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# ON LABOUR AND EXHAUSTION

## Tryst with Raul De Lara's *She's So Tired* (2019)

### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I engage with *She's So Tired* (2019)—a soft and warped sculpture of a straw broom created by Mexican artist Raul De Lara. The sculpture was conceived as part of his intriguing experiments with the design of everyday tools of manual labour in the sculptural series *Tired Objects* (2018–). Following queer cultural critique's turn to affect, sensation and form, I consider the artefact in its expansive materiality and examine how it theoretically, affectively and formally inquires into the inexorability of immigrant labour and exhaustion. Using

insights from social reproduction theory, queer theory and human geography, I develop an ekphrasis of the sculpture to critically grapple with the aesthetic alterity. I argue that *She's So Tired* (2019), in dramatizing the life-extinguishing expropriation of the cleaners' well-being, raises questions about the network of places, fantasies and people that anchor the reproduction of life in the twenty-first century.

KEY WORDS: exhaustion, cleaning, ekphrasis, space, immigration.

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## INTRODUCTION

In November 2025, the US Department of State expanded its guidelines on health-related inadmissibility in the context of US immigration. According to such updated directives, visa applicants suffering from chronic conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, respiratory disease, neurological or mental-health disorders will now become subjects of rigorous medical and financial scrutiny. Legal commentators at the Berardi Immigration Law firm elaborate that consular officers have been instructed to determine whether the applicant is likely to become dependent on government-mediated health schemes of public cash assistance or long-term institution care.<sup>2</sup> As a result, applicants (especially those aiming for permanent residency) are required to undergo intensive medical examinations and will have to present proof that they have adequate resources to fund healthcare for themselves and their dependent(s) during the entire duration of their expected life-span. Such changes in policy echo historical patterns of prejudices surrounding the migrant body, and point to the continued relevance of examining how national and cultural power differentials inform the unequal valuation of populations and their access to care. My essay extends such critical concerns by engaging with *She's So Tired* (2019)—a soft and warped sculpture of a straw broom created by New-York based artist Raul De Lara.

Notably, *She's So Tired* (2019) belongs to a larger series of sculptural explorations called *Tired Objects* by the artist. Noted for their soft and pliant form, the sculptures in this series evoke absent yet exhausted “domestic and agricultural workers”<sup>3</sup> by foregrounding everyday tools of manual labour such as shovels, brooms, pitchforks, and the like. When asked about his artistic practice, in a recent interview with Charlotte Beach, De Lara shares that through his work with everyday objects, he hopes to initiate “difficult conversation from a comfortable place for the viewer.”<sup>4</sup> In the following pages, I unpack the sensuous materiality<sup>5</sup> of De Lara’s sculpture and discuss how it theoretically, affectively and formally (re)imagines the inexorability of immigrant labour and exhaustion.

<sup>2</sup> Berardi Immigration Law, “Health Conditions Now a Visa Risk: How New US Rules Could Affect Immigrants,” *Berardi Immigration Law*, 2025. <https://berardiimmigrationlaw.com/health-conditions-now-a-visa-risk-how-new-u-s-rules-could-affect-immigrants/>.

<sup>3</sup> Eva Diaz, “Raul de Lara’s Rustic ‘Soft Sculptures’ Act as Portraits of Invisible Laborers,” *ARTnews.com*, May 17, 2023. <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/raul-de-lara-sculptures-portraits-invisible-laborers-1234668601/>.

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Beach, “Raul de Lara’s Whimsical Sculptures Address Immigration and Belonging,” *PRINT Magazine*, August 14, 2025. <https://www.printmag.com/designer-interviews/raul-de-lara-sculptor/>.

<sup>5</sup> Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez, “Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social,” *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 227–39. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2017.0031>.

