Aliens and Insecticide: Ecoambiguity in Two Stories from Dilman Dila's *A Killing in the Sun*

Nedine Moonsamy

ABSTRACT

Looking at two short stories from Dilman Dila's critically acclaimed short story collection, *A Killing in the Sun* (2014), I explore the controversial use of DDT in rural Uganda as a site of ecoambiguity. My close reading of "The Leafy Man" and "The Yellow People" illumines various paradoxes around the consumption of internationally sponsored insecticide and its subsequent cost to local society. These paradoxes contradict the Manichean thinking of earlier forms of postcolonial nationalism and self-determined nativist thought. I argue that by identifying ecoambiguity as a more appropriate tenor for insecticide usage in Uganda, Dila's short stories grapple with the realities of the neoliberal African state that must remain open to ambiguity and reconfigurations of the human, as it attempts to come to terms with, and potentially alleviate, local ecodegradation in a global economy.

KEYWORDS

Dilman Dila, *A Killing in the Sun*, African speculative fiction, African science fiction, African ecocriticism

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> Endosymbiosis. In this case it involved combining a living creature and a dead one. It was not easy. We kept experimenting until months ago, when I found out how to do it perfectly and easily with insecticide.
>
> Dila, "The Yellow People" (150)

Dilman Dila's short story collection, *A Killing in the Sun* (2014), has been acclaimed for its imaginative and poetic rendition of African futures where otherworldly technology blends in innovative ways with contemporary customs, cultures and concerns. In performing spatio-temporal experiments of this kind, speculative fiction and science fiction offer reflections of the impact of the past and the present on potential futures. These stories thus serve as ideological 'sounding boards' that prove their sociopolitical value by critiquing the trajectories of our contemporary actions and creating urgency around ensuring change that may lead to more progressive futures. As a case in point, Dila's narrative preoccupation with insecticide proves germane to ecocritical and public health debates on the continent, given that the Ugandan Ministry of Health states that Uganda "ranks sixth among African countries with high malaria-related mortality rates" (Ministry of Health). Both "The Leafy Man" and "The Yellow People" highlight the overwhelming presence of and reliance on internationally sponsored insecticide, while also marking its subsequent cost for local society. Yet Dila's representation of the controversial use of DDT in rural Uganda limns paradoxes that are neither didactic nor prescriptive.

Instead, these short stories cleave open sites of "ecoambiguity" that bear witness to "the complex, contradictory interactions between people and environments" (Thornber 1). In the stories, internationally sponsored insecticide is not experienced as antagonistic or as an open source of conflict for Ugandans, but instead produces an endosymbiotic environment where there appears to be a tacit modus vivendi between Africans – with varying degrees and forms of complicity – and the Western world. Ecoambiguity thus belies the Manichean ideals of earlier ambitions of the postcolony, as there is much less consensus about what it means to protect the sovereignty of the African nation state or about postcolonial expectations of the human in the global economy. In this manner, these narratives provide a sobering reflection of the neoliberal African state that must acknowledge ambiguity and complicity when grappling with issues of local ecodegradation in a global context.

Coined by Karen Thornber, the term ecoambiguity suggests that current ecocriticism can benefit from analyses of how ecodegradation often results from ambiguous action that

> manifests itself in multiple, intertwined ways, including ambivalent attitudes toward nature; confusion about the actual condition of the nonhuman, often the consequence of ambiguous information; contradictory human behaviors towards ecosystems; and discrepancies among attitudes, conditions, and behaviors that lead to actively downplaying and acquiescing to nonhuman degradation, as well as to inadvertently harming the very environments one is attempting to protect.
>
> (6)

Conflicting information, agendas and attitudes invariably inform actions that may or may not be taken in the face of environmental crises. Ecoambiguity is thus an ethos of taking fuller account of the convoluted ways in which communities interact with the environment and of the various levels and forms of influence that produce and sustain a particular environment. And, for Thornber, it is "literature's intrinsic multivalence" that most keenly highlights "the ambiguity that has long suffused interactions between people and environments" (6). Rather than representing "more obvious discrepancies between the attitudes of those who are responsible for major damage to environments and the outlooks of those who directly suffer from and protest this destruction" (Thornber 104), literary texts reveal a much wider series of agents and players who interact in significantly more complex ways. Ecoambiguity thus needles at our identification of benefactors and victims in environmental crises and induces paradigmatic adjustments that can allow for more effective and hopeful outcomes.

