



## Cancelling Apocalypse by Risking to Envision

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In February 2023, I posted [Potent Pink](#). The last stanza reads

the resonance of whispered  
waves  
the steadiness of waves  
crashing  
the gaze of a waveless sea:  
the moon is sectioned into many  
but light always in sight

it takes pain  
to feel free

Around the same time, a boat was sinking near Steccato di Cutro, Italy, one of [few](#) arduous migrant journeys covered in the mass media. My friend Mark connected the poem with the migrants on the boat, which made me think hard, not to mention rethink the poem.



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Mark's connection between the feeling of freedom, and migrants in a boat, came back to me on June 21, the day after World Refugee Day. I was reading a plea to respect the dignity and rights of migrants, and of European organizations working to save them. In the [plea](#), Mary Lawlor writes of the June 13 capsizing of a boat near Kalamata, Greece. One of the organizations to which Lawlor refers as human rights defenders currently being persecuted, ALARMPHONE, had notified numerous authorities, numerous times, of the 750 people in distress, including the boat's GPS location. The list of authorities includes FRONTEX, the Hellenic Coastguard, Hellenic Police, Ministry of Citizen Protection, NATO, the UNHCR Greece, and UNHCR Turkey.

In a boat, a migrant is free. Free from the [unpaid/unlivable](#) wages, [and worse](#), back home. Free from unimaginable repudiation in the places where they are heading.

If/when the boat sinks, life, unquantifiable, is lost. But something is saved too.

What is saved is what the saviors fail to do.

Imagine the imagination, envisioning, behind the decision to trek across land/rivers/desert, with the last of your savings, and the savings of others you have gathered around your vision. The big leap of being bid farewell by your chosen/family; boarding an unknown boat run by unknown sailors. The big thinking around what you will do on arrival, in places that you believe are as different to your own as they look.

If/when the boat capsizes, the migrant's panoramic vision is saved from the dismantling that docking in the rich world brings.

Shift the lens to Block 13, Kakuma Refugee Camp. For over ten years, queer refugees in Block 13 have faced differential rationing, arson, beatings, displacement, and other violence from the UNHCR, Kenyan state bodies, and other refugees. Violence in forms unimagined before leaving homophobic home. Established in 1992, the UNHCR's [Kakuma](#) Refugee Camp and Kalobeyi Integrated Settlement counted 196,666 registered refugees and asylum seekers in 2020. In 2014, it had surpassed capacity by 58,000 individuals. The Kenyan government receives a fee per refugee, placed in the camp and its related integrated settlement.

Block 13 may be extreme, but how to map or weigh the repudiated humanity faced daily by [refugees](#) and most [migrant workers](#), documented or not. Where the saviors fail is to play it to the end, as it is said by addicts in recovery: to think through the complications that lay ahead for the migrant whose boat is saved from sinking. The saviors, for the most part, also fail to play it back: to ask why, from the 1990s, did so many people begin seeing boats on the Mediterranean as vehicles to a better life; Africans in particular? And, to then ask, if bigger answers can't be found and fought for?

In contrast to migrants, the saviors fail to use their knowledge, resources, access, and headspace, to take the risk to envision.

And how many progressives and activists today are saviors?

## Apocalypse

Ecocide, reproductive crisis, multiple crises, Thy Kingdom Come, political Islam, global fascism, doomscrolling... talk is grave about the times we are living. Religious or not, few narratives are

brave enough to offer more than doom descriptions to which alternatives either do not exist, or are possible only with the sanction of the powers that be. In a 2019 public lecture in Johannesburg, scholar-activist Boaventura de Sousa Santos framed it through a question that went something like this: how is it that the youth of the burgeoning climate crisis movement can imagine the end of the world, but not the end of capitalism?

Returning from a trip to Southern Mexico about a decade ago, my dad spoke of the commonly misinterpreted Mayan prophesy, which offers more. The prophecy is actually [seven](#) interrelated prophecies. In poetic form, they could go something like this:

everything transforms  
evolving spirits remain

\*

the great room of mirrors  
humans reflecting multiplicities of the living  
circa 1999–2012

\*

one big beam

two paths

opening balancing  
closingcontinuing

\*

continents shifting

elemental energies sweeping

\*

time of no time  
end of the 26 000 year galactic day 5125 year night  
chaos

\*

heart-conscious dawn

If not apocalypse, how to make sense of a time of global chaos? And what constitutes radical action, in a time of no time?

