

A death in Durban: Capitalist patriarchy, global warming gimmickry and our responsibility for rubbish

Patrick Bond and Rehana Dada

abstract

This *perspective* reflects upon the struggle of Sajida Khan, an environmental activist based in Durban, South Africa, who dedicated her life to fight international corporations and local municipalities on the pollution and environmental degradation of her community. Khan's battle is then linked to ecofeminist theory and international feminist, anti-capitalist struggles. The paper ends with an interview of Khan about her views on environmental justice and possible ways forward to create healthier livelihoods.

keywords

pollution, incinerators, landfill, ecofeminism, World Bank

Paying tribute to Sajida Khan (1952-2007) who threatened a money spinner at the continent's largest rubbish dump – at the cost of her life.

This satellite picture (page 47) is Google Earth's rendition of Africa's biggest formal landfill, in the heart of the Clare Estate community of South Africa's east coast city Durban, a traditionally 'Indian' neighbourhood now also hosting thousands of 'African' and 'coloured' residents. At the bottom left, in the middle of the white circle, is a large house owned by the Khan family. Sajida Khan and her siblings grew up here and some members of the family still reside there.

There are many people around the world who

know this house because its location made Khan one of the key figures in the struggle against the world capitalist elite's 'solution' to climate change: carbon trading. The first paragraphs of a *Washington Post* article (S Vedantam, 'Kyoto credits system aids the rich, some say', 12 March 2005) heralding the Kyoto Protocol (just after the Russian government agreed to sign, thus bringing the treaty into force) read as follows:

'Sajida Khan, who has fought for years to close

an apartheid-era dumpsite that she says has sickened many people in her predominantly brown and black community outside Durban, South Africa, was dismayed to learn recently that she faces a surprising new obstacle: the Kyoto global warming treaty.'

'Under the protocol's highly touted plan to encourage rich countries to invest in eco-friendly projects in poor nations, the site now stands to become a cash cow that generates income for South Africa while helping a wealthy European nation meet its obligations under the pact. The project's sponsors at the World Bank call it a win-win situation; Khan calls it a disaster. She said her community's suffering is being prolonged so that a rich country will not have to make difficult cuts in greenhouse gas emissions at home. "It is another form of colonialism," she said.'

Privatising Durban's air

Two years later, in 2007, Khan was battling cancer for the second time, suffering chemotherapy that burned out her hair, at the same time trying to recover from an awful back injury which broke vertebrae. Inscribed on her body was evidence of an enduring fight against an insensitive industry whose illegal medical waste incinerator had sprinkled toxins onto her home until its closure and whose perfume rods today spew a smell just as noxious as the rotting garbage they are meant to disguise.

Even in her last days, Khan told us she could not bear the thought that for seven to 20 more years the landfill site would remain open. The Durban eThekweni municipality's justification is to capture carbon credits by selling investments in Bisasar² operations to global polluters who in turn will face less pressure to cut their own emissions. This represents the 'privatisation of the air', say critics in the Durban Group for Climate Justice, an international campaigning network which Khan's struggle inspired the founding of in 2004.³



Bisasar Road: Africa's biggest formal landfill site.

perspective

GOOGLE EARTH

be a very important source of foreign direct investment’.

As Daniel Becker of the Sierra Club’s⁵ Global Warming and Energy Programme interprets, ‘It’s sort of the moral equivalent of hiring a domestic. We will pay you to clean our mess. For a long time here in America we have believed in the polluter pays principle. This could become a pay to pollute principle’ (M Bustillo, ‘Developing countries to seek pay for preservation of forests’, *Los Angeles Times*, 28 November 2005).

Payments to South African polluters could be lucrative indeed. The United States are the largest CO₂ emitter in absolute terms, but in relative terms (measured by each unit of output per person) the South African economy emits 20 times as much of that gas than the United States.

