

African Para-Ontologies of Domestic Cleaning: Ecological and Pedagogical Concepts of Repetition in Pre-Colonial Rituals of Care

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Abstract

This essay conceptually investigates a minor literature in domestic cleaning practices within pre-colonial African contexts. It focuses on unpacking and conceptually reframing the complex poetics of sweeping the floor of the home and the power of this practice as repetitive act of care, which also affirms social status. While these practices are site-specific and vernacular, they also entail commonality and ecumenicity. At the same time, the spatial and political characteristics of housework and specifically cleaning have been extensively theorised in the context of ecofeminism. The ecology and pedagogy of cleaning that stem from pre- and anti-colonial thought, however, remains larval. Sweeping the floor using a broom specifically is – speaking eco-technically – a ritualistic act that implies an architecture of care, discipline and repetition, and which has ecological and pedagogical allusions. This article conceptually and critically examines these allusions, focusing

specifically on the complexity of the act of sweeping the floor in pre-colonial African homes. We do so by framing a para-ontology of the broom and its performative presence in the embodied act called sweeping, which is sensorial, environmental and ecological – therefore posthuman. Starting with Ursula Le Guin's carrier bag theory of fiction and Hélène Frichot's dirty theory, this essay explores the broom as a pedagogical and ecological asset with a value that can be reclaimed and thus lead to more equitable futures.

Keywords

Broom, cleaning, Africa, home, ritual

One sentence summary

This is a conceptualisation of the broom as a connective, ecological and pedagogical object of culture and social status, reflecting on domestic ritual, myth, and poetry from pre-colonial West Africa.

Of menial ordinance

Cleaning the home is a connective narrative of high value. It is equally complex and significant because it contributes to the architectures of everyday living of many different cultures. Its socio-economic value however is deemed low, resulting in imbalanced, hidden and precarious labour. Tasks associated with housework are casually and wrongfully considered menial, meaning not requiring much skill and lacking prestige. The performative act of getting a home clean(er) can, however, carry immense significance, projecting and sustaining socio-economic status and at the same time representing a sincere act of care and caring for (other, oneself, the immediate environment). It is additionally a contested act in terms of gender politics and labour, and of course it has its own diverse poetics and language,

manifested in its architectures, its spatial appropriations and embodied functions. The language of housework has an intriguing legacy and rich genealogy. For instance, the term menial was originally used to describe acts associated with housework.¹ It is now a term that conveys tedium, mindless and lowly work generally. Such tedium in the case of domestic cleaning is loaded with ritualised emotional, psychological and spiritual engagement. It is not extravagant to quote Ursula Le Guin's ode to Socrates here: 'the misuse of language induces evil in the soul'.² The misuse of the meanings of cleaning may have induced an additional malice or two, and this is not unrelated to Le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* where the bag-made-to-carry (and to care) becomes an ecumenical and ecosystemic point of reference for an alternative genealogy available to the humankind.³ Now, replace bag with broom, and see what happens. At once we are swamped with questions: Who carries the broom? Where is it stored? What does it sweep away? What do you do with the swept matter? How often do you sweep? Does the broom have a stiff whisk or standard brush broom head? Too many questions for a menial task. *The Household Discoveries: An Encyclopaedia of Practical Recipes and Processes* mentions that

to sweep well with a broom is an art that calls for quite a little skill and intelligence. There are wrong ways in sweeping as well as the right way, and the former are perhaps more often practiced than the latter.⁴

In this instructional manual-type entry, we read a protocol for sweeping. The embodied and therefore subjective act of holding the broom and performing with it becomes a peculiar gymnastic skill assessed for its propriety. According to this manual, there is also a designated day for sweeping, and very clear instructions about what not to do. For instance,

it is wrong to push the broom forward so as to drive a cloud of dust into the air... It is wrong to sweep always on one side of a broom so that it will get lopsided and have to be thrown away... The right way to use a broom is to keep the handle always inclining forward and never allow it to come to the perpendicular; much less incline backward.⁵

There are additional notes explaining how to store a broom correctly and how to sustainably keep older brooms for 'dirtier' work. The editor of the volume dedicates the book to 'the thousands of practical housekeepers'. Sweeping the floor is a common ritual across the world, and some well-recognised and in many ways commodified 'attitudes to cleaning are remarkably uniform'.⁶ From India to Nigeria, Greece to Wales, and Scotland to Ukraine,

intergenerational oral history bids that the otherwise mundane act of sweeping the floor never be performed at late hours, thus becoming a ritual with some sort of temporally sensitive and symbolic significance. Sweeping the floor using a broom is – speaking eco-technically – a ritualistic act that implies an architecture of care, discipline and repetition, and which has ecological and pedagogical allusions. In this essay, we examine these allusions conceptually and critically, focusing specifically on the complexity of the act of sweeping the floor in pre-colonial African homes.

