

On the Feceocene: Sewerage Works, Sanitation, and Society in Harare, Zimbabwe, 1890–2020

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The city of Harare has had several outbreaks of waterborne diseases between the late-1990s and 2020. This prompted academics to slot these recent infrastructural breakdowns of the city's sewerage works within the Zimbabwean crisis historiography. However, this glossed over the historical nature of the problem and created the erroneous assumption that colonial sanitation and sewerage regimes succeeded in disciplining human "shit." The proposed study pairs colonial high-modernist ideologies that dominated the management of "human shit" in the city with the stories of the human beings who worked in its human-excreta disposal units and sanitary farms to better understand the cultural meanings given to "human waste" over time.

Consequently, the research investigates the changing, racialized, and classed sensorial—sights, smells, feelings, and emotions—experiences that different or differentiated excretory narratives and cultures brought into the city. It does this to contribute to the city's previous economic, classed, and gendered interpretations by exploring the ecological, species, emotional, medical, and scientific dimensions of its human waste management systems. The proposed project uses human fecal matter to analyze Harare's history between 1890 and 2020. The study also examines how human "shit" contributed to the cultural production of the city, its politics, and cityscapes. Human feces allow for the exploration of discourses about water usage, sanitation, hygiene, and the regulation of "colonized" human bodies in an urban society over time.

This is because the management of human waste reveals so much about the classed and racialized organization of the city, its politics, the development of colonial capitalism, and the othering of human beings who were classified as people with backward excretory cultures. This research is guided by the assumption that human ordure is one of the most unremarked drivers of social, economic, cultural, and political change in Harare. For that reason, the research uses the flow of "human shit," sewerage sludge, and other things that flow with these variables to investigate the flow of history from a multispecies paradigm. Sewerage matter that got mixed-up with industrial affluent periodically started chemical chain reactions that altered the city's water quality and affected its environmental health.

The project acknowledges that the sewerage infrastructure, as a workspace shaped by human interventions, is also a self-acting environment characterized by the changing material qualities of human waste. These aspects were subject to change through human interventions and also transformed the human world (sometimes dangerously so).

Moreover, the study examines how the sewerage infrastructure affected the city's Mukuvisi, Marimba, and Hunyani rivers, its Hunyani dam, Lake McIlwaine, and the-other-than human lives that resided in these water systems. Muck's agentive capacity as a highly fertile nutrient for plant regeneration and its disease-causing capacities turned it into a recurring public-health issue deserving its own historical evaluation. Its capacity to assume different material qualities straddling the continuum from being nasty vile matter, associated with pollution and diseases, to being an important agricultural fertilizer meant that it has always been a double-edged actant. The study places emphasis on "human shit's" nutrient qualities to tell of its noxious agency—especially during a period when waterborne diseases broke out—and of how, in many other instances, human waste also sustained "unwanted" plant growth such as water hyacinth and snails that both altered the city's water quality and its public-health woes. Therefore, the research deploys the idea of the Feceocene to refer to an era, urban landscape, city, and time dominated by feces, or a process in which people found themselves living with feces by pairing the sanitary struggles of Harare residents with other variables such as race, class, gender, and species.