Uncovering what can be described as a point of ecoambiguity in literary and academic circles, critics have noted that ecocritical responses to African literature are few, primarily because of a postcolonial "emphasis on liberation and decolonisation" that relegated "environmental concerns to the background of African literary criticism" (Iheka 3). In addition, Cajetan N. Iheka argues that further hesitancy unfortunately stems from "the green movement being considered another imperial design" (3). Many theorists have since challenged these ideas by arguing that African ecocriticism does not assume the same contours as Western ecocritical theory. According to Chengyi Coral Wu,

> an Africa-focused ecocriticism can remind Anglo-American ecocriticism that environments are historically and culturally situated, and that African environmentalism revealed in an African literary text does not necessarily emphasise the global environmental crisis or propose top to bottom conservationism.
>
> (162)

Definitions of the 'natural environment' in Western ecocriticism often reproduce unfortunate colonial tropes, making it necessary to explore the African landscape as a discursive field whose constitution must be subjected to sociopolitical scrutiny. In assuming this challenge, Africa becomes "an important site to explore environmental degradation given its treatment as savage and brutish in the colonial imaginary and as a waste dump site in the current neoliberal order" (Iheka 8). Due to an historical failure to conceive of Africa as a human and nonhuman habitat, African ecocriticism tends to offer portraits of how overwhelming global forces produce – rather than solve – environmental crises in Africa.

Reflective of this ethos, Dila's novel highlights how multinational interference finds easy interpretation as a neo-colonial venture that continues to encroach upon the Ugandan environment. But Dila goes on to emphasise Ugandan complicity in this courting of disaster. The battleground is thus murkier than the mere identification of exogenous forces that impinge upon the local environment. Even as each story "foregrounds the question of freedom, it does so no longer in order to orient us toward a future measured against the promise of freedom but, instead, to direct us to (and desperately against) a future marked by the threat of extinction" (Baucom 140). Representations of eco-apocalypse, where *all* of humanity perishes because of our collective actions, stress the need to move beyond the political into more ecoambiguous terrain.

According to Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ian Baucom, we have reached a critical point where the "idea of the human needs to be stretched beyond where postcolonial thought advanced it" (Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies" 15). Ecodegradation, they argue, belongs to man as a species and in some senses supersedes the history of our capitalistic society, and all its attendant histories, because it will continue long after their demise. Yet, they question, where does that leave the historicism of the postcolony, where liberation and anti-colonial discourse still proves necessary in and against a global economy? How do we approach the dual operation of pursuing sociopolitical and economic reform in Africa while prioritising the integrity of man as a species? As I illustrate, ecoambiguity presented in Dila's stories goes some way toward pointing out that "justice must be construed in an entirely different mode" (Baucom 140–41) as neither the sovereignty of the postcolonial nation state and its subjects, nor the Western logic of late capitalism will suffice in the end.

In "The Leafy Man," a middle-aged man named Japia has been left to care for an abandoned two-year-old boy after the entire village has been decimated by Miss Doe, a mutant mosquito plague that was

sanctioned for trial in Abedo by the government. As the brainchild of a multinational company called PGCC (Pest and Germ Control Corporation), Miss Doe is a project in which genetically modified malaria-free mosquitoes have been introduced into the village of Abedo in order to replace the local malaria-infested mosquito population. These circumstances, however, are subject to dystopian treatment in Dila's narrative as Miss Doe is far from an effective solution: she begins to reproduce more rapidly than expected and turns into a mutant, bloodsucking army that bleeds her victims dry. When the PGCC eventually intervenes to destroy Miss Doe, the use of insecticide only makes the mosquitoes resistant and causes a further stage of virulent mutation.

Japia has survived because he is a traditional healer and has discovered that orange tree leaves serve as a natural repellent for Miss Doe. He was initially hired as part of a grassroots initiative called the Roll Back Malaria Campaign, in which "the government gave him a bicycle to promote insecticide treated nets, but he added his own agenda to the campaign. He knew of plants that repelled mosquitoes with their smell [and] the campaign was slowly yielding fruits, with the whole village collectively involved in fighting the epidemic" (Dila 4). But "when a company calling itself Pest and Germ Control Corporation came up with a new method"(Dila 4), the government hastily approves a trial run of Miss Doe in Abedo. Japia sees himself as better equipped to deal with the local malaria infestation, making him deeply critical of the Ugandan government for having turned to the PGCC for a solution instead of investing in the development of local infrastructure and indigenous science and technology.

