On 24 October 2020, I woke to the news that the South African anti-mining and environmental activist Fikile Ntshangase had been murdered. At around 6:30 pm on Thursday, 22 October, four men entered her home in Ophondweni, KwaZulu-Natal province, and shot her to death in front of a thirteen-year-old child. Ntshangase was a leading member of the Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation (MCEJO), which has been involved in a protracted legal dispute with Tendele Coal over its planned extension of the Somkhele open-cast coalmine, located a stone’s throw from the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi nature reserve in KwaZulu Natal (Greenfield; Kockott and Hattingh). The organization opposed the expansion of Tendele’s mining operations in the area because of what many in the local community viewed as a truncated consultation process – one that led to the granting in 2016 of additional mining rights to Tendele for an area covering over 222 square kilometres – and because of the company’s failure to comply with environmental laws (Kockott and Hattingh). The latter is tied to widespread concerns about the environmental impacts of opencast mining. These include the contamination of groundwater sources and the degradation of air quality, to which a host of respiratory and other human health problems have been ascribed (Borralho).

Ntshangase’s assassination was the latest atrocity brought on in a year that delivered more than its fair share of grief. The struggles of Ntshangase and others opposed to extractive capitalism’s ongoing disregard for human and environmental health are at the coalface, literally, of growing global awareness of a rapidly intensifying planetary climate crisis. The latter was thrown into sharp relief in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic, which radically transformed social and economic relations around the globe in a matter of weeks. A corollary of consumer
capitalism’s harmful relationship with non-human life and non-life alike, COVID-19 offers a prelude to the devastating threats to human survival that climate change is predicted to deliver if the destruction of wildlife habitat and biodiversity for the sake of mining, industrialized agriculture, and human housing continues apace (Vidal; Volz). The virus struck a heavy blow to the comforting fictions that wealth and technological innovation – what Naomi Klein refers to as “magical thinking” (189) – might insulate some from the inescapable interdependence of human and non-human ecologies. These are fictions to which communities such as those Ntshangase advocated for have never had easy access. As Kathryn Yusoff explains, recent expressions of concern about “the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities” conceal a much longer planetary legacy that saw these harms “knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism” (14).

Wayward Feeling is located in the wake of some of these histories of harm as they unfold affectively in the post-apartheid South African present. The manuscript for this book was submitted just as the planet suddenly retreated into the quarantined physical space of the home, even as it opened, for some, to new digital realms. Though much has changed in the interim, the relevance of Wayward Feeling to an understanding of contemporary public culture and its affective expression has simultaneously been heightened, as rage, anxiety, and despair in the face of historical dispossession, as well uncertainty about the post-pandemic future, catalysed new forms of global protest action. I draw attention, in these prefatory reflections, to Ntshangase’s murder in part because it connects with a host of concerns that coalesce in the chapters of this book, in turn amplified by the evolving pandemic.

The mineral revolution that started to reshape South Africa from the mid-nineteenth century onwards has arguably been the leading historical driver of contemporary social, racial, economic, gender, and environmental injustice in the country. Though the book does not explicitly place the South African afterlives of resource extraction at its centre, they reverberate through its pages, from the extractive histories of rubber referenced in chapter 1; to the devastating massacre of the miners at Lonmin Platinum, Marikana, in 2012 (chapter 3); to the 2015 #RhodesMustFall protests highlighting the links between the legacy of one of the founders of the De Beers mining company and the forms of economic, emotional, and epistemic injustice shaping contemporary higher education (chapter 4); to the connections that I draw between breathing as an autonomic respiratory mechanism central to the body’s capacity to regenerate and regulate stress and a larger respiratory crisis
that confronts a planet increasingly choking on the mining industry’s toxic waste (chapter 5 and the conclusion).

As I drafted the conclusion at the start of South Africa’s 2020 lockdown, I was struck by the pertinence of the book’s overarching concern with waywardness – what Saidiya Hartman calls “an improvisation with the terms of social existence … when there is little room to breathe” (228) – to the threats posed by the novel coronavirus to human respiratory health. In the months since these lockdown restrictions were first imposed, the breath and breathing took on renewed significance, not least in the aftermath of the death of African-American citizen George Floyd in May 2020. Though the phrase “I can’t breathe” has long been a rallying cry among decolonial and racial justice activists in the United States and South Africa alike, as I point out in chapter 4, Floyd’s merciless asphyxiation by white Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin during an interminable nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds – while he repeatedly cried “I can’t breathe” – drew attention anew to the suffocating nature of racial injustice in the United States and elsewhere (Apata). At the time, Floyd’s death was the latest in a long history of similarly brutal police killings of Black US citizens, yet what made his murder unique was the fact that it was captured on video, quickly going viral online, and unleashing an unprecedented wave of antiracist protests around the globe.

