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Demon Landscapes, Uneven Ecologies: Folk-Spirits in Guyanese Fiction

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“Many a ridiculous thing concerning the interior of Guiana has been propagated and received as true, merely because six or seven Indians, questioned separately, have agreed in their narrative.” So opined the naturalist Charles Waterton in *Wanderings in South America*, an account of his various expeditions into the forests of Guyana between 1812 and 1824.¹ Providing a few examples of the things he has heard “propagated”, Waterton mentions the Indian belief in “a horrible beast, called the watermamma, which, when it happens to take a spite against a canoe, rises out of the river, and [. . .] carries both canoe and Indians down to the bottom with it, and there destroys them.” “Ludicrous extravagances”, is Waterton’s judgment: “pleasing to those fond of the marvellous, and excellent matter for a distempered brain.”² This dismissive attitude toward Amerindian beliefs is hardly unique amongst colonial explorers, the rubbishing of native cosmology serving to refute the relationship to the land such cosmology implied in the interests of European claims to territorial possession.

More unusual is the incident of the “Nondescript”, recounted by Waterton in his fourth ‘wandering’, in which the eccentric naturalist claimed to have encountered and shot a strange, half-man-half-ape-like creature, possessed of a “thick coat of hair and [a] great length of tail.”³ Having preserved its head and shoulders, Waterton subsequently exhibited his taxidermic specimen in Georgetown before transporting it to England. The Nondescript, however, was a fake. Fashioned out of a monkey’s skin (the mouth was originally probably the animal’s anus), Waterton’s creation was most likely meant as a satire on “the credulity of the viewing public and as a joke at the expense of other scientists and their preference for the classification of dead specimens over field naturalism.”⁴

On the surface, at least, the Nondescript has little to do with Amerindian cosmology. In *Among the Indians of Guiana* (1883), however, botanist and explorer Everard F. im Thurn, in a discussion of a folk-spirit he labels the “di-di”, claims that the latter should be of interest to English readers as “being probably that which suggested to the vivid and quaint imagination of Charles Waterton the idea of constructing” his taxidermic hoax.⁵ Although the name “di-di” suggests the Bush Dai-Dai of Guyanese folklore (a wild animal that can assume

¹ Waterton 1903, p.75. For ease and consistency I use the term ‘Guyana’ throughout this article to designate the country known as British Guiana until independence in 1966.

² Ibid.

³ Waterton 1903, p.328.

⁴ Henning 2007, p.673.

⁵ im Thurn 1883, p.385.

the form of a beautiful woman), in Thurn's description of these creatures – "beings in shape something between men and monkeys, who live in the forests near the river banks" – is more reminiscent of another folk-spirit, the massacouraman.⁶ In a typology of various Guyanese folk-spirits, Satnarine Persaud defines the massacouraman in general terms as male, slightly larger than human beings, very hairy, aquatic, found in deep interior waters, and inclined to topple the boats of travellers and eat the occupants.⁷ Waterton's Nondescript lacks the massacouraman's aquatic qualities, but is otherwise reminiscent of typical accounts of these ape-like beings.

I emphasize the affinity between the Nondescript and the massacouraman since my intention in this article is to move from a consideration of Waterton's joke as an unconscious expression of the anxieties provoked in colonial explorers by confrontation with the Amerindian spirit landscape of the Guyanese interior – anxieties that often revolved around the potential breakdown of received colonialist understandings of the relationship between human and extra-human natures – to an analysis of the very different significance of the massacouraman for postcolonial authors. In what follows, I first consider the way the Nondescript's massacouraman-like scrambling of species boundaries and its allusive manifestation of anxieties over the organization of nature might be viewed in relation to processes of uneven and combined development. Drawing on Stephen Shapiro's claim that Gothic modes and devices tend to flourish during periods of transition in the capitalist world-system, I connect the element of Gothic grotesquerie that surrounds Waterton's creation to the reorganization of the global economy in the early nineteenth century and its implications for the peoples and landscapes of Guyana. I next examine a selection of Guyanese novels in which depictions of the massacouraman help mediate the felt experience of later periods of ecological change. Focusing on Wilson Harris's *The Secret Ladder* (1964), Roy Heath's *From the Heat of the Day* (1979), and Cyril Dabydeen's *Dark Swirl* (1988), I show how such depictions respond to the upheavals involved in the reconfiguration of Guyana's economy over the course of the twentieth century, from the decline and subsequent reorganization of its sugar industry in the period 1920-1960 to the impact of neoliberal restructuring in the 1980s. My analysis will be framed by the world-ecology perspective, which posits reality as a historically- and geographically-fluid (yet cyclically stabilized) set of actively reproducing relations between manifold species and environments.⁸ In this perspective, historical systems

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Persaud 1978, p.68.