We start with the axiom that cleaning the home and particularly the sweeping act are polysemous and enriched by symbolic and epistemic varieties of meaning assigned to objects embedded in the domestic environment. These objects are contextually and conceptually potent when they become indicators of social status and connectedness with the divine. The broom, for example, features prominently in Yoruba mythology and spirituality.⁷ Its presence asserts the collectivist moral order of strength in unity. Brooms are used as boundary objects to denote material and immaterial thresholds. A charmed broom should signal to a thief the power and authority of the owner of the house or room, stating that the territory is marked. Would-be thieves who gain access to the spaces marked by charmed brooms could take items but will not have the ability to leave the premises, under the charm of the broom. Instead, any attempt to remove the items they intend to steal will result in an uncomprehensible impulse to keep the space clean. The thief removes the charmed broom and begins to sweep until the owner arrives. African art historian David Doris describes this territorial attitude as a form of defence: 'to use a broom is to engage in a defining act of civilization; to sweep is to assert the boundaries of one's dwelling space and to defend that space against the natural forces of entropy'.⁸ There is a transactional dimension to cleaning, which has personal rewards and carries socioeconomic, psycho-emotional and especially spatial and political recognition. The broom becomes the beholder of Le Guin's carrier bag theory of fiction.

Ecological paraontologies

In response to these complex dimensions of the broom in situ, we wish to highlight the distinctive and contested nature of the sweeping act of the broom. This is particularly evident when the success of removing dirt becomes subordinate to visually demonstrating that the act is done with intent and definition, in order to display status and erudition in the household. To do this, we employ a paraontological approach – 'a method of reading that... can account for that which conceals, retreats and shelters itself from classical ontology'.⁹ Paraontology, with its roots in the perhaps dubious term Black ontology, is a concept developed

by Fred Moten drawing from Black philosopher Nahum Chandler. To be paraontological means to be evaluative and 'evaluations, in essence, are not values but ways of being ... This is why we always have the beliefs, feelings and thoughts that we deserve given our way of being or our style of life'.¹⁰ While there is inherent negativity in thinking paraontologically, this negativity 'brims with potential for liberation', Thomas Dekeyser and David Bissell say, associating negativity with dance.¹¹ The dancefloor of the pre-colonial home is swept in the sometimes synchronous and sometimes conflicting rhythms of class, family, generation and the micropolitics of the everyday. Our methodology is eclectically founded in Black ontology and paraontology, meaning that we accept, like Claire Colebrook, that

there is no innocent or pure foundation; terms such as 'matter' in the 'new materialism' are ways of recognizing that the point of view from which theory unfolds can never be fully theorized. Bodies, matter, flesh, or affect become ways of thinking about the imbrication of the cognitive/theoretical with a substrate (the Real) that is impossible and unavoidable.¹²

We therefore create theory that is unbound to its ontological obligation to serve the world as we know it. Such theory is dirty theory, a concept coined by architectural ecologist Hélène Frichot. To think paraontologically means to think dirtily (in Frichot's terms).¹³