South Africa’s five-fold increase in CO₂ emissions since 1950 can largely be blamed upon South African electricity supply company Eskom, the country’s mining houses and metals smelters who brag about the world’s cheapest electricity for industrial users. A small proportion of CO₂ emissions – less than 5% of all consumption

She was a pain in the neck to apartheid-era and post-apartheid bureaucrats for nearly 15 years

– is due to low-income households coming onto the grid in recent years. In one fell swoop last November, Eskom added a potential 3.5% increase in grid demand – raising the likelihood of yet more overload and brownouts – by offering extremely cheap electricity to the Canadian firm Alcan for its Coega smelter, which will hire fewer than 1,000 workers.

Into the debate over post-apartheid climate policy marched Khan, an ordinary resident who equipped herself with detailed knowledge of chemistry, public health and landfill economics. Khan had organised a landfill-closure petition campaign with 6,000 signatures as well as a mass

march during the mid-1990s. Even after the mass mobilising ended, she was a pain in the neck to apartheid-era and post-apartheid bureaucrats for nearly 15 years who first located the continent’s largest formal dump in a residential area and then promised closure to reap votes but subsequently refused its decommissioning (Bond et al, 2007).

As a Muslim woman, Khan waged her campaign at a time, as Ashwin Desai⁶ puts it, ‘when religious gate-keepers were reasserting authority over the family. This involved the assertion of male dominance’. She resisted, Desai testifies:

‘Sajida Khan was breaking another mould of politics. During apartheid, opposition in her community was channelled through the male-dominated Natal Indian Congress and Durban Housing Action Committee. But these were bureaucratised struggles with the leaders at some distance from the rough-and-tumble of local politics. She eschewed that. Her politics were immediately on her doorstep. It was a politics that, gradually at first, made the links between the local and the global. It was a kind of trailblazing politics that later was manifested in what have become known as the ‘new social movements’. In contrast, her political peers in the Congress tradition have built an impressive electoral machine but ended up merely with votes for party candidates rather than a movement to confront global apartheid and its local manifestations.

What about class, though? Asked by Desai if the battle is over a selfish interest, property values, Khan rebutted, ‘No, no. It’s to do with pollution, and it transcends race and colour’.

Yet there are certainly class and, to some extent, race and gender power relations at play. At the upper end of the satellite photo [see page 47], the Kennedy Road shack settlement – which is just as closely located to the dump as Khan’s house – organised a dozen residents to formally



Sajida’s brother, Rafique Khan, points to the Bisasar Road landfill site across the road from his family’s house.

recycle material from the dump. (Many dozens more used to informally pick materials from the dump, until Durban Solid Waste, the municipal cleansing arm of the Durban Metro Council, limited access due to safety and health dangers.)

Kennedy Road leaders accused Khan of threatening livelihoods and a handful of promised jobs and bursaries (in Uganda) in the event the CDM project got off the ground. With the World Bank investigating the potential R100 million (\$14.4 million) investment, tensions rose.

Insensitively, Khan sometimes used the word ‘informals’ to describe the shack settlement residents and once advocated that they be moved off the land, to areas nearby, sufficiently far from the dump (she recommended a buffer for all residents of 800 meters) to be safe from the

windswept dust.⁷ At the nearby clinic, health workers confirmed that Kennedy Road residents suffer severely from asthma, sinusitis, pneumonia and even tuberculosis.⁸

Khan had a profound empathy for people in the same proximity as cancer-causing and respiratory-disease particulates, as she noted in an interview: ‘Recently a woman was buried alive. She died on the site [picking rubbish, killed by a dump truck offloading]. I could have saved her life.’⁹

Ecofeminist anti-capitalism?

The term ‘ecofeminism’ was first used in Francois d’Eaubonne’s 1974 book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Death). As this paper was prepared for *Agenda*, Khan’s condition worsened. She fell into a coma on 12 July 2007 and died three

days later. It's here where ecofeminist theory sheds light on struggles that unite Khan's with the anonymous shackdweller's. In the words of Kathleen Manion (2002:3):

'Certain ecologically damaging issues have more of a detrimental effect on women than on men, particularly as women tend to be more involved in family provisions and household management. Such problems include sustainable food development, deforestation, desertification, access to safe water, flooding, climate change, access to fertile land, pollution, toxic waste disposal, responsible environmental management with in companies and factories, land management issues, non-renewable energy resources, irresponsible mining and tree felling practices, loss of biodiversity (fuel, medicines, food). As household managers, women are the first to suffer when access to sustainable livelihoods is unbalanced. When the water becomes unpotable, the food stores dry up, the trees disappear, the land becomes untenable and the climate changes, women are often the ones who need to walk further and work harder to ensure their families survival.'

