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“To Err is Human, that is Your Doom and Delight”: Uncovering Nonhuman Agency in the Environmental Literature of the Global South

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Abstract

This dissertation analyses three environmental texts from the Global South, focusing on presentations of environmental decline in the neoliberal era as inherently connected to histories of colonial oppression in the past and the continuation of colonial ideologies and power structures in the present. The textual analyses in this dissertation uncover depictions of nonhuman agency and distributed networks of agency between human and nonhuman actors. The first novel analysed is Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), which exposes the inherent connections between the systemic oppression of the most marginalised characters and the degradation of the natural environment in India as a result of state-sanctioned development projects. Ultimately, the representation of nonhuman nature as an active agent in the tragedies that occur in the novel champion a more interdependent relationship with nonhuman nature. The next is Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019). The discussion of the novel focuses primarily on the assertive and agential presence of the swarm chorus of mosquitoes that guide and provide commentary on the narrative. It examines the destructive effects of Western development discourse and neoliberal globalisation on Zambian ecologies. Finally, the dissertation analyses Rita Indiana's *Tentacle* (2018), showing how the novel's temporally fluid narrative and its investment in the materiality of oceanic interconnection exposes the intrinsic connection between the decimation of Caribbean marine environments in the neoliberal era and anthropogenic climate change to the legacies of colonialism and the perpetuation of these legacies by the capitalist world-system.

Key Words

Postcolonial ecocriticism, distributed agency, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift,* Rita Indiana's *Tentacle*

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Introduction

In the current neoliberal era, we are constantly confronted with the ever-increasing reality that the world is embroiled in crisis. Whether it be the COVID-19 pandemic that brought the world to a halt and exposed the dramatic inequity driven by the capitalist world-system, violent humanitarian crises across the globe, or the increasing severity of ecological and human disasters as a result of climate change, it is becoming increasingly apparent that humans have become a destructive force that is driving the planet towards a threat of collective extinction. Although technological advancement in the era of globalisation has allowed those of us with access to modern technologies to have all the bad news we could possibly bear at our fingertips, the incessant stimulation we receive from the various communication platforms at our disposal makes these environmental catastrophes increasingly banal to those who are not directly affected by them. It seems impossible to think that in our world of unceasing connection, we are largely unable to view the current ecological crises of our era as intimately bound to the violent histories of our past and the continuation of those legacies under the guise of profit and progress. This is particularly relevant in the Global South, as the continued marginalisation of communities that have historically been othered and deemed expendable by the world's capitalist elite is indelibly linked to the degradation of nonhuman nature. If we are to usher in a more life-sustaining future, we need to re-entangle connections that have historically been negated by the world's dominant power systems that are driven by self-interest; we need to rethink what it means to be human, we need to reconfigure our relationship to our fellow planetary inhabitants (both human and nonhuman), and we need to reconsider our anthropocentric conceptions of justice.

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In addressing such concerns, it is valuable to turn to postcolonial literature that is either overtly or even implicitly environmentally focused, as such texts might offer a way of looking at the human and the natural environment that reconnects the severed links between them, and might offer counter-hegemonic avenues for repairing our damaged world. What often emerges from environmental literature of the Global South is a view of nonhuman nature that acknowledges its agential capacity to guide and influence human action, and that the violence perpetrated against the Earth in the name of development and the accumulation of capital is part and parcel of the exploitative colonising practices of the West and the perpetuation of its racist ideologies in the current neoliberal era. The three texts under discussion in this dissertation engage with various forms of ecodegradation and nonhuman agency in relation to the continued othering of the previously colonised in three separate regions of the Global South – namely India, Zambia and the Caribbean, more specifically the Dominican Republic. Even though all three texts are distinct in terms of their geographies, their critiques of environmental decline and the concomitant marginalisation of human others reveal an interconnected undercurrent of concern that extends beyond the borders of the nation-state and pervades the Global South as a whole. Hence, without universalising, I convey the overarching similarities that emerge from these texts in order to elucidate the dominant patterns of thought and action that sanction both the violence affected against the previously colonised and the Earth.

Although it is easily assumed that postcolonial theory encompasses an anthropocentric approach to critiquing colonial oppression and its lingering effects on the previously colonised, Graham Huggan (2004:702) argues that the emergence of postcolonial ecocriticism proves that "postcolonial criticism has effectively renewed, rather than belatedly discovered, its commitment to the environment" (Huggan,

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2004:702). The assumption that postcolonial studies does not take into account the impact of colonialism and neo-colonial practices on the natural environment "overlooks a long history of ecological concern in postcolonial criticism" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:3), and further perpetuates the view that human and non-human history are mutually exclusive. Similarly, failing to see or denying that "colonial and environmental histories [are] mutually constitutive misses the central role the exploitation of natural resources plays in any imperial project" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:10). Thus, in the convergence of postcolonial and ecocritical studies, it becomes evident that there is an "insistence on the inseparability of current crises of ecological mismanagement from historical legacies of imperialistic exploitation and authoritarian abuse" (Huggan, 2004:702).

In order to understand the ways in which colonialism has altered (and is still altering) geography – which includes "resource use, stewardship, and sovereignty" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:24) – it is essential to look through "an ecological frame" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:24). Essentially, "[p]ostcolonial studies has come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically – and persistently – depend" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:6). Colonial settlers brought with them crops and domesticated animals and destroyed indigenous ecosystems by clearing land and implementing western agricultural practices (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:7), which subsequently introduced new diseases, ecological imbalances and the traumatic dispossession of local communities (Said, 1993:225). Subsequently, the indigenous communities were "forced or coopted over time into western views of the environment, thereby rendering cultural and environmental restitution difficult if not impossible to

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achieve" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:6). Conversely, the human, animal and plant specimens taken from the colonies to Europe were never in any significant danger of altering European ecosystems in this way, as they were brought and treated as "isolated exotics" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:7).

European colonial enterprise – the so-called 'civilising mission' – was justified by a "western definition of humanity [that] depended – and still depends – on the presence of the 'not-human': the uncivilised, the animal and animalistic" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:5), which included the supposedly animalistic and primitive indigenous people and their cultural practices. Consequently, any non-European land was viewed as *terra nullius* – savage, unused, and empty. The othering of indigenous people and cultures that inhabited the land before European invasions or colonisation thus extends to the natural environment as well and assumes "a natural prioritisation of humans and human interests over those of other species on earth" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:6) that is still perpetuated in current times. The very basis of colonial ideology thus depends on an inseparability between Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism, which inevitably justifies the views of colonialism that see indigenous cultures as 'primitive' and as being closer to nature. Furthermore, through the "Enlightenment dualisms of culture/nature, white/black, and male/female" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:24) that were normalised through colonial enterprise, the natural environment and those "naturalized others" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:25) were equated with "a construction of nature that was increasingly seen to require masculine European management" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:25).

Certain branches of environmentalism such as deep ecology still perpetuate this view to some degree, through "the rhetorical conflation of Eastern and indigenous religious

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traditions, particularly in their perceived [biocentrism], which is positioned as the spiritual and emotional counter to the destructive secular rationality of the west" (Cilano & DeLoughrey, 2007:71). For instance, American deep ecology – in its "shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric ethical perspective; [its] exclusive focus on the preservation of unspoiled wilderness at the expense of questions of human justice; [and its] invocation of Eastern spiritual traditions as forerunners of deep ecology" (Curtin, 1999:91) – resists the idea of postcolonial agency in managing and protecting their own natural resources, and rather prefers to depict the previously colonised as "hapless victims of an industrial north which is simultaneously their source of exploitation and, through the intervention of [Western] deep ecologists, their salvation" (Cilano & DeLoughrey, 2007:72). Such views negate the existence of inequalities within human society (Guha, 1989:72) in an attempt to solidify the universality of the deep ecology philosophy – which, in turn, echoes the universalist approach of neoliberal globalisation. It is thus necessary to be cautious about attempts at collapsing the postcolonial "concern with the human inequalities that resulted from colonialism into a universalizing focus on the future of the nonhuman environment" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:21). Through this approach to environmentalism, non-western landscapes and subjects are viewed as the *tabula rasa* on which the Western ecologist's agency can be inscribed (Cilano & DeLoughrey; 2007:71), thus appropriating the voices of those on whose behalf they are supposedly speaking and further perpetuating colonial power structures (Cilano & DeLoughrey, 2007:72). Postcolonial ecocriticism must, then, be "globally engaged, not simply in terms of geographic breadth but in its commitment to an open dialogue about the diverse production of local and global knowledge(s)" (Cilano & DeLoughrey, 2007:74), without being universalising or totalising in its approach. In recognising alternative social and

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ecological knowledge systems of indigenous communities "that are neither acknowledged nor necessarily understood by development experts in the West" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:20), postcolonial ecocriticism can, as a field of study, construct a new approach to environmentalism that does not perpetuate ecological imperialism, and address "the social and environmental problems of the present, but also [imagine] alternative futures in which our current ways of looking at ourselves and our relation to the world might be creatively transformed" (Huggan, 2004:721).

In order to do this, postcolonial ecocriticism must take into account the inevitable link between environmental crises and the further marginalisation of postcolonial communities, and examine and critique the neo-colonial processes of development and exploitation of the environment. The way humans have structured the hierarchy of life forms on our planet – and the way we as humans have separated our histories from those of the natural environment – has resulted in complicity in exploitative practices that are driven by colonial and racist ideologies. The field of postcolonial criticism is rooted in a historical understanding of the inherent links between socio-political issues and environmental crises and is not apolitical in its approach to environmental criticism (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:12) – rather, it encompasses an "aesthetics committed to politics" (Cilano & DeLoughrey, 2007: 84), that does not follow an "escapist pastoral impulse" or "favour an aesthetic appreciation of nature for its own sake" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:12). Similarly, postcolonial ecocriticism does not lean toward the other side of the spectrum, where certain Western attitudes towards nature define it simply as an endlessly replenishable resource for human use and perpetuate the Enlightenment view of Man as categorically distinct from nonhuman nature. Both these perceptions – that nature has value completely separate from human enterprise, or that it is a resource to be used in pursuit of capital growth (Curtin,

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1999:6) – fail to take into account "traditional relationships between nature and human culture" (Curtin, 1999:7), and that in the Global South these "relationships to land […] are disrupted when either [of these] first world attitude intrudes" (Curtin, 1999:7). By situating the natural environment both historically and culturally, it is clear that the non-human cannot easily be separated from human enterprise – as nature and the animal, as well as the animalised other are seen as endlessly renewable resources to be exploited in pursuit of global power; both in the colonial mission and in the contemporary neoliberal world. It is thus necessary to engage in a "historical dialogue" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:4) with postcolonial landscapes and notions of place, as "the decoupling of nature and history has helped to mystify colonialism's histories of forced migration, suffering, and human violence" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:4), and since colonial powers tend to suppress that violence, "the land and even the ocean become all the more crucial as recuperative sites of postcolonial historiography" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:8). It is also important to note that these patterns of violence and marginalisation still continue to rise to the surface in more recent history and current times. Reading an essay like Arundhati Roy's "The Greater Common Good" (1999) – which discusses the Narmada Valley project and its effect on the disenfranchised – serves to highlight how environmental degradation and "ecological disruption [are] coextensive with damage to the social fabric; and that environmental issues cannot be separated from questions of social justice and human rights" (Huggan, 2004:704). An ecocritical approach to postcolonial theory thus posits that the distinction between human and non-human history needs to be collapsed and revisited in order to highlight the threat that neo-colonial practices of globalisation and development present to the survival of the planet and all the species that inhabit it. However, instead of simply extending "postcolonial methodologies into the realm of

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the human material world" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:4), postcolonial ecocriticism must also take into account "the ways in which ecology does not always work within the frames of human time and political interest" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:4); nonhuman nature is not an inert or passive backdrop to human agency but has agency of its own.

My analyses of nonhuman agency in this dissertation are largely guided by Cajetan Iheka's (2018:4) theorisation of "distributed agency," in which "an account of exclusive human agency gives way to a sense of a distributed network of agency between human beings and other components of the ecosystem" (Iheka, 2018:3). Rather than conceiving of agency as something which is unavoidably bound to reason and intentionality, Iheka develops Bruno Latour's (2005:71) argument for expanding our understanding of what can be considered an "actant" as "*any thing* that [modifies] a state of affairs by making a difference." Iheka calls for a view of human and nonhuman existence as mutually entangled, to forego the Enlightenment view of Man as exceptional and superior to all other forms of life, and to acknowledge the agential capabilities of nonhuman nature to produce effects on the human. Such a materialist view of agency enables critiques of anthropocentric approaches to nonhuman nature that sanction the destruction of the natural environment, while also being attentive to how these processes are indelibly connected to the further marginalisation of those who have been historically othered by the West. For Iheka (2018:14), it is necessary to blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman nature in order "to undercut notions of superiority and to bring about ecological awareness and/or restoration." Although Iheka's work is specifically rooted in an African context, I find it is useful to apply his theories to literature from other regions of the Global South, as the human and environmental injustices perpetrated by neo-colonial power structures and the

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paternalistic and dichotomising attitudes that underlie Western development projects are prominently featured in all of the texts I analyse in this dissertation. Foregrounding the imbrication of human and nonhuman lifeworlds provides an alternative vantage point from which to view and challenge the ideologies that underlie Western development, and to work toward finding workable alternatives for these ideologies. This is specifically relevant to the Global South, as development is often seen – in alignment with "radical Third-Worldist critiques" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:27) – as neo-colonial practices that are disguised by well-intentioned economic reform, but instead "serve the economic and political interests of the West" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:27).

According to Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar (1995:4), the "'Third World' has been produced by the discourses and practices of development since their inception in the early post-World War II period." Development in the Global South came into existence as part of the 'war on poverty' that was led by the US, and saw the creation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank – economic agencies that back development in the Global South (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:29). As a discourse, development was brought about by various factors in the immediate post-war era, such as "the demands of decolonisation; the pressures of the cold war; the need to find new markets; and the faith in modern science and technology as a panacea for social and economic ills" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:29; see also Escobar, 1995:32). Escobar (1995:45) thus argues that development is "a historical construct that provides a space in which poor countries are known, specified, and intervened upon," that came to be not because of a natural process of knowledge gathering and addressing subsequent problems, but rather as a result of the post-war "problematization of poverty" (Escobar, 1995:44) which persistently relied on the conception of two thirds of the world as 'underdeveloped'. Apart from being a form of

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economic management, development has become a way of exercising discursive control in the Global South, with this control being “based on the assumption that the western values it inculcates are indisputably the right ones” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:28) – whereas the cultures and values of those people it aims to help become “a residual variable, to disappear with the advance of modernization” (Escobar, 1995:44). As a result, development treats “people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of ‘progress’” (Escobar, 1995:44), and aims to “make societies fit a preexisting model that embodie[s] the structures and functions of modernity” (Escobar, 1995:52), instead of rooting the process of development in the cultural traditions and histories of each of these societies (Escobar, 1995:52). The result of this approach is to discursively homogenize the subject of the Global South as poor and underdeveloped (Escobar, 1995:53), which in turn situates development as a hegemonic force that enables neo-colonial domination of human and nonhuman ecologies and economies in the Global South (Escobar, 1995:53). Development can thus be understood as perpetuating colonial ideologies, where the native inhabitant is seen as something that needs to be “reformed” (Escobar, 1995:53) and further expands the divide between North and South, whilst endlessly reproducing “the separation between reformers and those to be reformed by keeping alive the premise of the Third World as different and inferior, as having a limited humanity in relation to the accomplished European” (Escobar, 1995:53-54).

Although the rise of globalisation has enabled some regions of the South to gain significant footing in the global market system, it remains problematic because it requires a homogenising and universalist approach to development that perpetuates the view that “all peoples on the globe appear to move along one single road, following the pacemakers who are supposed to represent the forefront of social evolution”

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(Sachs, 2010:x). However, the construction of the world order according to a "Euro-Atlantic model of civilization" has, according to scholars like Wolfgang Sachs and Dipesh Chakrabarty, lost its legitimacy because of the simple fact that "it is proven to be incompatible with the planet" (Sachs, 2010:xi). The rise of colonialism and Euro-Atlantic civilisation was heavily dependent on "access to biotic resources from colonies and fossil resources from the crust of the earth" (Sachs, 2010:xi), and industrialisation would not have been possible without "the mobilization of resources from both the expanse of geographical space and the depth of geological time" (Sachs, 2010:xi). These biotic resources are, however, in rapid decline as a result of environmental degradation and exploitation, and as the "planet's biodiversity disappears, fossil-fuel resources dwindle and the global climate destabilizes, the conditions that brought about Europe's success are no longer available" (Sachs, 2010:xi).

In the age of the Anthropocene, the term for the new geological epoch the Earth has entered since the industrial revolution – introduced by Nobel Prize winning atmospheric chemist, Paul Crutzen – the human species has become "a geological force on the planet" (Chakrabarty, 2012:2), largely as a result of our dependency on fossil fuels. As a result of the human species' geophysical impact on the planet, we are destabilising the parametric conditions all forms of life need to exist (Chakrabarty, 2009:218), and are thus facing the threat of a collective, planetary extinction. For Chakrabarty (2012:14), it is thus necessary to conceive of ways to think about the human across multiple scales, which simultaneously take into account the contingencies of individual experience and the human's new role as a non-ontological, planet-altering force. Arguably, such a view of the human's multi-scalar existence on the planet brings the entire model of Western development into question, as the "Euro-Atlantic model of production and consumption" (Sachs, 2010:xii) inevitably leads to

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environmental decline that affects everyone on the planet. It is thus necessary to alter these patterns of production and consumption to be "resource-light and compatible with ecosystems", because "there will be no equity without ecology in the twenty-first century" (Sachs, 2010:xii).

It is thus necessary to acknowledge the non-ontological, geological power of the human *species* whilst simultaneously working towards a more sustainable way of inhabiting the earth that is invested in individual human diversity and moving towards righting the wrongs of the past. There is, however, a danger in the term 'sustainability' or 'sustainable development' for theorists like Escobar and Sachs, who argue that it is simply "the latest ruse deployed by the apostles of development ideology to ward off critiques of development's destructive tendencies" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:31). Huggan and Tiffin (2010:32), however, argue that "despite its flagrant abuses" 'sustainability' is worth upholding as an ecological term "because it can become a useful banner under which to fight for social as well as ecological justice in the postcolonial world" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:32-33). However, sustainability still needs to be disconnected from the totalising and universalist approach of development where "[t]he Western scientist continues to speak for the Earth" (Escobar, 1995:194), and alternative knowledge systems and their accomplishments in sustainability need to be recognised. Acknowledging such alternative knowledge systems is necessary because it pushes back against development discourse which often blames "the Southern poor for their lack of environmental consciousness" in an attempt to shift the "blame away from the industrial polluters of the North" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:33).

Rather than being overtly *anti*-developmental, postcolonial ecocriticism must, then, be "*counter*-developmental" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:20) by bringing to light and drawing

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on alternative social and environmental knowledge systems that are beyond Western understanding and support. These alternative knowledge systems are not only necessary in sustaining the planet's biosphere, but they also often "underpin postcolonised communities' sense of their own cultural identities and entitlements, and […] represent the ontological basis for their politically contested claims to belong" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:78). This sense of belonging is also rooted in experiences of place and a connection to the land "as a primary site of postcolonial recuperation, sustainability, and dignity" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:3). These experiences of place are significant because landscapes and seascapes are not simply bystanders to human history, but are active participants therein (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:4). Edward Said (1993:xii) argues in his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, that narrative and imagination are vital in addressing and reclaiming postcolonial identity and existence – as the "power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (Said, 1993:xiii). In order to move towards a reclamation of personal and cultural identity, the postcolonial subject's "geographical identity must […] be searched for and somehow restored" (Said, 1993:225), and because of the complexities introduced by the persisting presence of "the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination" (Said, 1993:225). Based on this, postcolonial ecocriticism must "foreground a spatial imagination made possible by the experience of place" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:4), in which the concept of 'place' is not restricted to a single meaning:

> Place has infinite meanings and morphologies: it might be defined geographically, in terms of the expansion of empire; environmentally, in terms of wilderness or urban settings; genealogically, in linking communal ancestry to land; as well as phenomenologically, connecting body to place. (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:4)

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This experience of 'place' is thus multifaceted and complex, and is necessary in historicizing the natural landscape in order to examine how the "histories embedded in the land and sea have always provided vital and dynamic methodologies for understanding the transformative impact of empire and the anticolonial epistemologies it tries to suppress" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:4). In order to examine this and to work toward a recuperation of postcolonial landscapes and identities, postcolonial ecocriticism must be invested in "the value of imaginative writing as a site of discursive resistance to authoritarian attitudes and practices that not only disrupt specific human individuals and societies" (Huggan, 2004:703) but the natural environment as well.

The three novels I have chosen to examine in this dissertation can be read as encapsulating the broad concerns which I have outlined above, and offer nuanced engagements with nonhuman nature as an active agent in the production of human histories and as intrinsically bound to the perpetuation of inequalities in the Global South under discriminatory power regimes. Although I analyse each text in turn without much overlap between my discussions, my aim in writing this dissertation is to highlight the underlying connections between the three texts' environmental critiques in relation to their portrayal of postcolonial subjectivities and the persistence of colonial legacies in the neoliberal era. What emerges from my engagement with these novels, is that in order to evade a human-induced mass extinction that looms dangerously over the planet and all its inhabitants, we must forego human exceptionalism – and the human and nonhuman injustices it inevitably produces – and enter into a reciprocal relationship with the natural environment which is premised on mutual understanding and interconnectedness.

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In Chapter 1, I analyse Arundhati Roy's critically acclaimed novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), which follows the lives of the Ipe family in the southern Indian state of Kerala. The split narrative is focalised mainly through the twins, Estha and Rahel, during their early childhood and when they return to Ayemenem at the age of thirty-one. The plot centres around a series of family tragedies that occur in the late 1960s; the doomed cross-caste love affair between the twins' divorced Syrian Christian mother, Ammu, and the untouchable carpenter, Velutha; the drowning of Estha and Rahel's British cousin, Sophie Mol, in the aftermath of the affair coming to light; and Estha and Rahel's return to their childhood home after twenty-three years apart. Although there is arguably not much 'new' to be said about *The God of Small Things* because it has been extensively studied as a seminal work of postcolonial literature, it remains a valuable text to examine, as the human and environmental concerns encapsulated in the novel seem, rather disquietingly, to have become more pressing in the years since its publication. The main focus of my analysis is on Roy's depiction of the mutual permeability of human suffering and the exploitation and degradation of nonhuman nature, and how the 'small lives' – both human and nonhuman – which exist in the periphery of the world's 'Big systems' are deemed expendable in order to maintain dominant power structures that privilege only a select few. The novel's depiction of the more privileged characters' attitudes toward nonhuman nature, the environmental decline in Ayemenem in the twenty-three years since Velutha's murder, and the systemic oppression of the novel's most disenfranchised characters serve to portray the intricate web of connection between *all* forms of oppression and the attendant ideologies that justify them. However, despite the novel's perceived pessimism about the human condition and the state-sanctioned development projects that decimate the environment in the name of progress, Roy inscribes the natural

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environment with an agential power, and is able to offer a recuperative view of the human which champions mutual reciprocity and entanglement with nonhuman nature through the character of Velutha. Even though my analysis inevitably draws on some of the myriads of scholarly work which has been written on *The God of Small Things*, I hope to add to the discussion by analysing it alongside two more recent texts – Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019) and Rita Indiana's *Tentacle* (2018) – and in doing so elucidate how the similarities between these texts' environmental critiques, despite being published two decades apart, are worth serious consideration if we are to counteract the current human and ecological crises of our times.

Chapter 2 examines Namwali Serpell's epic, *The Old Drift* (2019), which depicts a refracted history of Zambia's founding and development as a nation, and a speculative projection of its future, as it follows the entwined lives of three multi-ethnic families across three generations. The novel is primarily divided into three parts – 'The Grandmothers', 'The Mothers' and 'The Children' – with each chapter being focalised through a specific individual from either the Clarke, Mwamba or Corsale families while depicting how their lives continuously overlap. The first and final chapters of the novel do not form part of the three-part division of the text, with the first chapter, 'The Falls', being written from the perspective of the late-colonial British settler, Percy M. Clark, and the final chapter, 'The Dam', depicting the speculative failure of the Kariba Dam wall in the early 2020s, which causes widespread destruction across Zambia. Although the human-centred narrative chapters make up the bulk of the novel – and offer much to be analysed from various critical perspectives – I have chosen to focus primarily on the short, italicised sections between each chapter which are narrated by a sardonic swarm chorus of mosquitoes that functions as a Greek chorus throughout the text. Serpell's anthropomorphised swarm of mosquitoes offers scathing critiques of the

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human condition and are deliberately mercurial, often negating the narrative plot and focusing exclusively on themselves. It is constantly implied that the human stories in *The Old Drift* are being told from the swarm chorus's perspective, although mosquitoes are conspicuously absent in their insect form throughout the body of the text. What is truly interesting about the mosquitoes' direct engagement with the reader is that they continuously assert themselves as being intimately bound to the production of human stories, as 'agents of history' in their own right, thereby subverting anthropocentric scientific discourse. I further turn my attention to the novel's portrayal of the destructive effects of Western development discourse and neoliberal globalisation on African ecologies, by looking at the novel's engagement with the Kariba Dam – and the quasi-apocalyptic failure of the dam wall – which can be read as a monument to uneven development in Zambia. What becomes clear through the intrusive and self-interested swarm of mosquitoes' engagement with this tragedy, is that they are meant to serve as a subversive mirror to the inherent selfishness that underlies human-being-in-the-world. Much like *The God of Small Things*, *The Old Drift* seems to offer a rather pessimistic view of the human condition as the driving force of an inevitable planetary extinction. However, my reading of Serpell's novel posits that rather than portraying the failure of the Kariba Dam and the mosquitoes' insouciance toward the aftermath as an inevitable and tragic 'End', it can be read as representing a comic interpretation of historical time, which exposes human fallibility and vanity as the driver of a continually re-enacted eco-apocalypse. I thus argue that instead of being a fatalistic projection of the futility of human action, *The Old Drift* invites its readers to self-reflection on what it means to be human in a world where human and environmental crises have become periodic and normative.