As noted by Stacey Alaimo, commonly found in ecological narratives is the mixing of "authoritative scientific discourse with the observations and vexed ruminations of the non-expert [in order to] dramatise life in a risk society" (Alaimo 107). Assuming the role of advocate for traditional medicine, Japia initially approaches his pursuit with optimism: the "government did not recognise herbalists as proper doctors and scientists but Japia was on a mission to change that" (Dila 4). Japia's ambition thus delineates an historical failure to restore lost "environmental knowledge that characterised pre-colonial African societies" (Iheka 27). According to Iheka, the colonial era denigrated environmental knowledge produced by "traditional African societies, [which] despite their complexities and differences, seem joined by an attentiveness to the idea of an ethics of the earth. In this mode of seeing, certain nonhuman life forms in the environment including animals, plants, etc. are considered sacred and important" (27). Hence the eco-

apocalypse in "The Leafy Man" that results from ignoring Japia illustrates how the flow of global capital and Western technology sets up a neo-colonial reverberation that denigrates African environmental knowledge still further.

By insinuating that indigenous solutions can in fact save Abedo, the narrative ostensibly conforms to a Manichean pattern that encourages a distinction between exogenous forces that violate the integrity of the village and Japia's indigenous cause. Yet the narrative soon eschews unbridled postcolonial binarism by probing the issue further so as to reveal how attitudes and values regarding ecodegradation are "inconsistent both within and among individuals and groups" (Thornber 104). Equally hindered by his own community's scepticism towards his project, Japia cannot assume the role of the local hero who triumphs over antagonistic Western powers.

Japia is a second-generation shaman who, after developing his gift, "dissociated herbal medicine from spirit worship" (Dila 4). Moreover, Japia "believed that mixing the two [medicine and spirit worship] hindered the proper research and development of native medical science" (Dila 4), disclosing an astute awareness of the terms that govern our understanding of African and Western science. Japia seeks not only a reassertion of traditional methodology in the community, but also a fundamental ideological shift from the superstition of magic to the respectability and veracity of hard science. This decision, however, occurs much "to the dismay of the community": "when they saw him performing greater miracles outside the shrine, they accepted him as a medic only" (Dila 4). Contrary to Japia's aspirations for traditional medicine to gain credibility in the rationalist framework of Western science, the community appears perturbed by the abuse of his talent and demotes him accordingly. This social critique is not without significance as it undermines Japia's desire for scientific validation and heroism.

According to Harry Garuba, the need to assert the value of indigenous knowledge over and against the global influences of science and technology is informed by a flawed reading of Western modernity as a unidirectional force that squeezes out, contests and eventually annihilates local cultures in Africa. Instead, he suggests that it is possible for animism – which he reads as central to the African imaginary – to reconfigure modernity on African as opposed to Eurocentric terms, where

> 'magical elements of thought' are not displaced but, on the contrary, continually assimilate new developments in science, technology, and the organisation of the world within a

> basically 'magical' worldview. Rather than 'disenchantment,' a persistent re-enchantment thus occurs, and the rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical.
>
> (Garuba 267)

As part of a subconscious collective culture, Garuba argues, animism animates matter and objects with spiritual and psychological properties; it colours the world with a non-empirical sense of time, place and being. Yet this enchanted mode of thinking has ostensibly ebbed since the arrival of Western modernity, because the rational discourse of science and technology are perceived to be in direct conflict to animistic belief systems.

Somewhat refreshingly, Garuba insists that tradition does not survive *despite* technology, but rather that animism enfolds technology into culture. The exerting force for ideological and sociopolitical mutation is thus animistic enchantment and *not* empiricism. Animism imbues technology and science with the otherworldly and allows for its incorporation into African societies. And the significance of thinking in these terms, he argues, lies in noting how animist logic "destabilises the hierarchy of science over magic and the secularist narrative of modernity by reabsorbing historical time into the matrices of myth and magic" (Garuba 270).