In terms of method, my interpretative engagement with *She's So Tired* (2019) has been shaped by recent developments in queer cultural studies that combine seemingly outmoded preoccupations of formal movements such as structuralism, narratology, and the figural in light of theoretical debates on sense, affect, and disruption.<sup>6</sup> As proponents of such reading practice have demonstrated, such a critical orientation is particularly potent in highlighting the varied ways in which the shuttling of meaning between the “social and the aesthetic”<sup>7</sup> is conceived. For instance, in their introduction to the special issue on Queer Form (2017), Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser and Roy Perez adapt this critical methodology to question certain patterns of interpretive violence that are often faced by artists working on themes of structural violence and suffering. Considered “art that transmits information,”<sup>8</sup> artworks engaging with such themes are predominantly read through the lens of “about-ness.”<sup>9</sup> They highlight that in many facets of the contemporary art world, such readings dismiss the polyvalences of the aesthetic innovation and formal manipulation inherent in the works of such artists. Responding to such interpretive deficiencies, Amin, Musser and Perez (2017) suggest reading artistic form expansively, “as a sum total of formal structure, artistic technique, plasticity of medium”<sup>10</sup> to develop analytic supplements that might yield multiple and resistant readings of an artwork. In this manner, these thinkers invite us to tend to the elaborate processes of mediation and signification that shape aesthetic productions and suggest how these very mechanisms result in a (re)interpretation and reimagination of the social and material scripts they originated in. Additionally, their reading practice recognises the sensorial contingency of any interpretive engagement and holds space for more diffused affective and sensuous modes of meaning-making.

I translate such discussions on aesthetics, form and sensation by fabulating my encounter with De Lara’s sculpture during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020 through the Ethan Cohen Gallery’s website. When narrating this encounter, I use the formal method of ekphrasis as espoused by Tina Campt in her work on affective labour and haptic engagement,<sup>11</sup> which involves translating a work of visual art into prose. As Tina Campt proposes, this gesture of looking, when augmented by diverse forms of sensorial engagement (such as listening, reading) could prove to be an effective way of challenging the violence of uncritically identifying with and/or fetishizing scenes of suffering. Such mode of engagement by dynamically attending to what is evident, overtly visible and transparent, allows us to speculate and imagine what escaped such frames of vision and capture. Taking after Campt’s work, I produce a description of the sculpture, foregrounding features that remain at the edges of the

<sup>6</sup> Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez, “Queer Form,” 229.

<sup>7</sup> Amin, Musser and Pérez, 229.

<sup>8</sup> Amin, Musser and Pérez, 227.

<sup>9</sup> Amber Jamilla Musser, *Between Shadows and Noise: Sensation, Situatedness, and the Undisciplined* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2024), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Amin, Musser and Pérez, 228.

<sup>11</sup> Tina Campt, “Adjacency: Luke Willis Thompson’s Poethics of Care,” *Flash Art*, June 9, 2020. <https://flashart.com/article/adjacency-luke-willis-thompsons-poethics-of-care/>.

sculpture.

For the sake of clarity, I have further organised my paper in three sections. In Part One, I discuss the exhibition profile on the gallery website to situate these sculptures and clarify how I use artist biography and institutionally-cultivated frames of interpretation in my analysis of the sculpture. In Part Two, I thicken my discussion of the sculpture's aesthetic strategies by including insights from social reproduction theory (Fraser 2017), queer studies (Puar 2017, Ahmed 2019) and human geography (Bissell 2021). Revelling in the density of De Lara's sculpture, I flesh out how this sculpture, by materializing the labouring body's extension into its surroundings, attunes us to the "hyperinvisibility"<sup>12</sup> of the racialised, gendered, and classed attrition that stabilises quotidian demands of normalcy and progress. In Part Three, I dwell with the title of the sculpture and speculate how the conceptual rendering of this sculpture intervenes in larger debates on exhaustion.

#### A NOTE ON "EXHAUSTION"

Before I discuss the sculpture, it is important for me to clarify what I mean by 'exhaustion' in this paper. Etymologically speaking, exhaustion derived from the Latin word *exhaurire* conveys the "act of drawing out or draining off."<sup>13</sup> Since the early seventeenth century, the meaning of the term in the English language has been closely associated with fatigue and is used to describe the waning of strength, connoting the "action of or process of consuming or using up completely" and the "making of weak and helpless by fatigue."<sup>14</sup> Sighard Neckel, Anna Schaffner and Greta Wagner (2017) in their writings have built on such etymological connotations to discuss how developing critiques of exhaustion orients readers/critics to the varied ways in which individual suffering, wider socio-political dynamics and ecological depletion are inter-related.<sup>15</sup> Thus studying exhaustion has emerged as a rather interdisciplinary preoccupation and has been actively taken by sociologists, psychologists, human geographers, scientists, feminists, political scientists, and philosophers in recent times to characterise an array of related but distinct concerns. For example, cultural geographer David Bissell (2021) explores exhaustion in the context of geographical thought:

For instance, to exhaust can mean "to tire" in the bodily sense of making someone feel tired. But it can also mean "to empty" in the sense of using up reserves completely. Furthermore, it can also mean "to expel" in terms of the

<sup>12</sup> Françoise Vergès, "Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender," *e-flux Journal* #100, 2019. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/269165/capitalocene-waste-race-and-gender/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Exhaustion, N. Meanings, Etymology and More," *Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d., [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/exhaustion\\_n?tl=true](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/exhaustion_n?tl=true).

<sup>14</sup> "Exhaustion, N. Meanings, Etymology and More," *Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.

<sup>15</sup> Sighard Neckel, Anna Katharina Schaffner and Greta Wagner, ed. *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on a Modern Affliction* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

removal of a by-product.<sup>16</sup>

Bissell's discussion of exhaustion's varied connotations, namely "to tire," "to empty," and "to expel" in an effort to rethink the body-space continuum meaningfully serves as my entry point into De Lara's aesthetic experiments in *She's So Tired* (2019). By allowing these layers of meaning to jostle next to each other in my analysis, I do not, however, mean to conceptually undermine phenomenological distinctions between states of tiredness, fatigue and exhaustion. Instead, this gesture is rooted in my efforts to recognise *She's So Tired* (2019) as a critical interlocutor in debates of exhaustion and give primacy to its aesthetic alterity that might require us to read across these adjacent experiences. Therefore my analysis is less interested in confirming a specific predetermined meaning of exhaustion, but is more invested in exploring how thinking with the sculpture's aesthetic peculiarities (re)imagines and attunes us to this complex phenomena. I have thus retained traces of the complex procedures of "judgement, reading, rationalization and conjecture that normally go undescribed"<sup>17</sup> in my ekphrasis of the sculpture. As the following pages will reveal, my reading of the sculpture is frequently peppered with ellipses, parentheses, italics and rhetorical questions to confect the hesitation, confusion, and discomfort that my encounter with this artefact has incited in me.

## I

### *I WAKE UP IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY EVERY DAY* (2020)—EXHIBITION

By clicking the 'installation view' mode of *I Wake Up in a Foreign Country Every Day* (2020), I found myself in a rather busy gallery. Navigating fourteen hand-carved sculptures, displayed as part of Raul De Lara's first solo exhibition in New York, took way longer than I expected. For between the artist that conceived it and the viewer that is now engaging with it—a lot had happened. *A lot seems to be going on, in fact.* As the gallery clarifies, exchanges on "ideas of nationality, language barriers, body language, and the sense of touch"<sup>18</sup> seems to reanimate each sculpture. And yet the straw broom sculpture on my screen, titled *She's So Tired* (2019), leaning against the gallery's white wall, is all alone, appearing so quiet, bent and frail. Or have I, in reading the sculpture through a predetermined frame, diluted its formal, theoretical, and

<sup>16</sup> David Bissell, "Liminal Geographies of Exhaustion: Exhausted Bodies, Exhausted Places, Exhausted Possibilities," in *Negative Geographies: Exploring the Politics of Limits*, ed(s) David Bissell, Mitch Rose and Paul Harrison (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 126.

<sup>17</sup> Adrienne R. Brown, *The Black Skyscraper: Architecture and the Perception of Race* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 23.

<sup>18</sup> Ethan Cohen Gallery, "Raul De Lara: I Wake Up in a Foreign Country Every Day Overview," 2020. Accessed August 31, 2024. <https://www.ecfa.com/exhibitions/20-raul-de-lara-i-wake-up-in-a-251-w-19th-st>.

affective propositions to confirm it as quiet, bent and frail?