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Finally, in Chapter 3, I turn to Rita Indiana's *Tentacle* – originally published in Spanish as *La mucama de Omicunlé* and later translated by Achy Obejas (2018). It presents a speculative future in which a series of 'natural' disasters have resulted in the complete annihilation of marine life in the Caribbean Sea. The novel is set in the Dominican Republic and the temporally fluid narrative continuously fluctuates between three time frames; the late 2020s to 2030s following the complete collapse of marine ecosystems in the Caribbean Sea, the early 1990s to 2000s, and the early 1600s when the island was still a Spanish colony. The plot follows Acilde, a transgender youth who is endowed with the mythical power to travel back in time during a Yoruba ritual in which the tentacles of a Giant Caribbean Sea Anemone are fused with a circle of moles that crown his[1] head. Acilde is tasked with fulfilling the prophecy laid out for him by his previous employer, a Yoruba priestess named Esther Escudero or Omicunlé, in which he must be reborn in the past in order to circumvent the spilling of Venezuelan bioweapons into the Caribbean Sea after a seaquake in 2024 had done away with the base where they were being warehoused.

While the previous two chapters engage mainly with terrestrial ecological concerns, *Tentacle*'s focus on the degradation of *marine* ecologies in the Caribbean necessitates a turn to critical ocean studies and Elizabeth DeLoughrey's (2017:34) theorisation of "sea ontologies." I argue that *Tentacle*'s investment in the materiality of oceanic interconnection, through its temporal fluidity and its depiction of Afro-Caribbean and Taíno belief systems, enables the novel to expose how the decimation of Caribbean marine environments in the neoliberal era and the "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011:2) of

[1] For the sake of clarity, I refer to Acilde as 'she/her' when discussing the first part of the novel when she identifies as female, and as 'he/him' in the second part after Acilde's sexual transition is complete. For reference, see the following interview conducted with Indiana in which the author does the same: https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2019/02/a-unique-caribbean-spin-on-climate-fiction/

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anthropogenic climate change are intrinsically bound to the legacies of colonialism and the inception of capitalism as a world-ecological regime. In conjunction with this, the fluid movement between time-frames can also be read as presenting a multi-scalar view of the human that is attentive both to the contingencies of individual experience, as embodied by the ultimate failure of the novel's redemptive prophecy – because Acilde uses it to maintain his life as a heterosexual white male – and to the fact that we are headed toward a near-future in which the agential powers of nonhuman nature will be overcome by the human species' collective, 'Earth destroying', force. Although the novel's conclusion certainly bespeaks a sense of hopelessness and environmental grief, I argue that *Tentacle*'s exposure of the human error and selfishness which brings about ecological destruction and eco-apocalypse enables it to envision counter-hegemonic ways of engaging with the natural environment that do not perpetuate human exceptionalism and its attendant forms of violence against the earth and systemically marginalised communities.

Despite their apparent despondency, the endings of all three texts I analyse in this dissertation can be read as recuperative gestures that encourage their readers to acknowledge the destructive nature of anthropocentric approaches to human-being-in-the-world, and to recognise that the exceptionalism which defines our relationship to nonhuman nature inevitably informs our relationship to our human others. I thus argue that these texts from the Global South – in their appreciation for reciprocal bonds between humans and nonhuman nature, and their reframing of agency as not only belonging to human actors but to the natural environment as well – expose the dire need for acknowledging human fallibility and self-conceit if we are to usher in a more life-making future on this planet. Hence my chosen title for this dissertation, which I

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have borrowed from Serpell's (2019:19) subversive swarm chorus of mosquitoes: "To err is human, and that is your doom and delight."

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Chapter 1:
Big systems and small lives:
Distributed agency and systemic oppression in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

The success of Arundhati Roy's various critiques in *The God of Small Things* (1997) stems from the dense layering of interconnected processes of meaning-making that function, one could say, as an ecosystem in the text. As a critically acclaimed and widely studied piece of postcolonial literature, *The God of Small Things* has permeated the global imaginary through its singular representation of the varying degrees of violence and oppression experienced by the disenfranchised. Roy's novel fulfils its purpose in depicting the interplay between the existence of the marginalised – both human and nonhuman – and the various ideological forces and power structures that govern and influence them. What becomes clear throughout the text, is that there is an inevitable link between all forms of oppression that is not simply limited to the realm of human experience. Roy extends beyond the limitations of an anthropocentric exploration of subjugation and exploitation through her carefully woven narrative that highlights the interconnectedness of the lives of her characters and their natural surroundings.

It seems only fitting to use the novel's epigraph as the primary point of departure for this chapter: "Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one" (Roy, 1997:np). This short quotation from John Berger's novel, *G* (1972), speaks to the ethos of interconnectedness that runs through *The God of Small Things*. Not only does it allude to the novel's complex narrative structure – the non-linear and abstracted framing of the plot and shifting narrative perspectives – but it can also be viewed as

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the foundation of what Aarthi Vadde (2009:522) calls the "ecological collectivity" that lies at the centre of the text. The epigraph forms the starting point (functioning as a kind of distilled mission statement) for the complex "narrative of connection" (Vadde, 2009:522) that is to follow; one in which the perpetual exploitation and oppression of 'Small Things' are carefully mapped in relation to and juxtaposed with the 'Big Things' that structure the fabric of their fragile existence. Roy speaks of this interrelation between 'Big Things' and 'Small Things' in an interview with David Barsamian (2007:n.p.):

> *The God of Small Things* is a book where you connect the very smallest things to the very biggest: whether it's the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water or the quality of the moonlight on a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom.

For Roy, all of these things are connected to each other; "the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water" is invariably linked to the intrusion of these 'Big Things' – "history and politics", the neo-colonial processes linked to globalisation and development – into the "small lives" (Roy, 1997:1) that exist in the periphery of these governing forces and their accompanying ideologies. The novel's opening passages subtly allude to the complex interactions between these two opposing facets of existence in the description of the Ayemenem landscape during the south-west monsoon. Here, the narrator describes how the natural landscape, in its own way, intrudes into and intermingles with man-made construction that – in an anthropocentric view – is meant to contain and control it:

> But by early June the south-west monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn moss green. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across flooded roads. […] And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD [Public Works Department] potholes on the highways. (Roy, 1997:1)

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The diction in this passage is significant as it reveals the fraught relationship between nonhuman nature and those elements of modernity – the "[b]rick walls," "electric poles," and "highways" (Roy, 1997:1) – that supposedly symbolise civilisation and progress. More significantly, perhaps, it also lays the foundation for Roy's inclusion of nonhuman nature as a 'character' with agency in her novel, which she achieves through strategic anthropomorphism, where "the lines between humans and nonhumans are blurred to undercut notions of superiority and to bring about ecological awareness and/or restoration (Iheka, 2018:4). By anthropomorphising the natural environment and positioning it as an active agent that "snake[s]," "burst[s]" and "spill[s]" out of the control of human intervention, and through the description of the "small fish [appearing] in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways" (Roy, 1997:1), Roy sets the stage for her story that aims to address "several spheres of existence – the biotic, the public, and the private – [and] to develop formal strategies that enable readers to see these spheres as overlapping" (Vadde, 2009:522-523). This can be seen as indicative of what Cajetan Iheka (2018:4) calls "distributed agency – the idea that humans possess and share agency with the landscape and animals, among others"; with the notion of agency not being exclusively based "on intentionality but on the actions or effects produced by both humans and nonhumans" (Iheka, 2018:3). The "countryside [that] turns an *immodest* green" and the "short spells of *sharp*, glittering sunshine" (Roy, 1997:1; emphasis added) during the monsoon also reaffirm that the natural world is not simply a benevolent bystander to human history, but that it is a reactive force which cannot be indefinitely suppressed and exploited without some kind of fallout. This repositioning of nonhuman nature as an active participant in the course of human history challenges the "rhetorical treatment of the natural environment as reservoir of usable elements, as mere resource and

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commodity" (Lobnik, 2016:116) – a view which has historically occluded the natural environment's "complex ecologies, its liveliness, and, above all, its conjunction with subaltern and marginalized human beings" (Lobnik, 2016:116). Throughout *The God of Small Things*, the natural environment is foregrounded as a witness to and record-keeper of human history – most specifically the history of the Ipe family – but there is also a deliberate blurring of boundaries between the perception of human and nonhuman history as mutually exclusive; a perception which supposedly justifies the exploitation and "commodification of life that predominates in the hypercapitalist global economy" (Iheka, 2018:8). It is through these forms of multiplicity and overlap that the novel fulfils the commitment made by the epigraph, and reaffirms that the story told in *The God of Small Things* does not belong to an individual character living in a vacuum of isolated human experience.

Looking at the human characters in the novel, however, the plurality which is promised by the epigraph is most notably embodied by the novel's main protagonists, the twins Estha and Rahel. From the outset, the reader is made aware of the seemingly telepathic or psychic connection between the "two-egg" (Roy, 1997:2) twins, as even though they did not look alike and were easily told apart, Estha and Rahel "thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us" (Roy, 1997:2) during their early childhood; "[a]s though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities" (Roy, 1997:2). Throughout the text, the psychic connection between Estha and Rahel (in childhood and adulthood) is continuously emphasised. Estha instinctively knows that Rahel has come to Ayemenem without seeing her, as her arrival fills his mind with "the sound of passing trains, and the light and shade that falls on you if you have a window seat" (Roy, 1997:14). Similarly, Rahel feels "the wetness of rain" (Roy, 1997:21) on Estha's skin

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when he returns to the house later that afternoon, and can "hear the raucous, scrambled world inside his head" (Roy, 1997:21) even though he does not speak to her. During their childhood, this telepathic connection is even more pronounced, as the twins are privy to each other's thoughts and experiences. Even in adulthood, Rahel feels as though she has memories that she has "no right to have" (Roy, 1997:2); she remembers the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man sexually assaulting Estha although she had not been there when it happened, and remembers waking up laughing at a funny dream Estha had dreamt. Despite their differences in appearance, Estha and Rahel thought of themselves and lived as though they were a single entity during their childhood – a connection that is symbolically reforged by their incestuous act towards the end of the novel. Estha and Rahel's relationship is thus marked by an acute interdependence and plurality rather than being limited by sociogenic constructions of individual identity. The plurality of their identities serves to undermine notions of exceptionalism and superiority and promotes "an interdependent rather than ascendant model of the human" (Vadde, 2009:536). Their joint subjectivities thus subvert the hierarchical structuring of "taxonomic thought" (Vadde, 2009:533), which severs links between beings and is predicated on epistemologies of ascendancy and human exceptionalism. Significantly, Estha and Rahel are vilified for their joint identities by Baby Kochamma, who embodies the pitfalls of "ascendant humanism" (Vadde, 2009:524) throughout the text. Before one can fully understand the significance of the oppression and alienation experienced by the novel's most prominent marginalised characters – Estha, Rahel, Ammu and Velutha – and how these abuses are connected to the degradation and exploitation of nonhuman nature, it is necessary to examine the systemic logic which permits it; the rationalisation of "human nature's pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly" (Roy,

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1997:309) that perpetually justifies the "continuing abuses of authority that operate in humanity's name" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:13).

The novel's engagement with these constructions of hierarchy and human superiority can be seen in the different characters' treatment of and interaction with nonhuman nature throughout the text; specifically, the "banal acts of violence committed against the nonhuman world by the novel's more privileged characters" (Vadde, 2009:531). The ascendant and appropriative behaviour embodied by the processes of "taxonomic thought" (Vadde, 2009:533) can most clearly be linked to the natural imagery used in the description of Baby Kochamma's "fierce, bitter garden" (Roy, 1997:26) and the recurrent motif of "Pappachi's moth" (Roy, 1997:35). Baby Kochamma's ornamental garden came about as a result of her futile pursuit of a young Catholic priest she had fallen in love with when she was 18 years old. After converting to Catholicism herself in the hopes of being closer to him – entering a convent in Madras as a trainee novice – Baby Kochamma became physically ill and mentally troubled and was withdrawn from the convent by her father, Reverend Ipe. Since he deemed it unlikely that she would find a husband, he arranged for her "to attend a course of study at the University of Rochester in America" where she obtained "a diploma in Ornamental Gardening" (Roy, 1997:26). Baby Kochamma's subsequent cultivation of the Ayemenem House's front garden can be read as a symbol of "an anthropocentric view of the environment, wherein natural beauty is a reflection of the human will's triumph over its raw materials" (Vadde, 2009:531). Through the description of Baby Kochamma's gardening practises, it becomes clear that there is no reciprocity or interdependence in her approach to the environment she cultivates. Rather, her approach is overbearing and described in violent terms:

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> Baby Kochamma spent her afternoons in her garden. In sari and gum boots. She wielded an enormous pair of hedge shears in her bright-orange gardening gloves. Like a lion tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and Chinese guava. (Roy, 1997:27)

The description of Baby Kochamma as a "lion tamer" wielding "an enormous pair of hedge shears" (Roy, 1997:27) in her efforts to *tame* and *limit* some of the plants in her garden, and her "war" (Roy, 1997:27) against naturally occurring weather patterns in the hope of growing non-indigenous plant species is indicative of an appropriative approach to nonhuman nature "that only increases [her] estrangement from the land rather than her comprehension of it" (Vadde, 2009:531). Even though her garden flourishes, the description of it as "fierce" and "bitter" (Roy, 1997:26) and the images of violence and limitation that follow "reflect a particularly antagonistic and domineering form of human agency – one that measures success through overwriting the environment rather than cooperating with it" (Vadde, 2009:531). Similarly, it echoes "European/western conceptions and practices" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:8) during colonialism where "settlers set about rendering [land] productive and profitable through imported methods rather than by accommodating [it] to local circumstances" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:8). The fact that she obtained her diploma at an American university also cannot be overlooked, as it suggests an assimilation of "colonialism's epistemologies, complicating the notion that Indian subjectivities can be separated from European ones even in the aftermath of national independence" (Vadde, 2009:531). Various members of the Ipe family – most notably Chacko and Pappachi – inhabit what Homi Bhabha (1994:7) calls the "in-between space" of postcolonial hybridity; where they are caught between assimilating the discourses of power associated with imperial epistemologies and reclaiming their cultural identities as Indians in the post-independence era. The description of Baby Kochamma's enjoyment in constantly

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policing her garden – and by extension all forms of nonhuman nature – thus takes on greater significance when one considers how this extends to and mirrors her treatment of *people* throughout the text; her constant pursuit of ascendancy over the natural world and her family members can be seen as an extension of the colonial discourses of knowledge production and power structures, and the hierarchical structuring of "western attitudes to human being-in-the-world" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:6).

Throughout the text, Baby Kochamma's treatment of the novel's most disenfranchised characters – even before the death of Sophie Mol – is analogous to her domineering attitude towards her ornamental garden. In the same way that Baby Kochamma deems herself superior to the garden she cultivates, she justifies her place in the Ipe family through a kind of taxonomic structuring that becomes apparent in the novel's second chapter when she, Ammu, Chacko, Estha and Rahel are on their way to Cochin to watch *The Sound of Music* and to pick up Sophie Mol and her mother from the airport:

> In the way that the unfortunate sometimes dislike the co-unfortunate, Baby Kochamma disliked the twins, for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs. Worse still, they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry. She was keen for them to realize that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, their maternal grandmother's house, where they really had no right to be. Baby Kochamma resented Ammu, because she saw her quarrelling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman. […]
>
> She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a *divorced* daughter –according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a *divorced* daughter from a *love* marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a *divorced* daughter from an *intercommunity love* marriage – Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (Roy, 1997:45-46; emphasis in original)

Although she too "lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House" (Roy, 1997:45) because she was never married, Baby Kochamma is able to justify her being there – and her supposed superiority over Ammu and the twins – through constructing (as

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recorded here by the narrator) a kind of phylogenetic tree that charts the reasons why Ammu and the twins have no position in the Ipe family. Described in rather taxonomic terms, their hierarchical standing in the family is laid out in this passage as Baby Kochamma maps their position according to a preconceived, systemic reasoning that justifies the marginalisation not only of unmarried women but married and divorced women as well. Ammu's marriage is not arranged by or approved of by her family and her husband's family are Hindu and thus not part of the Syrian Christian community. She decides to leave her husband when the twins are still very young because he is an abusive alcoholic, and although she is begrudgingly allowed to return to her father's home she is treated without sympathy and suffers an even greater deal of ostracization than if she had never been married at all. Ammu's unfortunate circumstances are used as a justification for the ill-treatment of her and the twins and lower them even further in the 'taxonomic rank' of their family.

According to Baby Kochamma, Ammu's familial standing is determined by four 'variables' that are based on rigid social structures: Her sex, her marital status, the conditions under which she was married, and the community she was married into. At the base of Baby Kochamma's hierarchical structuring is her wholehearted subscription to "the commonly held view that a married daughter [has] no position in her parents' home" (Roy, 1997:45). From this belief, she further branches Ammu away from the family, as for her, "a *divorced* daughter" has "no position anywhere at all" (Roy, 1997:45). The third and fourth 'variables' that Baby Kochamma takes into account further marginalise Ammu, as being "a *divorced* daughter from an *intercommunity love* marriage" (Roy, 1997:45-46) which subsequently downgrades her to having "no position anywhere at all" (Roy, 1997:45). Extending from Ammu's position in the hierarchy of the Ipe family tree, the twins have even less standing in

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their maternal family as Baby Kochamma's resentment of the twins also stems from a taxonomic structuring of their existence; she "disliked the twins, for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs" and because "they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry" (Roy, 1997:45). Using further, systemically ingrained preconceptions to determine her feelings towards the twins, Baby Kochamma asserts her belief that they "[have] no right to be" in their "maternal grandmother's house" (Roy, 1997:45), and although she acknowledges that her presence in the house may also simply be because she is tolerated rather than overtly approved of, she is able to justify her standing in the family through the processes of taxonomic thought outlined above, and by extension, the "epistemologies of ascendancy [that] reinforce a solipsistic and exceptional model of the human" (Vadde, 2009:529). Through depicting Baby Kochamma's treatment of nonhuman nature and the characters that have been systemically othered by the rigid social structures in India, Roy is able to expose "the hierarchical dualism and instrumental reasoning that are used to justify violence against the disenfranchised" (Chae, 2015:521). Baby Kochamma's ornamental garden can thus be seen as a symbolic representation of the pitfalls of the hierarchical dualisms that set humans above nonhuman nature and Self above Other, and illustrate how these dualisms "instrumentalize people at the bottom and justify dominant social ideologies" (Chae, 2015:524) in order to maintain power structures that have historically determined perceptions of those who are supposedly indispensable and those who are deemed expendable. This form of instrumental reasoning that views "nature and the animal 'other' as being either external to human needs, and thus effectively dispensable, or as being in permanent service to them, and thus an endlessly replenishable resource" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:4) cannot be

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separated from Imperialist discourses of sovereignty and ascendancy that still permeate postcolonial subjectivities.

Another example of this appropriative attitude to the natural world is the recurrent symbol of "Pappachi's Moth" (Roy, 1997:35). The twins' grandfather, Shri Benaan John Ipe – known as Pappachi throughout the text – was an "Imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute" (Roy, 1997:48) until Independence, after which "his designation was changed […] to Joint Director, Entomology" (Roy, 1997:48-49). Pappachi's "greatest setback [in his life] was not having the moth that *he* had discovered named after him" (Roy, 1997:49). Finding a moth with "unusually dense dorsal tufts" (Roy, 1997:49) when it fell into his drink after a day's work in the field, he takes great pains to properly mount and measure it before taking it to the Pusa Institute for classification, as he believed it to be a new, undiscovered species – he "caught the first train back to Delhi. To taxonomic attention, and, he hoped, fame" (Roy, 1997:49). To his great disappointment, he was told that it was merely a variant of a well-known species. Although this had already been quite the disappointment for Pappachi, the "real blow came twelve years later, when, as a consequence of a radical taxonomic reshuffle, lepidopterists decided that Pappachi's moth *was* in fact a separate species and genus hitherto unknown to science" (Roy, 1997:49). Because he was retired by then, he could not "assert his claim to the discovery," and the moth was named after "the Acting Director of the Department of Entomology, a junior officer whom Pappachi had always disliked" (Roy, 1997:49). Thereafter, Pappachi's moth became a private "symbol of powerlessness and betrayal" (Vadde, 2009:532) in the Ipe family, as its "pernicious ghost – grey, furry and with unusually dense dorsal tufts – haunted every house that he ever lived in. It tormented him and his children and his children's children" (Roy, 1997:49). The taxonomic reshuffling that leads to the reclassification of the moth as a

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new species "exposes the shortcomings of human approaches to nature that cannot keep pace" with its contingencies, "namely the ways in which beings evolve, mutate, and hybridize" (Vadde, 2009:532). Pappachi's unmoving belief in the rigidity of "taxonomic structures of thought" becomes "the source of his bitterness when lepidopterists destabilize taxonomy by re-examining *their own grounds of classification* rather than their insect objects" (Vadde, 2009:532; emphasis added). Because he is unable to reconcile himself to the fact that the grounds for taxonomic classification were altered as a result of a change in human understanding and consideration, he refuses to renounce his claim to the moth and "remains locked into a discourse of discovery and possession, which prevents him from viewing the moth as a being in itself, something other than a projection of his own thwarted ambitions" (Vadde, 2009:532).

This appropriative attitude to nonhuman nature highlights the persistence of Imperial epistemologies and serves as an expression of "ascendant humanism in the discourses of colonial science" (Vadde, 2009:524) that encourage modes of thinking which propagate the "natural prioritisation of humans and human interests over those of other species on earth" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:6). For Pappachi, "[n]ature's chief or only function […] is to contribute to the aggrandisement of the self," (Mortensen, 2003:191) and significantly, his behaviour towards his family is dominated by this same self-serving attitude – his frequent beatings of Mammachi because her pickling business had gained some success while he "was having trouble coping with the ignominy of retirement" (Roy, 1997:47), for example. Subsequently, the consequences of his self-perceived failure in not being given credit for the discovery of the moth endows it with "a mythical power" (Vadde, 2009:532) that persistently torments his family members even after his passing. As the story of the moth is passed down, Estha

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and Rahel's "children's logic transforms the insect from an object of human knowledge to an agent of despair" (Vadde, 2009:532) that is present in their most acute moments of helplessness and personal tragedy. To the twins, the moth becomes an active agent that serves to rationalise the effects of dread on their psyches. At Abhilash Talkies, Rahel hurts Ammu's feelings with a petulant comment and the narrator describes that a "cold moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts [lands] lightly on Rahel's heart" (Roy, 1997:112) after Ammu tells her that careless words "make people love [her] a little less" (Roy, 1997:12). Rahel uses the legend of Pappachi's moth to make sense of her feelings of distress, as where the moth's "icy legs touched her, she got goosebumps. Six goosebumps on her careless heart" (Roy, 1997:112). However, the most significant moments where the moth is present are when Sophie Mol drowns and the twins are at the police station after witnessing Velutha's brutal assault at the hands of a "posse of Touchable Policemen" (Roy, 1997:304). After their boat capsizes on the Meenachal river and Sophie Mol does not make it to the riverbank with her and Estha, "Pappachi's moth [snaps] open its sombre wings" (Roy, 1997:293) on Rahel's heart as the reality of the situation dawns on her. The moth is also described as "spread[ing] its wings over both [Estha and Rahel's] hearts" (Roy, 1997:315) when Baby Kochamma arrives at the police station instead of Ammu, and as being "on the move" (Roy, 1997:316) in Inspector Thomas Mathew's office while Baby Kochamma accuses them of murdering Sophie Mol in order to manipulate them into identifying Velutha as their abductor so she will not be charged with filing a false police report. The inclusion of Pappachi's moth as a symbol of the twins' despair in the moments when they are most vulnerable and being taken advantage of is greatly significant, as it exposes "the logic and consequences of ascendant humanism" (Vadde, 2009:524) that actively enable the destruction, exploitation and suppression of those things and people that

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are deemed to be expendable in order to maintain dominant power structures and social order. The recurrent symbol of the moth throughout *The God of Small Things* thus serves to translate “Pappachi's individual myopia into a community's collective blindness as the police and a powerful family collude in killing a man who threatened the legitimacy of their social order” (Vadde, 2009:532). Through depicting the broader implications of Pappachi’s “monological approaches to entomologic taxonomy” (Vadde, 2009:524), Roy is able to explore “humanism as an epistemology of ascendancy derived from the desire to dominate others without understanding them and measure knowledge through certainty rather than curiosity” (Vadde, 2009:524).