### **Making sense: playing it back**

I met Mark in Toronto, in 2001, just after Manhattan's Twin Towers were no more. A gathering had been called by activists in the days following the demolishing of the World Trade Centre. Most attendees were people who were floored by the possibility of an attack on the United States. Mark and I were part of a group of people who found such thinking ahistorical, to state it minimally. Concerned about what would be the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and anti-Muslim racism in North America, we formed The Coalition against War and Racism (CAWR).

Between September 11th and up to an including October 7th, 2001 when the United States and allies began bombing Afghanistan, we demonstrated weekly outside the U.S. Consulate in Toronto, and pamphleted almost daily. In the next months we embarked on a mass education campaign with the goal of mobilizing people to oppose the Anti-Terrorism Bill that became law on December 18th, 2001. The Act continues to enforce Islamophobia, as is made particularly clear in the case of Canadian citizen, Hassan Diab. In 2014, Dr. Diab was extradited to France, which had accused him of a bombing but could not try him due to [lack](#) evidence. Diab returned home to Canada in 2018, but now faces the risk of re-extradition to France. I have never forgotten the conviction of an anarchist in one of our gatherings, in 2001, who underlined the danger of George Bush Junior's words at the time: you are either with us, or against us.

One of our debates in the CAWR was the major underlying cause of the second U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in less than 30 years. Some argued it was the strategic positioning of Afghanistan for U.S. control of some 50 billion barrels of Kazakstani oil and gas via Turkmenistan, thereby avoiding anti-imperialist Iran. A similar, oily argument was made about the U.S. attack on Iraq, a few years later.

Being the child of politicized parents born in colonial Africa, and a lifelong student of world historical thought which was partly inspired by 1970s discussions in Africa, I took a different position. I argued that the U.S. state needed to assert its power militarily, in a historical moment of faltering U.S. hegemony. The U.S.-led attacks on Afghanistan, and later Iraq, in all their might were actually a mask for the weakness of U.S. hegemony—a tactic discussed centuries before in *The Art of War*, by Sun Tzu.

In world historical thinking, hegemony is a global political-economic phenomenon, dating back to the fifteenth century, when states of western Europe began collaborating with merchants and financiers. This collaboration strengthened both western European states, and merchants/financiers, leading to the world conquering known today as capitalism. In a 1991 [article](#), Samir Amin, one of the first world historical thinkers, points out that European state power was unique as compared to that of large states of China, India, the Americas, and Africa. The latter, much older states, drew their power from controlling land and extracting tribute from peasants, leaving merchants and financiers to do their business.

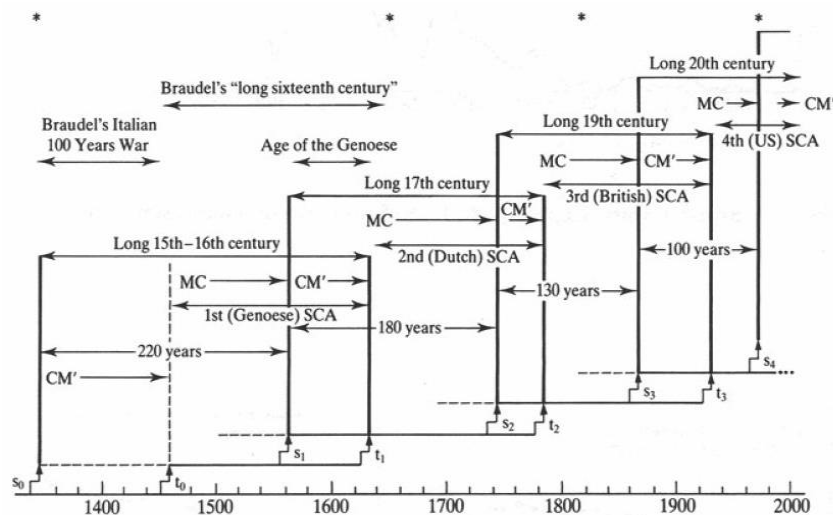
In the world historical approach, class struggle, colonialism, racism, sexism, and other “isms” are all part and parcel of capitalism. This differs to other approaches, where the “isms” and class struggle are seen separately or debated, one for the other, as the dominant force of history. In an [article](#) titled “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America”, world historical thinker