Herein lies a clearer understanding of the community's resistance to Japia's scientism. While he seeks to distance his practice of environmental knowledge from the underlying social imaginary, the community expects the exact opposite. The role of the traditional healer, they imagine, is precisely that of transposing Western styles of medical science into a cultural register where they gain the greatest level of intelligibility and visibility. But Japia isolates himself from the rest of his community by hankering after Western scientific discourse and its elusive rewards. Unable to see how African modernity has assumed a different form altogether, his hubris is to lament Africa's failed modernity, and is thus approximated to the PGCC's failure to consider the community's animistic worldview when attempting to cure malaria. By bringing Japia toward a wretched conclusion, "The Leafy Man" illustrates that a desire to place traditional environmental knowledge over and against global forces is ill-informed, governed by the reactive logic of threat and defensiveness.

This point is made clearer still after Japia remembers:

> when he was a little boy, his father had campaigned against birth control pills. 'It makes our women barren,' his father

> had said. 'It's a trick of the white man to wipe out the black man.' Japia had dismissed his father's argument as ridiculous, but with Miss Doe blanketing the sky, he could again hear the old man's warning, and he used all the strength left in his body to run.
>
> (Dila 11)

As a child, Japia is able to dismiss his father's claims that issuing birth control to local women is genocidal, highlighting how traditional responses to Western medicine are sometimes hysterical in nature and vulnerable to misogynistic apprehension about the reproductive rights of women. That Japia revisits his father's fears in the face of Miss Doe, paradoxically serves as a constructive illustration of how Western science and technology *are*, in fact, culpable in the production of biotechnological racism. This moment in the text is interesting: as readers we cannot decide between denigration and affirmation of the protagonist's fears, as they are portrayed as mutually inclusive. The ambiguity attaching to Japia's hysteria is significant in that it foregrounds the paradoxes of what Jean and John Comaroff describe as the "impassioned rhetoric of autochthony" (631). According to Comaroff and Comaroff, it is not uncommon for the postcolonial narrative to adopt a rhetorical style in response to threat because

> much of the debate over the 'crisis' of the nation-state hinges upon the contention that governments can no longer control the flow of currencies and commercial instruments, of labour and commodities, of flora and fauna, of information, illegal substances, and unwanted aliens. It is true, of course, that international frontiers have always been more-or-less porous. But technologies of space-time compression do appear to have effected a sea-change in patterns and rates of global flow, human and virtual. Which is why so many states, most maybe, act as if they were constantly subject both to invasion from the outside and to the seeping away of what should properly remain within.
>
> (635)

Writing in the African context, the Comaroffs outline how globalisation complicates the desire for an essentialist national identity. For while engaging in global and intra-African exchange is a contemporary necessity, the fear of being overwhelmed by exogenous forces often results in a reversion to discourses of autochthony. Yet in order to construct the autochthonous, one must establish "alienness [as] the

negative counterpoint" (Comaroff and Comaroff 631). A common strategy for doing so involves deploying "nature as alibi, as a fertile allegory for making people and objects strange, thus to forge critical new social and political distinctions" (Comaroff and Comaroff 628). Looking at South African mainstream media, they examine how the fear of alien plant species formed part of the nationalistic rhetoric when the concern over the influx of African immigrants peaked, eventually resulting in largescale xenophobic attacks. Environmental discourse can thus become a rhetorical battlefield separating the indigenous from the alien and inspiring a need to protect the 'natural world' from that which threatens its existence.

In "The Leafy Man," Dila utilises the idea of the alien accordingly. Miss Doe is "unlike her natural predecessor the anopheles, which had a sight limited to about ten feet, Miss Doe had the eyes of an eagle" (Dila 2). She is an ominous and invasive predator that "had overcome her fear of the chemical repellent" (Dila 13) and grows stronger as a result. This conceit of alienness extends to her creators, the PGCC, who "wore protective white clothing that covered every inch of their bodies. Each had a small tank on the back, and a spray muzzle in one hand" (Dila 10). Just like Miss Doe, they are monstrous creatures who cause Japia to flee on sight. Moreover, the narrator states that the PGCC's "plan was to out-populate and replace the natural mosquitoes with the disease free bugs" (Dila 4–5). A superior, genetically modified and environmentally friendly bug has arrived to replace the lacklustre, diseased, indigenous mosquito population. From a rational perspective, the obliteration of malaria would be a welcome reprieve. Consider, however, Japia's dismay when "he heard Miss Doe stirring, the irritating buzz that in the past had given him sleepless nights and at worst a bout of malaria, but now amplified a billion times, humming a song from hell" (Dila 11). For Japia, the malaria-infested world now seems preferable to this one, where indigenous mosquitoes have been completely displaced by more ferocious foreign bugs. Arguably, Japia's ambiguous sympathy for the displaced indigenous mosquitoes delineates the loss of African sovereignty due to the lack of resources required to remain competitive in a neoliberal global market. Pathos thus limns the ideological erosion of "the energy, dynamism, and optimism of the decolonising and immediate post-independence era" (Lazarus 4) in Africa, as self-determined nation-building now seems a whimsical ideal. In the postcolony, globalisation has given rise to crippling foreign debt and an ever-widening gap between the political elite and citizens, who are suffering new levels of vulnerability and displacement. Hence, when the PGCC team leave in their helicopter in pursuit of Japia, Miss Doe gets