The hierarchical dualisms that pit “man against nature as surely as [they pit] the upper classes against the lower classes and men against women” (Mortensen, 2003:191), and that justify the rigidity with which most of the Ipe family and the police uphold and support discriminatory social structures and the caste system, can be viewed as an extension of the exploitative and appropriative attitudes to nonhuman nature represented by Baby Kochamma’s ornamental garden and Pappachi’s moth. The Ipe family’s social standing as high-ranking Syrian Christians enables their exploitative interpersonal relationships, and their subscription to “Kerala society's complex and deeply-entrenched caste-system still convinces [them] of their innate superiority, enabling them to continue treating other members of the community as menials” (Mortensen, 2003:189). Although the Ipes are not Hindu, they are considered “Caste Christians” (Roy, 1997:73) and still use the caste system to maintain power over the lower-caste individuals they exploit, such as Vellya Paapen and his son Velutha who are Paravans, and thus part of the ‘untouchable’ communities of the lowest caste – the *sudra* group (Tickell, 2007:23). Pappachi’s “clinical categorisation and aggressive appropriation of the moth” (Mortensen, 2003:191) serves as an echo of Mammachi

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and Baby Kochamma's "careful classification of people into touchables and untouchables" (Mortensen, 2003:191), and their unfaltering belief that their social bigotry is justified. Mammachi sees Velutha's talent when he is young and arranges for him to be educated in the school for untouchables which her father-in-law had founded and later employs him as a carpenter at Paradise Pickles and Preserves where she puts him in charge of general maintenance. However, her "impenetrable Touchable logic" (Roy, 1997:75) keeps her from fully valuing his abilities and seeing him as an individual – she "often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer" (Roy, 1997:75). She did not "encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed)," and "thought that he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that Touchables touched. She said that it was a big step for a Paravan" (Roy, 1997:77). Although she continuously relies on Velutha's knowledge and skillset, Mammachi is unable to distance herself from the social biases that underpin the oppression of lower-caste individuals – which is symbolised throughout by her extremely poor vision. Although Mammachi does initiate Velutha's small degree of upward social mobility, her near-sightedness regarding caste and class is highlighted by her clear distaste for Margaret Kochamma's working-class family – filing Margaret away in her mind as "*Shopkeeper's daughter*" (Roy, 1997:167) – and in the way she, rather nostalgically, tells Estha and Rahel

> that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. (Roy, 1997:73-74)

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Although the harsh proscriptions outlined in the passage above are no longer enforced by the time Mammachi tells Estha and Rahel about them, the perpetuation of these inequalities in post-independence Kerala, albeit in more covert ways, remains a central theme throughout *The God of Small Things* (Tickell, 2007:27). Velutha's status as an untouchable Paravan is what makes his sexual relationship with Ammu so transgressive, and what subsequently inspires Mammachi to "[spew] her blind venom, [and] her crass, insufferable insults" (Roy, 1997:283) at Velutha the night Vellya Paapen tells her about the affair. The use of the word "blind" (Roy, 1997:283) in this description of Mammachi's outburst is significant, as it not only refers to her physical blindness, but also acts as a symbol for the collective blindness of a community so entrenched in social prejudice that this one transgressive act serves as a catalyst for multiple tragedies; Velutha's murder, Sophie Mol's drowning, and Ammu's subsequent expulsion from the family, which leads to the separation of the twins and her own untimely death. Through depicting the continuation and consequences of these ingrained social prejudices, Roy exposes how the older characters' "obsession with honour and purity corrupts all [their] authentic human relationships" (Mortensen, 2003:190). In conjunction with this, Roy also effectively demonstrates how the logic which supposedly justifies "the tradition of violence on which [the Ipe family's] social status rests" (Mortensen, 2003:189) is contiguous with anthropocentric approaches to nonhuman nature which perpetuate the "construction of [humans] *against* nature – with the hierarchisation of life forms that construction implies" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:6; emphasis added). To Mammachi – as with Pappachi's treatment of the moth – Velutha is a resource to be exploited in order to maintain a sense of self-importance; a mere cog in a machine designed to maintain the power of 'Big Things' over the small lives they oppress.

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In a similar vein, Baby Kochamma – as a character who is overtly identified throughout the text as being alienated from nonhuman nature – is the main perpetrator in the events that lead directly to Velutha's capture and murder. Baby Kochamma views Velutha as a threat because Rahel claims to see him in a labour union march while they are on their way to Cochin, and after she is humiliated by another man taking part in the march she "[focuses] all her fury at her public humiliation on Velutha," as in "her mind he [grows] to represent the march [and] the man who had forced her to wave the Marxist Party flag" (Roy, 1997:82). Her subsequent hatred of Velutha stems from her "fear of being dispossessed" (Roy, 1997:70) by the violent Naxalite rebellions that "organized peasants into fighting cadres, seized land, expelled the owners […] and struck terror in every bourgeois heart" (Roy, 1997:68). Baby Kochamma's security and well-being is maintained by the dominant hierarchies that are threatened by the Naxalites – and that, rather ironically, oppress her as a woman – and she subsequently directs her fear at Velutha, as his rumoured involvement in the march enables her to put a face to her disembodied fear. After the march, she begins to loathe him more fervently than before, and this later inspires her to enact her plan that frames Velutha under the guise of saving the family name, whereas she is predominantly motivated by revenge. Baby Kochamma considers his life "a small price to pay" (Roy, 1997:318) in order to maintain the dominant social structures that ensure her security and comfort. In the same way she finds purpose in disciplining the natural environment when cultivating her ornamental garden, Baby Kochamma's fear of dispossession leads her to falsely accuse Velutha of rape and abduction in an "attempt to instil order into a world gone wrong" (Roy, 1997:260). Velutha's involvement in the march and the fact that he is a card-holding member of the Communist Party is significant, as it affirms that he "sees the oppressive social hierarchies as embedded in the caste system"

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(Chae, 2015:528) and that he has not "internalized the ancient caste system as the natural social order" (Chae, 2015:528) like his father, Vellya Paapen, has. Although he never overtly rebels against the Ipe family and their treatment of him, his affair with Ammu taking place in secret – Velutha's dissent from the inferiority which he inherited at birth is enough of a threat to justify the brutal beating he receives from the police and his ensuing death.

The "posse of Touchable Policemen" (Roy, 1997:304) who find and beat Velutha share Baby Kochamma's "ancient, age-old fear […] of being dispossessed" (Roy, 1997:70), and their brutality serves as a means to exorcise this "inchoate, unacknowledged fear" (Roy, 1997:308). The police are described as acting out of a sense of perverted duty and the assertion that they are simply protecting their community from a person who has broken the "Love Laws" of caste that "lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much" (Roy, 1997:33). They are "[i]mpelled by feelings that [are] primal yet paradoxically wholly impersonal" (Roy, 1997:308), and they act "with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria" (Roy, 1997:309). In their minds, they carry the "[r]esponsibility for the Touchable future on their thin but able shoulders" (Roy, 1997:307), which leads them to act with a "sober, steady brutality" (Roy, 1997:308) and with an "absence of caprice" (Roy, 1997:308) – an "abyss where anger should have been" (Roy, 1997:308). There is a practicality to the policemen's actions, as though they "were opening a bottle [or] shutting a tap" (Roy, 1997:308), that is reminiscent of the "relentless, pernickety attention" (Roy, 1997:27) Baby Kochamma pays to her garden – attentions that are, rather symbolically, said to be "endured" (Roy, 1997:27) by the garden for more than 50 years – and the detached manner in which Pappachi mounts and measures the moth after finding it in his drink. The police – who are described by the narrator as "history's henchmen" (Roy,

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1997:308) – are representative of “the agency of the state in sustaining the social hierarchy and hegemonic power relations” (Chae, 2015:529) that enable and perpetuate the “structured inequality and economic exploitation” (Chae, 2015:528) of those who are othered by “the violence of the Big System that legitimizes the suppression of Small Things” (Chae, 2015:529). Velutha’s systemic othering as a result of his untouchability leads the police to overlook his humanity in the same way Mammachi does – echoed by Pappachi’s inability to see the moth as a being in itself – and his subsequent animalisation is exemplified by the narrator’s observation that if the policemen “hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature – had been severed long ago” (Roy, 1997:309). Similarly, when Vellya Paapen reveals Ammu and Velutha’s affair to Mammachi, she strips both Velutha and Ammu of their human qualities and animalises them when imagining them having sex: “She thought of [Ammu] naked, coupling in the mud with a man who was nothing but a filthy *coolie*. […] *Like animals*, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. *Like a dog with a bitch in heat*” (Roy, 1997:257-258). This dehumanization speaks to the lingering influence of “the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation” (Fanon, 1963:41) which declares the other to be

> insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces. (Fanon, 1963:41)

Velutha’s murder is a “clinical demonstration” of “human history, masquerading as God’s Purpose” (Roy, 1997:309), flowing from the same corrupt processes of justification that underpin colonial oppression and exploitation and animalises the

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colonised other; it "is the result of a social pathology masquerading as a collective ethics, and Roy locks it into the same symbolic economy as Baby Kochamma's ornamental garden and Pappachi's moth[, as each] of these images present power struggles wherein civilization is safeguarded by the disciplining of plant, animal, and human others" (Vadde, 2009:532-533).

Velutha's death is a key moment in the text for a number of reasons, and the betrayals that lead to his ultimate fate are equally worth examining, as they represent the interconnectedness between human and nonhuman history in interesting ways. The night Vellya Paapen drunkenly tells Mammachi about Ammu and Velutha's affair, he is driven to do so by a corrupt sense of guilt. As an "Old World Paravan [who had] seen the Crawling Backwards Days" (Roy, 1997:76), Vellya Paapen's internalisation of the caste system's bigotry warps his sense of loyalty, and his "gratitude to Mammachi and her family for all that they had done for him [, it] widened his smile and bent his back" (Roy, 1997:76). Although he is conflicted about divulging his son's indiscretions, Vellya Paapen, like many of the other characters in the novel, decides to uphold the dominant social structures that justify violence against the marginalised. Significantly, the night Vellya Paapen goes to the Ayemenem House, there is a "*Cyclonic disturbance*" (Roy, 1997:254) that causes uncharacteristically heavy rainfall during that time of the year. The narrator observes that it might have been "the rain that drove Vellya Paapen to the kitchen door" (Roy, 1997:254) and that to "a superstitious man, the relentlessness of that unseasonal downpour could have seemed like an omen from an angry god" (Roy, 1997:254), and that to "a drunk superstitious man, it could have seemed like the beginning of the end of the world. Which, in a way, it was" (Roy, 1997:254). The cyclonic disturbance is significant as it serves as a symbol for the intertwining of human and nonhuman history because

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Vellya Paapen's decision to betray his son leads directly to the drowning of Sophie Mol, whose death is inadvertently caused by the unseasonal downpour. As a result of the unusually heavy rain, the "river had risen," and "its waters [are] quick and black, snaking towards the sea, carrying with it […] a whole palm frond, part of a thatched fence, and other gifts the wind had given it" (Roy, 1997:289). The weather disturbance causes the river to run faster than the twins had anticipated and dislodges large branches and logs along its banks, which turns the Meenachal into a "silent highway full of muffled traffic" (Roy, 1997:292). As the three children near the opposite bank, their boat capsizes after colliding with a log, and while Estha and Rahel's experience in swimming in the river allows them to reach the bank safely, Sophie Mol is swept up in the current and drowns. Cyclones that appear more frequently are the result of climate change (Chakrabarty, 2009:199), and it can be argued that Roy's inclusion of the cyclonic disturbance in one of the novel's most pivotal moments – as a seemingly active agent in driving Vellya Paapen to the Ipe's door and the tragedies that are to follow – negates the historical denial "that nature could ever have history quite in the same way humans have it" (Chakrabarty, 2009:201).

The connection between the human tragedies that occur after Vellya Paapen's drunken confession and the effects of climate change may seem tenuous at first glance, but by including (however briefly) the detail that the torrential rainfall is caused by a cyclonic disturbance, Roy is able to re-entangle the connections between human actions and the agency of nonhuman nature, embodying Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2012:10) claim that "humans are now part of the natural history of the planet" (Chakrabarty, 2012:10). Roy does not use "natural detail as a mere exotic backdrop to a primarily human action" (Mortensen, 2003:190), as the Meenachal is ascribed with an *active* role in the events of Sophie Mol's death – it is not simply a passive bystander

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or an aesthetic device. The role of the Meenachal in Sophie Mol's death can be described as an act of "distributed agency" (Iheka, 2018:44) that challenges "the emphasis on human agency expressed in terms of linguistic and political subjectivities all rooted in the idea of intentionality" (Iheka, 2018:44) and emphasises the "roles that nonhumans play even in connection to human agency and the multifarious effects that they produce" (Iheka, 2018:44). Although Sophie Mol's drowning is the direct result of intentional human agency as the children make the decision to flee the house and row across the river during a storm, the Meenachal and the nonhuman elements surrounding it are distinctly framed as active participants in the tragic event even though the actions they produce are not bound to intentionality or reason. As the children prepare to row across the river, the narrator describes how "[d]ense clumps of yellow bamboo [droop] into the river as though grieving in advance for what they [know is] to going to happen" (Roy, 1997:291), and the river is described as "accepting the offering" (Roy, 1997:293) of Sophie Mol's life; "There was no storm-music. No whirlpool spun up from the inky depths of the Meenachal. No shark supervised the tragedy" (Roy, 1997:293), it was simply "a quiet handing over ceremony" (Roy, 1997:293). Although Sophie Mol's death is described as "a quiet handing over ceremony" (Roy, 1997:293), the preceding text deliberately inscribes the river and the bamboo along its banks as actively engaging in the tragedy, which frames the event as one in which intentional human agency converges with unintentional nonhuman agency. This is not only significant because it serves to re-entangle human and nonhuman forces and actions, but also because it connects nonhuman nature to the far-reaching personal and political consequences of Sophie Mol's death. The active participation of nonhuman nature in the death of Sophie Mol can thus be said to embody Iheka's theorisation of distributed agency which "resists a linear account of

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human agency" (Iheka, 2018:46) and foregoes "anthropocentric thinking [that] has often placed humans as agents and the nonhuman as object, inert and passive" (Iheka, 2018:49). This form of distributed agency further echoes Chakrabarty's (2009:205) claim that changes to "the climate, and hence the overall environment, can sometimes reach a tipping point at which this slow and apparently timeless backdrop for human actions transforms itself with a speed that can only spell disaster for human beings" (Chakrabarty, 2009:205). As a result of the continuously multiplying human population "and their consumption of cheap fossil-fuel-based energy to sustain their civilizations" (Chakrabarty, 2012:15), humans have become "a geological force that determines the climate of the planet much to the detriment of civilization itself" (Chakrabarty, 2012:15). Sophie Mol's drowning serves as a painfully intimate account of the individual tragedies that occur because of global environmental change brought about by anthropogenic forces, and it is this intimacy that makes it such a poignant example of the detrimental effects of environmental degradation that are "mediated by the inequities of capitalist development" (Chakrabarty, 2012:1). The confluence of human and nonhuman agency that precipitates Sophie Mol's death serves to elucidate how, in the age of the Anthropocene, "nature *becomes* history" (Poyner, 2018:54).

The other significant betrayal that leads to Velutha's incarceration and death is Comrade K.N.M. Pillai's strategic refusal to provide Velutha with the Communist Party's protection and support after his affair with Ammu has come to light. In order to bolster his political aspirations to become a local member of the Legislative Assembly, Comrade Pillai takes a special interest in the Ipe family's pickling factory, Paradise Pickles and Preserves, and constantly urges the factory workers to stage a revolution. Velutha is the only factory worker who is a card-holding member of the Party, but the other Touchable workers' resentment towards him – believing, "for ancient reasons of

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their own" (Roy, 1997:121), that "Paravans were not *meant* to be carpenters" (Roy, 1997:77) – makes him "an ally [Comrade Pillai] would rather have done without" (Roy, 1997:121). Comrade Pillai's self-serving actions in rallying up the factory workers to demand yearly bonuses, provident funds and accident insurance are impeded by Velutha's position in the party, but "Comrade Pillai [steps] carefully around this wrinkle, waiting for a suitable opportunity to iron it out" (Roy, 1997:121). His opportunity comes when Velutha arrives at his door after his confrontation with Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, as Comrade Pillai decides to strategically align himself with the dominant powers that he is conspiring to undermine in order to fulfil his political ambitions. He tells Velutha that "the Party was not constituted to support workers' indiscipline in their private life" (Roy, 1997:287), and effectively dispels Velutha's only hope of security by turning him away on the basis that it "*is not in the Party's interests to take up such matters*" because an "*individuals' interest is subordinate to the organizations' interest*" (Roy, 1997:287; emphasis in original). The morning thereafter, Comrade Pillai further betrays Velutha by disavowing him and by not refuting Baby Kochamma's allegation of attempted rape although he knew it to be untrue. Although Comrade Pillai did not plan the events that followed, he "slipped his ready fingers into History's waiting glove" (Roy, 1997:281) and used Velutha's death as a steppingstone to fulfil his personal objectives:

> It had been in the papers. The news of Sophie Mol's death, of the police 'Encounter' with a Paravan charged with kidnapping and murder. Of the subsequent Communist Party siege of Paradise Pickles & Preserves, led by Ayemenem's own Crusader for Justice and Spokesman of the Oppressed. Comrade K. N. M. Pillai claimed that the Management had implicated the Paravan in a false police case because he was an active member of the Communist Party. That they wanted to eliminate him for indulging in 'Lawful Union Activities.' All that had been in the papers. The Official Version. (Roy, 1997:303)

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In the same way Mammachi exploits Velutha as an untouchable by using his skill set and abilities as a carpenter but failing to value him as an individual, Comrade Pillai uses Velutha's status as an untouchable to further his political ambitions whilst being complicit in his murder.

The broader significance of Comrade Pillai's betrayal lies in the fact that, as an untouchable Paravan, Velutha's "death [is] more profitable than his life had ever been" (Roy, 1997:281). There is a parallel that can be drawn between Velutha's exploitation by the novel's more privileged characters in pursuit of self-aggrandisement and the environmental degradation that occurs in Ayemenem as a result of "mismanaged development projects" (Chae, 2015:522) in the 23 years that follow his death. Estha and Rahel both return to Ayemenem after twenty-three years of separation and find the landscape significantly changed from when they were eight years old. When they return at the age of thirty-one, the Meenachal river that once had "the power to evoke fear [and to] change lives" (Roy, 1997:124) now smells "of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans" (Roy, 1997:13) and is "no more than a swollen drain" that "[ferries] fetid garbage to the sea" (Roy, 1997:124). The river has shrunk as a result of state-sanctioned development projects, like the salt-water barrage that was built by the state government "in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby" (Roy, 1997:124). The barrage was built to regulate "the inflow of saltwater from the backwaters" (Roy, 1997:124) in order to increase crop production – the rice farmers now had "two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river" (Roy, 1997:124). The river has been transformed from a once lush and powerful ecological force to a "sludging green ribbon lawn" (Roy, 1997:124), and its "waters collect the abject secrets of globalization" (Vadde, 2009:537) – "Bright plastic bags" (Roy, 1997:124), dead fish and fish that "[suffer] from fin-rot" (Roy, 1997:13), human faeces

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and "unadulterated factory effluents" (Roy, 1997:125). The pollution of the river is a direct result of the capitalist greed that drives the neoliberal era of globalisation, and Roy effectively uses the Meenachal as "a symbolic background indicating the economic condition of people and their livelihood, as well as ecological environments" (Chae, 2015:522). The History House where Velutha was savagely beaten by the police has been bought and renovated by a five-star hotel chain, and the hotel – ironically named "Heritage" (Roy, 1997:126) – further adds to the pollution of the backwaters. As a result of the environmental decay and toxicity caused by the salt-water barrage and other state-sanctioned development projects, the hotel could not be approached from the river and the guests had to be "ferried across the backwaters straight from Cochin. They arrived by speedboat, opening up a V of foam on the water, leaving behind a rainbow film of gasoline" (Roy, 1997:125). The hotel is marketed as "God's Own Country" (Roy, 1997:125) – the same phrase used by Kerala's Department of Tourism to advertise the region (Vadde, 2009:523; see also Mukherjee, 2010:25) – which supposedly serves to represent how "the updated modern hotel epitomizes a developed modern India" (Chae, 2015:522). Roy deliberately foregrounds how the environmental degradation in the backwaters is not only caused by human-centred processes of capitalist development but that these processes – which are underpinned by the naturalisation of hierarchical dualisms (such as development and non-development) that "justify exploitation of the natural environment under the guise of social progress" (Chae, 2015:522) – serve to further "increase the gap between the impoverished underclass and wealthy elite" (Chae, 2015:522). Although the view from the hotel may be beautiful, the water that surrounds it is "thick and toxic" (Roy, 1997:125) with chemicals and human faeces that causes "the smell of shit [to lift] off the river and [hover] over Ayemenem like a hat" (Roy,

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1997:125). The narrator's cynical observation that the hotel is a "smelly paradise" (Roy, 1997:125) implies "the ambivalence of development economics and their problematic impact on nature and people living along the river" (Chae, 2015:522). Despite the hotel's clear efforts to obscure the surrounding squalor and subsequent environmental impact, the natural environment confronts guests and management with the olfactory proof of its decay; although the visual evidence of pollution is obscured by physical boundaries that separate the hotel and the river, there "wasn't much [the hotel] could do about the smell" (Roy, 1997:125). The hotel had "built a tall wall to screen off the slum and prevent it from encroaching on Kari Saipu's estate" (Roy 1997:125), and "they knew, those clever Hotel People, that smelliness, like other people's poverty, was merely a matter of getting used to" (Roy, 1997:126). The hotel's deliberate obfuscation of the surrounding environmental degradation and the effect it has had on the local community "exposes the rationalized economic logic that ideologically justifies the sacrifice of 'small' people" (Chae, 2015:522) and nonhuman nature.

The significance of the paradoxical co-existence of the Heritage Hotel – as a symbol of progress and modernisation – and the slum on the borders of its estate cannot be overlooked, as it serves as yet another symbol of how "[a]ssaults on a nation's environmental resources frequently depend not just on the physical displacement of local communities, but on their imaginative displacement as well, indeed on the prior rhetorical and visual evacuation of those communities from the idea of the developing nation-state" (Nixon, 2010:62). The members of the community were not only physically displaced because the hotel chain had bought ancestral homes that bordered the estate from "old families" (Roy, 1997:126), but the wall that obscures the local community's destitution symbolically represents the "production of unimagined

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communities" (Nixon, 2010:62) – an "imaginative work of expulsion" (Nixon, 2010:62) that is driven by "[n]arratives of national development […] that efface from view communities that inconvenience or disturb the implied trajectory of a unitary national ascent" (Nixon, 2010:62). The people living in the slum are thus not only physically obstructed from view by the wall; their privation is imaginatively exorcized from the landscape and the image of the nation-state because they do not fit the carefully crafted façade of Indian modernity the five-star hotel attempts to convey to tourists and because their destitution is seen merely as a nuisance to perceived social and economic progress. Through Roy's representation of the continued marginalisation and imaginative expulsion of communities classified as expendable by narratives of national development that dominate the era of globalisation (Nixon, 2010:63), *The God of Small Things* embodies Graham Huggan's (2004:704) claim that "ecological disruption is coextensive with damage to the social fabric; and that environmental issues cannot be separated from questions of social justice and human rights" (see also Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:52).

Roy's deliberate foregrounding of the devastating effects of the construction of the hotel is also significant because it speaks to the realities in Kerala where, according to the state government, tourism has replaced agriculture and fishing as the region's "primary source of economic growth" (Vadde, 2009:523). However, the income produced by tourism in Kerala is low and remains "a negligible proportion of its domestic economy" (Vadde, 2009:523-524), and the tourism-driven "development in the state has been primarily the result of a particular interest group, the hotel industry, benefiting from subsidies, tax exemptions, and credit facilities at low interest rates" (Vadde, 2009:524). With these motivations "the state government has created several models of public-private partnerships" (Vadde, 2009:524) with large hotel

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conglomerates "while successfully lobbying against the central government's Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) rules" (Vadde, 2009:524). By depicting the large-scale environmental decay in the 1990s when Estha and Rahel return to Ayemenem, Roy exposes how the "enmeshing of state and corporate interests [supersedes] ecological and local community concerns" (Vadde, 2009:524) in a globalised era "when transnational capital replaced the Communist movement as the revolutionary force within Kerala" (Vadde, 2009:524). The Heritage Hotel thus serves as a symbol for the neo-colonial underpinnings of modern development, where "the ongoing collaboration between national governments and gargantuan transnational companies whose economies exceed those of all but the largest 'developing' countries" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:30) is aligned "with a predatory socioeconomic system – global capitalism – that effectively spreads inequality at the same time as it champions its own adherence to freedom, democracy and human rights" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:30).

Comrade Pillai's actions the night before Velutha is captured and his "siege of Paradise Pickles" (Roy, 1997:281) after Velutha's death – where he delivered "fervent, high-pitched speeches about Rights of Untouchables" (Roy, 1997:281) – can be seen as a parallel to the predatory nature of global capitalism which in turn is connected to "ascendant humanism and its accompanying ideologies of progress and profit" (Vadde, 2009:536). The hypocrisy that underlies Comrade Pillai's actions after Velutha's death – emphasised by his transformation into "Ayemenem's own Crusader for Justice and Spokesman of the Oppressed" (Roy, 1997:303) – mirrors the justification of the environmental degradation Estha and Rahel are confronted with upon their return "as an inevitable sacrifice in the process of development in postcolonial India" (Chae, 2015:524). Roy is able to connect these two seemingly disparate examples of exploitation and violence by symbolically linking them through

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"the experience of place" (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011:4). The violence of Velutha's beating – which, significantly, took place in what is now the Heritage Hotel's kitchen – is invariably linked to "the violence wrought by rationalizations of economic logic and optimistic narratives of national development" (Chae, 2015:521) which is represented by the construction of the hotel and the ensuing environmental decay. Although "[n]othing worse than kebabs and caramel custard happened [in the site of Velutha's beating] now" (Roy, 1997:127), some evidence of the crime still exists – Rahel's toy wristwatch "lay buried in the ground [under] twenty-three years of June rain" (Roy, 1997:127). This small detail is significant as it yokes together the violence of Velutha's beating and the violence of neoliberal processes of development and exposes how the construction of the hotel has resulted in what Rob Nixon (2010:62) calls "spatial amnesia". In the same way the local community, "under the banner of development, [is] physically unsettled and imaginatively displaced, evacuated from place and time and thus uncoupled from the idea of a national future and a national memory" (Nixon, 2010:62), Velutha's wrongful death is exorcized from Ayemenem's collective memory and obscured by environmental and human change. It can also be argued that the references to the different forms of pollution in the descriptions of Ayemenem when Estha and Rahel return, can be read as symbols for "the unpunished crime that still contaminates the collective unconscious" (Mortensen, 2003:188) of Ayemenem; a reading which highlights that questions of social justice and human rights cannot be separated from environmental justice (Tickell, 2007:34). In symbolically aligning the destruction of nonhuman nature and the violence experienced by the oppressed, Roy challenges nature/culture dichotomies in order to expose how "politics and environment, 'nature' and 'culture' [are] necessarily and mutually interpenetrated" (Mukherjee, 2010:18). Through spinning an intricate web of connection between caste

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oppression, neoliberal globalisation and development, and the private life of the Ipe family – and how these seemingly disparate processes are invariably linked to Velutha's murder, the separation of the twins and the degradation of nonhuman nature in Ayemenem – Roy is able to expose how the violence experienced by the disenfranchised is coextensive with the decimation of nonhuman nature. *The God of Small Things* thus effectively portrays how human exceptionalism and its accompanying ideologies of ascendancy, profit and progress are used to justify the exploitation and oppression of human and nonhuman others.