We follow Frichot, by instigating thought through which we can 'cross boundaries, challenge decorum, contravene norms'.¹⁴ Such theory is inherently paraontological and has ecological and pedagogical perspectives and ramifications. Through theorising a dirty paraontology of the broom we can meaningfully and creatively explore the connective and divisive facets of sweeping the floor using literary findings from oral history and heritage, poetry and fiction, as well as contemporary philosophy and anecdotes from the vernacular architectures of the everyday. More importantly, we can conceptually render everyday acts observed in the precolonial home and highlight the not so serendipitous spiritual links to indigenous cultures. Such examination allows us to conceptually map out how these acts of everyday care and recognition of social status create a network of practices that add ecological and pedagogical value rooted in heritage and underpinned by anticolonial thought. This geographically and paraontologically 'dirty' conceptual survey of the 'clean' is very important. Not only does it offer an opportunity to challenge concepts of cleaning-as-cleansing imposed by colonial, Eurocentric and westernised systems of thought, but it also leads to hopeful and liberatory reflective accounts on the ecological and pedagogical significance carried by the repetition and instated value coming from pre-colonial, domestic cleaning,

paving the way for more equitable futures in architectural humanities. The paraontological and dirty therefore is the clean of a more equitable future.

Domesticities and ritual

Housework is never just the job, and the job is never done.¹⁵ Sweeping the floor in this context becomes not only a narrative act of commoning, but an orchestrated synthesis of power play among bodies, objects, spaces and infrastructural systems. Julia Wieger says that

many of the discussions on commoning point toward ways of life beyond capitalism. They thoroughly examine everyday practices for possibilities of less exploitative ways of living together. That is also why they so strongly concern the domestic realm, a part of our everyday lives prone to gender inequalities.¹⁶

Catharina Gabriellson adds that 'housework points to an ethics of care that is fundamentally at odds with capitalist accumulation'.¹⁷ The political and performative dimension of the act of sweeping the floor in this case is in direct dialogue with the domestic. This is a dialogue that architectural feminist criticism has systematically surveyed. The 2012 edition of *Neufert Architects' Data*, an essential reference guide for architectural design and planning, infamously shows a man taking a bath and a woman cleaning the bathtub.¹⁸ Cleaning the home is always a site of narrative complexity. In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize of Fiction, two sisters inhabit a house that has accumulated the dust and human debris of generations of women, revealing a tension between the hidden art of domestic life and the fragility of those who seek to escape their undervalued roles as keepers of houses.¹⁹ 'If housework is understood as ... beneath some people, then no architecture can undo this hierarchy'.²⁰ And indeed, domestic labour – the link between wage and housework – is political and social. It reveals inequalities, oppressions, and hidden structures of power featuring 'the unwaged housewife whose work is not separated from her life, if she is allowed to call it work'.²¹ Yet, acts of domestic work (housework) can carry higher value. 'All types of cleaning, mending and repairing reproduce architecture on a daily basis', Elke Krasny reminds us in her seminal essay titled 'Care'.²² The notion of care founded upon cycles of faithful – often meaningless and habitual – repetition is an important concept for understanding and establishing a dirty paraontology of the broom.

To embark on the laborious (pun intended) act of mapping a paraontology of sweeping the floor, we must explain how the ecology of the broom, as an asset of care, extends beyond sanitisation rituals (cleansing). To do so we must first understand the ecology of the acts of sweeping and

scrubbing, which are well rooted (as most housework acts are) in two principles, work process and technological system, according to Ruth Schwartz Cowan. This implies a parametrised ecology that is visible through the postwar industrialisation of housework.²³ In Cowan's words, if, for example,

we view cleaning rugs as a work process, then we might see that it is composed of several activities (moving the instrument, moving the rugs, removing the accumulated dust, and so on), and that at least one of these (moving the instrument) is much harder to do with the vacuum cleaner than with the broom. In addition, if it is more likely that the presence of the vacuum cleaner will increase the frequency with which the work is done... or will involve fewer people in the work... then the question of whether cleaning a rug has been made easier or faster by the advent of vacuum cleaners becomes considerably more difficult to answer. Easier for whom? Faster for whom? Under what conditions?'.²⁴

Technofeminist Helen Hester and digital economist Nick Srnicek note in this context that even during the contemporary era of the smart home, a transformation that entails similar dynamics to earlier industrialisations,

we remain enmeshed in a world of domestic technologies whose potential to reduce work has gone largely unfulfilled... the capacity of these devices to significantly reduce household labour has been limited by the social organisation of the work... with hours spent on housework remaining broadly stable for all of the twentieth century'.²⁵

Once we think of the labour-saving apparatus as part of its wider ecosystem, we start questioning whose labour it is saving and how.