For a middleclass woman like Sajida Khan, just as for the impoverished woman killed on the dump, the struggle for reproduction was more costly than any of us can contemplate. High-profile heroines have led such struggles: for example Wangari Maathai fighting for Kenyan greenbelts; Erin Brockovich campaigning for clean water in Hinkley, California; Medha Patkar opposing big dams in India or Lois Gibbs advocating against toxins at Love Canal, New York. Others have written eloquently of Chipko tree huggers (Vandana Shiva) and the Nigerian Niger Delta's women activists (Terisa Turner).

In all these cases, including Bisasar Road, women's defence of immediate family and

community is a compelling handle for a larger analysis of patriarchal power relations and anthropomorphism. But though Khan did not find a way to work with all her neighbours as a result of huge political, class and race divides, her campaign against carbon trading using the Bisasar Road dump has at least brought this pilot project to the world's attention, as an example of how 'low-hanging fruit rots first', to borrow the metaphor of Canadian CDM critic Graham Erion (2006). Still, the attention she has gained for this cause only goes so far, as Desai¹⁰ observes:

'Sajida's main strategic flaw was the belief that by meticulous scientific presentation of the facts based upon thorough research, she could persuade the ruling class. Facts became the main weapon of struggle. But without an ongoing critical mass of people, once the World Bank was convinced she was right and dropped out – apparently the case by 2006, just as happened with the Narmada dams in India – then the domestic government stepped in to take up the slack. So eThekweni Municipality is now taking over from the World Bank and looking for investors because the bigger cadreship isn't there to stop it. Facing down the World Bank was impressive and deserved the claim to a victory. But its one thing to tell truth to power, and Sajida was absolutely brilliant in defeating the system's experts. I hosted one debate for the *Mail & Guardian* [South African weekly newspaper] in 2005, and she got a first round knockout. However, the corollary is that you must not just talk technically but also expose and defeat the power. And you need a much bigger mass movement to do that.'

Ecofeminist-socialist Ariel Salleh (2005:11) might also find in Khan's story an inspiring if as yet uncertain fight against capitalist patriarchy:

'As an old feminist adage goes: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house". For socialists, the capitalist class, its government cronies and lifestyle hangers on are the master and his house is the global public sphere. For ecofeminists, this is also true, but there is another master embodied in the private power relations that govern everyday life for women at home, at work and in scholarship. This is why we use the double construct capitalist patriarchal societies – where capitalism denotes the very latest historical form of economic and social domination by men over women. This double term integrates the two dimensions of power by recognising patriarchal energetics as a priori to capitalism. As reflexive ecosocialists know: the psychology of masculinity is actively rewarded by the capitalist system, thereby keeping that economy intact.'

As Khan struggled for life, the toxic economy of Bisasar Road was being rebuilt by the Durban municipality with the global capitalist master's CDM tool. Although Khan's brother Rafique will take up the baton, Khan's campaign to close apartheid's dump may ultimately fail, as a result of the various post-apartheid forces whose interaction now generates overlapping, interlocking, eco-social and personal tragedies.

Elusive gender, class, race and political unity

If inhaling status quo pollution meant paying dearly with her health for so many years, still, Khan was partially successful: preventing a major World Bank investment and raising local/global consciousness. Most importantly, she left us with a drive to transcend the inherited conditions and mindsets into which apartheid categories have cemented infrastructures and people.

Pessimistically, it may not be feasible for Clare Estate residents from different and sometimes



Environmental activist Sajida Khan fought to close the Bisasar Road landfill site.

opposed race/class backgrounds to forge more effective alliances against the municipality, at least not in the short-term. It may be only a matter of time before the price of a tonne of carbon dioxide is financially attractive enough to bring new investors to Bisasar Road.