into the helicopter and it blows up, claiming the lives of all of its occupants, yet this symbolic obliteration proves only momentarily cathartic.

Prior to this event, Japia invents a shield made of orange tree leaves and rides his bicycle to an abandoned store where he discovers a radio transmitter. Switching across channels in the hope of getting rescued he identifies certain voices as "wazungu" or white people (Dila 9) and, feeling pleased that someone will come to their aid, he establishes contact. Once he realises that they are from the PGCC, however, he starts to flee, though ironically they *have* come to rescue him. Japia is aware of his ambivalence as he struggles to discern a foe from a friend: "they probably meant him no harm, they might have come to rescue him, but he could not trust them" (Dila 11). Deciding that they cannot provide any assistance to him or the starving toddler, he retreats to the orange grove and contents himself with obscurity. Yet, as we learn, the rescue effort was sincere because the PGCC have recognised that "the leafy man is the key" (Dila 15). They were intent on tracking Japia down precisely because they acknowledge his ability to develop a cure on the basis of his miraculously having survived the infestation. Discomfortingly, the narrative ends with the intimation that had Japia been more open to engaging with 'alien' powers, he could have ended the plague by developing his cure with Western scientists. However, he remains resolute in keeping his knowledge from them.

At the end of the narrative Japia's acute marginalisation becomes a stark portrait of how African

> nation-states find themselves in a double bind. In order to partake of that economy, to garner the value that it spins off, governments require at once to open up their frontiers and to secure them: on one hand, to deregulate as far as possible the movement of currencies, goods, people and services, thus to facilitate the inflow of wealth; on the other, to regulate them by establishing enclaved zones of competitive advantage so as to attract transnational manufacture and media, investment, information technology.
>
> (Comaroff and Comaroff 636)

Comaroff and Comaroff argue that in facing the realities of a neoliberal capitalist economy, the postcolony is caught in a quandary in terms of which participation and non-participation in a global world order can prove equally detrimental. In rejecting the sheer ecoambiguity of his circumstances, Japia cannot explore the possibility that the PGCC can serve as both enemy *and* 'saviour' in relation to the plague. Japia's

circumstances are imperfect but real; he lacks the resources to develop his own cure, and, having let the PGCC into Abedo initially, the local government seems apathetic and dismissive of his labour. Consequently, Japia is tasked with saving the entire village on his own – not an impossible scenario but a seemingly improbable one – or building opportunistic allegiances with the enemy that may lead to further exploitation, but also the complete eradication of malaria. Hence the conclusion goes some way towards illustrating that "radical Third-Worldist critiques that tend to see development as little more than a disguised neo-colonialism, a vast technocratic apparatus designed primarily to serve the economic and political interests of the West" (Huggan and Tiffin 27) can become unsustainable when they fail to consider the ecoambiguity of a particular context, where the risk of exploitation coexists with cure.

This conundrum resonates with the central thrust of Chakrabarty's and Baucom's arguments that the age of the Anthropocene requires a different historical consciousness altogether. Global environmental crises, they opine, have enforced a collapse of the distinction between natural and human history since man has now assumed the role of a geological agent that affects the environment in detrimental ways. And, while neither dispute the role of the developed world in reaching this point, "the whole crisis cannot be reduced to a story of capitalism" (Chakrabarty, "Climate of History" 221) because

> whatever our socioeconomic and technological choices, whatever the rights we wish to celebrate as our freedom, we cannot afford to destabilise conditions (such as the temperature zone in which the planet exists) that work like boundary parameters of human existence. These parameters are independent of capitalism or socialism.
>
> ("Climate of History" 218)

Seeing how close we are to eco-apocalypse, questions of survival place a different emphasis on our historical modalities by reframing notions of freedom and justice. Arguably, 'anthropological difference' fades against the gargantuan backdrop of the geographical, environmental and biological facts of existence. Yet what then is the nature of freedom, and what form does the idea of the human assume in the postcolony when species survival is at stake?