Such complexity also extends to the human's connection to even wider (planetary) ecosystems, demanding a multilayered and contextual understanding. From an anthropological perspective, the primordial connection with the natural fibres that constitute the material substance of the broom denotes proximity to the earth as a unique ecology. Other connections indicate historical, sociological, political and theological links to the sacred and mundane materiality of brooms as objects of bounty, and the pragmatic application of knowledge and technology for human utility, creating a unique, almost mysterious, eco-techno-cultural continuum. Trees and shrubs that to many communities have unique spiritual and existential importance are used to make brooms, including the majestic palm and vital coconut, as well as some ubiquitous shrubs, have spiritual relationships that encourage awe and wonder, inspiring appreciation for the life-giving products of the flora. Palm fronds, for instance, are commonly understood by some

cultures as key spiritual symbols associated with power and energy. This interlocks with the reverence for the tree as an entity that is the inherent custodian of strength and longevity, and its symbolism, include fertility, wisdom and prosperity. We also observe products of the tree retaining an esoteric, almost arbitrary – even inexplicable, to many – mysticism, even when they are no longer part of the living organism of the tree and become an operative object of everyday use. An indicative example of this depiction is Obatala respectfully refraining from drinking from a palm. Obatala is one of the most important Yoruba deities, the divine spirits called *Òriṣà*. Regarded in some narratives as the creator of humanity, the dual-gendered god is known for benevolence, patience, purity and fairness. With white clothing symbolising sacredness, spiritual cleanliness and peace, Obatala inspires creativity and artistic expression. In poetry, we observe Obatala exercising an act of compassion (care) by regarding the palm tree as kin, god, and part of a cosmic infrastructure that leads to life, even when it has been partially industrialised,

an axis mundi and a bridge for communication with heaven. Because trees never lose their leaves and grow them back in the tropical climate of southwestern Nigeria, the palm tree lacks the critical quality of regeneration that characterizes cosmic trees, world trees, and variations on the tree of life.²⁶

The palm trees

I eat from the palm tree,
I drink from the palm tree,
Palm fronds formed the path through which I came into the world
It is out of compassion for *Oriṣanla* that I do not drink palm wine.²⁷

The cultural significance of brooms emanates from both the aforementioned religious reverence and integrated sustainable approaches that encourage ecological conservation and recycling of products, akin to a circular economy in hope of sustainable futures. Brooms are part of a system and lifecycle that is subject to a peculiarly chthonic axis mundi. The dirty broom, the worn-out broom, is an object at the end of its days. It can, however, be neither light-heartedly discarded nor piled up in storage for eternity. A new pedagogy is needed for such an ecological turbulence. The broom – once active and a sacred part of a living god, the tree – progressively becomes, through its repeated operative function, an object of industrialisation and therefore an integral component of waste management, accumulative capital and space. [Fig. 1] To own a broom is not just to own a labour-saving apparatus; it means ownership of nature and culture, and carries its own ecology of end-of-life care that is not yet resolved and accounted for.



Fig.1: A broom made from palm tree leaves. Screenshot from R&R *YouTube* channel, @rrchannel6665 (timestamp 2:17).

Accordingly, in pre-colonial homes brooms are used by women and men when carrying out domestic tasks. They also seem to take on a variety of cultural and legal significance in different contexts. While in postwar western homes, cleanliness was a 'marker of class status', a dirty house continued to be a sign of failure for the housewife or the mother whose 'caring as a practice was increasingly conflated with *being* caring as a disposition'.²⁸ Brooms, however, present a very special case of diverse objecthood, both symbolic and operative. They are supposed to clean away dirt and dust, but also create an exodus for negativity, evil spirits, bad thoughts and wicked omens that may have intruded into the home. This is the same object we see at the hands of the – traditionally male – chimney sweep and the – traditionally female – hunted witch. This does not mean that the broom is spatially genderless, on the contrary, it means that it can carry a dirty gendered genealogy complemented by contested objecthood and complex ecology.