Optimistically, before that point is reached, an ideal solution does exist, uniting the red and green strands of politics against capitalist-patriarchal rubbish, for Durban should and could:

- adopt a 'zero waste' philosophy that would create dozens – perhaps hundreds – of reliable jobs in recycling for Kennedy Road shackdwellers who, where needed, could (at their own volition) be suitably resettled with security of tenure, on stable land in the immediate vicinity, and
- simultaneously terminate and rehabilitate the Bisasar Road dump, while safely removing its methane, preferably through piping it out of the area to a nearby gas main via a cleansing filter.

Regardless, with women's bodies carrying deep scars of this fight and with many women in

the vicinity of Bisasar Road suffering respiratory diseases and other health/welfare problems from the dump, we all – especially those (like we authors and many of you readers) with an inordinate contribution to climate change and municipal waste – have an obligation to be part of a solution. As Desai¹¹ mused,

‘Sometimes, when lives are judged by visual victories, we see failures and after all, the dump remains right outside Sajida’s front door after her 14-year fight. But, on the other hand, if a life is judged by a legacy that endures and is built upon hers is one of multiple larger victories: of a woman standing against male domination of nationalist politics, of knowledge about global capitalist ecology over amnesia, of ordinary people harnessing the most incredible forms of expertise so as to enter forums usually dominated by people with multiple degrees and of a political ecology that is a politics of all the people. Whatever you might say about her race and class privilege, the final denominator is that she’ll die fighting the cancer infection and fighting the dump that gave her that cancer. This was not a death of privilege, it was murder.’

Interview with Sajida Khan by Rehana Dada in September 2005

Rehana Dada (RD): Sajida, how long have you been fighting this dump?

Sajida Khan (SK): I became involved with the community association in mid-1993 and then fought the rates campaign. One year, we Indians paid about 80% higher than the whites. And of course the money was used to develop white areas, and Indian areas were neglected.

RD: Had the dump been there your entire childhood?

SK: I grew up here. It’s been here since 1980, and

people were fighting it even before, when they proposed to put the dump site here. The council hall was in the valley and homes were removed to build this dump. You cannot put a dump site in the middle of a highly developed residential area, with ten schools within one kilometre. Although this dump site was classified as a domestic dump site, they ended up dumping hazardous waste on the site. So, [it was] an incorrect classification and an incorrect location. This is the kind of terrain we have in Bisasar [Road], with hills on both sides, so you get a concentration of pollution. If it was a flat terrain, the gases would be more diffused, but here it’s more concentrated.

RD: This is an enormous area.

SK: It’s more than 44 hectares.

RD: Where does the waste come from?

SK: From all over Durban.

RD: You’ve got quite a view of this dump, from your lounge window.

SK: It used to be lovely. We had a natural spring and bird and animal life and everybody enjoyed the views. The manner in which this permit was granted, it was unfair to the community. We have a right to procedure and fairness. The council had already adopted Local Agenda 21 in August of 1994. This permit was granted in 1996. Local Agenda 21 is based on the United Nations’ Agenda 21. This means that there should be public participation. And, of course, the [South African] Constitution came into effect in 1996, and that’s when the permit was granted.

RD: So this dump has a history of violating community concerns?

SK: Oh yes. Before the 1994 elections we had no say. We were basically gagged. There was no freedom of speech. But the community did write letters of objection. South Africa acceded to the Berne Convention in December 1991. Even that



Sajida Khan campaigned against carbon trading using the Bisasar Road dump.

was violated because that convention protects migrating birds, and this area had a natural spring and because of [it], the birds relied on the mud to build their nests. These are swallows that migrate in the area. In the past we used to have more than three nests attached to our buildings and garage and right now there’s not one. The birds have gone because of the pollution levels, both the flora and fauna are affected.

RD: Is it the pollution levels or is it just the noise and activity around the dump site?