⁸ See Moore 2015; Deckard 2012; Niblett 2012.

are understood as co-produced by humans alongside the rest of nature, such that capitalism, for example, is to be viewed as a world-ecology – as a historically specific, systemically patterned bundle of human and extra-human relations.

In his essay “The Function of Myth” (1973), the Guyanese novelist Roy Heath describes the massacouraman thus:

He is of vast proportions and rises suddenly out of black water rivers. His head towers higher than the trees on the river banks, while water reaches to his waist-line. He makes thunderous noises and his eyes flash fire. With long, gleaming teeth, the hair covering his bulking form is composed of excited venomous snakes. He is thought to be responsible for river deaths in the jungle.⁹

Although this creature would appear to have both Amerindian and African roots, its origins are obscure. There appear to be no direct references to “the massacouraman” in pre-1900 colonial travel narratives, otherwise so full of the beliefs European explorers encountered – or thought they had encountered – amongst Amerindian peoples in Guyana’s interior. Nevertheless, certain of the descriptions by colonial writers of folk-spirits to which they give different names recall the massacouraman as it is now understood. Im Thurn’s aforementioned reference to the di-di is one such instance, as is Henry Kirke’s account in *Twenty-Five Years in British Guiana* (1898) of the Amerindian belief in “water-mammas” with “snakes twined round their heads and bosoms”, who use their “huge claw-like hands [to] drag boats down and drown their occupants.”¹⁰ To these should be added reports of “wild” or “hairy” men of the woods, such as those recorded by Alexander Von Humboldt of a furry, flesh-eating creature known as the *salvaje*.¹¹

It is perhaps significant that accounts of the massacouraman have been a staple of the stories and songs of Guyana’s pork-knockers – small-scale, independent gold and diamond miners. The rise of the pork-knockers can be traced to the 1890s, when a gold rush in Guyana’s North West region drew thousands of prospectors into the interior. The miners

⁹ Heath 1973, p.92

¹⁰ Kirke 1898, p.176.

¹¹ Von Humboldt 2009, p.270.

returned with a wealth of tales about the forest and its marvels, which helped to shape the image of the hinterland in the Guyanese imagination.¹² Given how their work brought the pork-knockers into close contact with Amerindian peoples, it is possible that the now common view of the massacouraman dates from this period.¹³ Certainly, by the early twentieth century the term seems to have become more widespread. Describing an expedition into the interior in 1925, Matthew French Young makes detailed mention of the massacouraman. He recalls, for example, being warned to stay out of the river in which he has been swimming since “there were things under the water dangerous to anything moving, such as the ‘water tiger’, known locally as the ‘massacuruman’, something in the shape of a human form covered with hair, having small ears set in a head armed with the fangs of a tiger with webbed hands and feet having terrible claws and having a tail.”¹⁴

Before turning to fictional representations of this folk-spirit, I want to consider in more detail the depiction of Amerindian cosmologies in colonial travelogues and scientific surveys. As we have seen, it was common for explorers to misinterpret native beliefs and to confuse and conflate different spirit-beings. What they could not mistake, however, was the close relationship that existed for the Amerindians between these spirit-beings and the landscape. “Nearly every rock, cataract, and valley,” writes Graham Burnett, “[. . .] was associated with Amerindian legends. Some places were possessed by particular spirits; many rock formations were thought to be the petrified remnants of animals, plants, men, and food from a heroic age of giant ancestors. [. . .] No nineteenth-century explorer of British Guiana failed to mention that the landscape of the Amerindian was suffused by spirit presences.”¹⁵ So struck was the colonial surveyor Robert Schomburgk by what he regarded as the Amerindians’ “perpetual fear” of the “evil spirits” supposed to inhabit the landscape that he designated “the Indian” a “professor of Demonology.”¹⁶

The attitude of colonial explorers to this “demon landscape” was often ambiguous. On the one hand, by rubbishing the native meanings associated with certain topographical features, they asserted mastery over the terrain. However, it was important that the ‘demonology’ of the land not be dismissed too swiftly. Explorers had at least to hint at the potency of Amerindian beliefs in order to burnish their own image as courageous adventurers

¹² Creighton 2014.