Civilisation and objecthood

The ecology of the African broom centres on responsibility and collective action. An individual frond is unable to match the achievements of a strong assemblage of fronds. Brooms are used to represent solidarity. Cleaning is a communal activity and the use of brooms at the first light of dawn engendered collaboration and solidarity. Starting a new day or new season with a clean slate indicated that the community was aware of its civic responsibilities, open to receiving and hosting visitors. It was common practice to display the outdoor broom prominently in the compound, espousing one's cleanliness as cultural etiquette. The practice of punishing crime or greed with sweeping the market space or village square alone, suggests that it was used as civic pedagogy. The broom is used as an educational tool, a reusable learning object (RLO), supporting socialisation, moral education, and legal and environmental learning. The pedagogical phenomenon of using everyday political life to scaffold learning is still an important aspect of African moral education. Symbolic tools are used to frame proverbs, poetry, intergenerational oral history, wise sayings and intellectual cultural stories in such a way that they become useful nodes of connection that hold the historical and moral trajectories of the community. They create a 'worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect'.²⁹ [Fig. 2]

The Hausa people of West Africa still believe that sweeping at night causes poverty. This myth may have come from the productive injunction to only sweep when there is enough light to see what one is doing and has become a taboo. Though electricity as a source of light effectively negates the tenet, the perceived prohibition to

refrain from sweeping away one's riches at night remains significant in Hausa thought. The myths and superstitions fabricated around the broom for hygienic purposes portray sociopolitical beliefs steeped in the space created at the intersection of religion and nature and their connections with material objects. For example, in Zimbabwe, the Shona see little distinction between the cleanliness of the environment and of the spirit. The Shona phrase 'Kuchena mumweya, pfungwa nemumagariro', which translates as 'to be spiritually clean in thought, deed and practice', is used to connote hygiene and the care-full-ness of a woman. Michelina Andreucci argues that the female 'affiliation with the broom was an integral part of the Shona woman's protocol; a symbol of her existence, responsibility, co-operation and desirability'.³⁰ These connotations complement the symbolic and mythological capacity of using the broom. Sweeping the floor at night causes poverty. A child sweeping uninstructed forecasts the arrival of guests. If a man sweeps with brooms, he will not be successful in finding a woman to marry. Brooms also depict resilience. Several African proverbs refer to the broom's strength, reiterating the need for unity by demonstrating that the broom's functionality lies not in the power of a single frond but in the resilience of its united fronds.

For the Yoruba (Nigeria), 'Òṣùṣù ọwọ la fi ñgbálẹ tí'lẹ fi ñmọ' means 'It's a bunch of broomsticks that's used to sweep the floor clean'. The broom's simplicity exemplifies the profound, demonstrating how the object embodies collective strength, unity and cooperation. Just as a broom's strength comes from its interwoven sticks, African societies emphasise interdependence over extreme individualism, manifesting as greed, selfishness and isolation. African cultures also use the broom to depict harmony and societal functioning. Individual parts of the community are effective when they function together and complement each other. In several African cultures, decision-making is consensus-driven, and the broom is used to portray the harmony of the village square. In Igbo culture (Southeast Nigeria), elders use broomsticks in mediation, where each person adds a stick to symbolise agreement, reinforcing the importance of unity in leadership. The Igbo proverb 'Ọtù anya na-anwụ, mana ọtù osisi adighi emebi' translates as 'A single eye may go blind, but a single broomstick does not make a broom', reflecting the centrality of collective responsibility. The communitarian moral code is used to maintain the moral and social order of teamwork. The symbolism of the broom extends to principles of governance, decision-making and community progress. The society focuses on the principle that no one succeeds alone; progress requires collective effort. Yet diversity and complementarity are emphasised: each broomstick is unique, yet they work together for a common goal, just like diverse talents



Fig. 2: Traditional brooms made from the petioles of the coconut tree, and nylon rope on the wall at grocery store in Serium, Myanmar. Shutterstock, 2020.

in a team. The resilience of the broom and its capacity to withstand pressure due to tight binding shows that unity strengthens a team.