The predetermined interpretive frame I am referring to is the Ethan Cohen Gallery's description of the sculptural series *Tired Objects* (2018-), as part of which *She's So Tired* (2019) was conceived. According to the description, the bent forms of the objects displayed in this series evoke the deep exhaustion that comes with experiences of work instability, the fear of getting caught, and the weight of being seen as tools rather than human beings.<sup>19</sup> Writing in her book on *Queer Phenomenology* (2004), Sara Ahmed argues that spaces shape our matrix of perception, determining not only 'what' but also 'how' something "comes into view."<sup>20</sup> Having encountered this straw broom as part of an art exhibition in an institutional setting, I take the information provided by the gallery as a frame of reference, which has consequences for how I access the creative intrepidity of the sculpture.

Let me discuss some sections of the gallery descriptions to clarify how I implicate this frame in my reading of the sculpture. The overview page of this exhibition opens with the gallery introducing Raul De Lara, elaborating how his artistic practice originated in his experiences of being an immigrant from Mexico in the United States. Imbued with his "feeling neither from here nor there,"<sup>21</sup> his sculptures often use wood, which "shows the passing of time on its skin."<sup>22</sup> We are informed, importantly, that De Lara's sculptures "explore how stories, folklore, and rituals can be communicated through inanimate objects, tools, and foreign environments."<sup>23</sup> If one pays "slow deep attention"<sup>24</sup> to this sentence in relation to the entire description, it arguably clarifies the preoccupation that reanimates De Lara's sculptures. Hinging on the 'how,' De Lara's practice is, among other things, an inquiry into "what *can be* silently communicated"<sup>25</sup> through inanimate objects, tools, and foreign environments. Reading in light of the information that his practice often draws on wood, one might infer that his woodcarving is the driving force of his inquiry. Thus the woodwork in the sculpture is a tangible expression of the struggle to communicate when navigating foreign environments.

Further on in the description, the claim that De Lara's artistic practice is an inquiry into "what *can be* communicated"<sup>26</sup> begins to fizzle out, and we learn very little about his technique. Before specifying details about the displayed objects, De Lara's work is attributed a testifying role. We are told that De Lara's sculptures are often autobiographical and are revealing of memories, personal experiences, and hard truths of the artist's existence. What is perhaps limiting about the gallery

<sup>19</sup> Ethan Cohen Gallery, "Raul De Lara: I Wake Up in a Foreign Country Every Day Overview," 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press Books, 2004), 16.

<sup>21</sup> Ethan Cohen Gallery, "Overview."

<sup>22</sup> Ethan Cohen Gallery, "Overview."

<sup>23</sup> Ethan Cohen Gallery, "Overview."

<sup>24</sup> Eugenie Brinkema, "Form," in *A Concise Companion of Visual Culture*, ed(s) A. Joan Saab, Aubrey Anable, Catherine Zuromskis (Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 264.

<sup>25</sup> Ethan Cohen Gallery, "Overview," my italicisation.

<sup>26</sup> Ethan Cohen Gallery, "Overview," my italicisation.

description at this junction is the way it discusses the infused symbolism of his work to affirm the revelatory force of these sculptures and render it isomorphic with the artist's immigrant heritage. By clothing "an idea in sensuous form,"<sup>27</sup> symbolism in art diffuses meaning by performing an act of displacement—specifically, a symbol might "be an object, animate or inanimate, and often stands for something else."<sup>28</sup> In other words, the use of a symbol enacts a negotiation between what is abstract and concrete and, in doing so, activates the role of imagination, provoking us to examine "what remains omitted from what is stated."<sup>29</sup> Thus, the use of symbolism in De Lara's work could be a way of re-signifying static narratives of disenfranchisement and suffering often fetishised in readings of immigrant-related cultural productions.