SK: Both. The noise chases the birds away, but pollution levels include the leaching that comes off this dump, highly toxic, that contaminates the water. As early as 1987 the city promised to close this dump site and in its place give us all these

sports fields. And they broke that promise to us. And again, for the 1994 election, the political parties promised to close the dump, decommission it and relocate the Claire Estate dump site. Again they broke that promise to us. Before the permit was granted, they should have created a buffer zone to protect the people and that wasn’t done. The buffer zone should be a minimum of 800 meters for a dump site this size.

RD: Would the buffer zone help with the pollution problems?

SK: Well, the pollution would still be produced but the people would be protected; they’d be further away. Most of the complaints are concentrated around the dump site. Because of this valley effect, there was really poor diffusion of the

gases. The medical waste incinerator produced dioxins, which are highly toxic. And dioxin causes cancer. Lead emissions from that incinerator exceeded the guideline limit 30 to 40 times. The cadmium level exceeded two to three times the maximum recommended limit.

RD: I believe the medical waste incinerator was shut down about six, seven years ago?

SK: Yes, the incinerator was shut down, but the effect it leaves behind... You cannot just get rid of the pollution. It settles. And most of the waste was burned at night. They didn't learn their lesson from this. Now they want to put in a new set of generators in the valley again and flare off additional methane that would not be used for electricity. Let me explain the kinds of pollution they would produce if this goes ahead: in the process, you'll get more than 43,000 tons of carbon produced a year. They are saying it is going to alleviate global warming because they are going to get carbon credits.

RD: The municipality argues that they can take methane out of that landfill and burn it and have a net positive impact on greenhouse gases.

SK: Methane is extremely light compared to carbon dioxide. So, methane just dissipates into the air fairly easily, whereas carbon dioxide tends to linger. People around here would be affected more by the carbon. In addition, the generators would produce 95 tons of nitrogen oxide, which causes respiratory problems and exacerbates asthma. There's also 319 tons of carbon monoxide that would be produced by these generators. That again would reduce the oxygen-carrying capacity of the blood. Then, it would produce more than 300 tons of total hydrocarbons, which contain chemicals or gases like benzene, which is a carcinogen. So, naturally, we don't want the global warming caused by methane emissions to continue, but at the same time we need to protect the people. There are ways of removing the methane without the flaring they suggest.

RD: How compare gases caused by the burning of the landfill gas to the gases coming out of that landfill site now?

SK: What happens now is that you get decomposition of the waste and that means methane, toxic groundwater leaching and non-methane organic compounds. They already found levels of these compounds exceeding the maximum recommended limit by 500% at this site. Non-methane organic compounds contain, for example, benzene and formaldehyde, which include carcinogens and cause respiratory problems.

RD: Comparing the landfill gases as they are now to the affects from combusting the landfill gases – could you anticipate a difference?

SK: In my opinion, it would make a bad situation even worse because the flaring will increase by a factor of 15, according to the government's paperwork. All those gases cannot be extracted overnight, so you're going to get all that moving into the air. Then you're going to have six generators producing other gases. In addition, by bringing the gases up, you also bring the leachate up to the surface. The leaching is really poorly managed and you can see overflow of leachate from the wells, which produces all those toxic gases, those non-methane organic compounds. Then the generators themselves are extremely noisy. You can see how close the schools lie. Even if they put those generators in sound-proof rooms, it won't solve the problem of pollution.

RD: I hear a lot of noise just from the traffic here. How would generators compare this noise?

SK: It's even noisier. I've been to sites overseas. For generators producing 2.7 megawatts of electricity, we couldn't even hear the others speak when we visited the site. The noise will travel. It tends to follow the same pathway as the pollution pathway. You can hear the trucks making those beeping sounds now. On Bisasar [Road] itself, they want to put six of these generators. And you can see the

chimneys sticking out. And all the pollution. This is not an industrial area. This is a residential area, and now you're going to have chimneys out in the valley producing all the pollution, affecting all the schools and affecting all the residents.

RD: Durban Solid Waste is adamant that what they are doing is not only affecting global greenhouse gas levels positively but that they will be benefiting the community (a) through capital injection into developing members of the community and (b) through reducing the landfill gases.