Brooms are also used to depict sacrifice. Some colonial travellers in Africa traditionally used young African boys as 'human canaries'. Known as 'dew driers', the boys' bodies were used as bait for leopards and hyenas which become exposed as the boys brush the dew of the high grasses in early morning jungle expeditions; this enabled the 'opening' of the road for would-be explorers. Poets and civil rights activists such as Dan Crawford coined the term 'Human Brooms' to portray the dew-driers' sacrifice and vulnerability as unwilling decoys.³¹ Fundamentally, the sociocultural mores of the broom used to point to a heritage of purity through cleanliness, environmental management and sustainability, and of environmental affordance. Broom masquerades are popular in west African mythology and entertainment. The Diola people of the Casamance region (Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, and Gambia) use the Kumpo dance as a cleansing ritual protecting villages from bad supernatural forces. The masked figure appearing in the masquerade is believed to be a manifestation of a spirit, in the shape of a large broom-like figure. Covered in palm leaves and adorned with a stick, the masked figure engages in spinning acrobatic movements that resemble sweeping gestures. The masked figure communicates with the people through a special interpreter enjoining the community to be united, hardworking and judicious citizens. It is considered taboo to try to investigate the broom or use it to communicate with the spirit. We find similar masquerade rituals and dance performances in Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon and Benin Republic. The masquerades are used to coordinate communal work and protect males during circumcision initiation ritual, which leads us again to a common ground of hygiene, care and spirituality. Mary Douglas in her seminal book *Purity and Danger* devotes a lot of thought to the topic of cleaning as cleansing. Drawing from Durkheim, she asks:

If the sacred is characterised by its contagiousness, how does it differ from non-sacred magic, also characterised by contagiousness? What is the status of the other kind of contagiousness which is not generated from the social process? Why are magical beliefs called primitive hygiene and not primitive religion?³²

She concludes that we 'should start by recognising communal life for a much more complex experience'.³³ Such experience demands environmental and social affordances and is fundamentally posthuman. The broom that becomes human that becomes machine that sweeps, is a complex sensory-motor system that can be responsive, reactive and sentient. To hold (onto) the broom is to

become broom-human, a status we have always known. The increasingly built environments we continue to create may sustain or challenge such affordance to hold, store and worship the broom. In the Museum of the Home in London, the exhibition *Rooms Through Time* explores how ways of living evolved in the UK from the townhouse in 1878 onwards.³⁴ In one of the rooms – the 'Tenement Flat 1913' we can see the mop and bucket resting in a corner, fully integrated in the décor, an intrinsic part of the furniture and the reenactment of life once well lived. It is far from an oddity and curated beautifully to add to the synthesis of objects and sounds that immerse the visitor in an environment from an increasingly lost era. [Fig. 3]

Fabulations of sweeping

Housework and in particular sweeping (dust) features prolifically in modern literature across languages and cultural territories, so as to create its own mythopoetic genre. Sweeping tools like brooms and brushes are frequently portrayed in poetry and prose as agents of labour. The poem 'Our Old Brooms' by Ngalim Jusline Veeyeenyuy, Cameroonian teacher and writer, unpacks the lifecycle of the broom becoming dead matter, soon to be replaced with no burial or wake observed:

Our Old Brooms

Our homestead is filthy and grimy
yet, we possess brooms, old brooms
littered along the family corridors
all the corners of the house, they know
but they can't sweep again.

Old brooms don't sweep
they dig deep trenches
deeper than Lake Barombi –
these pits swallow us gently
like the whale did Jonah.

We possess palm bushes
yet, our brooms are old
and our residence is foul.

We grumble and denounce
yet, we in idiotic clamour
recycle our ancient brooms in ululation –
after each seven and five years of deep drilling
and digging resumes anew.

New brooms sweep clean
and cover the trenches
dug by wizened brooms
yet, we shun and damn them,

never have we given them a chance
to show how well they sweep.

Dearest kin, for how long shall
we perish on the enclaved paths?
We somersault, tumble and shrivel
and end up engulfed by these mosh pits
dug by our cobwebbed brooms.