Even though Roy's description of the environmental destruction in Ayemenem seems to paint a rather pessimistic picture of the multidimensional fallout of what Roy (2015:9) calls the "era of the Privatization of Everything," *The God of Small Things* also effectively challenges the "solipsistic and exceptional model of the human" that dominates this era by strategically aligning the novel's most disenfranchised characters (Estha, Rahel, Ammu and Velutha) with nonhuman nature throughout the text. In its more obvious form, the alignment of the novel's main protagonists with the natural environment is brought about by direct and indirect comparisons to nonhuman nature. Take for example Chacko's explanation to the twins as to why "Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to [Paradise Pickles and Preserves]" (Roy, 1997:57) even though her workload was equal to Chacko's; he "told Rahel and Estha that Ammu had no *Locusts Stand I*" (Roy, 1997:57; emphasis added). It is significant that the twins internalise the Latin term, *locus standi* – having no recognised position or acknowledged right or claim – through the animalistic imagery of "Locusts" (Roy, 1997:57). Having used a phonetic breakdown of the phrase to make sense of it, they have subconsciously connected their mother's systemic oppression as a result of her sex to nonhuman nature, and more significantly, perhaps, to a pest that ruins crops

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and causes widespread agricultural damage. Ammu's transgressive affair with Velutha later leads her family – specifically Mammachi and Baby Kochamma – to view her as a pest that has destroyed their carefully wrought façade of superiority and high standing in Ayemenem, which leads Baby Kochamma to try and cover up Ammu's willing participation in a relationship that violated the "Love Laws" (Roy, 1997:33) of caste. The twins are also described using animal imagery throughout the text. Ammu thinks of Estha and Rahel as "a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed in each other's company, lolloping arm in arm down a highway full of hurtling traffic. Entirely oblivious of what trucks can do to frogs" (Roy, 1997:43). The significance of this comparison not only lies in the representation of Estha and Rahel as animals (which symbolically aligns the impending destruction of their lives with the destruction of nonhuman nature), but in the way it again establishes the novel's preoccupation with the potentially devastating effects of "the violence of the Big System that legitimizes the suppression of Small Things" (Chae, 2015:529). Estha and Rahel – symbolically represented as frogs and, thus, 'Small Things' – are, as young children, understandably oblivious to "the dominant power systems that support the existing order of society" (Chae, 2015:524) – the 'Big Systems' symbolically represented as the looming threat of the trucks on the highway – that will inevitably play a large role in the tragedies that affect their lives into adulthood. In a similar vein, Velutha is compared to a dog after Comrade Pillai turns him away the night before he is found and beaten by the police. The narrator describes how Velutha's "feet walked him to the river. As though they were the leash and he were the dog. History walking the dog" (Roy, 1997:288). Not only does this comparison link back to Mammachi's animalisation of Velutha and Ammu when she pictures them having sex, but it also foregrounds the powerlessness of the small lives that are deemed expendable by

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systemically justified processes of othering. Velutha's death is seen as a necessary sacrifice to uphold dominant social structures predicated on "the notion of human exceptionalism that sanctions the brutalization of other members of the biosphere" (Iheka, 2018:50), whether human or nonhuman.

Although these examples of the characters' alignment with nonhuman nature are significant – in the sense that their oppression and exploitation is justified by the same hierarchical dualisms that are used to justify the degradation of the environment in pursuit of progress – there is another layer of meaning-making that runs throughout *The God of Small Things* which arguably warrants a more thorough investigation and analysis. Throughout the novel, "Roy interrogates constructions of the human" (Vadde, 2009:529) through her representation of the protagonists' (especially Estha, Rahel and Velutha's) reciprocal engagement with nonhuman nature, in contrast with the exploitative tendencies of the novel's more privileged characters. In his essay, *Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change* (2012), Chakrabarty argues "that in an age when the forces of globalization intersect with those of global warming, the idea of the human needs to be stretched beyond where postcolonial thought advanced it" (2012:15), because the figure of the human has, as a result of anthropogenic global warming and environmental degradation, been doubled:

> Humans put out greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and the biosphere. Here the picture of the human is how social scientists have always imagined humans to be: a purposeful biological entity with the capacity to degrade natural environment. But what happens when we say humans are acting like a geophysical force? We then liken humans to some nonhuman, nonliving agency. That is why I say the science of anthropogenic global warming has doubled the figure of the human – you have to think of the two figures of the human simultaneously: the human-human and the nonhuman-human. (Chakrabarty, 2012:11)

Although humans have always been "biological agents, both collectively and as individuals" (Chakrabarty, 2009:206) – existing within "the culture/nature distinction

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that has allowed humans to look on their relationship to 'nature' through the prism of the subject/object relationship" (Chakrabarty, 2012:13) – humans, as a species, "now have an agency in determining the climate of the planet as a whole, a privilege reserved in the past only for very largescale geophysical forces" (Chakrabarty, 2012:9). The figure of the human that functions as a biological agent on the planet "is endowed with a sense of ontology" (Chakrabarty, 2012:13), but the new, nonhuman-human that acts as a geological force has resulted in "a form of collective existence that has no ontological dimension" (Chakrabarty, 2012:13). Although humans "cannot ever experience [themselves] as a geophysical force (Chakrabarty, 2012:12), the current realities of environmental crises across the globe necessitate "thinking disjunctively about the human, through moves that in their simultaneity appear contradictory" (Chakrabarty, 2012:2). This is a task well-suited to imaginative literature, and *The God of Small Things* "disputes established ideas of human sovereignty by reconceiving the human within networks of interdependence and reciprocity with the nonhuman natural world" (Vadde, 2009:529).

In stark opposition to the appropriative and exploitative attitudes toward nonhuman nature exemplified by Baby Kochamma's garden and Pappachi's Moth, Estha and Rahel share a reciprocal connection to the natural world that surrounds them – much in the same way they share a seemingly telepathic connection with each other – that offers them "nonviolent and nonascendant forms of human knowledge ascertained through their environmental literacy" (Vadde, 2009:534). Once again, the Meenachal river serves as a vessel through which Roy can reinscribe human relationships to nonhuman nature with a sense of entanglement and distributed agency:

> The first third of the river was their friend. Before the Really Deep began. They knew the slippery stone steps (thirteen) before the slimy mud began. They knew the afternoon weed that flowed inwards from the backwaters of Komarakom. They

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> knew the smaller fish. The flat, foolish pallathi, the silver paral, the wily, whiskered koori, the sometimes karimeen […] Here they studied Silence (like the children of the Fisher Peoples), and learned the bright language of dragonflies. Here they learned to Wait. To Watch. To think thoughts and not voice them. To move like lightning when the bendy yellow bamboo arced downwards. (Roy, 1997:203)

This passage serves to highlight what Iheka (2018:23) refers to as the "aesthetics of proximity." Although Iheka's aesthetics of proximity focuses on "processes by which *African* literary artifacts depict the interconnectedness of human lives with Others in the environment" (Iheka, 2018:23; emphasis added), the dimensions of proximity he outlines are applicable to Roy's work of Indian-English fiction as well. The first dimension of proximity refers to "multispecies presence [which] illuminates the spatial sense of nearness" (Iheka, 2018:23). Estha and Rahel have an intimate knowledge of the various biotic and abiotic entities with which they share "their river" (Roy, 1997:122) – the "slimy mud," "the afternoon weed," the various "smaller fish", the "dragonflies" and the "bendy yellow bamboo" (Roy, 1997:203). By specifically highlighting the twins' awareness of and engagement with the other species that form part of the river's ecosystem – with their "natural education [resulting] in markedly different values from Pappachi's and Baby Kochamma's" (Vadde, 2009:535) – Roy affirms that the river is "an ecological community where the nonhuman is always present and visible with the human" (Iheka, 2018:26). The "multispecies presence" (Iheka, 2018:26) in this passage and the emphasis on their spatial proximity foregrounds "that which is elided in the emphasis on human subjectivity – a mode of being that foregrounds human imbrication with the nonhuman" (Iheka, 2018:27). The emphasis here on physical proximity extends to include "the second form of nearness [which] is predicated on similar or shared attributes that bring humans closer to other components of the ecosystem" (Iheka, 2018:22). In the passage above, Roy subverts subject/object dichotomies as "silence becomes a human trait and language the province of the river,

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dragonflies, and bamboo" (Vadde, 2009:535). The foregrounding of nonhuman nature being the possessor of language in this passage is significant because of the power that has been ascribed to language by scholars of post- and anticolonial thought. Frantz Fanon, for example, emphasises the significance of language in colonial oppression in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986:8-9):

> To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. [...] A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power.

By assigning this powerful tool to nonhuman nature, rather than to the human characters of Estha and Rahel, Roy "undermines the grand narrative of human-centeredness" (Iheka, 2018:41) that has sociogenically constructed the human "species as distinct, capable of ethics, and imbued with political and creative capabilities unlike other life forms often [...] [perceived as being] without rights, intellect, and other superior endowments" (Iheka, 2018:22-23). The inscription of language onto the natural environment in this instance thus holds broader significance, as it problematises the view of nonhuman nature as the inscrutable Other which is only knowable "through the use of human terms and language" (Iheka, 2018:14).

Another striking example of this distinctive proximity to nonhuman nature is Velutha and Ammu's engagement with "the minute spider who lived in a crack in the wall of the black verandah of the History House and camouflaged himself by covering his body with bits of rubbish" (Roy, 1997:338) during their affair:

> Without admitting it to each other or themselves, they linked their fates, their futures (their Love, their Madness, their Hope, their Infinnate joy), to his. They checked on him every night (with growing panic as time went by) to see if he had survived the day. They fretted over his frailty. His smallness. The adequacy of his camouflage. His seemingly self-destructive pride. They grew to love his eclectic

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> taste. His shambling dignity. They chose him because they knew that they had to put their faith in fragility. Stick to Smallness. (Roy, 1997:339)

Ammu and Velutha's individualisation of the spider is significant as it offers a stark contrast to Pappachi's appropriative relationship to the moth he found. Where Pappachi fails to view the moth as an individuated being and rather sees it as an object of human knowledge and a reflection of his foiled ambitions, Ammu and Velutha "[link] their fates, their futures" (Roy, 1997:339) to the spider in a way that does not perpetuate human exceptionalism. Their fixation on the spider's survival – which, to them, is intimately linked to their own – highlights the "vulnerabilities of death in both humans and other animals" (Iheka, 2018:23) and "allows for contemplating the human body in relation to other bodies easily commodified and disposable" (Iheka, 2018:23). By focusing on the shared attribute of mortality and frailty, Roy, via Iheka's theorisation of the aesthetics of proximity, is able "to problematize the idea that humans are the locus of existence and should occupy the center of literary and cultural analysis" and "puts pressure on the ideas of human exceptionalism and absolute distinctions from other forms of life" (Iheka, 2018:23).

Apart from these examples of multispecies entanglement and multidimensional proximity, the most prominent example of Roy's challenge to the hierarchical structuring of human being-in-the-world throughout *The God of Small Things* is Velutha. Although Velutha's death is one of the novel's most pivotal narrative moments, his life is equally worth investigating. Throughout the text, Velutha's reciprocal relationship with and intimate connection to nonhuman nature is continuously stressed, whether through descriptions of his "light brown birthmark, shaped like a pointed dry leaf […] that made the monsoons come on time" (Roy, 1997:73) or how "wood, in [his] hands, seemed to soften and become as pliable as

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Plasticine" (Roy, 1997:79). Even though Velutha uses the resources at his disposal in his craft, his interaction with nonhuman nature is foregrounded as one which is predicated on mutuality and reciprocity – a benign relationship which "is quite rare because of the prevailing exploitative thrust of human relations with the nonhuman world" (Iheka, 2018:29). Although it can be argued that Velutha is "positioned as a boundary-figure, a gatekeeper, who mediates between culture and nature" (Mortensen, 2003:192), there is also an argument to be made that Roy's depiction of Velutha functions "beyond such boundaries between culture and nature […] so that human and non-human agency are incorporated within each other: each [producing] inscriptions, material and discursive, upon the other" (Poyner, 2018:60). When Ammu watches Velutha emerge from the river on the night of their first sexual encounter, "she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it" (Roy, 1997:333-334). This description of Velutha "presents a particularly compelling instance of the permeability of human bodies and their entanglement with matter" (Lobnik, 2016:129), as Velutha is positioned as belonging to, rather than owning, the more-than-human world that surrounds him. Moreover, in witnessing Velutha emerge from the river, Ammu understands "the quality of his beauty" (Roy, 1997:334); "How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. Each plank he planed, each nail he drove, each thing he made had moulded him. Had left its stamp on him" (Roy, 1997:334). Through these descriptions of reciprocal belonging, Roy assigns "the physical world a role in Velutha's identity formation – the material environment, curiously, touching back reciprocally" (Lobnik, 2016:129) – thus expanding "the conception of intersubjectivity beyond the human and [redistributing] agency among human and nonhuman actors" (Lobnik, 2016:129). Velutha becomes the "God of Small Things" (Roy, 1997:217),

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leaving “no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors” (Roy, 1997:216). The imagery of leaving no footprints deliberately links back to Velutha’s untouchability as a Paravan and the way in which the narrator describes the doubled marginalisation faced by untouchables who had converted to Christianity in the hopes of escaping the oppressive caste system:

> When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas (among them Velutha’s grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. […] It didn’t take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. […] After Independence they found they were not entitled to any government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless. *It was a little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being allowed to leave footprints at all.* (Roy, 1997:74; emphasis added)

The significance of Velutha being described as not leaving footprints in sand thus cannot be overlooked, as Roy has used an image that is linked to his caste oppression in order to reinscribe Velutha with agency. Although not leaving footprints and images in mirrors can be read as symbols of Velutha’s lack of agency as a Paravan – reflections in mirrors being “figuratively identity-bearing” (Poyner, 2018:66) – as the symbolic God of Small Things, Velutha lives in symbiosis with nonhuman nature and leaves no mark on it, and his “lack of reflection in the mirror suggests an absence of narcissism and, consequently, of an anthropocentric worldview” (Poyner, 2018:66). By doubling the image of the footprints in this way, Roy subverts the myth of pollution connected to untouchables – traditionally performing activities that are considered spiritually polluting (Tickell, 2007:23) – by emphasising Velutha’s reciprocal and non-exploitative relationship to nonhuman nature. The figurative pollution implied by Velutha’s caste status is thus transfigured through the reality of his material engagement with the natural world and calls “for ethical reflection on the part of

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humans regarding their obligations to the Other(s), broadly conceived" (Iheka, 2018:30).

Velutha thus represents a particularly interesting figure of the human in his multidimensional alignment and entanglement with nonhuman nature, and ultimately promotes a model of the human that champions interdependency rather than ascendancy (Vadde, 2009:536). However, Velutha's powerlessness in the face of the 'Big Systems' that ultimately cause his demise reflects Chakrabarty's (2012:7) claim that "ethnographies of what the marginal, the poor, and the excluded actually do in order to survive yield no alternative norms for human societies that are still in the grip of large and centralizing institutions, corporations, and bureaucracies." Roy's portrayal of Velutha is thus a call "for social and economic justice for postcolonial India's other, the disenfranchised and subordinated people and non-human nature" (Chae, 2015:529), but the symbolic link that binds Velutha's death to the destruction of nonhuman nature as a result of neoliberal globalisation highlights the fact that, as a geological force in the Anthropocene, humans "have a collective mode of existence that is justice-blind" (Chakrabarty, 2012:14). This non-ontological model of the human, however, does not supersede the model of the human that functions as a "political agent, as a bearer of rights and as author of actions" (Chakrabarty, 2012:14). The human-human and the nonhuman-human exist simultaneously and contradictorily, being at once subject to the forces of nature and being a geological force itself, whilst still remaining "open to the contingency of individual human experience" (Chakrabarty, 2012:14). Through her depiction of Velutha's multidimensional modes of existence, Roy not only advocates for a more ethical and reciprocal engagement with nonhuman nature, but also exposes the violence affected by both figures of the human – the human-human and the nonhuman-human – and that these forms of violence are not

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mutually exclusive. The same notions of exceptionalism and ascendancy that dominate the discriminatory social structures that justify Velutha's exploitation and oppression and lead to his death, lie at the centre of the figure of the human that has become a geological force in the era of neoliberal globalisation and the Anthropocene. *The God of Small Things* thus effectively highlights the need to reconfigure the human in the Anthropocene and to consider the multiple forms of agency that constitute our individual and collective modes of existence. The novel's final word, "Tomorrow" (Roy, 1997:340), can thus be read as a recuperative gesture, urging the reader to consider a future where human exceptionalism – and its accompanying forms of violence against the earth and all its inhabitants – is replaced by interdependency and mutual understanding.

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Chapter 2:
The secret life of mosquitoes:
Nonhuman agency and uneven development in Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*

Although the scope and density of Namwali Serpell's multigenerational epic, *The Old Drift* (2019), opens it up to multiple avenues of critical engagement, there is a distinct undercurrent of environmental concern which runs through the text. What emerges from this winding and ambitious narrative is a history of Zambia – and a speculative projection of its future – that resists a purely anthropocentric reading; one which foregrounds the complex entanglement of human and nonhuman forces and the destructive effects of Western development discourse and neoliberal globalisation on African ecologies. The most prominent challenge to anthropocentricism in *The Old Drift* emerges in the form of a sardonic swarm chorus of mosquitoes, who function as a Greek chorus in the text, guiding and commentating on the narrative. Although swarm and insect imagery has historically been used throughout literary history as symbols of human social order and the individual's role within it, Serpell's swarm chorus does not serve such an allegorical purpose. Instead, the swarm is looking back at the human, tracing the ways in which mosquitoes are inextricably linked to the production of human stories and demonstrating that mosquitoes are far more than irksome pests and vectors of disease.

In order to fully understand the significance of the swarm chorus's role in the text, it is necessary to briefly consider the varied modes of narration in *The Old Drift* and to examine how Serpell uses the mosquitoes to undermine and challenge human exceptionalism and anthropocentric historical narratives. The bulk of the novel

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consists of the omniscient third-person narrative chapters which focus on the human characters in the three families around which the plot is centred. The main voice in the text, however, falls to the swarm chorus of mosquitoes who narrate the short, italicised sections between every chapter from a first-person-plural perspective (which, for the sake of clarity, will not be quoted in italics in my text). These 'choral sections' contain the musings and often sardonic commentary of Serpell's "gossipy chorus" (Serpell, 2019:19), and not only serve to guide the narrative, but also convey the immense effect mosquitoes have had on human history and provide insight into mosquito biology. The first and final words of the novel belong to this chorus, which actively engages with the reader through directly addressing them – and more broadly speaking, the human race – as 'you'. In the second choral section, the mosquitoes introduce themselves as a "chorus of gossipy mites" (Serpell, 2019:19), and make it clear to the reader that this multigenerational epic is being told from *their* perspective:

> We've been needling you for centuries untold. Or perhaps we should say centuries told: you certainly love your stories. Your earliest tales were of animals, of course, beastly fables carved into cave walls. Well, it's time to turn the fables, we say, time for us to tell you what we know. (Serpell, 2019:19)

By 'turning the fables' and assigning the role of storytelling – a capability considered peculiar to humans – to a nonhuman entity, Serpell endows the swarm of mosquitoes with a sense of agency and superiority that subverts the hierarchisation of lifeforms that positions the human as the locus of existence and sole proprietor of ontological knowledge. Although the vast majority of the novel focuses specifically on individual human characters and the connections between three families over more than a century, the swarm chorus of the mosquitoes' continuous intrusion into the narrative "points to the difficulty (if not impossibility) of extricating the human from the nonhuman" (Iheka, 2018:51).

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There is perhaps no animal more fitting to provide an alternative vantage point from which to view the anthropocentric construction of historical narratives because, as the swarm chorus reminds the reader: "We've been around here as long as you have – for eons before, say the fossils" (Serpell, 2019:545). Indeed, there is evidence that mosquitoes existed during the Cretaceous period 145 to 66 million years ago (Poinar & Poinar, 2008:123), further lending credence to the chorus's assertion that "[w]hen man took up tools, [mosquitoes] were right there beside [humans]" (Serpell, 2019:545). However, the mosquito's connection to human history extends far beyond simply co-inhabiting the planet and existing alongside humans; these small, ubiquitous insects are intimately connected to human life and histories of human suffering and expansion, and the diseases they carry "have felled great leaders, decimated armies, and decided the fates of nations" (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:xv). There are more than 2,500 species of mosquito that inhabit this planet, and while not all of them carry viral or parasitic pathogens, "[n]o other animal on earth has touched so directly and profoundly the lives of so many human beings" (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:xv). Of the diseases transmitted by mosquitoes, malaria is not only the most well-known but also the "oldest and cumulatively the deadliest of the human infectious diseases" (Webb, 2009:1; quoted in Howell, 2019:1), and its impact throughout history has been so profound that it has even affected the human genome (Howell, 2019:1). Serpell's decision to use a "bare ruinous choir" (Serpell, 2019:19) of mosquitoes as a kind of Greek chorus in *The Old Drift* is not only fitting because one of the species of mosquito responsible for transmitting malaria – "man's enemy, *Anopheles gambiae*" (Serpell, 2019:562) – is endemic to Zambia, but because the mosquito can be viewed as an "agent of history" (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:49) in its own right. Through anthropomorphising the mosquito and using it as the focalising perspective through which to portray the

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individual experiences that collectively convey a refracted history of Zambia's founding and development as a nation, Serpell, much like the authors and texts discussed by Cajetan Iheka in *Naturalizing Africa* (2018), problematises "the notion of a self-sufficient human subjectivity" (Iheka, 2018:26) and, instead, foregrounds a relationality between the human and the mosquito which "makes visible the agency of nonhumans" (Iheka, 2018:45). Throughout the novel, the mosquitoes remind the reader of their intimate relationship to and often devastating effects on human endeavours, once again bringing to mind Iheka's conceptualisation of "distributed agency" (2018:58), which emphasises "the capacity of nonhumans – water, trees, and other inhabitants of the environment – to produce effects on the human" (Iheka, 2018:58) without being limited by the notions of reason and intentionality. In "linking agency to intentionality" (Iheka, 2018:58), Enlightenment discourse elided "the agentic possibilities of the nonhuman world in order to uphold the Western man as superior to women, people of [colour], and, of course, the Others in the environment" (Iheka, 2018:58). The notion of 'distributed agency' calls "for a conceptual shift that does not oppose intentionality but [rather] displaces it as an essential marker of agency" (Iheka, 2018:59). Serpell's swarm chorus of mosquitoes echoes Iheka's call to "focus on the ways [in which] the nonhuman acts on the human and the implications of their effects for the production of agency" (Iheka, 2018:59) and the participation of nonhuman actors even "in instances of *intentional human* agency" (Iheka, 2018:58; emphasis added).

One such example from the text is when the mosquitoes claim responsibility for a notorious part of Zambian history – the establishment of Alice Lenshina's Lumpa Church in the mid 1950s, and the 'Lumpa Uprising' a few months before Zambian independence in 1964, in which at least one thousand people lost their lives (Gordon 2008:45). Alice Lenshina – born Mulenga Lubusha Ngandu – "lived a life typical of a

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Bemba woman in the first half of the twentieth century" (Gordon 2012:89), but in September 1953 she contracted an illness – most likely cerebral malaria – that changed the course of her life and significantly impacted Zambian history. The events that followed are unclear but have been detailed in many myth-like accounts; most of which recount how Lenshina died and came back to life the following day (Gordon, 2012:89). The swarm chorus in *The Old Drift* provides a condensed but accurate account of what Lenshina supposedly experienced while dead:

> You find yourself drowning alone in a sea. You grasp a boulder to stay above water. Three men in white robes say you cannot cross here, but then God tells the angels to save you. They cast a rope out and you pull yourself over to the other side of the sea. You enter a city, a splendid musumba, where the angels check the Book for your name. When they do not find it, they teach you new hymns, give you passports to heaven, send you back to spread the word to the people. You awaken from death with two Books in your hands – one black, one white; one sky, one ground – both aflame with the spirit of God. (Serpell, 2019:139)

Lenshina's task of ensuring that her people were saved and provided with "passports to heaven" (Serpell, 2019:139; see also, Gordon, 2012:90) would be "accomplished by abolishing the sin of witchcraft" (Gordon, 2012:90) and rejecting "the heavenly afterlife promised by the missionaries in [favour] of a spiritual quest in the physical world" (Gordon, 2012:90). After her resurrection, Lenshina established the Lumpa Church, which would gain an estimated 60,000 followers by the end of 1955 (Gordon, 2008:49). The church had strong ties to African nationalist movements in what is now northern Zambia, with Lenshina's followers being "the most vocal group opposing colonial authority and white missionaries, especially the Catholics" (Gordon, 2008:49). Growing political unrest and anticolonial protest during the late 1950s meant that for thousands of Zambians in the north, "the battle against the evil of 'Satani' became a battle against the evil of colonialism, against the Central African Federation and the 'Colour Bar'" (Gordon, 2008:50). Although Lenshina "had encouraged evasion and

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escape from evil" (Gordon, 2008:50), African nationalist organisations – most notably the African National Congress (ANC), the Zambian African Congress (ZANC), and later the more militant United National Independence Party (UNIP) – confronted this evil directly, resulting in the rural anti-colonial Cha Cha Cha revolt in 1960-1961, during which "violence against the objects of Lenshina's and the nationalists' wrath engulfed Chinsali District" (Gordon, 2008:50) where the Lumpa Church was headquartered. There were many similarities between the nationalist movements and Lenshina's church which saw the temporary alignment of their common fury, as "[p]opular nationalism had theocratic claims on truth and morality, with associational structures and strategies of mobilization that were Christian" (Gordon, 2012:117); both Lenshina's church and the nationalist movement were campaigning "for a new dawn, for a salvation from evil that would lead to a heaven on earth" (Gordon, 2012:116). Popular nationalism's – specifically UNIP's – plight to eradicate evil through "literally cutting ties with the colonial state, with all of its exactions, its controls over livelihood, and excessive taxation" (Gordon, 2012:116) also aligned with "Lenshina's claim that she did not want anything to do with 'government'" (Gordon, 2012:116). These similarities did not, however, serve to unify the Lumpa Church and UNIP, with conflict between the church and UNIP's nationalist cadres beginning in the Northern Province in 1961.