Anibal Quijano pinpoints the arrival of the Castellanos in the Americas in 1492 as the start of the assemblage central to historical capitalism. This is the assemblage of different forms of labor, and labor control. Quijano names slavery, serfdom, petty-commodity-production, reciprocity, and wages as the forms of labor/control assembled together in the Americas. Now organized to produce commodities for a single world market driven by capital, Quijano argues that each form of labor became historically and structurally new. In other words, rather than merely existing simultaneously in the same space and time, each was also articulated to capital and its market, and all forms were mutually transformed. Quijano notes that the location of wageless African slaves at the very bottom of the hierarchy helps explain the particular intensity of anti-Black racism that is both historical and ongoing.

Through the centuries that followed, various parts of the world, in different ways, were brought into the fold of this assemblage. Via webs of internal and external power dynamics intermeshed, a range of forms of production and social relations were redirected toward feeding a growing world capitalist market. Concurrently, what is now a tangible global power structure was molded and reconfigured through the interface with new places and social relations. Contrary to Eurocentric theories of imperialism, colonial rule by western Europe and its nineteenth century scramble for raw materials come much later in the story, and do not constitute the defining moment for the Majority World. Similarly, what has come to be known as “globalization,” usually dated from the second half of the twentieth century, is not so new.

In his book *The Long Twentieth Century*, Giovanni Arrighi identifies four “systemic cycles of accumulation” (SCA in the figure below) in an evolving world capitalist system. Each cycle is led by one key hegemonic state, flanked by major capitalists, and other western European states. Over time, other states fall into a hierarchy reflecting the differential location of their varying combinations of labor forms in the global assemblage.

Each cycle of accumulation is characterized by a period of consistent, though unevenly distributed, productive growth (MC, or “material expansion” in the figure). Because this “consistency” is ultimately based on various forms of inequality, within both states, and the global assemblage, the contradictions eventually explode.



The tenuous consistency of material expansion gives way to a period of financial expansion (CM, or financial expansion), in which the largest capitals shift from investment in production, to investment in speculation. Social disintegration, pronounced conflict, inequality to extremes, political disarray, including weakening ability of the hegemony to lead, abound.

In a word, chaos.

In the third (British) systemic cycle of accumulation, the period of chaos was signaled by the 1875 global recession (S3, or signal crisis in the figure), terminating with the final blow (T3, or terminal crisis), World War II. The financial expansion we are currently living began in the early 1970s (S4), when mass manufacturing became less profitable as unions around world and Majority World states demanded larger shares of the spoils. Large capitals and the world's richest individuals began pulling their pockets books out of production, and investing much more in speculation: money markets, futures, and a host of new financial instruments that have become common today.

States around the world also shifted: from policy aims of jobs and/or basic public goods for all, to policies favorable to big finance, and large capitals still investing in production. A favorite for the latter was the curving of labor rights, to which most unions around the world, in various shapes and forms, either gradually or quickly acquiesced. Beyond the economy, states shifted their energies to cultivating cultures that calculate every last thing, and this in terms of money/results/status/fame. In a word, neoliberalism.

Forty years on, egomania, alienation, social division, fundamentalisms bordering fascism, and polarized wealth are everywhere, along with recurring, showy muscle-flexing by an ever-weakening hegemon.

Just before he died, Arrighi identified what has been called The Great Global Recession of 2008 as the terminal crisis of the fourth (U.S.) systemic cycle of accumulation. At that time, rather than introducing financial rules and regulations to reign in speculation, the U.S. state used what was ultimately public funds to maintain the financial might of those most responsible for high risk speculation: hedge funds, private equity funds, and other major capitals. The continued lack of reigning-in rules made for the recent collapses of the Silicon Valley Bank, First Republic, and Credit Suisse.