SK: How are they going to actually improve the lives of the community [members] when these generators will be producing all this gas? In addition, they will extend the life of the dump for seven to eight years. So they're going to dump more and more dirt on this site, and you can see from the management of the site that they've been dumping things that they shouldn't be dumping here.

RD: What do you suggest that they do with that methane if they don't burn it?

SK: Since the 1990s we've been asking them to remove the methane. What they can do is look for alternatives. There's the gas liquification process in which they can take out the methane, purify it and add it to diesel for trucks and use it as fuel. It can be pumped and used in industry. There's a gas pipeline running right along the dump site. All they have to do is extract and purify it and add it to that pipeline. It's far cheaper but they won't get so much of the emissions reduction credits. But then what is more important, the health of the community or making money at the expense of the community? If, in contrast, this dump site was located out of the city, far away from people, this project would have been ideal, to extract the gases and produce electricity. But because it's going to affect the community so badly, the pollution from the generators themselves will affect the community. This is why we object to it.

RD: If the municipality was to decide against the burning of the gases, it would have to incur expenses to find another way to deal with the methane?

SK: Now that's a lot of nonsense. According to their scoping reports, they are saying the capital costs will be R106.8 million (\$15.3 million) and general expenditure R41.7 million (\$6 million), for a total of R148.5 million (\$21.3 million). It will take them 21 years to recover that money in the form of credits. The profit over the 21 years is only going to be R59.9 million (\$8.6 million). You can take the R148.5 million (\$21.3 million) and put it in the bank at no risk whatsoever, receive a 6% rate of return and, over six years, you can recover more than R60 million (\$8.6). It doesn't even make economic sense to invest in the CDM project. This money can be used to create the buffer zone.

[Appreciation goes to Kathleen Millar who transcribed the tape.]

Notes

- 1 For a detailed profile of Khan by Trusha Reddy, see www.carbontradewatch.org/news/trusha.html.
- 2 Bisasar Road municipal landfill site in Durban.
- 3 The Durban group's most powerful statement – one which features Khan (Lohmann, 2006:290-294).
- 4 The CDM is an arrangement under the Kyoto Protocol allowing industrialised countries with a greenhouse gas reduction commitment (called Annex 1 countries) to invest in projects that reduce emissions in developing countries as an alternative to more expensive emission reductions in their own countries.
- 5 Sierra Club is a Washington DC-based organisation that promotes solutions to global warming using current and cutting-edge technology that will reduce our use of fossil fuels.
- 6 Statements made during an interview with the authors on 14 July 2007 in Durban.
- 7 As a point of correction of a record, there are at least two web citations critical of Khan. Allegations that Khan 'wants the settlement and the dump cleaned out of her neighbourhood' (<http://sds.ukzn.ac.za/files/Pithouse%20seminar%20paper.pdf>, p14) and that 'Khan and other residents with formal housing and water are happy to consign shackdwellers to distant areas like Marx's "sacks of potatoes"' (<http://abahlali.org/files/Patel%202007%>

20Electing%20Land%20Questions%20CODESRIA.pdf, p18) are undocumented, uncited and have no basis in reality. While Khan expressed a desire to have the dump closed for reasons of historical racial justice (given its apartheid origins), public health (given an extreme cancer mortality rate in the immediate vicinity), dignity, and, yes, economic self-interest, we never heard her campaign express itself as suggested above.

- 8 Patrick Bond interview with Durban Clare Road clinic health worker on 15 September 2005.
- 9 Rehana Dada interview with Sajida Khan on 28 September 2005.
- 10 Statements made during an interview with the authors on 14 July 2007 in Durban.
- 11 Statements made during an interview with the authors on 14 July 2007 in Durban.