Although some of the earlier conflicts arose from "competition over grazing and land allocation" (Gordon, 2008:51), tensions rose higher when after poor election results in 1962, "UNIP wanted to ensure undivided loyalty and perceived any organization, political or civilian, to be a threat" (Gordon, 2008:51). Tensions continued to rise between UNIP cadres and the Lumpa, leading to various violent altercations between the two groups in the next two years. The increased violence led to the Lumpa

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establishing "independent, stockaded villages" in order to "evade UNIP violence and isolate themselves – as they had with chiefs and colonial authorities" (Gordon, 2008:58). This, however, added to the mounting tension and resulted in more frequent UNIP harassment and retaliatory attacks by the Lumpa. In early July 1964 – when UNIP was in control of the government although colonial administration still controlled security (Gordon, 2012:131) – then Prime Minister Kenneth Kaunda sent in troops to resolve the violence and ensure that the Lumpa's independent villages were destroyed and that Lumpa adherents returned to their original villages within a week (Gordon, 2012:131; see also, Gordon, 2008:60-61). The Lumpa, who had begun preparing for a battle on Lenshina's orders (Gordon, 2008:59-60), refused to abandon their independent villages, and in response to Kaunda's orders, "local government and police officers thought that after one week they were entitled and expected to use force to destroy the Lumpa *misumba* [villages]" (Gordon, 2008:61). When the Lumpa refused to submit to the troops' demands and did not surrender the rudimentary weapons with which they had armed themselves, the military opened fire (Gordon, 2012:131). Over the course of the next two months, similar operations were conducted in eleven other Lumpa villages and against Lumpa refugees, resulting in the death of at least one thousand people "as a direct consequence of troop action, Lumpa retaliatory attacks, and starvation as people fled into the bush" (Gordon, 2012:131).

The swarm chorus in *The Old Drift* captures the violence of the conflicts, but deliberately resists depicting it as "a linear account of human agency" (Iheka, 2018:46) by claiming responsibility for the violence, thus emphasising the agential capacity of nonhuman actors in histories that are considered distinctly human:

> Your people lie around you, scattered in heaps, riddled with holes, draining blood.
> We drained yours first, only a little, but enough to cause cerebral malaria. Oh Alice

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> Lenshina! Our own Joan of Arc! *So many dead at the birth of this nation and all from a single, stray bite.* (Serpell, 2019:139; emphasis added)

From the swarm chorus's perspective, the establishment of the Lumpa Church, its controversial history in Zambia and the significant acts of human violence related to it can all be attributed to "a single, stray bite" (Serpell, 2019:139) from a mosquito. The use of the word "stray" (Serpell, 2019:139) is significant as it points to the incidental nature of the mosquito's interaction with Lenshina, thus foregrounding that although the agential capabilities of the mosquito are not dependent on intentionality or reason, it still has the capacity to significantly influence the course of history and is intricately linked to acts of intentional human agency. The implication that this history was brought about by an act of unintentional agency by a nonhuman-animal deliberately "undermines the dualistic thinking that structures the human/nonhuman dichotomy" (Iheka, 2018:59), and ensures that the mosquitoes "receive the credit they deserve for their roles in the production of agency" (Iheka, 2018:44). By having the swarm chorus claim responsibility for the Lumpa history in Zambia, Serpell subverts and challenges anthropocentric historical narratives that elide the inherent connection and complex interplay between humans and nonhuman nature. There is also an interesting juxtaposition in this passage between the intentional acts of human violence leading to Lenshina's people being "riddled with holes [and] draining blood" (Serpell, 2019:139) as a result of being shot and the mosquito's comparatively minuscule act of 'violence' in puncturing Lenshina's skin and draining her blood. The two images of 'puncturing' – one in the form of the skin being punctured by bullets and the other the mosquito's proboscis making tiny punctures in human skin – serve to emphasise the horrific nature of the shootings in 1964 by creating a stark visual contrast between the minuteness of the unintentional puncture 'wound' left by a mosquito and the severity of the wounds inflicted by military troops who *intentionally* opened fire on people who

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were only armed with rudimentary weapons. This imagery also draws a rather unsettling parallel between the capacity of humans to commit acts of great violence and the mosquito's devastating effects on human life despite their lack of intentionality; whether it be through acting as the unintentional catalyst for human violence in the case of the Lumpa Church, or as a vector of the world's deadliest disease, malaria. The World Health Organisation (© 2021) estimates that there were 229 million new cases of malaria and 409 000 malaria deaths worldwide in 2019 (94% of which were in Africa), but while the staggering amount of malaria fatalities may numerically eclipse the estimated one thousand lives that were lost as a result of the 'Lumpa Uprising' in 1964, by drawing out distinctions between intentional human agency and the effects produced on the human by the unintentional agency of nonhumans, Serpell is able to further emphasise the severity of the human's capacity for violence against those who have been systemically othered. Although mosquitoes may be responsible for more human fatalities than humans themselves, by directly juxtaposing the unintentional agency of the mosquito with the intentional agency of humans, the notion that humans *knowingly* commit and justify such atrocities in pursuit of power becomes even more impactful.

It is worth pausing here, for a moment, to briefly consider René Girard's (1986) theory of the role of the scapegoat figure in human societies. Girard's theory posits that the collective tendency of humans toward violence and conflict is often assuaged by communal acts of supposedly 'lesser' violence against a sociogenically constructed 'enemy', as "[u]ltimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society" (Girard, 1986:15). Despite the scapegoat figure's apparent threat to society, it remains an important social figure as it serves to

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unify the crowd of people in opposition to it. The collective violence committed toward the scapegoat is thus necessary in order for social and communal harmony to occur. When viewed through this lens, the violence of the 'Lumpa Uprising' takes on a different shape, as Alice Lenshina and the Lumpa Church were presented as a collective enemy which threatened the regenerative promise of Zambia's independence from colonial rule. The construction of the Lumpa Church as an enemy to social progress – and thus a scapegoat figure – justified the acts of violence against them, as it was seen as a necessary mechanism in the restoration of communal peace. Serpell's swarm chorus of mosquitoes, however, destabilises this (arguably anthropocentric) reading of the scapegoating of the Lumpa Church by claiming responsibility for its history and accompanying acts of violence. In absorbing the blame for the acts of communal violence toward the Lumpa, the mosquito assumes the role of the scapegoat in this episode of human history, once again challenging notions of human exceptionalism and absolute human agency. In this sense, the mosquito emerges as the 'ultimate' scapegoat figure; one that is intimately bound up in producing the structure of human societies.

Another example of the imbrication of human and nonhuman forces can be found in the swarm chorus's discussion of how mosquitoes and the diseases they carry are linked to histories of colonial expansion:

> As Simon Mwansa Kapwepwe once said, the lowliest creature, the tiny *udzudzu* [mosquito], is what kept the imperialists at bay! Thus when the whites first swooned to the tropics, they say that the blacks never fell: the raging calenture that gripped the *bazungu* passed over the huts of the *bantu*. This place was the White Man's Grave. (Serpell, 2019:486)

The mosquito did, in fact, play a significant role in keeping "the imperialists at bay" (Serpell, 2019:486) in Africa, as malaria and yellow fever functioned like a "defensive

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wall" (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:67) which often defeated European powers seeking to establish colonies on the continent. By the 1400s, when Europe started seeking colonial outposts in Africa, the malarial and yellow fever "parasites and local peoples had developed an exquisitely balanced relationship" (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:66), because "[a]s the pathogens became endemic, immunity [for indigenous communities] became almost universal" (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:66). Before the arrival of Europeans in Africa, the containment of diseases like malaria in smaller, more isolated communities meant that the pathogens that cause these diseases were "constantly circulating in the bloodstreams of local people, who [consequently developed] a limited sort of immunity that [rendered] their symptoms quite mild" (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:52) and significantly reduced their chances of dying. Foreigners entering the continent would have been much more susceptible to the diseases carried and transmitted by mosquitoes because they had no established immunity. Thus, as Serpell's swarm chorus states, "the raging calenture that gripped the *bazungu* [white men]" (Serpell, 2019:486) seemed to "pass over the huts" (Serpell, 2019:486) of the indigenous populations. In the three centuries following the arrival of the Portuguese in Africa in the late 1400s, malaria and yellow fever continuously hampered European expansion. Although they were often able to seize political power, "much of Africa could not be inhabited comfortably by Europeans who lacked immunity" (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:69) to these mosquito-borne diseases, which subsequently "made imperial Europe's adventures in Africa costly" (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:69) – West Africa, for example, did come to be known by the British as "The White Man's Grave" (Serpell, 2019:486; see also, Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:52). Although the use of quinine "somewhat ameliorated death rates after the 1850s" (Howell, 2019:1), malaria was consistently viewed "as one of the main impediments to imperial success"

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(Howell, 2019:1) during the nineteenth century, becoming "an iconic disease of empire" (Howell, 2019:1). Even after the discovery in the late 1890s by Ronald Ross that mosquitoes are responsible for transmitting the disease, "the struggle against malaria in the colonial environment was explicitly scripted as a struggle between races" (Howell, 2019:7), as "the body of [colour was] scripted as a dangerous reservoir of malarial disease" (Howell, 2019:168). The acquired immunity of black African communities to malaria was used to further legitimise colonial imposition and the othering of 'savage' indigenous populations, as the disease came to be depicted as "the principal and gigantic ally of Barbarism" (Ross, 1905:451; quoted in, Howell, 2019:7) that needed to be 'conquered' by the 'civilising' practices of the West. Malaria's role in shaping the colonial project once again points to the inevitability of encountering the mosquito in the annals of human history, not only as an active agent that impeded the progress of imperial conquest but also in its complex entanglement in the oppression of the marginalised; here, too, the mosquito emerges as a spectral scapegoat figure.

In foregrounding the distributed agency of the mosquito, Serpell's swarm chorus forces readers to shift their gaze and to consider the ways in which histories of colonial expansion have been depicted as distinctly human – and how the focus on Western Man as the pinnacle of existence served to obscure not only the histories and humanity of the colonised but the nonhuman actants that are bound up in these histories as well. The chorus does, however, draw the reader's attention to questions of intentionality through remarking that although mosquitoes are intrinsically linked to histories of human suffering, their role is incidental rather than deliberate: "When a zombie attacks you, bites into your flesh, does it know what it's doing? Not really. This is true for us as well. We carry ill but we don't really mean to" (Serpell, 2019:431). Even though the

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human "*desire* to conquer, to colonise others" (Serpell, 2019:486; emphasis added) underpins Africa's colonial history, the mosquito played a significant role in shaping and producing that history. In exposing how the course of human history is always predicated on the entanglement of human and nonhuman forces and the distributed agency of these forces, the swarm chorus of mosquitoes undermines "the exceptionalism and airs of human superiority that often characterize human relationships with other inhabitants of their shared ecosystem" (Iheka, 2018:55-56) and challenges anthropocentric historical narratives. The relational existence of humans and mosquitoes is not only brought to the fore in the choral sections of the text, however, as Serpell also manages to embed the mosquito into the main, human-centred chapters of the novel in interesting and meaningful ways.

Despite its very active role in the choral sections of *The Old Drift*, the mosquito is only referred to directly 28 times throughout the novel's main narrative chapters (which is not a great deal considering the length and density of the text). In the human-focused chapters, the mosquito exists on the periphery of human life, barely warranting any notice at all. In these chapters, the mosquito's presence is mostly mentioned offhandedly and only implied through references to mosquito nets and repellents. Apart from being an annoyance to be "slapped at" (Serpell, 2019:275), that "[whines] piteously" (Serpell, 2019:189) and "[loops] ringingly round" (Serpell, 2019:76) the heads and shins of the human characters, the mosquito has no active role in the main body of the text. This contrast is significant if one considers that the swarm chorus continuously intrudes into the narrative between each chapter, and often rather abruptly draws the reader's attention back to them, their seemingly larger than life presence throughout human history and their complex entanglement with human endeavours. It can be argued that the *lack* of emphasis on the mosquito in the narrative

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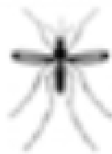
chapters only serves to highlight how the focus on human exceptionalism negates the imbrication of human and nonhuman lifeworlds and their conjunctive roles in the production of agency.

However, despite the mosquito's conspicuous lack of action in the human-centred chapters, Serpell manages to subliminally allude to its constant presence through an easily overlooked form of *visual* representation throughout the body of the text. Instead of using an asterisk to indicate narrative transitions, Serpell has chosen to use a minute symbol of a mosquito:



This symbol appears 287 times in the novel's main narrative chapters and a doubled version thereof concludes the novel at the end of the final choral section. Although at first glance it may seem as if replacing an asterisk with a tiny mosquito might have been a purely stylistic or aesthetic decision, the mosquito's physical presence on the page continuously iterates "the enmeshment of human and nonhuman lives" (Iheka, 2018:23), even when it is not a prominent narrative feature in the majority of the novel. The symbol of the mosquito serves to reaffirm the relationality of human and nonhuman worlds, because even though the mosquito might predominantly be 'unseen' in the narrative sections of the text, it physically occupies the transitional spaces in the novel, forcing the reader to subconsciously acknowledge its presence. By foregrounding the mosquito's proximity to humans through visual representation, Serpell is able to further destabilise notions of human exceptionalism through an implied "ethic of multispecies entanglement" (Iheka, 2018:23) that subconsciously reinforces humans' inherent attachment to and coexistence with the mosquito. As

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discussed in the previous sections, the mosquito has had an immense effect on the course of human history despite its marginal existence; something which is mirrored by the mosquito symbol's structural function in *The Old Drift*. The use of the mosquito symbol to indicate narrative transitions thus holds further significance as it becomes part of the production of meaning in the text, ultimately producing the form of the story and giving the narrative structure. Symbolically, this could be said to represent the mosquito's agential role in shaping and producing human history, because even though it occupies such a marginal and liminal space – both as a living insect and on the pages of *The Old Drift* – there is an innate, and perhaps repressed, reliance on the mosquito in determining how the human story is crafted; in both its living and literary form, the mosquito continuously proves itself to be "invisible but unavoidable" (Serpell, 2019:279).

Serpell's layered engagement with the mosquito is further deepened by the swarm chorus's discussions of mosquito biology throughout the text. Because many of the main chapters of the novel end rather abruptly, the choral sections often seem to disrupt the flow of the narrative. These 'disruptions' are often made more jarring as a result of the mosquitoes' seemingly deliberate refusal to fully address or engage with the contents of the preceding chapter, the haphazard and distracted manner in which they express themselves, and the fact that they often "[spew] Wikipedian facts" (Serpell, 2019:562) that are not explicitly relevant to the plot of the novel. Although the information on mosquito biology provided by the swarm chorus throughout the text might seem like deliberately unnecessary diversions – especially since they are relayed using linguistic flourishes that do not particularly suit the conveying of scientific facts – it subliminally provides the reader with the tools to make sense of the mosquito's incredibly broad historical impact. One of the main reasons why

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mosquitoes have endured for so long is that they require comparatively little in order to procreate: still-standing water and a blood meal with which to nourish their eggs. The chorus outlines the key processes of mosquito life cycles at various points throughout the novel, explaining that any form of standing water serves as "an amniotic crib" (Serpell, 2019:78) for their development from "egg to larva, [to] the comma-shaped pupa, then the winged and wobbly imago" (Serpell, 2019:261). The chorus of mosquitoes also, rather accurately, state that they are "like the Russian dolls of metamorphosis, each phase of [them] hatched from the previous" (Serpell, 2019:261). The quick development of mosquitoes from egg to adult is mostly due to the fact that during "every stage in their development, they already contain the beginnings of organs and muscles they will require in the next" (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:6), with the final transition from pupa to imago (the new adult) taking place within only a couple of hours under the right conditions. The chorus even provides the reader with a brief outline of mosquito breeding patterns, explaining that the males swarm "over a chimney or a steeple" (Serpell, 2019:261), forming a "grey haze, a swirling mass of seduction" (Serpell, 2019:261) into which females fly to find a mate. Many species of mosquito form these breeding swarms over a landmark, with some species even swarming above an animal or human moving within their range (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:11). When mosquitoes mate successfully, the male "leaves behind in his semen a pheromone called matrone that renders the female much less receptive to future sexual partners" (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:12), and it is therefore likely that a female mosquito will mate only once in her short lifespan, while males may mate up to seven or eight times. As interesting as these biological facts may be in their own right, what is truly significant about the swarm chorus's depictions thereof is that they regularly equate aspects of their biology to aspects of human nature; strategic parallels

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which are further emphasised and complicated by the language used to convey them. For example, the chorus deliberately, and rather sardonically, draws the reader's attention to the similarities between human and mosquito mating patterns:

> With quickspinning wings […] she swoops through the chaos of men, and with their hairy antennae, they track her. Then comes the chase, the grapple, the fall – *you humans have these rituals, too.* The male on the bottom, *the pair tightly lock,* and after a minute or so, they part ways […] If [the male] escapes unscathed, he'll do it again, six to eight times in his lifespan. But the female is done now – *she has loved and lost once* – and she has all that she needs for the breeding. (Serpell, 2019:261; emphasis added)

Here, the swarm chorus not only illuminates the (perhaps uncomfortable) parallels between the mating of mosquitoes and human sexual conduct – specifically the physicality of interlocking bodies – but also problematises the notion that humans are absolutely distinct from other creatures by pointing out that humans have mating "rituals" (Serpell, 2019:261) like all other animals. It can thus be argued that in pointing out the similarities between human and mosquito sex, Serpell's swarm chorus subtly subverts "the Enlightenment trajectory of humanist essentialism [which] demanded the repression of the animal and animalistic in all its latent and recrudescent forms" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:34). Although this is neither a new nor particularly shocking comparison, it is perhaps the simplest way of reminding the human reader that for all their supposedly superior endowments, they remain an animal. But the parallels drawn here are not necessarily meant to serve some larger symbolic purpose because despite the similarities between humans and mosquitoes alluded to by the chorus, the biology being discussed is still distinctly that of a mosquito. The chorus does, however, briefly relate their explanation of mosquito breeding to the human character, Sylvia, who becomes a sex-worker at a young age and is generally very cynical about love in all its forms: "Sylvia knows well, love can be hell: familial, romantic, maternal. Oh, lovers are murder! They'll cast you aside, they'll run you out as quick as quicksilver!"

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(Serpell, 2019:261). While it could perhaps be argued that the mosquito's breeding patterns function as a symbolic representation of Sylvia's life as a prostitute, the biological information provided by the swarm chorus is the dominant focus of this particular choral section, with the short reference to Sylvia at the very end seeming almost like an afterthought.

Thus, by including the information on the mosquito's life cycle seemingly for its own sake, Serpell undermines "the human/animal symbolic economy" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:148) which tends to reduce "nonhuman presences to symbols and metaphors that merely shed light on the human world" (Iheka, 2018:25). Even though the chorus equates aspects of mosquito biology to certain aspects of human nature, the representation thereof resists an anthropocentric interpretation which would read it as having "an exclusively human significance" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:139). Furthermore, through conveying these biological facts in language that is decidedly unscientific and, in some instances, emotionally charged – the implication that the act of mating is a process of 'loving' and 'losing' for the female mosquito, for example – Serpell acknowledges the mosquito as a being in itself and resists portraying it as an object of scientific knowledge. This is further achieved through reinstating the mosquito as the primary keeper of its own biological knowledge and by assigning the role of imparting that knowledge to the insect itself. Even though this can only be accomplished by anthropomorphising the mosquito and thus enabling it to communicate in a distinctly human language, the subversive potential of the chorus's rewriting and reframing of scientific discourse is not lost. Serpell takes advantage of the possibilities offered by imaginative literature in order to subvert the hierarchisation of knowledge-systems which positions scientific discourse as the only source of verifiable knowledge. In its anthropomorphic form in *The Old Drift*, the mosquito usurps

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the seat of power which has been so comfortably held by the figure of the human scientist, inverting the scientific gaze and turning the human into the object of observation. In reclaiming ownership of their own biology, Serpell's anthropomorphic mosquitoes destabilise the essentialising tendencies of scientific discourse and serve to highlight that "[b]odies, organisms, and nature are not just passive receptors of the naming power of science" (Escobar, 1995:207). Instead, by conveying mosquito biology from the perspective of mosquitoes, Serpell foregrounds that the "specificity and affectivity [of nonhumans] mean that they have an active part in the production of knowledge about them" (Escobar, 1995:207), thus collapsing the boundary distinctions of the subject/object dualism inherent to scientific discourse and challenging the "humanistic vision of Man as the thinking being *par excellence*" (Braidotti, 2019:7).

This view of the human is further deconstructed by the swarm chorus's assertion that humans and mosquitoes are "both useless, ubiquitous species" (Serpell, 2019:545). It is commonly understood that mosquitoes serve very little ecological purpose, as it does not "aerate the soil, like ants and worms," it "is not an important pollinator of plants, like the bee," and "does not even serve as an essential food item for some other animal" (Spielman & D'Antonio, 2002:X); the mosquito's main 'purpose' is simply to perpetuate its species. Thus, the comparison being drawn here by the chorus implies that, like the mosquito, humans as a species are self-serving creatures, predominantly concerned with their own survival regardless of the environmental cost. The implication that the mosquito and the human have both evolved as self-serving creatures with little ecological benefit further brings into question the positioning of the human as the 'superior' species on the planet. The chorus further destabilises notions of human ascendency by pointing out that the very theory which supposedly justifies

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the human's position as supreme being – and the 'inferior' existence of all other lifeforms – is entirely incidental: "Evolution forged the entirety of life using only one tool: the mistake" (Serpell, 2019:431). In foregrounding that the existence of all lifeforms is predicated on the same principle, the chorus implies that while the evolutionary trajectory of humankind has allowed it to "rule the earth and destroy it for kicks" (Serpell, 2019:545), the evolutionary capabilities of the mosquito that have enabled it to exist alongside humans from the very beginning of their story will likely see it outlast any imaginable human futures. Serpell toys with this idea in *The Old Drift*, as the mosquitoes complicate their role in the novel by admitting in the final choral section that their swarm consists, at least in part, of "the microdrones Jacob designed" (Serpell, 2019:562) – which are modelled on mosquitoes, and which Jacob aptly brands "Moskeetoze" (Serpell, 2019:483) – and that they have "joined up with the local mosquitoes" (Serpell, 2019:562) to form a "semi-cyborgian nation" (Serpell, 2019:562); a blend of "red-blooded beasts [and] metallic machines" (Serpell, 2019:562).

The swarm chorus of mosquitoes is not the only "semi-cyborgian nation" (Serpell, 2019:562) in *The Old Drift*, however, as Serpell also reimagines the world in the 2010s and beyond as a place where smartphones have partially been replaced by the implantation of "Digit-All Beads" (Serpell, 2019:461) into people's hands. These 'Beads', as they are called, function like smartphones, but they are powered by the body's nervous system which acts as an electric interface. Tattoos in conductive ink connect the electrical circuit in the median nerve in the palm of the hand to the torch and speaker which are embedded into the person's finger and the mic which is embedded in their wrist. Although Beads are mostly considered to be practical and beneficial, the more critical characters in *The Old Drift* – specifically Naila, Jacob and

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Joseph, the youngest generation of the three families around which the novel is centred – eventually come to view them as problematic for a number of reasons. While on a trip to India to scatter her father's ashes, Naila's realisation that her Bead works outside of Zambia prompts her to consider the significance of the product's early distribution in developing countries:

> That her Bead worked in India was a relief – it would be much easier to get around. She should have known her SIM would sync automatically with a local network. After all, developing countries had all got Bead-fever first. Digit-All had been savvy. Instead of calling these technological gadgets *chips*, the company had marketed them as *beads*, which sounded smooth and round and ever so 'cultural'. After an initial high-cost roll-out to spark interest, Digit-All had partnered with local governments to distribute free Beads. The Third World had been ripe for them. Power cut? A torch in your finger. Poor schools? Google in the palm of your hand. Slow communication? A photo beats a thousand words: a Bead was also an eye. (Serpell, 2019: 495-496)

The implication that the "Third World had been ripe" (Serpell, 2019:496) for the implementation of this advanced technology as a result of its poor infrastructure – "[p]ower cuts," "[p]oor schools," and "[s]low communication" (Serpell, 2019:496) – echoes the paternalism of early development discourse which saw the advent of technology as one of the key factors in 'liberating' poor, 'underdeveloped' countries and bringing them into the light of modernity (Escobar, 1995:36). Although Joseph tries to convince Naila at one point that "development is a good thing" (Serpell, 2019:507) – using the continent-wide free Wi-Fi system called AFRINET and the Beads as examples – Naila retorts by saying: "They only gave us free Beads because electro-nerve technology uses melanin. Again, they were *testing* them on us" (Serpell, 2019:507; emphasis in original). Where Joseph sees the deployment of this technology in Africa as a boon to society, Naila views it as deliberate exploitation, sarcastically stating that "black people have always made great guinea pigs" (Serpell, 2019:506). Although the comparison of people to guinea pigs when they are the

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subject of an experiment has become a well-known and generally inoffensive colloquial expression, the context in which it is being used here calls to mind colonial discourse's strategic "animalization of the colonized Other to differentiate him/her from the superior colonizer, the proper human subject" (Iheka, 2018:163). This comparison serves to highlight the neo-colonial underpinnings of Western development discourse, which perpetuates the sociogenic construction of black Africans as the animalistic, and thus 'savage' or 'uncivilised' other in order to uphold the West as the dominant power in the era of globalisation. Naila's scepticism about the Beads, and her assertion that they are a perpetuation of the exploitative attitude of the West toward bodies of colour, echoes Cajetan Iheka's wariness that "the technological advancements at the heart of the posthuman idea make it unsuitable for the African context" (Iheka, 2018:160). Even though the invention and use of Beads in *The Old Drift* may at first seem like a posthumanist "celebration of the enmeshment of the human with the technological" (Iheka, 2018:160), the developmental paternalism which justifies their experimental implementation further serves to highlight how the Global South's "reliance on the West for these technologies has been indispensable to their exploitation by their unequal partners in the Global North" (Iheka, 2018:161).