Our brooms are ancient indeed!
It's not late, let's all scamper
to the palm bush
and cook up new brooms
from fresh green viyang
before dusk arrives.³⁵

Veeyeenyuy's poem includes a subtle call to action for African society – a call based on time-sensitive conviviality and laboured community engagement rooted once again in care and spirituality, exclaiming in ecstasy 'Our brooms are ancient indeed!'. Greece's national female poet Kiki Dimoula, on the other hand, is known for her emotive work that emanates intimacy and ambivalence. Dimoula, who left full time employment at the Bank of Greece to care for her children, and became one of three women ever to be inducted in the Academy of Athens, has been celebrated as 'the best Greek woman poet since Sappho'.³⁶ In her song titled 'Dust', Dimoula pays tribute to the housewife and progressively sets the scene for brooms, brushes and dustpans (a 'fleshless body') to dance to her rhythm of a virtual interior with no floors and balconies, turning the Athenian private life inside out, offering a new pedagogy of the ecology of the everyday – a treaty made with dust, a ritual made with the broom at hand and a myth carried by dirt. This all is too much to carry inside, Dimoula reminds us, while performing a mute sigh:

I pity the housewives
The way of their labour
Every morning to sweep the dust out of the home
Like the last flesh of a fleshless body of
brooms and sweepers
[...]
Never short of dust, the never-leaver
Any time that time brings it back
A new deal is done by dust.
[...]
[Dust] I let you be
I am not made to endure the flipping
Of the inside life, outside.³⁷

In response to the ever-accumulated mythology of sweeping, we (the authors) present a short poem to contemporary and future brooms. We summon, through this poem, the power of convivial community and communion that takes place through the physical and social labour of cleaning the floor. We discard, through this poem, the dichotomies of a hard-wired binary world where machine cannot be body and nature cannot be culture. We celebrate, through this poem, the site-specificities and the emerging pedagogies of the lifecycle of our semi-operative and semi-spiritual objects that form ecologies, affordances and civilisations – the brooms.

Ode to the Broom

Do you recognise it?
Used to ride it.
Can we patronise it?
If you can hide it.
To the cupboard, to the utility
With pride, stance, humility.
It rests with care,
It dances with flair
By the hand to the floor,
All the way to the door,
Or a pan, much more fun.

Radical para-ontologies and hopeful futures

A radical para-ontology of the broom is rooted in pre-colonial thought and practice. It manifests in spiritual endeavours, social interactions, transgenerational ritual, phrases of wisdom, trees and poems. The para-ontological broom embodies the carrier bag theory of fiction and is dirty. It is an in-between agent of affordances and deeply connective practices. It sweeps the floor but does not get rid of the very DNA of the home – it just rearranges and rearticulates its energy to accommodate worlds afresh: a new dawn, a new arrival, a new tenant, a newborn life, a new broom. Its pedagogical capacity rests on its handle being made from both nature and culture, albeit always industrialised and sometimes bastardised and masqueraded. The broom was once the tool that could affirm the status of the good housewife and allow it to shine. The shiny and polished objects it creates, together with bodies and spirits, embody an architecture that itself enables and affords. The connectivity and value of such embodiment may seem lost by the operative disruption of the machine. This can pessimistically lead us to recognise the labour-saving apparatus solely as capitalistic mediator, a status that implies passive ownership of the object performing the spotless cleaning and superiority by the owner's capacity to acquire, use and replace. In such a process of the apparatus being broken down and not actively felt to be worn out, the value carried



Fig. 3: A tenement flat in 1913. Installation detail, Museum of the Home. Photo: author.

by the housewife as assets manager becomes diffused. This carries a value change and an honest questioning: Where is the value now? This question creates the necessary negative space for a para-ontology of the broom to emerge. Both value and energy in the form of performing the sweeping of a floor are now diffused and replaced – we do not know anymore where and how often they are sighted, sited and cited. Things that are valued are cited. If we reinvent the site and citing of the value of the carrier of the asset of the sweeping apparatus, then we can be hopeful. The pedagogy of reciting the poetry of the broom and re-siting the architecture of sweeping the floor affords host-carer justice. In such a pedagogy, contested pockets of labour are revalued and reinstated otherwise. The ambivalence of siting the broom asks: Where do I store it? When do I discard it? How do I replace it? Once I have done so and have entered a new life cycle assessment that calls for radical and compassionate waste management, what have I earned? What have I learned? Such a pedagogy carries relational logic and contextual sensibility, and these are also fundamentally pedagogical acts of care and communion. They may demand the physical apparatus of machine-body, yet they are beyond it. The instated affordances of body-object-environments sensoria and collegia of the broom have the capacity and tenacity to lead the way towards equitable and sustainable futures, beyond mono-species societies into multispecies and disclosive networks of convivial practice.

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Notes

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Biography

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