The tendency to over-determine what Raul De Lara's sculptures mean in relation to a predefined socio-political biography is further evident in the way the gallery introduces the *Tired Objects* (2018-present). Highlighting the "bent" forms of these sculptures, the description, perhaps inadvertently, flags what is striking about these sculptures' objects, thereby flattening the other formal peculiarities of each of these sculptures. Furthermore, such an introduction obfuscates that each sculpture is an exploration of "what *can be* communicated"<sup>30</sup> and is consequently named and exhibited differently. Additionally, in co-relating the bent nature of the sculptures as evocative of deep exhaustion, the introduction prematurely abbreviates what different textures of bent-ness across the series might conceptually and theoretically claim in the context of the exhibition. Therefore, in the next part of my paper, I tend to the specificity of the straw-broom by meticulously describing my encounter with the materiality of the sculpture (colour, texture, medium, negative space, etc.) and its posturing in the exhibition.

## II

### *SHE'S SO TIRED* (2019)

I am looking at an image of a straw broom leaning against the wall on my laptop. The luminosity and softness of the broom stands out against the wall's flat and coarser texture, perhaps because of the way the wood is carefully carved and generously coated with lacquer. This juxtaposition of the smooth texture of the broom and the coarse wall creates a sense of depth, guiding me to the vertical posture of its soft and bent form. Made of pinewood, the rod of the broom absorbs some of the gallery light as it comes into view. However, given the physicality of the wood used, light seems to touch the straw broom only *partially*; further dispersing the appearance of its warped form and allowing us to observe its immersion into its surroundings. The lacquer

<sup>27</sup> "Symbolism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, July 11, 2024.

<https://www.britannica.com/art/Symbolism-literary-and-artistic-movement>.

<sup>28</sup> J. A. Cuddon and M. A. R. Habib, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Oxford: Penguin Books, 2013), 699.

<sup>29</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 51.

<sup>30</sup> Ethan Cohen Gallery, "Overview," my italicisation.

coating of the rod draws attention to the texture of the wooden grain of the broom. Fine and wavy, the wooden grain appears to run its vertical course and furls into spiral knots mid-way, coincident with the portion of the broom that is touching the wall. One cannot help but acknowledge how simple yet measured the curve of the wooden rod is, at this point in the sculpture. Following the wooden grain's descent towards the grey floor, I observe how it opens into a strawy broom head. *I find it funny how the strawy panel which often remains in contact with the floor is called the head of the broom. I worried about how I had been describing the broom. Should I have launched my reading by first discussing the broom head?*

The pointy, fine straws of the broom had been intricately stitched together by the artist using metal and fibre wires. As I zoom in by clicking on the image, the straws seem to have a darker tint, and its tips appear fizzy, curly, scattered as they touch the grey floor. *Perhaps these tips have been ruffled from use?* I am particularly tempted to make this reading because of the way the broom head was proximate to a stain on an otherwise clean floor. Sara Ahmed writes that by reconsidering “how something is used,” we can often discern that the logic of its usability necessitates depletion or the process of taking “the life out of something.”<sup>31</sup> Intrigued by the darkened edges of the broom, I found myself revisiting my sense memory of a broom in use—how broom heads such as the one facing me rub against floors, streets, and varied surfaces when in use. Whereas the generated friction of the straw head against such surfaces allows one to move dirt and clean the surface, it is also concomitant with the broom's wear and tear. David Getsy and Jennifer Doyle in their rehearsal of queer cultural critique, clarify that a gesture of “reading into” an artwork allows the (critic's) desire to intrude on the fixity of interpretations. Instantiating in this manner, alternate frames of seeing, being and relating to artefacts, a gesture of “reading into” helps us grapple with what remains unacknowledged without necessarily claiming that “something [is] anti-normative.”<sup>32</sup> The way I have been proceeding with this reading certainly involves a degree of projection. As Sara Ahmed explains in *Uses of Use* (2019), projection often takes the form of “an object being vacated by a subject putting herself in the place.”<sup>33</sup> In this manner, the act of projection yields valuable information about how certain “subjects and objects are thrown together from the very beginning.”<sup>34</sup> This critical inference has deep resonances for this sculpture because, as hinted by the title, hovering around the broom is a *she*. We are told, specifically: ‘She's so tired.’

Looking at the straw broom and thinking about this (phantom) *she*, I found myself considering how the use of the broom is negotiated as it circulates among people, things and environments. Often a broom is used to clean. As a form of

<sup>31</sup> Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2019), 54.

