is difficult to determine as one thing. Every person that looks at it has a different response. Because it's dark, it draws you in. Because it's black it makes you look twice. People even like to touch it...I don't know why? My priority was to impart a sense of pride. I display them higher than eye-level when they are being curated. So, the audience looks up at them, they investigate it more. It's a visual testament to acknowledge children and the different levels of power that they are both denied and adorned with. It's also about Black Excellence in its totality not as an antagonism to whiteness. The colour black holds a conceptual underpinning that brought forth ideas of developing my text-based works conceptually and materially without hindering my visual language/signature. I wanted to offer the contemporary Black audience texts that would resonate with them but desire further interpretation and engagement.

There is a depth in the colour Black as it draws attention, absorbs light and requires further visual examination and interrogation. I enjoy the colour's expandability within medium – there is so much that can be done with the colour. For example, it can be mixed with certain solvents, a variety of inks, and bases to achieve certain colours/ shades, reflections and viscosities.

Efua The issues of childhoods is quite contested within the social sciences (some of these contestations include the invisible way in which children's perspectives are rendered; the complications arising from poor conceptualising of what childhood is when one reconsiders child-headed households, romanticised versions of an idyllic childhood, etc.) Are some of these contestations felt within the world of art?

Katlego I think that in the art world we see children as growing people. I wouldn't give a child the same tasks as I would to an adult. I mean they are full humans but we're always growing even as adults. Are these contestations felt within the art world? I am not sure yet. I am yet to discover them. My childhood has shaped my creative ideas immensely.

Over the years, I have drawn influence from my father's political duties and activities. I believe that his involvement in South African political parties has groomed me to be critical of my political beliefs and affiliations.

Throughout my career, my artistic interests have spanned from social and political crisis in South Africa, the independent African continent and the United States of America, namely labour-related violence (Marikana¹), USA's #BlackLivesMatter, resistance and protest, dialogues around race and positive methods of representation of the Black body and its experience, have been at the center of the contextual framework in my work. The personal and political emerge in my work, drawing from early memories of sympathetic acts of kindness from my mother have influenced my social concerns, while watching my father preparing for rallies and protesting influenced my political concerns. As I continue with my career, I will probably avoid delving into personal childhood memories to inspire my work, as now that I am older most of those memories are not my fondest. In looking back, it would seem as though I was very selective about what I remembered about my childhood.

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- 1 Formerly known as Rooikoppies, Marikana is a town in Rustenburg local municipality, Bojanala Platinum District Municipality district in the North West province of South Africa. On the 16th of August 2012, it became the site of the most controversial and lethal attack by South African security forces against civilians since the 1976 Soweto shootings. Mine-workers were protesting for better living wages and in the process were gunned down brutally, 34 miners were killed..