"The Leafy Man" directs our attention to this crucial question as Japia, holder of the ultimate cure to malaria, chooses political hermeticism. The speculative cost of his decision is borne by his fellow citizens and the world at large. Isolated in his orange grove, bound by

proprietorship – as much as he rails against it, capitalistic logic seems inescapable – he assumes the role of a geological force that makes the prospect of human extinction a tangible reality. Arguably, his predicament – and certainly ours as readers, in the context of what constitutes good action, longevity and human wellbeing – is indicative of "the necessity of thinking disjunctively about the human, through moves that in their simultaneity appear contradictory" (Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies" 2). Thinking beyond the postcolonial conception of the human while still asserting the postcolonial subject's right to sovereignty presents us with an impossible conundrum, since states of dehumanisation can easily arise from asserting one form of the human over the other. Unsurprisingly, the indecision of this paradox is treated with regret in "The Leafy Man," as Japia is bound by a lonely paralysis. In "The Yellow People," however, Dila approaches this ecoambiguous terrain with satirical candour and macabre humour. In this story, insecticide is used to create a zombified Ugandan population and, as the living-dead, they again force us to think seriously about the paradoxical status of the postcolonial human.

In "The Yellow People," a white American named Tom Dunningan amasses a multimillion-dollar fortune from his online dating site. He is also a serial killer who has murdered many of his family members, including his parents. Fearing that his trademark signature – cutting off and keeping his victims' thumbs – will soon lead to his arrest, he decides to leave America to settle in Uganda because "he believed he could kill a person a day and no one would notice. If they did, he could easily pay his way out of trouble" (Dila 146). Just like PGCC in "The Leafy Man," Dunningan is patronising towards his choice of location, regarding it as an amenable host for crime and corruption.

Dunningan builds a school in rural Uganda as a philanthropic ruse, and quickly becomes widely respected in the village. One day, however, while visiting the local store he is caught off-guard by the fantastic spectacle of his latest murder victim, now seemingly alive again and wearing a strange yellow suit. Dunningan approaches this manifestation, noting that "his voice was hollow, as though he were speaking from inside a pipe. As he spoke, the wrinkles on his face moved as though worms were crawling under his skin" (Dila 140). The yellow man purchases numerous cans of insecticide and leaves, with Dunningan quietly following. Trying to ascertain the reason for his re-appearance, Dunningan engages the yellow man in conversation, who explains that he has to get the insecticide back to his doctor. They soon arrive in "a cave that looked like a honeycomb […] the old man vanished into one of the cells. Dunningan touched the wall. It was spongy, and warm. It

stained his finger with a yellowish, gooey substance" (Dila 143). Dunningan is astonished by what he sees; many of his victims have been 'resurrected' and wear the same yellow suit as the man. After he demands some answers, the yellow people reassure him that the doctor will visit him that night.

Later, the doctor arrives and tells Dunningan that they are aliens whose ship crashed on his farm many years ago. The doctor explains how over time

> '[…] we discovered that we can inhabit a dead body and live properly in this world. Endosymbiosis. In this case it involved combining a living creature and a dead one. It was not easy. We kept experimenting until months ago, when I found out how to do it perfectly and easily with insecticide.' He smiled again. 'We had to steal money from your safe to buy it. Sorry. Now we can feed and procreate. We'll make this our home until we fix our ship.'
>
> (Dila 150)

After some experimentation, the aliens have realised that they can reanimate the bodies of Dunningan's murder victims with insecticide and use these bodies as hosts, to venture out into the world and find the necessary resources to rebuild their ship. Hence, just as Dunningan identifies Uganda as a good environment for his criminal activity, the aliens choose Ugandan corpses as good hosts for alien life. And, in a masterful twist, the story concludes as follows:

> He had feared that zombies walking about might lead to his discovery, but now he did not know if aliens were a blessing. He could keep killing, and never be found. Missing persons would eventually turn up, but they would not say anything about being killed. Maybe he was actually doing something good by helping these refugees find a new home.
>
> 'Go sleep over it,' the doctor said. 'We can be good allies.'
>
> […] Dunningan smiled.
>
> (Dila 151)