<sup>32</sup> Amin, Musser and Pérez, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Ahmed, *What's The Use?*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> Ahmed, *What's The Use?*, 54.

continual activity, cleaning “encompasses tasks, occupations and roles”<sup>35</sup> that are implicated in reproducing life. Scholars such as Sheila L. Cavanaugh<sup>36</sup> has shown that cleaning helps stabilize the hygienic superego<sup>37</sup> by materialising prohibitions against dust and dirt. Dwelling on the rough straw edges of the broom, I am almost forced to confront the debilitation implicit in cleaning. Cleaning is often fatigue-inducing and places considerable strain on the cleaners’ body through gestures of repeated bending and moving and meticulous attention to detail. Alongside it being physically and cognitively draining, cleaning by design involves (over-)exposure to dirt and microbial contamination and/or repeated contact with toxic cleaning materials on a regular basis. Many cleaning products and supplies such as chlorine bleach, aerosol products, and detergent release volatile organic compounds and other dangerous chemicals that vaporize at room temperature.<sup>38</sup> Breathing in such harmful compounds contributes to respiratory problems, itchy eyes, nausea, headaches, and allergies. In evoking the sense memory of a broom, *She’s So Tired* (2019) prompts us to acknowledge how the routine wearing down of cleaners’ well-being is endemic to the imaginary of an ordinary life-sustaining, clean and hygienic space where bodies can “work, rest, eat, exercise.”<sup>39</sup> Considered in this manner, the very attachment to a clean world for all is made possible by unevenly delegating the pressures of its reproduction to a few.

Under the neoliberal configuration of the labour force, cleaning and interrelated forms of domestic, care, and affective work are both necessary and rendered invisible in evaluative terms. Deemed “disgusting and degrading work,”<sup>40</sup> cleaning is commodified and structured by relations of gender, race, class, sexuality, and migration, with the “poor, women and people of colour”<sup>41</sup> disproportionately performing this type of labour. In the context of the United States, cleaning is often relegated to lower-status work, subject to precarious conditions, monitoring and scheduling pressures. Because of the demands of their work, the cleaners’ bodies are metonymically associated with “abject body fluids”<sup>42</sup> and other substances coded as unclean and dirty. Such associations deepen the dehumanisation and devaluation of these bodies, jettisoning them from the social imaginary of entitlement.

<sup>35</sup> Käthe von Bose, “Cleanliness, Affect and Social Order.” *Gender, Work and Migration*, March 20, 2018, 46. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315225210-4>.

<sup>36</sup> Sheila L. Cavanaugh, *Queering Bathrooms: Gender, Sexuality, and the Hygienic Imagination* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> In her work on *Queering Bathrooms*, Sheila Cavanaugh, adapts Nadir Lahiji and D. S. Friedman’s formulation of the term “hygienic superego.” In her work, hygienic superego connotes the wider processes such as linguistic processes, and architectural segregation through which we internalize “prohibitions on dirt and disorder to consolidate a clean and proper body” (Leheji and Friedman in Cavanaugh, *Queering Bathrooms*, 136).

<sup>38</sup> American Lung Association, “Volatile Organic Compounds,” n.d., <https://www.lung.org/clean-air/indoor-air/indoor-air-pollutants/volatile-organic-compounds>.

<sup>39</sup> Verges, “Capitalocene,” n.p.

<sup>40</sup> Käthe von Bose, “Cleanliness, Affect and Social Order,” 46.

<sup>41</sup> Käthe von Bose, “Cleanliness, Affect and Social Order,” 46.

<sup>42</sup> Cavanaugh, *Queering Bathrooms*, 136.

As Nancy Fraser shows in her work on crisis and care (2017), US social insurance and its entitlements often “exclude domestic and agricultural workers,”<sup>43</sup> thereby disproportionately affecting African Americans, immigrant communities, and people of colour, who mostly occupy these roles. This disproportionate allocation of social protection along racialised, classed and gendered lines continued during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite being deemed the great equalizer, responses to the catastrophe continued to reproduce inequalities based on race and citizenship. As Zophia Edwards (2021) reports in her work on racial capitalism and COVID-19:

The U.S. Coronavirus Aid Relief, and Economic Security Act of March 2020 offered a one-time \$1,200 payout to people living below a certain income threshold... The Act also excluded undocumented workers in all industries, including food production. It did so through a range of measures, such as by excluding workers who use taxpayer identification numbers to file taxes, as undocumented workers typically do, thus excluding whole families, even if children or spouses are U.S. citizens or permanent residents if taxes were filed jointly.<sup>44</sup>

Black people, Latinx populations, Indigenous people, migrant labourers (documented and undocumented) and other people racialised as non-white are hypervisible in the service economy. Their physical and mental exertion is “required for and constitutive of”<sup>45</sup> transportation services, health care support, food production maintenance, grounds cleaning and maintenance, and personal care services. Deemed populations providing essential services, they were mobilised not only to sustain the provision of food, health and sanitation services, but also to ensure the continuation of profit-building activities at a time when governments across the world, but especially in the United States, were issuing stay-at-home orders. As a result of state-mandated responses and profit-accumulation activities, these bodies were disproportionately exposed to disease and death from the virus and experienced increased economic precarity in the form of layoffs and reduction in wages. Thus, despite being hypervisible—in that their participation has received extraordinary attention and was deemed necessary—they are made “hyper-invisible.”<sup>46</sup> Treated as expendable bodies, “their needs, desires and lives”<sup>47</sup> are grossly disregarded in the service of such operations. Thinking with *She’s So Tired* (2019) invites us to recognise how the exhaustion of the cleaner arises not only from bodily exertion but is procedurally produced through disproportionate exposure to the world.

<sup>43</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism,” in *Mapping Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, edited by Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 31.

<sup>44</sup> Zophia Edwards, “Racial Capitalism and Covid-19,” *Monthly Review* (March 11, 2021): 8. [https://doi.org/10.14452/mr-072-10-2021-03\\_2](https://doi.org/10.14452/mr-072-10-2021-03_2).

<sup>45</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2017), 81.

<sup>46</sup> Jeannine Gailey, “Undesirably Different Hyper(in)Visibility and the Gendered Fat Body,” in *The Contemporary Reader of Gender and Fat Studies*, ed. Amy Erdnam Farrell (London, New York: Routledge, 2023), 19-29.

<sup>47</sup> Verges, “Capitalocene.”

Let me now return to the fine and wavy wooden grain of the rod of the straw broom. Homing in on the versatility of wood, De Lara reflects at length in his recent interview with Beach, on the role of woodworking in his artistic practice. As he puts it, through this craft he hopes to “preserve, honour and propel forward generational knowledge of wood in Mexican and American culture.”<sup>48</sup> Returning to the straw broom in light of this comment makes me think that the pinewood’s grain that materially records the age of the wood used might signify more than the passage of time. Its fine, wavy and knotted texture could also evoke impressions of a body habituating to the demands of his occupation and place in an ever-changing world. As Bissell argues vis-à-vis Lauren Berlant’s suggestions in *Cruel Optimism*, such spatiotemporal shifts require the subject to reckon with episodic loss of “consciousness, intentionality, and effective will,”<sup>49</sup> altering their capacity to affect and be affected by the world. Thus the warped wooden rod of *She’s So Tired* is remnant of the accretive strain and disorientation that a body experiences when adjusting to fluctuations and instability in their environments.

### III

Closing the installation view of the gallery, my eyes now linger on the curious title that identifies the sculpture in the exhibition. I slowly read it several times: “She’s So Tired.” By uttering these words *aloud*, I can hear the effect of the third-person address in the title. Unlike first-or second-person narration, third-person narration creates a degree of distance between the story and the narrator. I wondered: *Who might be the narrator of such an observation? Was it De Lara? Is the title a passing observation by someone I will never meet? Moreover, why is she “so tired”?* Retracing the compact phrasing of the title, I considered how utterances about tiredness and exhaustion play out for people in the service economy. It might be inferred that the artist by using this phrase as a title, attunes us to the occlusion inherent in such an utterance. In his monograph *Tolerance Is A Wasteland* (2022), Saree Makdisi theorises occlusion as a rhetorical gesture that stages “an act of affirmation as denial.”<sup>50</sup> Such speech, often used to consolidate biopolitics of dispossession, proceeds not only by obscuring referents to what is being excluded from such imaginaries, but also effaces the very trace of such denial by using hyperbolic speech. In this case, the very act of affirming tiredness with the intensifier “so” becomes a way of not addressing the quotidian and debilitating plight of the immigrant cleaners’ exhaustion. As Alia Al Saji reminds us, public health policies in promoting and operationalising selective provisions of care, protection, and therapeutics, materially and discursively reproduce the categorial

<sup>48</sup> Beach, “Whimsical Sculptures,” n.p.