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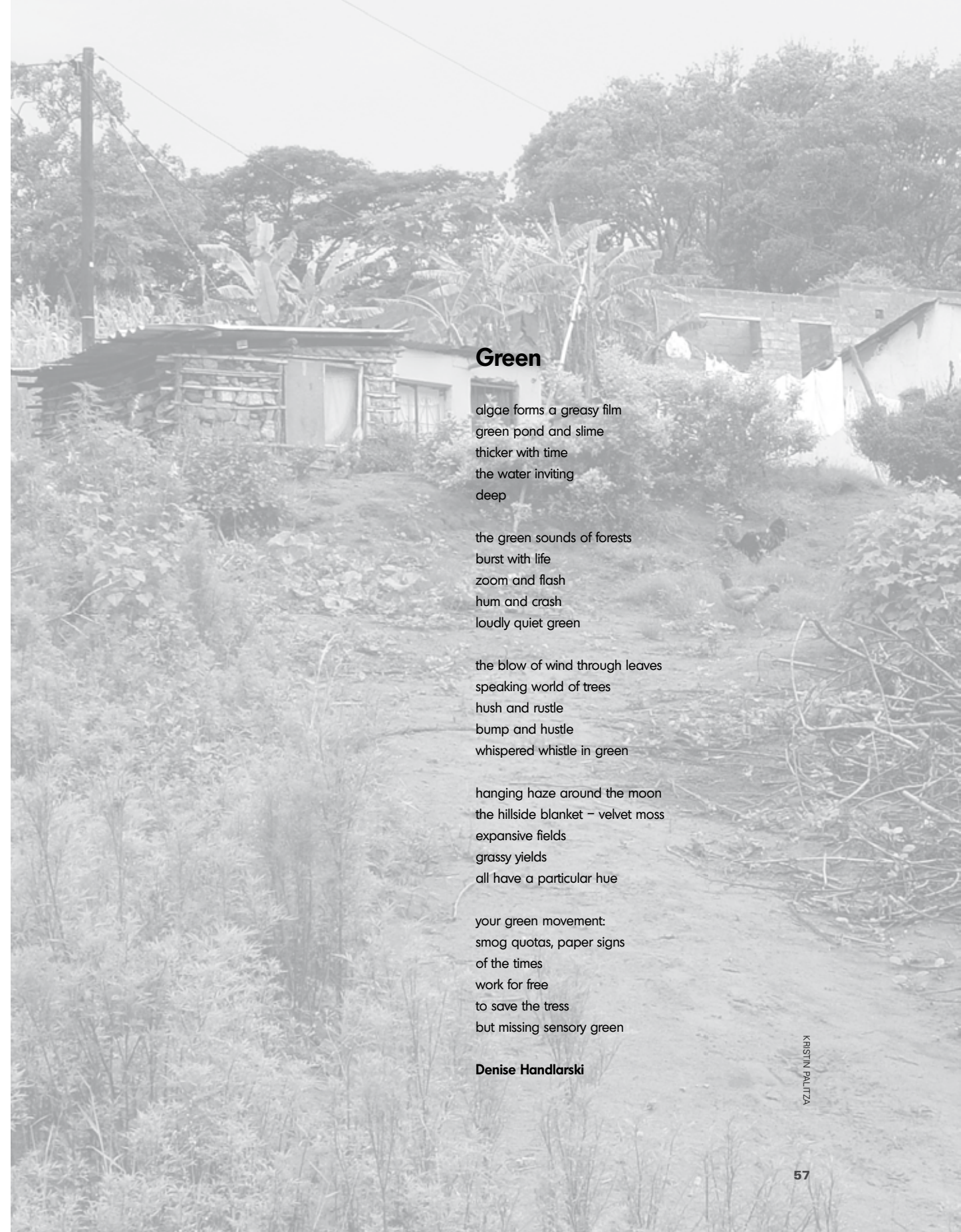
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Green

algae forms a greasy film
green pond and slime
thicker with time
the water inviting
deep

the green sounds of forests
burst with life
zoom and flash
hum and crash
loudly quiet green

the blow of wind through leaves
speaking world of trees
hush and rustle
bump and hustle
whispered whistle in green

hanging haze around the moon
the hillside blanket – velvet moss
expansive fields
grassy yields
all have a particular hue

your green movement:
smog quotas, paper signs
of the times
work for free
to save the tress
but missing sensory green

Denise Handlarski

KRISTIN PALITZA