¹³ See Heath 1973, 89: “From the pork-knocker saga came shanty songs, stories, the fearful Amerindian Dai-Dai and Masacurruman. The Afro-Guyanese saw nothing bountiful in the jungle; its terrors were ever present. On land roamed the Bush Dai-Dai, and beneath the river waters lurked Massacurruman.” (89)

¹⁴ Young 1998, pp. 12-13.

¹⁵ Burnett 2000, pp.183-84.

¹⁶ Quoted in Menezes 1979, p.16.

into the unknown. This acknowledgement of the “demon landscape” was inseparable from a genuine fear of the forest as a ‘green hell’ in which one could easily become disoriented amidst the trees and end up lost, mad, or dead.¹⁷ As Burnett observes, the “recognition of the hallucinatory power of the landscape placed the explorer at risk; it was a short step from empathy to the kind of collapse – the ‘going native’ (or mad) – that disqualified the explorer.”¹⁸ Neil Whitehead concurs, noting that in the writing of Schomburgk the forest becomes not only a spirit landscape, but also a spirit-being in its own right.¹⁹ To encounter this adversary is to “risk a loss of humanity, or going ‘bush’ in the ‘demon landscape.’”²⁰ At this point, Waterton’s Nondescript re-enters on the scene. For Burnett, this “disturbing taxonomic monster” represents “an allusion to the threat of collapse into a spirit landscape.”²¹ It is easy to see why: in its disruption of classificatory norms and blurring of the boundaries between different species, it gestures to the dislocation of the explorer’s sovereign selfhood and the scrambling of epistemological certainties that a descent into the “green hell” of the jungle would entail. Such a reading reinforces the connection between the Nondescript and the masscouraman: not only is the latter one of the spirit-beings that endows the landscape with its “demonic” character; it also embodies an entanglement of different orders of existence – human, animal, and supernatural. As such, it hints at the threat posed by the “demon landscape” to the ideology of nature instantiated under capitalism, in which human nature (in the form of the isolated individual – here, the pioneering colonial explorer) is posited as radically separate from extra-human nature (understood as an external object).

But if the masscouraman-like Nondescript implicates the colonialist fear of a fall into a world governed by an alien social logic, it might also be said to speak to the processes of uneven and combined development unfolding in the period in which Waterton was ‘wandering’ across South America. The Nondescript’s scrambled, topsy-turvy features (an anus for a mouth) suggest the contradictions generated by the movement between two phases of capitalist development. To clarify this assertion (and to begin to relate such concerns to aesthetic practice) I want to turn to the category of the Gothic. Stephen Shapiro has argued that “generic inscriptions of Gothic narratives and devices tend to re-emerge in swarms at certain discrete periods.”²² Capitalist commodification, he writes, produces an intrinsically

¹⁷ On this point, see Burnett, who notes the “oppression and anxiety interior explorers described feeling when they were deprived of [landmarks]” (2000, p.175).

¹⁸ Burnett 2000, p.184.

¹⁹ Whitehead 2002, p.84.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Burnett 2000, p.184.

²² Shapiro 2008, p.30.

Gothic experience: as human energy “becomes invested in commodities made for surplus value, rather than the satisfaction of living needs”, an “occult transformation arises with the commodity fetish. [. . .] The human creator now seems to be simply the bearer of a commodity’s social energy, rather than its originator, [while] the object appears autonomous and self-creating, like an awful, supernatural alien towering before its human meat-puppets.”²³ That said, the intermittent clustering of Gothic tales – at moments like the 1780s/90s, 1880s/90s, 1950s, and 2000s – suggests that “the oscillating pump of Gothic emissions reveals a more specific, albeit recurring representational purpose beyond its application as a general thematic for describing capitalist-induced phenomenology.” Specifically, Gothic’s periodicity suggests that “these narrative devices seem particularly to sediment during the passage between two phases of long-wave capitalist accumulation. Gothic representational devices become recalled and revitalized in the synapses that both link and distinguish the dendrites of two time-spaces of capitalist development and its reformation of inter-regional trade relations.”²⁴