<sup>49</sup> Bissell, “Liminal Geographies of Exhaustion,” 133.

<sup>50</sup> Saree Makdisi, *Tolerance Is a Wasteland: Palestine and the Culture of Denial* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2022), 6.

wearing down of racialized bodies as “socially tolerable.”<sup>51</sup>

Another layer of interpretation emerges if we recontextualise the use of “so” in the title in relation to the warped straw broom and the absence of the labourer. As an adverb, when we invoke “so” in a phrase or sentence, it qualifies an excess of an action and/or experience. In indexing this excess, “so” circumscribes the force of an experience that cannot be adequately quantified. It occurs to me that perhaps De Lara’s gesture of textually circumscribing a phantom (she) and visually displaying a bent wooden straw broom reclaims a certain degree of opacity for this portrait of immigrant labour. In the realm of media studies, the use of opacity as aesthetic strategy, following Edouard Glissant’s seminal work on the right to opacity,<sup>52</sup> challenges interpretive engagements that clamour for transparency by interrupting the conceptual translation of signs into knowledge. Keeping this insight in mind, we might posit that by rearranging well-known signifiers of exhaustion and labour, the sculpture prompts the reader/viewer to recognise that they will never fully grasp the extent of the cleaners’ exhaustion and the ongoing rhythms of uncertainty and habituation that characterises her lived experience as an immigrant. In light of bureaucratic regimes whose processes of epistemic valuation often translate the migrant subject into objective data for the purposes of knowledge extraction and governance, the opacity of *She’s So Tired* (2019) prompts us to grapple with the unintelligible aspects of our embodied experience in space.

## CONCLUSION

Through my discussion in this article, I have tried to demonstrate the way that *She’s So Tired* (2019) materially and psychically invites us to read bodily and cognitive attrition in relation to dispersed forms of systemic incoherence and violence. In dramatizing how the life-extinguishing expropriation of cleaners’ well-being is hyper-invisibilized in the contemporary world, the sculpture invites us to (re)consider the wide network of places, fantasies and people that make life possible for all. My project’s sustained engagement with the aesthetic strategies of the sculpture, also demonstrates the potency of implicating artworks as critical interlocutors in debates of exhaustion. As scholars such as Michael Greeney (2017)<sup>53</sup> have argued, art and literature materialise the “fears, desires, fantasies”<sup>54</sup> that have been implicated in perceiving, imagining, and interpreting exhaustion over time. Moreover, cultural productions through their embedded processes of signification and mediation often

<sup>51</sup> Alia Al-Saji, “A Debilitating Colonial Duration: Reconfiguring Fanon,” *Research in Phenomenology* 53 (3): 281, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691640-12341529>.

<sup>52</sup> Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity” in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Michigan University Press 1997).

<sup>53</sup> Michael Greaney, “Literary Exhaustion” in *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on a Modern Affliction*, edited by Sighard Neckel, Anna Katharina Schaffner and Greta Wagner (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 237-58.

<sup>54</sup> Greaney, “Literary Exhaustion,” 238.

defamiliarise the terms through which the exhausted are differentiated and “get to speak of their plight.”<sup>55</sup> If seminal accounts of fatigue and embodiment<sup>56</sup> give primacy to the physicality of the factory floor when theorising exhaustion, *She’s So Tired* (2019) offers the story of an exhausted body-in-transit and provokes us to explore what alternative historical and contemporary lineages of exhaustion might be conceived vis-à-vis mobile bodies and their ongoing adjustments to spatiotemporal shifts in the world. □

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<sup>55</sup> Greaney, “Literary Exhaustion,” 254.

<sup>56</sup> Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

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