It also becomes apparent that the Beads are used by the increasingly authoritarian Zambian government as a surveillance mechanism; a concern that prompts Naila, Jacob and Joseph to stage an anti-governmental 'revolution' called SOTP. Their first rally, however, is undermined when a giant drone lands and dispatches thousands of Jacob's Moskeetoze – which he sold to the government – to forcefully administer the experimental HIV vaccine which Joseph continued developing after his father's death. The vaccine research conducted by Joseph and Dr Musadabwe at the One Hundred Years Clinic is originally sponsored by the fictive "Sino-American Consortium" (Serpell,

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2019:506), who later retract their funding and use Joseph's research to develop trial vaccines. By the time the SOTP rally is staged in 2023, the Zambian government has made the vaccine compulsory for all citizens and is using the Beads to monitor compliance. The collaboration between the Zambian government and the multinational Consortium in Serpell's speculative future is a concerning example of the exploitative possibilities of "neocolonial biological control" (Wu, 2016:161), which sanctions the policing of African bodies under the guise of progress. Serpell's speculative projection of the perpetuation of hegemonic power relations further extends to include natural resources and its accompanying infrastructure, as in *The Old Drift*'s present-day Zambia, the "Sino-American Consortium owns the [Kariba] dam and the electric grid" (Serpell, 2019:518) that provides electricity to most of the country – to Naila, the Consortium's power in Zambia amounts to a modern-day "Scramble for Africa" (Serpell, 2019:518). The seemingly unfettered access granted by the Zambian government to the Sino-American Consortium embodies the "continuing economic hegemony" (Young, 2001:45) perpetuated by neo-colonialism; a system "in which metropolitan control continues to be exerted by economic measures" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:78) and in which "the ruling class constitutes an elite that operates in complicity with the needs of international capital for its own benefit" (Young, 2001:45). The Consortium's procurement of the Kariba Dam is especially significant because it becomes the central mechanism in Naila, Jacob and Joseph's final attempt to revolt against the Zambian government and their multinational cohorts. After their failed rally, Naila, Jacob and Joseph realise that the government can always hack their Beads, even in the event of a power cut, because the AFRINET servers are plugged directly into the power grid at Kariba Dam. This revelation subsequently inspires their plan to shut down the power grid at Kariba in order to "jam the cloud" (Serpell, 2019:550),

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which allows the government access to all of the Beads in the country, thus putting an end to government surveillance; a plan in which Jacob's microdrones play a significant role. The Moskeetoze are programmed to seek out the two transmitters that Naila plants in the Dam's sluices, thus shutting down the power grid for long enough to cause a malfunction. Things do not quite go to plan, however, as the already failing infrastructure at Kariba, the blockage caused by the microdrones and unusually heavy rainfall as a result of "The Change" (Serpell, 2019:563) – the name given to the immense effects produced by abnormal weather patterns as a result of global warming – cause the dam wall to fail, resulting in widespread destruction:

> The bodies of water spilled their banks within days and soon the whole country was drowned. The gorges and valleys were rivers and lakes, the escarpments were lost under waterfalls. Electric grids failed, people fled from their homes. The flood flowed broad and washed out the roads, making streams and canals of the tarmac. Traffic slowed down, then stopped altogether. Passengers waded, then swam. (Serpell, 2019:563)

The failure of the Kariba Dam is not only significant because of the immense impact of the subsequent environmental devastation, it also holds symbolic significance because of its ties to late-colonial enterprise, histories of dispossession and uneven development.

Kariba Dam was built during the latter half of the 1950s and formally opened by the Queen Mother on the 17th of May 1960. The dam's completion was hailed as a significant economic and industrial accomplishment for the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, and the hydroelectric scheme was praised for the economic progress it promised for the 'multiracial' Central African state. The establishment of the Federation – which combined the British protectorates of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Nyasaland (now Malawi) with the self-governing British colony of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) – was an attempt by the British government to

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re-establish the legitimacy of Empire amid growing anti-imperial protest during the late colonial period. Under the banners of ‘multiracialism’ and ‘partnership’, the Federation was to serve as a compromise between struggles for independence by the black majority, and the white settlers’ strong nationalism. As the key foundation of the Federation’s development program, the Kariba Dam not only symbolised economic development and promises of industrialisation and modernisation but was intrinsically linked to the broader project of nation-building. The promise of economic expansion was not only limited to the cheap electricity the dam would provide to the mining industry in the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt and Southern Rhodesia’s urban-industrial centres, but Central African politicians soon realised that “the dam would turn nature into an economic resource in more ways than by electricity generation” (Tischler, 2013:214). The massive reservoir promised other development opportunities and economic benefits in the form of transport, tourism, fishing and agriculture (Tischler, 2013:214). Although Kariba came to symbolise “the attempt to navigate around white and black nationalism by increasing prosperity” (Tischler, 2013:24), the hydroelectric scheme “had no demonstrable benefit for Africans and instead displaced tens of thousands of the poorest” (Tischler, 2013:52). An estimated 45,000 Gwembe Tonga were forced to evacuate their ancestral land along the banks of the Zambezi River because it would flood as a result of the dam. The Federal government could have opted for a smaller project on the Kafue River near Lusaka – where ‘only’ about one thousand people would have been removed (Tischler, 2014:161) – but ultimately, the forced removal of tens of thousands of Gwembe Tonga from their ancestral land did not affect the decision-making process (Tischler, 2013:59). Ultimately, the construction of the white minority as “the engines for development [that] would carry the Africans with them” (Tischler, 2013:57) justified the

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resettlement "as a necessary sacrifice for the national interest [and] as a measure of 'African advancement' in itself" (Tischler, 2014:164), as "the Tonga and the African population in general would supposedly be drawn into the European-led process of economic expansion" (Tischler, 2014:167). This was an outlook which was shared by the dam's main donor, the World Bank, whose position was that "development required a radical rupture with 'tradition'; seen in this light, the Tonga's forced removal was an exodus to modernity" (Tischler, 2013:59).[2] Some of the Gwembe Tonga were, however briefly, able to benefit from some measure of development, as a thriving fishing industry and increased support from the Northern Rhodesian government helped to improve living conditions after resettlement – although not all were that lucky, with many villages (especially on the southern side of the river) enduring great hardship. However, when Zambia gained independence in 1964, new president Kenneth Kaunda lifted the restrictions that reserved fishing on Lake Kariba for the local population, and the Tonga soon "found themselves outdone by better-capitalised competitors" (Tischler, 2014:1050); the new commercial fishing and tourism opportunities greatly disadvantaged those who had suffered great losses, and rather benefitted outsiders. Ultimately, the construction and completion of the Kariba Dam seemed to reify suspicions that the promised 'partnership' on which the Federation was founded was "nothing but white supremacy in disguise" (Tischler, 2014:174), and today, Kariba still stands as a monument to the turbulence of the Federation and the longstanding effects of uneven development.

[2] The disregard for the Tonga's sacrifice (most notably shown by the Southern Rhodesian government) becomes even more discernible when considering the disparities in sums spent relocating and rescuing humans and animals respectively from the rising flood waters of the dam. During 'Operation Noah' – the mass relocation of approximately 6,000 wild animals to game parks on the south bank due to loss of habitat – the cost per animal rescued was about £968, in comparison to the £50 spent per person (Tischler, 2013:221).

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The fictitious failure of the Kariba Dam in *The Old Drift* thus takes on a new shape, as it comes to symbolically represent the unsustainable nature of development strategies which harm those in whose interest they are supposedly deployed, and can be read as a critique on "the kind of developmentalism that panders to global-corporate interests" and "the flagrant social and environmental abuses that continue to be perpetrated in its name" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:20). Although the number of lives that are presumably lost as a result of the floods certainly overshadows the 'triumph' of putting an end to government collusion with multinational conglomerates, Naila, Jacob and Joseph's inadvertent destruction of the symbolic monument of 'development' in Zambia points to the catastrophic outcomes of the perpetuation of Western development discourse. What is also noteworthy about this disastrous event, is the way in which it alters Zambian futures, forcing what is left of the capital to adopt a more subsistence-based way of living:

> Lusaka survived, that dusty plateau, as its own city-state. Kalingalinga became its capital. A small community, egalitarian, humble. People grow all of the food that they eat. There are a few clinics, and one or two schools. Beads are used for barter and voting. (Serpell, 2019:563)

If one interprets the failure of the Kariba Dam as a symbol for the collapse of capitalist greed in Zambia, the resulting egalitarian and subsistent community in what remains of Lusaka can be read as a stunning reversal of the colonial gaze, in which "the European improving eye produces subsistence habitats as 'empty' landscapes, meaningful only in terms of a capitalist future" (Pratt, 2008:60). The implied grassroots politics of Lusaka as an autonomous city-state does not, however, signal a utopian return to a pre-colonial society, but instead presents a projection of an indigenous modern ecology with a smaller environmental footprint; one that, at least for the time being, seems to operate outside of the neoliberal global market. It can also be argued

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that this new Zambia represents “the possibilities of ‘post-development’, which may be loosely understood as a set of revisionist strategies through which development is re-articulated at grass-roots levels, and which emerges from the recognition that the non-homogeneity of the world system requires that the multiple modernities encapsulated within it be negotiated in local terms” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010:30-31). Nevertheless, one should not disregard the cataclysmic nature of the events that lead to this new way of life in Zambia. Almost no specific detail is provided about the loss of life and broader environmental devastation caused by the flooding of the Zambezi River basin after the dam wall breaks, but the reader is left to assume that this new Zambian future comes at a great cost to both humans and nonhuman nature. Even though the new subsistent society in Lusaka seems to represent a promising example of a more ethical engagement with the environment, it remains vexing because it is only achieved as a result of a catastrophic event and not because of a communal concern for the state of the planet.

In the alternate contemporary reality of *The Old Drift*, global warming is eerily named ‘The Change’, producing incredibly erratic weather patterns and abnormal geological disruption – “new cycles of drought and flooding” (Serpell, 2019:521) and unexpected earthquakes, for example – but the humans in Serpell’s reimagined world focus their attention on adapting to these immense ecological changes through technological advancement rather than adapting their lifestyles in an effort to counteract or improve the effects of ‘The Change’; before the dam wall breaks, it is business as usual in Zambia. It can be argued that the failure of the Kariba Dam thus serves as a warning of the dire consequences if the inhabitants of this planet do not find a way in which to strike a balance between “the systemic accelerations of advanced capitalism and the great acceleration of climate change” (Braidotti, 2019:2), but also serves to highlight –

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through the surviving grassroots community of Lusaka – that the climate crisis necessitates a perspectival shift that brings "into view certain other conditions for the existence of life in the human form that have no intrinsic connection to the logics of capitalist, nationalist, or socialist identities" (Chakrabarty, 2009:217); a view which acknowledges that humans are "a species dependent on other species for its own existence, a part of the general history of life" (Chakrabarty, 2009:219). The novel's final climactic event is thus a multi-layered critique of the destructive nature of anthropocentrism, and as *The Old Drift*'s most prominent vehicle for undermining notions of human ascendancy, it seems only fitting that Serpell's swarm chorus of mosquitoes is given the final word.

The swarm chorus purposefully denies the reader a satisfactory conclusion to the human narratives in *The Old Drift*, as the final chapter of the novel, 'The Dam', is abruptly cut off during the climactic scene in which Naila, Jacob and Joseph are fighting for their survival in the violent onrush of the Zambezi River. Readers are thus entirely dependent on the chorus to reveal the fates of the characters and to detail the impact of the dam's failure on Zambia as a whole. However, as one comes to expect from the mosquitoes, they deliberately deviate from the human-centred plot, choosing instead to focus on themselves and to question their own reliability as narrators:

> In fact, any facts, any stats that we've stated? There's just no vouching for their veracity. We deviate, drift … oh, how we digress. We're semantically movious, too. Are we truly man's enemy, *Anopheles gambiae*, or the microdrones Jacob designed? If that's who we are, then this tale has explained our invention. The problem is that we'll still never know because … we've joined up with the local mosquitoes. We get along fine, but can't tell us apart in this loose net of nodes in the air. (Serpell, 2019:562)

Although this final digression may seem to offer an explanation as to how the swarm chorus is able to express itself in human language and act as *The Old Drift*'s narrative

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guide, the uncertainty hanging over the mosquitoes' admission that they may or may not have misrepresented themselves further undermines the notion that the nonhuman other – both in its biological and biomechanical form – is an object of human knowledge that is easily decipherable through processes of rationalisation. Furthermore, the mosquitoes' insouciance regarding the quasi-apocalyptic failure of the Kariba Dam draws out distinctions between views of eschatological narratives and history as being either comic or tragic. In *Arguing the Apocalypse* (1994), David O'Leary proposes that "the interpretative traditions that surround the Apocalypse have tended to emphasize elements of either tragedy or comedy in the eschatological narrative, and thereby to adopt the perspectives of the tragic and comic frames in their constructions of historical time" (O'Leary, 1994:69). The tragic mode of apocalyptic rhetoric "conceives of evil in terms of guilt; its mechanism of redemption is victimage, its plot moves inexorably toward sacrifice" (O'Leary, 1994:68) and "conceives of destiny as Fate" which "promotes a view of time and human action as closed and 'predetermined'" (O'Leary, 1994:68). Contrastingly, the comic mode "conceives of evil not as guilt, but as error; its mechanism of redemption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves not toward sacrifice but to the exposure of fallibility. The comic plot […] portrays destiny as Fortune, […] [and when] destiny is conceived as Fortune, time is open-ended, allowing for the possibility of change" (O'Leary, 1994:68). While the tragic frame of apocalyptic rhetoric is read as being "literally predictive" (O'Leary, 1994:76), proposing "a cathartic ending in the (immediate) future" (O'Leary, 1994:72) in which no human action can effect change, the comic apocalypse's mode of interpretation is allegorical in nature and the evil which characterises it is seen as being a product of human error, vanity and foolishness. Understanding it as such means that the ultimate exposure of fallibility enables humans to enact change and

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move toward redemption. However, the episodic nature of the comic apocalypse means that "the drama of the end is continually re-enacted and experienced in the present while the End itself is delayed" (O'Leary, 1994:72), where "calamities become episodes, recurrent events that all human communities must face without recourse to an apocalyptic understanding" (O'Leary, 1994:75).

It can thus be argued that the swarm chorus's flippant disregard for the devastation caused by the Kariba disaster, their nonchalance regarding their identities and their continued focus on the recurrent and cyclical nature of human error throughout *The Old Drift* serves to represent their understanding of history and time as comic rather than tragic. Even though the failure of the Kariba Dam may be read as a cataclysmic and tragic 'End', the mosquitoes' broader understanding of history – as beings whose composite bodies metaphorically constitute the whole of human history – enable them to view it as the continuation of a comic apocalypse which is open-ended and continually re-enacted. While humans are caught up in the tragedy of anticipating a predestined end in which their actions will ultimately be futile, the comic view of time, which is foregrounded by the mosquitoes' final hijacking of the narrative, is founded on the recognition of error as a mechanism of redemption; a trope which is subtly infused into all the chorus's appearances throughout the novel. By assigning the role of tying up the narrative's loose ends to the swarm chorus of mosquitoes, Serpell not only acknowledges their role in the production of human histories and that humans' repressed attachment to the mosquito will likely continue into, and perhaps even beyond, any imaginable human futures, but also offers an interesting reflection on the nature of history in itself as something which is beyond human understanding and reason. The chorus's comic view of an event which could easily be scripted as tragic thus becomes representative of O'Leary's argument that "[w]hen the tragic drama of

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history fails to make its turn toward the absolute close, the rhythm of comedy, in which life must go on […] reasserts itself" (O'Leary, 1994:73). Taking into consideration that such a view is intended to restore "the moral order by exposing the foolishness of pretension and vanity" (O'Leary, 1994:69) that drives the perpetual apocalyptic cycle which characterises a comic interpretation of historical time, the mosquitoes' symbolic role as scapegoat figure serves an unexpected subversive purpose.

As briefly discussed earlier, the mosquito has become a spectral scapegoat figure in histories often considered distinctly human and is intimately bound up in the ways human societies have been structured and the various degrees of violence and oppression experienced by the marginalised; a role which the mosquito once again assumes in the novel's final climactic event, albeit in an unexpected form. Of the multiple factors that cause the Kariba Dam to fail, Jacob's mosquito-like microdrones are the final catalyst that allows the Zambezi River to push through the dam wall. Even in its bionic form, the mosquito becomes the central figure of blame in an act of intentional human agency, drastically altering the structure of Zambian society. It could be argued that in willingly recreating the mosquito in the form of microdrones, Serpell's characters symbolically reiterate the suppressed reliance on the mosquito as a scapegoat figure in episodes of human history – as with the Lumpa Church and the role of malaria in the othering and oppression of black Africans in colonial history. If one considers the earlier comparison between humans and mosquitoes as self-serving creatures with little to no ecological benefit, an interesting symbolic undercurrent emerges in the mosquito's continued role as a spectral scapegoat figure in acts of human violence – both against other humans and nonhuman nature – as it becomes the metaphoric double of the inherent selfishness which defines human relationships and interactions with human and nonhuman others. It can thus be argued

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that the egocentric nature of the swarm chorus throughout *The Old Drift* functions as a subversive mirroring of the self-serving and self-aggrandising tendencies of human being-in-the-world, and prompts one to pause and consider one of the chorus's concluding remarks about the nature of storytelling – that "[t]he best kind of tale tells you *you* in the end" (Serpell, 2019:563). Even though the mosquitoes identify themselves as scapegoat figures throughout *The Old Drift*, their purpose for doing so is to expose human fallibility and foolishness; much like O'Leary's reading of St Augustine's comic interpretation of the apocalypse in *The City of God*, the swarm chorus "cautions against ignoring the beast in ourselves and projecting absolute evil onto the tragic scapegoat" (O'Leary, 1994:74). The mosquitoes' remark that "[t]he best kind of tale tells you *you* in the end" (Serpell, 2019:563) thus defines their ultimate purpose in the novel, but can also be read as an invitation to self-reflection on the destructive nature of "privileging one life form over others" (Iheka, 2018:163), and to seriously consider the weight of the human's "unique capacity to significantly alter the ecosystem, for better or worse in the age of the Anthropocene" (Iheka, 2018:5). *The Old Drift*'s final climax and the mosquitoes' comic interpretation thereof thus serves to solidify the message which is continuously recapitulated throughout the text: "To err is human" (Serpell, 2019:19). However, instead of being a fatalistic projection of the futility of human action and change, the novel's ultimate critique of the nature of human-being-in-the-world is open-ended, signalling the redemptive possibilities offered by a more critical awareness of the far-reaching consequences of human exceptionalism. However adaptive and resilient nonhuman nature might be – symbolised by the mosquitoes' continued existence in the "warm, wet future" (Serpell, 2019:563) after the Kariba disaster – humans have a singular capacity to effect

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change, and in a world marked by ever-increasing ecological crises, the nature of that change will be determined by the human's capacity for self-recognition and humility.

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Chapter 3:
"Nobody knows what's at the bottom of the ocean": Slow violence and sea ontologies in Rita Indiana's *Tentacle*

Rita Indiana's *Tentacle* – originally published in Spanish as *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015) and later translated by Achy Obejas (2018) – presents the devastation of marine environments off the coast of the Dominican Republic in the speculative near future that has resulted from the 'slow violence' of anthropogenic climate change. Although the plot is driven by the redemptive promise of an Afro-Caribbean prophecy which enables the main character, Acilde, to travel back in time in order to circumvent the disaster which annihilated the marine ecosystems off the island's coast, the ultimate failure of this prophecy – because Acilde uses it for selfish ends – can be read as a critique of the exceptionalism which characterises human-being-in-the-world and exposes human error and vanity as the driving force of a continually re-enacted environmental apocalypse. Obejas' choice of *Tentacle* as the translated title is particularly apt because it not only alludes to the pivotal role played by the Giant Caribbean Sea Anemone that enables the enactment of the prophecy, but it also symbolically represents how current environmental crises in the Caribbean are inherently connected to histories of colonialism and resource exploitation; the novel's tentacular reach into the past serves to bind it to its speculative projection of seemingly irreversible environmental collapse.

Whereas the texts under discussion in my previous two chapters focused on environmental concerns and nonhuman lifeworlds which are primarily terrestrial in nature, a critical reading of *Tentacle* necessitates a broader understanding of

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postcolonial ecocriticism as concerned with the "ontologies of the sea and its multispecies engagements" (DeLoughrey, 2017:32). In her essay, "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene" (2017), Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues that we are witnessing "a new oceanic imaginary emerging in the wake of the knowledge of anthropogenic climate change and sea-level rise" (DeLoughrey, 2017:32). In conjunction with the awareness of climate change and its effects on the ocean, critical ocean studies has also come about as a result of the "loosening of nationally-bounded modes of thinking about capital and space" (DeLoughrey, 2017:33) which characterises the era of globalisation, as well as post-independence disillusionment in postcolonial countries. However, DeLoughrey further argues that although the sea may be read as a fluid and creolised space, it has been primarily inscribed by a "*transoceanic* imaginary, positioning the sea as a stage for human history; a narrative of flat surfaces rather than immersions" (DeLoughrey, 2017:33; emphasis added). *Tentacle*, however, joins the literary tradition of the Caribbean which has "long theorized the ocean in terms of the violent convergence of environment and history" (DeLoughrey, 2017:33) and views the ocean as a material entity. Rather than reducing the ocean to a metaphor "for a world of shifting, fragmented identities, mobilities, and connections" (Steinberg, 2013:158), Indiana figures the waters of the Caribbean as agentive and dynamic and as intimately bound to human histories and human futures. Although *Tentacle* projects a near-future in which the Caribbean Sea has turned into a "dark and putrid stew" (Indiana, 2018:83) following three 'natural' disasters that have "finished off practically every living thing under the sea" (Indiana, 2018:15), the novel's foregrounding of the ocean as a site of Afro-Caribbean and Taíno spirituality – presented in the text as the only hope of transformation and evading the collapse of marine ecosystems – situates the Caribbean Sea as "a submarine repository of ancestral memory that can be

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accessed through oceanic submersion" (Deckard & Oloff, 2020:8)[3]; something which is particularly relevant, given the Caribbean's violent histories of transoceanic slave trade and colonial imposition. It is useful, here, to briefly (albeit rather limitedly) unpack the details of the prophecy and the Yoruba traditions and deities it involves.

At the beginning of the novel, Acilde works as a maid for Esther Escudero, a Yoruba priestess (or santera) who is devoted to the Yoruba goddess of the sea, Yemayá, and serves as spiritual advisor to Said Bona, the fictive authoritarian president of the Dominican Republic. In her thirties, Esther is initiated as the daughter of Yemayá and named "Omicunlé, after the cloak that covers the sea" (Indiana, 2018:17). Cuban ethnographer Lydia Cabrera's (1974:20-21) description of Yemayá is translated by Deckard and Oloff (2020:9) as follows:

> Universal Queen because she is the Water, salty and sweet, the Sea, the Mother of all creation. She nourishes everyone, since the World is earth and sea, and the earth and that which lives on earth, is sustained thanks to her.

Although Acilde does not share in Esther's beliefs, Eric – a Cuban doctor who assists Esther and is also initiated as a Yoruba priest – chooses Acilde as the earthly incarnation of Olokun, as it was prophesied at his initiation that he would be "the Eyes of Yemayá" (Indiana, 2018:50), the one who "would discover in the flesh the one who knew what lies at the bottom of the sea" (Indiana, 2018:50). Like Yemayá, Olokun is an Orisha, a secondary deity in Yoruba religion, whose name means "owner of the ocean" (Clark, 2007:62) and who is "associated with the treasures that are hidden at the bottom of the ocean" (Clark, 2007:62). Olokun is described in the novel as a marine

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[3] All references to Deckard and Oloff (2020) refer to the following publication: Deckard, S. and Oloff, K. 2020. "The One Who Comes from the Sea": Marine Crisis and the New Oceanic Weird in Rita Indiana's *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015). *Humanities*, 9(3):86. Available at: doi:10.3390/h9030086
Although the starting page of the article is page 86, the page numbers provided for the open-access document are 1-14 and will thus be referenced as such.