State-sustained, global financial expansion translates to a macaron of distress sandwiched in decadence rarely served up by economists and analysts of our day. Let's try a few flavors here:

- African states [refuse](#) to fund a non-patented COVID vaccine, homegrown in Africa, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration [approves](#) human clinical trials for brain implants by Elon Musk's Neuralink Corporation.
- Latin American states maintain the region's status as the largest net food [exporter](#) in the world, while Brazilians queue for bones donated by agribusiness (industrial and financial all in one), and four in ten Latin Americans face food insecurity.

- As part of the deal between Republicans and Democrats to once again remove the ceiling on U.S. debt of \$31.4 trillion: a one-year limit on environmental assessments, two year limit on environmental impact statements, and [accelerated](#) completion of the Mountain Valley Pipeline.
- Exponential growth in renewable energy by private equity funds and other large [speculators](#), spurred by under-commitment and under-investment by states.
- Government approved overbuilding in Nanchang, China, alongside [uncompleted](#) family homes, paid up in advance.
- The United Arab Emirate's largest [sovereign](#) wealth fund expanding into real estate speculation in China, India, and Mexico.
- [Greedflation](#) driven by company mergers and state aid to corporations in Europe, while workers face decreasing jobs and wages, and worsening working conditions.
- Roughly 45 percent of South Africa's population dependent on miniscule social grants administered by government, including automatic [deductions](#) for financial instruments, and the employed in South Africa working the [longest](#) hours in the continent: 2,209 hours per worker per year.
- Fourteen banks in Nigeria [bailed out](#) by the Central Bank of Nigeria, to the tune of \$7 billion (\$3 trillion Naira), and 33 million people, [63 percent](#) of the Nigerian population, living in poverty.

And here we return to the instance of chaos with which this piece began: rickety boats, boat people, saviors, and state persecution of saviors.

### **Cancelling apocalypse amid chaos**

Chaos and financial expansion in the third (British) cycle of accumulation stretched for some 75 years—a lifetime, in rich countries today. With the greater relative reach, wealth, and power of U.S. hegemony, the period of financial expansion/chaos in the U.S. cycle is likely to be longer. If the current period of chaos began in the early 1970s, at best, we now may only be half way through. How to take radical action amid the cascading, exploding contradictions, of which the crumbling of traditionally used activist approaches are a part?

In 1990, during an activist gathering I attended in Tripoli, Kwame Ture/Stokely Carmichael shared advice that Kwame Nkrumah had given him in 1967. One of the early proponents of Pan-Africanism in Africa told the Black Power leader to practice patience; that all impatience is selfishness and egotism.

Some 1400 years before, activist and spiritual leader, Prophet Muhammad, said:

If you don't like something  
change it with your hands  
If you can't  
speak out about it  
If you can't speak out

feel it in your heart

Feeling it in your heart comes close to the room of mirrors of the Mayan prophecies. For activists, simply stopping here, or starting here, can be a feat. But in a reactive world where masking dominates, rather than jumping to the most obvious action, risking to feel can be a radical act.

Our efforts in Toronto in the Coalition Against War and Racism did not materialize into anything lasting. Neither have other, much larger mobilizations around the world, since. Time may still not be ripe for mass mobilizing. To paraphrase Hazrat Ali, a leader who followed Muhammed, “forbearance is a power unmatched.”

Risking yet further to combine feeling, with taking the time to play things back, can lead to places of envisioning: the world we want to see in 3D and more; the materials, tools, and hearts needed to re/build; the multiplicity of discourses, dialogues, poetics, and rhythms needed to unite around answers to such questions.

Here is how to cancel apocalypse. Now may be the best time for the slow building that is radical in this historical moment.

**About the Author:** **Salimah Valiani** is author of the research monograph, *Rethinking Unequal Exchange—The Global Integration of Nursing Labour Markets* (UTP 2012), and several articles on migration, health/care, development, and policy. In 2012 she was awarded the Feminist Economics Rhonda Williams Prize. Valiani is also the author of five poetry collections, including *29 leads to love* (Inanna 2021), 2022 Winner of the International Book Award for Contemporary Poetry.

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