These events struck a powerful chord with my third-year students and me as we tried to navigate the digital divide – suddenly amplified by South Africa’s pandemic lockdown – while working through the readings assigned for our seminar course on the literary, cultural, and aesthetic politics of mining in South Africa. With the images of George Floyd’s killing that flooded our social media feeds still seared into our mind’s eye, we could not fail to notice the prevalence of the breath in our mining curriculum, from the miner who had contracted “the sickness of the lungs” that “ate a man’s body away” (107) in Peter Abrahams’s classic 1946 novel Mine Boy, to struggles for breath in the poetry of Alfred Temba Qabula, Ingrid de Kok, and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, to the hidden health legacies of South African gold and platinum mining exposed in documentary films directed respectively by Rehad Desai, Aliki Saragas, and Richard Pakleppa and Catherine Meyburgh (the latter’s 2018 film Dying for Gold appositely produced by their independent film production company, Breathe Films). Yet our course texts, like the many forms of audio-visual and aesthetic mediation at the centre of this book, do not simply bear witness to these scenes of suffocation; they harness the embodied sensorium very deliberately to chart a wayward path beyond histories of loss, trauma, and injustice.
The racial justice protests that the death of George Floyd sparked in the United States coincided with a time of intensified securitization in South Africa, as the African National Congress (ANC) government tried to enforce its quarantine measures. Activist efforts by the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States to defund the police brought South African histories of police brutality targeting Black communities again into painful focus, exposing structural racism’s latest incarnation in the country. The South African Police Service in fact kills a staggering three times as many people per capita as do the police in the United States (Stuurman). Since the government imposed its first strict national curfew, so-called pandemic policing has resulted in the deaths of at least ten South African citizens as well as the criminalization of thousands, for mostly minor infractions (Trippe). Collins Khosa, for instance, was strangled and killed by members of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) in the privacy of his own home after being suspected of having alcohol in his front yard (the initial lockdown included the prohibition of alcohol and cigarette sales). Sibusio Amos, likewise, was followed to his home and shot to death by police after being found drinking at an informal bar (lockdown-related police brutality is subject to an ongoing inquiry by the government’s Independent Police Investigative Directorate, though Amos’s death remains uninvestigated).

Inspired in part by worldwide Black Lives Matter protests, thousands of South Africans gathered on 9 June 2020 in protest against lockdown-related police brutality. Recent months also engendered renewed protests against the ongoing scourge of gender-based violence (addressed in chapter 5 of this book), exacerbated by a lockdown that saw countless women and gender nonconforming people confined at home with their abusers. During the first five days of the initial lockdown, the police’s gender-based violence hotline received approximately 2,300 calls, nearly three times the pre-lockdown rate (Harrisberg). The gruesome murders of women such as Tshegofatso Pule, Naledi Phangindawo, and Sanele Mfaba fuelled the latest social media campaign to address the country’s deplorable rates of domestic abuse and femicide, a reality subsequently declared South Africa’s second pandemic by President Cyril Ramaphosa.

As social justice activists the world over breathed a collective sigh of relief, at least temporarily, in response to the outcome of the 2020 presidential election in the United States – not least for the implications for a climate crisis reaching its tipping point – it bears noting that the recent revitalization of anti-racist, feminist, anti-imperialist, and economic justice movements in the wake of Floyd’s death, and in light
of social inequalities heightened by the pandemic, was in many ways prefigured in the Global South (see for instance Makhulu, “Trump”). In South Africa, in particular, increasingly inventive methods of insurrectionary citizenship have been giving shape, since at least the mid-2000s, to feelings of despair, disappointment, and rage at the many forms of injustice that colonialism and apartheid continue to trail in their wake, messianic promises on the part of the post-apartheid state notwithstanding. By way of an extended conversation with multiple genres of aesthetic activism and audio-visual culture in South Africa, *Wayward Feeling* offers some insight into this difficult, painful, and, at times, regenerative affective archive. What follows explicitly foregrounds the South African context, but readers interested in some of the disruptive aesthetic and audio-visual strategies propelling publics towards a more affectively discriminating engagement with extractive and racial capitalism’s ever-unfolding global forms will find multiple points of connection.
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