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creature that "could travel back in time" (Indiana, 2018:105), and as "the oldest deity in the world, the sea itself" (Indiana, 2018:21). Eric discovers that Acilde is pre-inscribed with the signs of her[4] destiny to become the earthly incarnation of Olokun when he engages her services as a sex worker, noticing that she has "a crown of moles" (Indiana, 2018:51) that circles her head. These moles serve as the points of connection between Acilde and the tentacles of the Giant Caribbean Sea Anemone with which he, now having successfully transitioned, is fused in order to enact the prophecy which enables Acilde to be reborn in the past through a portal of anemones just off the coast of Playa Bo, a beach in the coastal town of Sosúa. Acting in his capacity as priest, Eric

> joined the tentacles to the moles on Acilde's head. [...] The tentacles stayed put, as though with Velcro, and the marine creature's smell supplanted the [neighbourhood's] garbage stink, transporting Eric back to Matanzas Bay [where he was initiated], to the silver lights the sun set moving on the water, and a strong smell of iodine and algae that infused him with the [vigour] he needed to finish the ritual. (Indiana, 2018:51)

The foregrounding of the anemone's strong scent is significant if one considers that by the time this ritual is being performed in 2027, the ocean's saline smell – which is also infused with the olfactory proof of its living inhabitants – is but a distant memory to those who had experienced it before a seaquake in 2024 which resulted in the dispersal of Venezuelan biological weapons (which Said Bona had agreed to warehouse on the island) into the Caribbean Sea and, after which "[e]ntire species had vanished in a matter of weeks," creating an "environmental crisis [that] had spread to the Atlantic" (Indiana, 2018:82). Further, the strong evocation of the smell emitted by the marine creature in this pivotal scene is "redolent of Olokún's cleansing power

[4] For the sake of clarity, I refer to Acilde as 'she/her' when discussing the first part of the novel when she identifies as female, and as 'he/him' in the second part after Acilde's sexual transition is complete. For reference, see the following interview conducted with Indiana in which the author does the same: https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2019/02/a-unique-caribbean-spin-on-climate-fiction/

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and capacity to regenerate marine life" (Deckard & Oloff, 2020:9), but the "smell of iodine and algae" (Indiana, 2018:51) that permeates the room while Acilde is physically being fused with the anemone also signifies his new material, albeit fantastical, bond with the ocean. The physical connection between Acilde and the anemone is not a momentary coalescence of human and nonhuman bodies, as Acilde's respawned double in the submerged tunnel of anemones at Playa Bo grows from "a blister about a foot long [that breaks] out on the main anemone" (Indiana, 2018:76). The new body develops slowly beneath the surface of the Caribbean Sea and is "as fragile as an embryo in the water" (Indiana, 2018:76) before it is fully formed. When he has emerged from his submarine birthplace, the new male body which Acilde now inhabits is described as having "dropped the scales from his eyes" (Indiana, 2018:77), further alluding to Acilde's new existence as a more-than-human creature. Acilde's transformation links back to the novel's epigraph which is taken from Ariel's song in Act I of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, as he too has "[suffered] a sea-change / into something rich and strange" (Indiana, 2018:np). Although his new amphibian body sheds all trace of its submarine origins and he emerges from his metamorphosis as a white man, Acilde, and the two doubles he spawns in the past – becoming Giorgio in the 1990s and Roque in the 1600s – can nevertheless be viewed as hybrid creatures; a mixture of human and the sea-creature from which they were born, both permanently inscribed with Olokun's sacred powers. Significantly, Olokun's power is materially manifested in the ocean and its more-than-human inhabitants rather than being part of a transcendental realm.

The cosmology of the Yoruba religion on which the worldview of its devotees is based is, according to Clark (2007:31), a singular cosmology:

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> There is no this world and another world, but a single world with visible and invisible elements. Visible elements include living people, plants, animals, rocks, stars, rain, the ocean, everything that can be perceived with the basic senses. The invisible elements include those who have died and those waiting to be born, the Orisha and Olodumare [the great god].

Although the Orisha form part of the invisible elements of Yoruba cosmology, they are given human form and "are multi-dimensional beings that represent the forces of nature, act as archetypes, and function as sacred patrons" (Clark, 2007:34). Yemayá, for example, is the patron of the ocean who "nurtures physical, psychological, and spiritual growth" (Clark, 2007:59). Significantly, she is not described as simply being an abstract representation of its forces, but also as the materiality of the ocean itself. Yemayá "*is* the Water, salty and sweet, [she *is*] the Sea" (Cabrera, 1974:20-21; translated in Deckard & Oloff, 2020:9; emphasis added). Similarly, Olokun is not simply abstractly associated with the depths of the ocean and its riches, but is "the sea itself" (Indiana, 2018:21). Further, the anemone used in Acilde's initiation ritual and the anemones in the tunnel at Playa Bo are endowed with Olokun's sacred power; they are not metaphorical representatives of this power but serve as material manifestation thereof. By relying on the Yoruba tradition, the novel cites an investment in the materiality of the ocean as a more-than-human space that can be accessed by submersion and through an ethic of multispecies entanglement. *Tentacle* is thus fully immersed in DeLoughrey's description of Afro-Caribbean "sea ontologies" (2017:34) as characterised by "the connection between ancestry, history, and non-Western knowledge systems in submarine aesthetics" (2017:36). Guided by the counter-hegemonic worldview of Afro-Caribbean spiritualities, *Tentacle* resists a portrayal of the ocean as "blank space or *aqua nullius* for human agents to cross" (DeLoughrey & Flores, 2020:133), but rather figures it as a "viscous, ontological, and deeply material

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place, a dynamic force, and an unfathomable more-than-human world" (DeLoughrey & Flores, 2020:133).

Tentacle's engagement with the materiality of the ocean also finds structural form in the novel, as its fluid movement between multiple time frames comes to symbolically embody DeLoughrey's claim that "[t]he discourse of oceanic submersion in the Caribbean articulates a submarine temporality in which linear models of time are distorted and ruptured" (DeLoughrey, 2017:33). The novel seamlessly and cyclically fluctuates between three time frames in the Dominican Republic; the late 2020s to 2030s following the complete collapse of marine ecosystems in the Caribbean Sea, the early 1990s to 2000s, and the early 1600s. The narratives that take place in the past are both set in the coastal area surrounding Playa Bo, a beach in modern-day Sosúa. The novel's temporal shifts are achieved through the magical splitting of Acilde's character – who is respawned as Giorgio in the 1990s and Roque in the 1600s – as well as through the secondary character, Argenis, who takes part in Acilde-Giorgio's art project at Playa Bo in the early 2000s and is accidentally transported to the 1600s after being stung on the head by an anemone. Acilde-Giorgio – who builds a life in the 90s as a wealthy businessman and restaurateur, and marries a well-intentioned but socially ignorant conservationist heiress, Linda – approaches a group of multi-disciplinary artists to take part in his "Sosúa Project" (Indiana, 2018:37), through which he hopes to raise money in order to build a laboratory where Linda and her fellow scientists can "study and cultivate coral to replant it, whenever it [is] necessary, in its natural habitat" (Indiana, 2018:106). After the incident with the anemone, Argenis simultaneously inhabits his own body in the present and the body of a castaway dubbed Côte de Fer in the early 17th century, inadvertently joining Roque's motley crew of buccaneers, who survive by trading animal hides with

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smugglers following the 'Devastations of Osorio', which saw the forceful "depopulation of the island's northern coast to avoid the illegal trade with English, French, and Dutch smugglers, who had been providing the people with what Spain could not" (Indiana, 2018:58). The buccaneers hunt abandoned cattle – "a species first introduced to the island by Nicolás de Ovando in 1502" (Deckard & Oloff, 2020:10) – that have been left to roam wild following the forced resettlement, in order "to produce leather and smoked meats, which they [trade] with the smugglers who still made stops on the coasts" (Indiana, 2018:58-59). Despite his initial resistance and terror, Argenis entirely immerses himself in the life lived by his double, Côte de Fer, and struggles to differentiate between his two selves, which causes his mental and physical health to decline dramatically. Although Acilde is initially vexed by Argenis's accidental intrusion into the past because he believes it will hinder his progress toward fulfilling the prophecy, Argenis's artistic talents become useful to Acilde-Roque in the 17th century and play into his plan to build the laboratory. During a trade with English smugglers, Acilde-Roque acquires a printing press which Argenis later uses to produce prints and engravings he creates from the blood of the hunted cattle, which he signs as Côte de Fer. Acilde realises that if he is able to 'discover' these engravings as Giorgio, he can use them to fund Linda's laboratory by selling "half the engravings to collectors and museums and [exhibiting] the other half in the Casa Museo Côte de Fer, which would be housed on the first floor of the laboratory" (Indiana, 2018:127). The 'discovery' of Roque's chest containing Argenis's engravings – which the buccaneers buried close to a ceiba tree near Playa Bo that remains there until the 2000s – is focalised through Argenis, who simultaneously watches the chest being unearthed in the present and tries to recover his engravings as Côte de Fer.

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Interestingly, the narrative transitions between present and past are not overtly stressed but are rather subtly indicated through a change in tense. The majority of the text is written in the past tense, but when the narrative moves *backwards* in time, the tense curiously, and abruptly, changes to *present* tense. The following passage from the text – which takes place immediately before and then during Argenis's first encounter with his 17th century self – is an example of the basic pattern followed when time-travel is indicated:

> When [Argenis] *saw* the huge new roll of canvas against the wall, he *felt* better and *told* Malagueta he could go back to his own room.
>
> That afternoon, finally free of the vertigo, Argenis *sleeps* and *dreams*. He *drowns*. He *flaps* around like crazy but *can't* move; his chest *hurts* from his violent efforts to breathe in air instead of salt water. (Indiana, 2018:54; emphasis added)

These transitions are particularly prevalent in the chapters which are focalised through Argenis and fluidly intrude into the present-day narrative in patterns that could be said to mimic the constant circulation and ebb and flow of tidal currents. On the surface, this might be viewed as a narrative tool that is employed to convey Argenis's lack of control and psychological turmoil. However, if one considers the novel's investment in the materiality of the ocean, it can be argued that the constant circulation between past and present symbolically embodies an oceanic temporality; an understanding of temporality which foregrounds "the ocean as an uncanny medium that distorts our terrestrial-bound understanding of figures, time, and space" (DeLoughrey, 2017:39). Significantly, in the passage above Argenis "drowns" (Indiana, 2018:54), he is not described as *feeling* as if he is drowning, which emphasises that his lived experience in the past is materially connected to his body in the present. Like Acilde, Argenis's 'birth' in the past is submarine, suggesting that the ocean, in its state of constant movement and fluctuating connection, exists beyond and challenges the limitations of linear historiography which is "a legacy of colonialism" (DeLoughrey, 2007:78). The

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simultaneity and fluidity which characterises the novel's depiction of temporal experiences is deliberately distortive and disruptive and can be viewed as representative of the ocean's more-than-human temporalities. By forcing the characters and the reader to 'live' through and process multiple temporal perspectives at once, *Tentacle* is able to trace the complex web of oceanic time and "sea ontologies" (DeLoughrey, 2017:34) that collapse distinctions between the past, present and speculative future. The Caribbean's coastal environment and its entanglement with human and nonhuman entities are thus placed beyond the grasp of Western understanding and destabilise linear accounts of human history.

Such an engagement with oceanic temporalities is particularly significant in the Anthropocene, as it has catalysed "a new oceanic imaginary in which, due to the visibility of sea level rise, the largest space on earth is suddenly not so external and alien to human experience" (DeLoughrey, 2017:34); because "our planetary future is becoming more oceanic" (DeLoughrey, 2017:33) due to global warming, "the ocean is now understood in terms of its agency, its anthropogenic pollution and acidity, and its interspecies ontologies – all of which suggest that climate change is shaping new oceanic imaginaries" (DeLoughrey, 2017:34). By representing the ocean's more-than-human temporalities in the structural form of the text, *Tentacle*'s "linking of the colonial era, neoliberal present, and dystopian future suggests an understanding of ecological apocalypse as long and cumulative" (Deckard & Oloff, 2020:10), and can thus be said to represent Rob Nixon's theorisation of "slow violence […] that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011:2).

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In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Nixon argues that while violence is generally understood "as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility" (Nixon, 2011:2), there is a necessity to "engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon, 2011:2). This second form of violence, which Nixon calls slow violence, unfolds insidiously over long periods of time and is not afforded the same attention as those events which are considered examples of spectacular violence, since "[f]alling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, volcanoes, and tsunamis have a visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power that tales of slow violence, unfolding over years, decades, even centuries, cannot match" (Nixon, 2011:3). The relative invisibility of processes of slow violence – such as climate change, toxic drift, deforestation, and acidifying oceans (Nixon, 2011:2) – is due, in part, to the fact in the current neoliberal era,

> speed has become a self-justifying, propulsive ethic that renders "uneventful" violence (to those who live remote from its attritional lethality) a weak claimant on our time. The attosecond pace of our age, with its restless technologies of infinite promise and infinite disappointment, prompts us to keep flicking and clicking distractedly in an insatiable – and often insensate – quest for quicker sensation. (Nixon, 2011:8)

Because of "the unequal attention given to spectacular and unspectacular time" (Nixon, 2011:6), particularly in an age where the corporate media is predominantly spectacle-driven, the casualties of slow violence – the gradual human and nonhuman casualties that result from slow violence, which Nixon refers to as the "long dyings" (Nixon, 2011:2) – are largely overlooked and underrepresented. For Nixon, it is necessary to rethink and destabilise our current understandings of violence in order

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"to account for how the temporal dispersion of slow violence affects the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social afflictions" (Nixon, 2011:3) – particularly in relation to environmental calamities and how their effects are experienced most keenly by the world's most disenfranchised communities. Nixon (2011:4) argues that the media's predilection for spectacular violence simultaneously exacerbates the vulnerability of the world's ecosystems and poor communities, both of which are deemed expendable by the capitalist world-system. Landscapes which are permeated by processes of slow violence, and the delayed human and nonhuman casualties that accompany these processes, are, according to Nixon, "landscapes of temporal overspill that elude rhetorical cleanup operations with their sanitary beginnings and endings" (Nixon, 2011:8) and cannot be defined by "the tidy closure, the containment, imposed by the visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat" (Nixon, 2011:7). The temporal flux of slow violence thus enables the widening of "the rhetorical gulf between development as a grand planetary dream premised on growth-driven consumption and its socioenvironmental fallout" (Nixon, 2011:41). Such distancing mechanisms that "have heightened capitalism's innate tendency to abstract in order to extract" (Nixon, 2011:41) subsequently make it more difficult to track the sources of ecological slow violence and to enforce multinational answerability in relation to environmental degradation. The insidious nature of slow violence thus poses significant representational challenges which require the creative reformulation of unspectacular environmental catastrophes, whose effects are temporally and geographically dispersed, in order to make them visible to the general public (Nixon, 2011:10). It is thus difficult, but necessary to convert such gradual and unsensational disasters into image and narrative despite the veneration of instant spectacle which defines the current neoliberal era. One of the predominant representational challenges is that of

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scale, as the temporal and geographical flux of slow violence has historically obfuscated its long-term effects; rendering these effects visible thus requires thinking about ecodegradation and the human's role in perpetuating such slow violence across multiple temporal and geographical scales at once.

Concerns of this kind also feature in Dipesh Chakrabarty's and Ian Baucom's examination of the Anthropocene. They argue that the human's new role as geological agent in the Anthropocene requires that our understanding of human history needs to be reformulated and extended beyond "an Enlightenment-inspired, progressive theory of history […] and an attendant politics of rights-based citizenship and democracy" (Baucom, 2014:137). Although such a view of history is indispensable to postcolonial thought, pursuits of freedom, and critiques of capitalist globalisation, the current crisis of climate change necessitates a multi-scalar view of history which brings into relation "[g]eological time and the chronology of human histories" (Chakrabarty, 2009:208) and that brings "together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital" (Chakrabarty, 2009:213). Chakrabarty argues that although "there is no denying that climate change has profoundly to do with the history of capital," critiques of capitalist globalisation as the sole cause of climatic slow violence "do not give us an adequate hold on human history once we accept that the crisis of climate change is here with us and may exist as part of this planet for much longer than capitalism or long after capitalism has undergone many more historic mutations" (Chakrabarty, 2009:212). This does not, however, render obsolete those "[a]nalytic frameworks engaging questions of freedom by way of critiques of capitalist globalization" (Chakrabarty, 2009:212), because the overarching fallout of climate change will not be equally felt and will rather, as Nixon argues, be offloaded on the

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world's poorest and most marginalised communities. Even though the capitalist world order and the inequity which defines it still necessitates a continually engaged postcolonial discourse that strives for freedom and justice – both human and environmental – it is vital to consider, in the continuation of this pursuit, the threat of extinction that looms over the human species and its fellow planetary inhabitants. The threat of "a collective, planetary, being-toward-death" (Baucom, 2014:140) further poses challenges of scale, because even though the human has, as a species, assumed the role of a geological force that significantly impacts the climate and lifeforms of the planet, Chakrabarty (2012:12) argues that humans can never experience themselves as such, although "we now know that this is one of the modes of our collective existence." It is thus necessary, as discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, to think about the human across different scales that are seemingly at odds with one another; both as biological and as geological agents, as having ontological and nonontological dimensions, as humans and as a nonhuman force. Only in doing so can we mediate "the temporal distance between short-lived actions and long-lived consequences" (Nixon, 2011:41) and make visible the casualties of slow violence – past, present and future.

Arguably, *Tentacle*'s diffracted and temporally fluid narrative functions as a bridging mechanism that enables a multi-scalar view of human existence, history and the slow violence which permeates the coastal environments of the Caribbean. Through its collapse of linear time, the novel is not only able to draw material links between the inception of capitalism as a world-ecological-regime in the colonial era, the already collapsing marine ecosystems of the Caribbean in the 90s and early 2000s, and the complete annihilation of these ecosystems in the speculative near-future, but is also able to refigure the role of the human across multiple scales; simultaneously

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foregrounding the contingencies of individual experience as well as the planetary impact of the human species as a geological force. Even in its geographic specificity, *Tentacle*'s engagement with processes of ecological slow violence is at once highly localised and globally situated, harnessing the materiality of oceanic interconnection and continuous flow in order to collapse boundary distinctions – and thus re-entangle – human and natural history. Although the seaquake and the tidal wave which result in the spilling of biological weaponry into the Caribbean Sea and the speed at which the marine ecosystems are subsequently eradicated can certainly be considered as spectacular environmental catastrophes, the novel does not present these events as isolated incidents or 'natural' disasters but rather portrays them as emanating from the slow violence of anthropogenic climate change and the legacies of colonialism. *Tentacle*'s portrayal of environmental catastrophe is not, however, only limited to the spilling of biological weapons into the Caribbean Sea, as the novel's long timespan records a host of gradually unfolding environmental catastrophes such as climate change and the subsequent rising of sea levels, coral bleaching, significantly altered weather patterns, industrial pollution, and overfishing.

The novel's opening passages situate the Dominican Republic in 2027 within a hyper-capitalist world in which Dominicans have become completely desensitized to the mechanised killing of Haitian refugees – who are killed by lethal gas and whose bodies are then disintegrated and disposed of by "automatic collectors" (Indiana, 2018:9) that constantly patrol the streets – and in which everything has become commodified as a result of implanted technology called "PriceSpy" (Indiana, 2018:10), which enables users to confirm the brand and value of any object within their field of vision. Before Acilde is initiated as the earthly incarnation of Olokun, she uses this technology to try and ascertain the value of the anemone which Esther keeps and tends to in the room

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containing the altar to Yemayà; opening the jar that forms the centrepiece of the altar, Acilde discovers the live sea anemone, which following the poisoning of the Caribbean Sea has become "an illegal and very valuable specimen" (Indiana, 2018:20), worth sixty-five thousand dollars. However, while marine creatures have become "a luxury coveted by wealthy collectors" (Indiana, 2018:15) in *Tentacle*'s speculative future where they have all but gone extinct, the novel also exposes the tourist industry's exploitation and commodification of marine life when the Caribbean was still a "tourist destination with coasts full of coral, fish, and anemones" (Indiana, 2018:20). The coastal waters of Playa Bo in the early 1990s are described as a "trove of natural treasures" (Indiana, 2018:70) with "water so clear [that] it was easy to pull out octopuses, starfish, and sea snails from under the rocks" (Indiana, 2018:70). The abundance of life in the waters of Playa Bo makes it a ripe target for poachers who support their families by "selling whatever [they can] find on the coral reefs to the gift shops and restaurants in Sosúa" (Indiana, 2018:70), thus further enabling the exoticisation and objectification of marine lifeforms perpetuated by the tourist industry. It is made clear, however, that the plenitude of animal life at Playa Bo in the 90s is unusual, implying that other reefs off the coast have been nearly depleted. The reason for Playa Bo's comparative fecundity in relation to other coastal habitats is due to the fact that Nenuco, the Taíno gardener who awaits Acilde's arrival, and his family forcefully protect it by threatening intruders with a shotgun. Nenuco and his family are entrusted with "taking care of the Great Lord, Playa Bo, where the most precious and sacred creature on the island dwelled, the portal to the land of the beginning, through which the men of the water would come, the big heads, whenever they were needed" (Indiana, 2018:75). The novel's evocation of Taíno belief systems – in conjunction with Yoruba spiritual traditions – foregrounds an animist view of the world which is

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"grounded on the continuity of relationships between all things, natural *and* cultural" (Oliver, 2009:53). In stark contrast to the exploitative attitude toward nonhuman nature epitomised by a capital-driven tourist industry, the relationship and interaction between Nenuco's family and the marine environment is premised on mutual reciprocity and more-than-human entanglement. Nenuco and his family's role as protectors of the reef serve to represent a counterhegemonic view of the natural world, as their animist belief system offers "an alternative to the impoverished Cartesian paradigm of nature as external to humanity" (Deckard & Oloff, 2020:10). However, despite the family's reciprocal relationship with the reef and its nonhuman inhabitants, and Playa Bo's relative prosperity, the novel's temporal fluidity is able to expose the gradual decline of its marine habitat over multiple centuries through Argenis-Côte de Fer, to whom the "beach is almost unrecognizable [in the 17th century], the sea full of shoals, fish swimming in circles in the hundreds, some a meter long that could be pulled from the water by hand" (Indiana, 2018:68). The plenitude of marine life which Argenis-Côte de Fer witnesses in the 1600s is largely depleted by the early 2000s, where the slow violence of anthropogenic climate change has resulted in an "increase in the water temperature" (Indiana, 2018:55) and the threat of immense ecological crisis as a result of "the fatal bleaching of coral in the Caribbean" (Indiana, 2018:55). The destruction of coral reefs is one of the central figures in *Tentacle*'s depiction of ecological slow violence in the Caribbean, as the gradual decay of these multi-species, life-sustaining organisms is made visible by the constant juxtaposition of abundance and depletion of marine life in Playa Bo across the novel's three time frames. The crisis afflicting the coral reefs of the global tropics serves as visible proof of the slow violence of climate change. The crisis of coral reefs is particularly severe in the Caribbean, because of increases in "ocean temperatures and acidification, sewage and agricultural runoff,

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overfishing, and tourism, over fifty percent of Caribbean coral has been destroyed since the 1970s" (DeLoughrey, 2017:40). However, the link between global warming and the degradation of reef ecosystems means that corals are considered by many ecologists to be an indicator of "*planetary* health" (Helmreich, 2016:56; emphasis added): "Because the changes registered [in reef ecosystems] indicate declining oceanic health and are often triggered by anthropogenic causes, scientists sometimes pose coral as delivering a message from the living planet" (Helmreich, 2016:56). *Tentacle*'s collapse of linear time and investment in the materiality of oceanic interconnection thus enables a critique of ecodegradation and climatic slow violence which is simultaneously locally focused and globally scaled. It is important to note, however, that even though *Tentacle*'s depiction of environmental decline over centuries can be read on a global scale, it still offers "a pointed critique of myopic mainstream responses to climate crisis or environmental degradation that ignore the political ecology of class and race" (Deckard and Oloff, 2020:8); a critique which the novel achieves primarily through a satirised depiction of Giorgio's wife, Linda, whose conservation strategies are well-intentioned but ultimately socially ignorant.