Shapiro’s argument can be extended by way of the world-ecology perspective, for which the transitions between different modes of capitalist development are simultaneously transitions between different ways of organizing nature. Capitalism, argues Jason W. Moore, is “constituted through a succession of ecological regimes that crystallize a qualitative transformation of capital accumulation—for instance the transition from manufacture to large-scale industry—within a provisionally stabilized structuring of nature-society relations.”²⁵ These ecological regimes emerge through revolutions in socio-ecological relations, such revolutions tending to occur as a result of a breakdown in the capacity of the dominant ecological regime to maintain the conditions for extended accumulation. Against this backdrop of stagnancy, ecological revolutions create the conditions “for new long waves of accumulation” by “expanding the *relative ecological surplus*”, reorganizing the production of nature in such a way as to generate new sources of cheap labour power, food, energy, and raw materials.²⁶ Such revolutions thus help drive down production costs and restore profitability. If, therefore, ecological revolutions are central to the transition between two phases of long-wave accumulation, then they too, following Shapiro’s argument, lurk behind those periodic moments when Gothic narratives tend to emerge in a swarm. Broadly speaking, this can be attributed to the way Gothic forms and motifs provide a useful means of

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Moore 2011, p.34.

²⁶ Moore 2011, p.25, p.23.

expressing the felt experience of the convulsions unleashed by ecological revolutions and the often intensely visible forms of uneven and combined development through which they unfold. As the existing ecological regime is overturned, the anamorphic and catachrestic features of Gothic texts register the feelings of rupture, strangeness, and irreality engendered by the scrambling of economic hierarchies, the coexistence of residual and emergent social formations, and the uneven transformation of human and extra-human geographies.

With this in mind, it is significant that Waterton's 'wanderings' were undertaken during a period of restructuring in the capitalist world-ecology that was both cause and consequence of a transition from one systemic cycle of accumulation to another. Following Giovanni Arrighi, we can designate these cycles as the Dutch and British respectively, in reference to the hegemonic powers associated with each.²⁷ The Dutch cycle lasted from the mid-seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century; it was superseded by the British cycle, which lasted from the 1770s to the early 1930s.²⁸ The passage between the cycles was marked by the exhaustion (sometime after 1760) of the 'first' agricultural revolution of the long seventeenth century, and by subsequent efforts to resolve this ecological crisis. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, observes Jason Moore, "a new wave of capitalist agrarian transformations swept over the core, and the world-economy again expanded dramatically, producing major transformations of agrarian life in the new peripheries."²⁹ The colonies through which Waterton travelled (at that point Demerara, Essequibo, and Berbice had yet to be united into the single colony of British Guiana) were very directly affected by these changes: as the global balance of power fluctuated in the late eighteenth century, they passed from Dutch to British control and back again, before falling definitively under British dominion in 1803. The final decade of the century, moreover, witnessed a "feverish" burst of speculation and expansion in the region with the export of plantation staples rising steeply (between 1789 and 1802, for example, the export of sugar rose by 433%).³⁰ With Britain's reoccupation of the colonies in 1796, a flood of planters poured in from the insular Caribbean, fleeing the increasingly degraded soils of the islands to the north.³¹ The boom soon turned to bust, however: by the early years of the nineteenth century, "the heady conditions of the 1790s" had been replaced by "an atmosphere of gloom and chronic crisis."³² The planters' woes were compounded by the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, and the

²⁷ Arrighi 2010, pp.28-59.

²⁸ Arrighi 2010, pp.219-22.

²⁹ Moore 2000, p.143.

³⁰ Adamson 1972, p.24.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

increasing moves towards ending slavery and reducing the protective tariffs on sugar entering the British market.

The sense of Gothic grotesquerie evoked by Waterton's *Nondescript*, therefore, can be read in light of the anxieties provoked by the conditions of flux and uncertainty he encountered on his travels. (Significantly, perhaps, the dates of Waterton's 'wanderings' – 1812-1824 – overlap with a surge in the publication of Gothic narratives between 1790 and 1815).³³ The *Nondescript*'s scrambling of species and the fear to which it alludes of a collapse into the demon landscape (and hence of the breakdown of a social logic predicated on the subject's separation from extra-human nature) registers an apprehension over the scrambling of social relations and the future of the colonies given the ongoing historical turbulence. We might also read both the volatility of the narrative voice in *Wanderings*, which shifts between first, second, and third person, and Waterton's frequent exhortations that the forested interior be properly managed and made productive, in a similar light.