This bewildering conclusion is indicative of the utter "confusion surrounding both human and nonhuman futures in the face of impending and severe environmental damage" (Thornber 204) as – neither dead nor alive – Ugandan citizens assume the status of "zombies" (Dila 151). Because "the production of chemicals in Uganda is still minimal,

constituting less than two percent of the total demand of chemicals […] about 98 percent of chemicals in Uganda are obtained through imports" (Kizito). Consequently, "Uganda's government teamed up with the United States to use chemical insecticide sprays – including DDT – to eliminate [malaria]," despite the fact that DDT had been declared "poisonous and inhumane" and banned in the US in 1972 (Kron). The consequences of the use of this insecticide are devastating, since "eighty-seven percent of Uganda's population live in rural areas and are dependent on agriculture for survival" (Kizito). DDT destroys entire agricultural villages by severely affecting crops, general livelihood and the economy. In addition, because "pesticides are potentially toxic to other organisms, including humans" (Kizito), DDT has been linked to numerous infant deaths and the low life expectancy of farmers and workers who are constantly exposed to toxins. The impasse, however, lies in the fact that although DDT has proven dangerous, "malaria kills 2000 children a day" (Kizito) in Africa, turning the poison into an unavoidable evil that sustains life while destroying it. The conditions of insecticide in Africa are aporetic; toxins *must* be introduced into the environment in order for this fragile balance to be maintained. Unlike other ecological disasters, the use of insecticide enhances *and* destroys the quality of life simultaneously, meaning that a working ecosystem has been set in place. Hence in "The Yellow People," the external parties with a vested interest in Uganda – Dunningan, the insecticide producers and the aliens – all turn out to be easy allies in the game of state parasitism. The fear of "popularly perceived porousness and impotence in the face of exogenous forces" (Comaroff and Comaroff 635) has been realised to the extent that there is an eerie sense of calm, as external powers – both Western and alien – collude in Dila's story to produce zombified Ugandan citizens.

The zombie, although tracing its origins to Haitian voodoo culture, is in fact "a white fantasy figure" (McReynolds 151) invented to quell the anxieties of the early twentieth-century white American psyche regarding the emancipated and self-governed Haitian population. Hence, contrary to what one might assume, the zombie is a placatory figure – a wish fulfilment of "a docile (black) labor force that would never revolt, never demanded better working conditions, were insensitive to pain, and that could work day and night devoted entirely to carrying out the wishes of the zombie master" (McReynolds 151). By conforming to the eternal master-slave relationship, the zombie distils fears around race and revolution and keeps the logic of imperialistic capitalism alive as the end of history. Unlike the modern zombie, who possesses cannibalistic ferocity, the early voodoo zombie drones on mindlessly, possessing no

desire to reconfigure power, labour and race relations: the plantation worker, par excellence.

Following this more classical configuration of the voodoo zombie, the yellow people are a horrific and "mythic expression of racialized bare life striving" without aim or end (McReynolds 162). The narrative thus satirises the mindless accommodation of aliens and insecticide, to the extent that Ugandans find themselves displaced within their own bodies – both biological and nationalistic. The system of racial and economic exploitation has been so successfully entrenched that Dunningan himself is amazed at how none of their actions give rise to environmental disruption or social revolution in Uganda. Hence, an optimal state of endosymbiosis has been realised as the will of the zombie masters inheres in that of the Ugandans. The eeriness of this saprogenic ecosystem effectively comments on how internationally produced insecticide sustains existence, but not a fully human one, only the bare animation of the zombie.

Yet while zombies as a cultural trope express increasing "anxieties about loss of agency and autonomy" (McReynolds 163) in a global economy, they also point to Ugandan passivity in failing to assert their full humanity. Apathy and acquiescence are revealed through "characters who simply look the other way when confronted with damaged ecosystems. These individuals often do so because they hunger for immediate profit and desire instant gratification" (Thornber 29). For example, the shopkeeper who sells the insecticide to the aliens knows that something untoward is happening but says, "I don't understand either, but it's good business for me. I don't ask questions" (Dila 139). Locals are not exonerated from their own zombification, as Dila once again illustrates how a wide range of internal and external forces has made Uganda susceptible to this troubling state of endosymbiosis. They have created an ecosystem where the demand for and consumption of insecticide is necessary for biological sustenance, but detrimental to human wellbeing. The dehumanised figuration of the zombie thus literalises the failure of the sovereign postcolonial subject to regain its humanity in the face of environmental disaster.