Linda is born into a wealthy Jewish family from Austria, who were granted asylum in the Dominican Republic during World War II and established a dairy "that soon fed the entire country" (Indiana, 2018:99). Growing up in the coastal town of Sosúa, Linda develops a passion for the ocean and protecting its nonhuman inhabitants, later qualifying as a marine biologist whose obsessive fretting about the state of decline of marine environments in the Caribbean manifests as a state of perpetual, extreme angst: "Where others saw scenery, Linda Goldman saw desolation. Where others heard relaxing subaquatic silence, she heard the shrieks of life disappearing. Where others saw a gift from God, given for the enjoyment of humankind, she saw an

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ecosystem fallen victim to a systematic and criminal attack" (Indiana, 2018:98). Although Linda's obsessive concern over the degradation of reef ecosystems translates into a well-meaning pursuit to conserve and restore them, her perspective on the nature of their decay and her view that their "salvation" (Indiana, 2018:98) depends "on re-educating an entire community" (Indiana, 2018:98) exposes her ignorance regarding the pervasive impact of colonial legacies and the inequity perpetuated by neoliberal regimes. Although Linda purposefully distances herself from her family's wealth – vowing "never to ask for [money] from her father" (Indiana, 2018:100) – her privileged position as a white woman and her higher class status instils a sense of entitlement that justifies her paternalistic attitudes toward the local communities:

> There were days she felt her commitment was irrelevant, when confronted, for example, with a local fisherman's anchor that, in a single minute, had torn a reef hundreds of years old, destroying a valuable specimen and the fish habitat the very same fisherman needed to subsist. The guards charged with enforcing environmental laws in the Cove of Sosúa were the first to ignore them: throwing garbage, fishing with harpoons, and stealing coral to sell – they lacked a comprehensive education and adequate salaries. (Indiana, 2018:98-99)

Even though her concerns seem to depict a feigned recognition of the links between social inequality and environmental justice, Linda's perspective is ultimately limited by her privilege and her inability to connect the actions of the local communities to their continued marginalisation by the capitalist world-system and all its attendant histories. Linda's short-sightedness – and by extension Acilde-Giorgio's – is further emphasised by the fact that they purchase the land which previously belonged to Nenuco's family, thus fully privatising Playa Bo so that Linda can conduct her research and develop her conservation plan. Linda and Giorgio's privatisation of Playa Bo may be well-intentioned, but in further estranging the local community from the natural landscape, they are effectively perpetuating Western discourses of ownership and control over

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nonhuman nature. In a similar sense, Giorgio and Linda's privatisation of Playa Bo in order to turn it into a "sanctuary, free of fishing and other pillaging" (Indiana, 2018:38) also plays into the marketing of Caribbean islands as "free-floating Edenic enclaves of natural time, unmoored from historical memory" (Nixon, 2011:181). However, despite Linda's privilege and her Western view of conservation practices which cause her to overlook the "suppressed history of dispossession" (Nixon, 2011:184) that underlies the ecological slow violence she is trying to combat, the novel is able to draw subtle links between these histories and the exploitative and deleterious nature of neoliberal resource extraction; links which are alluded to in Linda's despondent vision of the widespread damage caused by the dragnet of an industrial fishing ship:

> she'd descend to the bottom of a cold and dark sea where the heavy, industrial net of a commercial fishing ship would destroy everything in its path without mercy. In the Gulf of Mexico she'd seen with her own eyes what the nets brought up after shaving the marine floor for miles at a time. Once they had removed everything useful, they'd toss thousands of dead fish too small to be consumed, dolphins, tortoises, and enough coral to build a castle back into the sea, all products of the demolition of an ecosystem that had no resources left to regenerate. (Indiana, 2018:101)

The word 'useful' in this passage is not only significant because it conveys the dichotomising tendencies of the capitalist world economy, in which the 'usefulness' and 'value' of nonhuman nature is determined only by its capacity to further the accumulation of capital and whether it is a consumable resource. It can also be argued that the image of the bycatch of commercial fishing being tossed back into the ocean can symbolically be linked to the violent histories of the Middle Passage, as a result of which the ocean can be read as "an unmarked grave site" (DeLoughrey, 2017:35) of the millions of lives that were lost due to transoceanic slave trade. Linda's vision of the mechanised eradication of marine lifeforms in the neoliberal era can thus be said to trace the inherent connections between "the colonial-capitalist exploitation of labour

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and the domination and degradation" (Campbell & Niblett, 2016:2) of nonhuman nature. The novel's portrayal of the ecological carnage that is the main product of the capitalist world-system is thus indelibly linked to "the integral role of slavery and the Middle Passage in the development of capitalism" (Campbell & Niblett, 2016:4). In this sense, *Tentacle* echoes Campbell and Niblett's (2016:4) claim that the colonial histories of the Caribbean – the "extirpation and enslavement of the indigenous peoples; the slave trade, slavery, the plantation regime, and indenture; and the massive transformation of biophysical natures" – must be viewed as "dialectically interconnected processes that together were integral to the emergence of the capitalist world-system, and to the way in which it (re)produced itself through the reorganization of human and extra-human natures on a global scale" (Campbell & Niblett, 2016:4). The novel's portrayal of environmental crisis as intrinsically linked to violent colonial histories and the emergence of capitalism as a world-system in many ways echoes Kamau Brathwaite's view of slavery and the Middle Passage as "an ongoing catastrophe" (McSweeney, 2005:np), stating in an interview that, to his mind, "whatever happens in the world after that, like tsunamis in the Far East and India and Indonesia, and 9/11 […] are all aspects of that same original explosion" (McSweeney, 2005:np). It can be argued that *Tentacle*'s temporal fluidity and investment in oceanic time enables the novel to express a similar view of ecological slow violence, the devastating effects of climate change in the Anthropocene and its attendant human and 'natural' disasters. The seaquake that results in the poisoning of the Caribbean Sea, the anomalous weather event, La Llorona, and "its two years of rain" (Indiana, 2018:14), the bleaching of corals, and the decimation of marine life caused by industrial fishing are all presented in the novel as "constitutive moments of a single unfolding spiral of catastrophe" (Campbell & Niblett, 2016:4) that emanates from the

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legacies of colonialism in the Caribbean. Much like the mosquitoes in *The Old Drift*, *Tentacle*'s understanding of environmental decline as cyclical and temporally interconnected can also be said to represent a comic interpretation of historical time, in which an open-ended and continuously re-enacted apocalypse is driven by human error and vanity – an interpretation which is most notably signified by the novel's inconclusive and anticlimactic ending. Even though the prophecy ultimately fails because of Acilde's individualistic and self-centred ambitions, *Tentacle*'s multi-scalar representation of the human and historical time enables it to expose how the human error and vanity which drives a continuously re-enacted eco-apocalypse does not only belong to the *individual*, but to the human as a *species* that has assumed the role of a non-ontological, geological force on the planet.

Although humans may never be able to 'experience' themselves as a geological, planet-altering force, thinking about the human on a planetary scale, as a species, is a necessary adjustment because solving (or even simply counteracting) the problems of ecological slow violence cannot *only* be achieved by advocating for environmental responsibility on an individual level. As Nixon (2011:39) argues:

> although advocating personal environmental responsibility is essential, to shrink solutions to the level of the private and the small is evasive, even if it does constructively enhance one's sense of agency. Planetary problems – and transnational, national, and regional ones – cannot simply be resolved by the aggregated actions of responsible individuals. Institutional actions (and institutionalized inaction) have a profound impact on environmental outcomes, most blatantly in relation to climate change, which no collectivized ethical [behaviour] can combat without backing from well-implemented transnational accords.

Nixon's concerns about the evasive nature of advocating only for individual responsibility in lieu of enforcing transnational institutional management seem to be echoed in *Tentacle*, as the ultimate failure of the novel's redemptive prophecy – which

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is entrusted only to Acilde and his past doubles – paints a rather pessimistic picture of the human's innate tendency to favour individual prosperity over the survival of the collective whole. Although Acilde is given a unique vantage point from which to view and impact the slow violence that permeates the coastal environments of the Dominican Republic, he chooses to forego his prophetic destiny in order to maintain his life as Giorgio by simultaneously committing suicide as Acilde in the 2030s and Roque in the 17th century. Although it is implied that Giorgio still plans to continue his work on Linda's laboratory, which could presumably still hold some promise for the future restoration of oceanic environments, Acilde-Giorgio realises that the true purpose of his mission is to convince Said Bona – who is still a graffiti artist and performer when Giorgio 'meets' him in 2001 – not to warehouse the Venezuelan bioweapons during his future presidency; a responsibility Acilde refuses to accept because it could jeopardize his life as Giorgio:

> After chatting about rap and politics, he'd said goodbye to Said without a word about his future. He could sacrifice everything except this life, Giorgio Menicucci's life, his wife's company, the gallery, the lab. […] In a little while, he'll forget about Acilde, about Roque, even about what lives in a hole down there in the reef. (Indiana, 2018:132)

Giorgio's willingness – and, indeed, his implied hopefulness – to assume a perpetual state of amnesia regarding his other lives, the greater purpose they were supposed to serve and the anemone endowed with the more-than-human powers of Olokun, can be said to represent Glenn Albrecht's (2019:67) claim that the increasing power of the human as a species has resulted in "a type of emotional death with respect to nature," which "occurs when some humans no longer even have a reaction to the end, death, or loss of nature." In such occurrences there "is no emotional presence to bear witness, as all remaining biota are ignored as irrelevant to the life projects of individual humans" (Albrecht, 2019:67). Acilde-Giorgio's decision to forego the fulfilment of the prophecy

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thus embodies such an 'emotional death', and further serves as a poignant reminder of the inherent selfishness which underlies human-being-in-the-world. Moments before encountering Said Bona at the Sosúa Project event, Giorgio expresses his optimism about his endeavours to enable the future government "to help regenerate part of what was lost" (Indiana, 2018:128) by establishing Linda's laboratory, describing the lab as "the altar [he is] going to build for Olokun, in which [he will] turn Omicunlé's Yoruba prayers into an environmental call to action" (Indiana, 2018:128). Giorgio's supposed investment in Olokun's sacred power and the grand purpose of the Yoruba spirituality which enabled the enactment of the prophecy is, however, undercut by his egotistic musings about his role in circumventing the poisoning of the Caribbean Sea: "Suddenly, the idea struck him as real: he was a king, the king of this world, the big head, the one who knew what was at the bottom of the sea" (Indiana, 2018:128). Giorgio's refusal to fulfil the role for which he is supposedly destined is further complicated by the fact that, as Indiana herself states in an interview, "Acilde's most important supernatural power is not time travel but the privilege bestowed upon [him] as a white heterosexual male" (Brady, 2019:np). By having Acilde refuse to fulfil the prophecy, *Tentacle* thus subverts popular narrative tropes in which it is usually "the lone white heroic male who saves humanity from destruction" (Deckard and Oloff, 2020:11), as "Acilde's individual aspiration to achieve white masculinity – and to access the luxuries and securities associated with a higher class status – trumps the protection of the commons when he renounces the opportunity to alter history and usher in a more life-making ecological regime" (Deckard and Oloff, 2020:11).

Tentacle's critique of the inherent selfishness that defines human-being-in-the-world – both individually and collectively – thus extends to include the sociogenic construction of Western Man as the locus of existence on the planet. The fact that the prophecy's

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failure is directly the result of Acilde's new view of himself as "the king of this world" (Indiana, 2018:128) offers a pointed critique of the Enlightenment view of Man as the supreme being on the planet whose existence is separate from, and superior to, nonhuman nature. Furthermore, it is continuously implied throughout the novel that Giorgio's actions are driven not by his devotion to fulfilling the prophecy and protecting marine ecosystems, but by his desire to please Linda, and thus to fulfil his personal ambitions. Although the building of the laboratory would certainly "kill several birds with one stone" (Indiana, 2018:106), as Acilde opines, because "the mission for which he was destined was already aligned with his wife's mission" (Indiana, 2018:106), it is clear that his main goal in doing so is to "make *Linda's* dream come true" (Indiana, 2018:106; emphasis added) rather than to fulfil his destiny as the earthly incarnation of Olokun. Immediately following his realisation that building Linda's laboratory is not the plan for which he was destined, Giorgio starts to ponder the possible ramifications of convincing Said Bona not to accept the bioweapons in the future:

> [If] Said Bona followed his advice and there was no chemical spill after the tsunami, would Esther Escudero go looking for him? Would Eric Vitier find him among the hustlers at El Mirador? Would he be crowned in that shanty in Villa Mella and allowed the life he'd come to so appreciate? Would Giorgio disappear? He imagined Linda covering her head with her hands, out of her mind when her seas turned into a shit shake, while here, in the past of those seas destined to disappear, she was dancing happily with the prospect of the new lab next to a young and charming Iván. (Indiana, 2018:129)

Even though moments earlier, Acilde-Giorgio is singing his own praises and focusing on the role he will have in possibly restoring the marine ecosystems of the Caribbean, his focus instantaneously turns to the possibility of losing the life he has been able to build for himself in the 90s and early 2000s and, significantly, *Linda*'s reaction to the future catastrophe. Ultimately, even Giorgio's love for his wife and his concern over Linda's future distress is not able to sway him into making the correct decision; one

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that would save countless lives – both human and nonhuman – and that would spare Linda the pain he imagines her feeling when the one thing she dedicated her life to is completely destroyed. Although Acilde-Giorgio has intimate knowledge of what it is like to inhabit a “future of acid rains and epidemics in which prison was preferable to the outside” (Indiana, 2018:128), he chooses to forego his destiny and to leave the Caribbean Sea – and by implication the rest of the world’s oceans – to its fate, thus not only jeopardising the health and survival of Caribbean ecosystems but the health of the entire planet and all its inhabitants.

Indiana’s decision to conclude the novel on such a seemingly hopeless note, and without giving any indication as to whether Giorgio might later change his mind and choose to fulfil his destiny, could be read as an expression of ‘environmental grief’; a psychological phenomenon which can be broadly defined as “an expanding domain of human emotion [which is] tied to the feelings of grief and loss at that which has already negatively changed or disappeared” (Albrecht, 2017:294-295) as a result of anthropogenic environmental decline, as well as “anticipatory grief and mourning for that which is currently under stress and will most likely pass away in the foreseeable future” (Albrecht, 2017:295). This form of grief, which Albrecht (2017:296) refers to as “the new mourning”, encapsulates a range of “experiences of Earth-associated trauma, distress, grief, mourning, and melancholia that unfortunately are now often connected to escalating occurrences of acute and chronic environmental desolation” (Albrecht, 2017:292). This new range of emotions includes the experience of “solastalgia”; a neologism coined by Albrecht (2019:38; see also Albrecht, 2017:300) which he defines as “the pain or distress caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one’s home and territory [on any scale]. It is the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change,

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manifest as an attack on one's sense of place." *Tentacle*'s projection of irreversible environmental collapse in the near future arguably captures such feelings of Earth-associated distress and anticipatory grief for that which will inevitably be lost if humans continue on the destructive and discriminatory path forged by the neo-colonial capitalist world-system. Giorgio's refusal to fulfil the prophecy can also be read as encapsulating what Albrecht has named "terraphthoric" (Albrecht, 2019:10) or 'Earth destroying' emotions, as his decision to leave the Caribbean to its fate in order to maintain his life as a heterosexual white man arguably mirrors the justificatory processes followed by the capitalist elite who sanction the destruction of the Earth in order to accommodate their own self-interest. The novel's fluid temporality further enables it to convey a sense of solastalgia regarding the degradation of coastal ecosystems in the Caribbean that is not limited to the immediate aftermath of 'natural' disasters, but rather presents it as an emotion that traverses multiple generations and that has intensified as environmental crises have become more severe in the Anthropocene. However, despite *Tentacle*'s geographic specificity and its focus on the contingencies of individual experience, the novel's engagement with the human as a collective, 'Earth destroying' force can thus also be read as an embodiment of solastalgia that not only reflects a sense of loss that is regionally focused but as expressing concern for the collective, planetary 'home' of the human *species* and all the other life forms that co-inhabit the Earth. Indiana herself alludes to the possibility that *Tentacle* encapsulates such negative Earth emotions in an interview with Amy Brady, who asks the author whether she thinks about climate change beyond what she writes in her fiction, to which Indiana responds: "[C]limate change is not just something I think about – it's already affecting the way my family and me live" (Brady, 2019:np). Referring to the category five hurricane, Maria, that hit Puerto Rico in 2017

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and caused widespread devastation that continued long after the storm had passed due to "a slow and mediocre relief process" (Brady, 2019:np) – during which US President Donald Trump infamously "made jokes and threw paper towel rolls at people" (Brady, 2019:np) – Indiana's comment conveys a feeling of place-based distress, or solastalgia, as the space within which she lives her life is being chronically desolated by forces beyond her control. It can be argued that *Tentacle*'s depiction of environmental decline and climatic slow violence in the Caribbean as being a product of colonial legacies and the destructive forces of capitalism echoes this sense of powerlessness and solastalgia, and that Giorgio's refusal to fulfil the prophecy further exposes how advocating only for individual responsibility will not be successful in counteracting these feelings of Earth-associated distress. In order to move beyond the Anthropocene into a more 'Earth creating' future, these forces which the individual are unable to combat or control by themself must be addressed and managed at an institutional level. The novel further conveys feelings of ecological grief and anticipatory mourning through its projection of a future where "[m]ovies in which the sea is full of fish and humans run in bare skin under the sun are now part of the required programming" (Indiana, 2018:103) during the summer; a fact which prompts a Cuban inmate in the prison in which Acilde is incarcerated to state: "Isn't that something, that now that the sea's dead, that's when they come round to believing in its power?" (Indiana, 2018:103).

Even though the novel undeniably inscribes and entangles nonhuman nature with the agential capacity to influence the human – seen most notably in the magical capabilities of the Giant Caribbean Sea Anemone and the tidal wave that destroys a large section of Santo Domingo – one cannot help but interpret the novel's refusal to fulfil its narrative promise as an expression of hopelessness. By compromising the

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formulaic narrative arc implied by the magical possibilities of time travel, *Tentacle* arguably represents an understanding of eco-apocalypse as an irreversible, tragic 'End' in which human action is ultimately futile. However, if one takes into account the novel's diffracted and temporally fluid narrative which is invested in oceanic time as circulatory and materially interconnected, the novel's inconclusive ending can be read as representing a comic interpretation of apocalypse as continually re-enacted, which exposes human fallibility and allows for the possibility of change; thus offering "a goal that recedes even as it is pursued – and [harnessing] this pursuit as an engine of social change" (O'Leary, 1994:90). Indiana alludes to such possibilities of enacting change in her interview with Brady, as the author responds to Brady's statement that *Tentacle* "is mostly set in a Caribbean of the future, where capitalism, colonialism, and environmental destruction have made life a living hell for everyone save the very, very rich" (Brady, 2019:np) by saying: "The Caribbean you describe exists in the present. Placing these plagues in the future gives my reader a 'safe' place from which to view them" (Brady, 2019:np) By providing a 'safe' place from which to view the outcomes of the human species' role in the current trajectory towards planetary extinction, Indiana arguably enables her readers to confront their own complicity in the destruction of the natural world and to acknowledge their shortcomings. Even though *Tentacle*'s ending seems to suggest that the ever-increasing threat of planetary extinction is inevitable, its depiction of the ocean as a numinous, more-than-human space offers a vision of hope that forgoes "notions of growth and progress that privilege human life at the expense of all other life" (Albrecht, 2019:69). The novel's engagement with the animist Yoruba and Taíno spiritual traditions, which regard the ocean as a sacred space that is materially connected to all forms of life, is invested with the hope of finding counterhegemonic ways of existing as a species that are

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grounded in interdependence and reciprocity with nonhuman worlds rather than perpetuating human exceptionalism. As with the other novel's under discussion in this dissertation, *Tentacle*'s conclusion – although seemingly despondent and tainted by grief – is a recuperative gesture; it is an invitation to self-reflection on the destructive nature of human-being-in-the-world and the individual and systemic changes that are necessary in order to ensure the survival of *all* life forms on our shared Earth.

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Conclusion

> He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors.
>
> Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things,* 215

As the novels under discussion in this dissertation illustrate, it is becoming increasingly evident that we are living on the brink. As global temperatures continue to rise as a result of anthropogenic forces and the gulf between the sheltered lives of the rich and the unseen lives of the destitute continues to widen, it seems as though we are heading toward an inevitable and tragic End. Yet although it is vital to take into account the definition and the role of the Human as a geological force in the Anthropocene, it remains critical to make visible the social and environmental injustices perpetrated by the world's 'Big systems' against 'small lives', and to conceive of different ways of entering into a more reciprocal and interdependent relationship with nonhuman nature. I thus return to this quote from *The God of Small Things*, as to me it encapsulates the spirit of the necessary changes to be made if we are to ensure the survival of the Earth and those who call it home. Our future needs to be one of immersion rather than ascendency and we, as humans, need to acknowledge the destructive nature of our egotistical existence.

Despite their apparent pessimism regarding the human condition, the power regimes that sanction the destruction of the Earth in pursuit of capitalist growth, and the perpetuation of colonial ideologies in the neoliberal era, the three novels I have analysed in this dissertation can be said to embody an ethos of transformative change in reconsidering the human's place on the planet. Although it would be too prescriptive to label either *The God of Small Things*, *The Old Drift*, or *Tentacle* as works of explicit environmental activism, these texts can certainly be read as advocating for social and

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ecological justice in their representation of the intersectionality of postcolonial and environmental concerns. All three of these texts convey stories that are at once attentive to the real world(s) they inhabit, while making use of the opportunities afforded by fiction to create spaces in which to contemplate how the real world might be materially transformed.

The value of analysing each text in turn is that it has enabled me to be attentive to the geographic and historical specificity of each novel's environmental and social critiques. What is clear, however, is that even in their specific focus on their respective geographic and historical contexts, all three of these texts engage with human and ecological concerns across multiple scales that transcend their regional specificity. *The God of Small Things*, *The Old Drift*, and *Tentacle* can each be said to present a view of the human across multiple scales, engaging with the human as a biophysical and political agent as well as considering the role of the human species as a geophysical force in the Anthropocene. The similarities which rise to the surface in my analyses of these texts bespeak a general undercurrent of concern in the environmental literature of the Global South, although each of these novels is undoubtedly rooted in the historical contexts of their postcolonial settings and utilise different aesthetic approaches in critiquing the decimation of the environment and the systemic oppression of historically othered communities.

One of the most prominent tenets that emerged from the three novels analysed in this dissertation is their focus on the distributed network of agency between humans and nonhuman nature. Much like Roy's framing of the natural environment as an active participant in the human tragedies that occur in *The God of Small Things*, Serpell's reframing of the mosquito as an active agent in the production of human stories

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negates the historical separation of human and natural history as categorically distinct. In a similar sense, *Tentacle* also foregoes the assumption that nonhuman nature is simply a bystander to human history, as its temporal fluidity and its aesthetics of submersion point to the inseparability of violent human histories and the continued objectification and exploitation of human and nonhuman lives. While it can be argued that *Tentacle* presents nonhuman agency as futile in the face of the human species as an Earth destroying geological force – perhaps in stark contrast to the subversive power of Serpell's seemingly everlasting swarm of mosquitoes – its representation of the possibilities of acknowledging nonhuman nature's transformative powers offers a view of human and nonhuman entanglement which echoes Roy's depiction of Velutha as a model of symbiotic existence with the natural world. However, much like Velutha and the mosquitoes who are vilified as scapegoat figures in order to maintain dominant power structures and to restore a sense of communal peace, *Tentacle*'s projection of complete environmental collapse as a result of the powerlessness of 'small lives' in relation to the world's 'Big systems' echoes Roy and Serpell's depictions of the human and ecological cost of privileging one life form over all the world's perceived 'Others'. All three of these novels present the devastation of human and nonhuman ecologies in the Global South by state-sanctioned development projects and the exploitative tendencies of the global tourist industry as being inherently connected to colonial ideologies and the Enlightenment view of Man as the locus of existence on the planet, and effectively portray how these constitutive processes significantly undermine the agential capabilities of nonhuman nature to restore itself.

Another prevalent similarity that arises in each chapter is the veiled hope for a more life-making future that underlies all of the novels' seemingly tragic endings. In their own way, each text calls for contemplation on what it means to be human and to

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reconsider our relationship to our human and nonhuman others. Even in their apparent grief for what has been lost and their anticipatory mourning for what will be lost in the future, the novels' foregrounding of the human's ingrained selfishness and the perpetuation of human error as the driving forces of environmental decline, and the continued marginalisation of communities in the South, create imaginary spaces from which to confront the dire consequences of our individual and collective actions and the discriminatory ideologies that govern our world. Although, it can be argued that the more recent novels' focus on concerns that are similar to those in *The God of Small Things* – which was published more than two decades ago – presents a rather pessimistic view of the progress of postcolonial pursuits for human and environmental justice. However, my readings of *The Old Drift* and *Tentacle* as encapsulating comic interpretations of historical time softens this blow somewhat. Such an interpretation of a continuously re-enacted eco-apocalypse, which is driven by human error and vanity, allows readers to engage with their own shortcomings and the threat of extinction at a 'safe' distance, and in ways that do not feel like a personal attack on their individual beliefs.

Finally, I am aware that the texts I discuss in this dissertation could have been analysed from a posthumanist perspective, as they all encapsulate a sense of interconnectedness between humans and nonhumans, work to undermine human exceptionalism, and the 'semi-cyborgian' characters in *The Old Drift* and *Tentacle* can certainly be viewed as encompassing a posthumanist enmeshment of the biological body and machine. However, I tend to agree with Iheka's (2018:160) concerns regarding the posthuman label for previously colonised communities. Although Iheka's concerns are specifically focused on the suitability of posthumanism for *African* ecologies, I find myself equally wary of its application to other communities of the

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South who are still battling to be recognised as human or have only recently begun to achieve that recognition. Like Iheka (2018:161), I thus find myself "drawn to the seductive charm of the idea of a rehabilitated human," with a lowercase 'h', who "embodies the deconstructive sensibility that was useful for rejecting the universalist posture of the Enlightenment Man and takes pride in the idea of the [decentred] self that is always in a relation to the Other." Iheka's (2018:161) conceptualisation of the rehabilitated human thus calls for the formulation of a new human subjectivity that foregoes ideas of supremacy and uniqueness in favour of mutual reciprocity and empathy, and which considers being open to human and nonhuman others an ethical obligation. This new figure of the human is either overtly identified or alluded to in the three texts I analysed in this dissertation, and it is clear that these novels present the rehabilitated figure of the human as something which needs to be established beyond the parochialism of the West.

I thus conclude by turning once more to both the quotation used in my title, which I borrowed from *The Old Drift*'s swarm chorus, and the description of Velutha as the symbolic God of Small Things quoted at the beginning of my conclusion. Although the phrase "to err is human" (Serpell, 2019:19) might be read as expressing a sombre finality about the irredeemable nature of human-being-in-the-world, I argue that this admission in itself holds redemptive promise. It is only through such an admission of fallibility that we will be able to envision a future where we leave very little trace on the natural environment – symbolically leaving "no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors" (Roy, 1997:215). In their representations of nonhuman agency, the inequity which is spread by the capitalist world-system and its attendant histories and ideologies, and their refiguring of the human across temporal and geographic scales, *The God of Small Things*, *The Old Drift*, and *Tentacle* arguably embody the

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value of imaginative literature in altering global perceptions and inspiring individual change. This is particularly pressing in our current era of over-stimulation and fixation on sensationalism, and it is thus critical to utilise such texts in order to usher in a more equitable, life-sustaining future on our shared Earth.

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