Hence, just as we saw in "The Leafy Man," "The Yellow People" leaves us with "the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once" (Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies" 1): both stories suggest how the negotiation between man as species and the postcolonial subject appears to result in morbid paralysis. For Thornber, however, literary texts that unpack ecoambiguity should not be approached with despondency, because

"consciousness of ambiguity does not necessarily hamper efforts to repair environments; in fact, it can foster broader cooperation" (12). The strength of the ecoambiguous text lies in its ability to cleave open the circumstances that enable and sustain ecodegradation. In presenting actualities rather than ethical or moral ideals, these texts allow space for complexity and nuance in the context of imagining better futures and modalities of the human that can face ecodegradation.

While "The Leafy Man" illustrates Japia's stringent marking of sovereign borders that may amount to the harmful exclusion of external resources, "The Yellow People" highlights the problems of infestation that arise through the sheer lack of borders. In tandem, these narratives demonstrate how "the border is a double bind because national prosperity appears to demand, but is simultaneously threatened by, *both* openness and closure" (Comaroff and Comaroff 636): "no wonder the *angst*, the constant public debate in so many places, about what ought, or ought not, to be allowed in, what is, or is not, in the collective interest. And for whom" (636). Engaging the anxiety of the 'alien,' they argue, is part of the ongoing public debate that constantly reinscribes the conditions and limits of the neoliberal African state and subject. Due to its aporetic nature, ecoambiguity is best not approached as a problem to be solved. It must be navigated with circuitous and hesitant steps that constantly bear the risk of clumsiness and paralysis, but that must finally succumb to neither. Because inadvertent effects are an inevitable product of ecoambiguity, it is the work of the African neoliberal state, the African writer and the ecocritic to poise themselves among the paradoxes of global participation and humanity while protecting whatever small progress can be made in the constant renegotiation of conflicting, contradictory agendas at home.

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NOTES

1. Abedo-ber is a village in Northern Uganda.

2. Thornber identifies this as a frequently deployed eco-narrative where "governments, corporations, colonizers, or wealthy tourists – frequently are outsiders, relative strangers to the spaces they injure […] are often depicted as technologically sophisticated, seeking profit and pleasure, and harbouring

antagonistic attitudes toward nature, heedless of the damage they inflict. In contrast, the people who suffer from the ecodegradation triggered by outsiders are frequently portrayed as impoverished, undereducated, and less technically adept, but with deep ties to these spaces, many of which are imbued with spiritual significance" (104).

3. In this regard, Dila's narratives are akin to more recent studies on African science fiction that approach cultural syncretism in more complimentary terms and offer what is, currently, a popular mode of interpretation. For example, Nnedi Okorafor's notion of "Organic fantasy" (2009), Ian MacDonald's identification of "jujutech" (2014) and Marlene Barr's exemplification of "anti-science fiction" (2008) all point toward instances where Western technology fuses with African myth, fable and fantasy to produce an animistic mode of storytelling.

4. Autochthony is equally apparent in Ugandan sociopolitical discourse. As a case in point, Uganda was subjected to another agricultural pest in 2017 that the media dubbed the 'armyworm invasion.' The headline of *The State African* reads 'Uganda's scientists now fight alien crop pest' (Abdallah 2017). These pests that appear to be entering the country from the North, Halima Abdallah continues, "have invaded more than half of the country posing a significant threat to food security" (2017). Arguably this rhetoric resonates with the strained Ugandan-Sudanese political relationship.

5. In *Aporias* Derrida argues that Western philosophy has always perceived the aporia as a problem. As he argues, the Greek word *problēma* bears a double meaning: it can take the meaning of a task to be accomplished by seeing the border as something to be crossed, *or* as a border to hide behind in an act of self-protection. In an attempt to try to think more kindly about the aporia, he finds it possible to conceive of it as "an experience of the non-passage […] the very place where it no longer be possible to constitute a problem […] where the project is impossible and where we are exposed, without protection […] in this place of aporia, there is no longer any problem" (Derrida 12). For Derrida, the aporia need not be experienced as a problem, not because solutions have been provided but because the problem can no longer be articulated in the aporia. What Derrida proposes in his text is an acceptance of the aporia by arguing that it should be experienced in itself rather than be seen as a problem to overcome.

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