There is one further aspect of Gothic's periodicity I would like to consider here. In responding to the convulsions unleashed during the transition between two long-waves of accumulation, Gothic devices and motifs frequently work to encode the violence wrought upon labouring peoples by the penetration or intensification of capitalist regimes of exploitation. Ireal stylistic mannerisms and images of the grotesque, deformed, or monstrous register the felt experience of communities exposed to the often savage transformations in social relations, bodily dispositions, and psychic structures attendant on the expansion or reorganization of the capitalist world-ecology.³⁴ Now, it is not easy to read the Gothic undertones of the *Nondescript* in this light given Waterton's class position and ideological investments as a member of the landed gentry. Indeed, *Wanderings* as a whole largely elides the colonial violence upon which the naturalist's presence in the region ultimately depended.³⁵ Nevertheless, one might still venture to discern in the *Nondescript* something like an unconscious projection of this violence, the creature's bizarre juxtaposition of discordant features an intimation of the brutally disruptive coercions visited on the Amerindian societies whose customs Waterton was otherwise so keen to document.

It is possible to view the invocations of a demon landscape found in many of the explorers who followed Waterton in similar fashion. Take, for example, the surveyor Charles Barrington Brown, whose *Canoe and Camp Life in British Guiana* documents his travels

³³ Moretti 2007, p.14.

³⁴ On this point, see for example McNally 2011.

³⁵ A few brief mentions are made of the sufferings endured by the Amerindians and the enslaved, but this bitter pill is swiftly sweetened by sentimental odes to the kind-heartedness of British planters.

through the colony between 1867 and 1872. Brown's repeated references in his writings to the violence associated with the Amerindian folk-spirit *kanaimà* stand as a displaced expression of the devastating consequences of colonial intrusion into the interior, from which his own surveying mission was inextricable. The same could be said with respect to Schomburgk's emphasis on the "demonology" of the Amerindians, not least since elsewhere he was fairly explicit about the forcible restructuring of native lifestyles and social formations necessary to ensure their incorporation within a market economy as "consumers" and "cash-crop agriculturalists". "[I]t would be advisable for [the Indian's] advancement in civilization", he wrote, "to awaken in him a demand for decent apparel and other comforts of civilized nations, and by exalting him in his own opinion and increasing his self-respect, his industry would be called forth to keep up the standing he had acquired."³⁶ What Schomburgk calls for here is the intensive reorganization of human and extra-human nature – an ecological revolution, in other words.

If the violence of such transformations is generally downplayed or repressed by explorers like Waterton, Brown, and Schomburgk, for many later Guyanese writers the impulse has been precisely to uncover and document this violence, as well as to project the transcendence of its pernicious legacies. In the effort to do so, the literary mobilization of folk beliefs (such as the *massacouraman* legend) has been crucial. In the work of such authors as Wilson Harris, Roy Heath, and Pauline Melville, for example, the juxtaposition of modernist narrative techniques alongside folk forms and contents (oral tales, magico-religious traditions, etc.) both registers and provides a means to critique the forms of uneven and combined development through which capitalist imperialism manifests itself in Guyana. Such amalgamations of literary idioms are often categorized under the rubric of magical realism, which as Jameson once observed "depends on a content which betrays the overlap or the coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features."³⁷ In a commentary on the figure of the zombie in Caribbean literature, Kerstin Oloff contends that in works like Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), Frankétienne's *Dézafi* (1975), and Erna Brodber's *Myal* (1988), "the gothic mode is often subsumed by, or is employed alongside, magical realism, which is, like the gothic, a style of disruption growing out of capitalist unevenness subjectively experienced as ruptures in time."³⁸ In the following section I track a similar kind of transition to that which Oloff identifies between the colonial Gothic and an

³⁶ Quoted in Burnett 2002, p.27.

³⁷ Jameson 1986, p.311.

³⁸ Oloff 2012, p.39.

indigenized magical realism. In moving from Waterton's *Nondescript* to fictional evocations of the masscouraman we pass from a figure suggestive of the racial anxieties and eco-phobia of the colonial Gothic imaginary to a figure whose blurring of the boundaries between the human and the extra-human becomes emblematic of the potential transformation of the co-production of nature in emancipatory ways.

If, for colonial explorers like Waterton and Schomburgk, the demon landscape is an adversary to be exorcised, in Wilson Harris's *The Secret Ladder* it functions as a vital "catalytic agent of consciousness."³⁹ Harris emphasizes the animacy and invasiveness of the jungle. But for him the dissolution of the boundaries between the human and the extra-human is a necessity, something to be embraced in the quest to rethink the nature of existence. Whereas Waterton's *Nondescript* alludes to the threat to colonial subjectivity of collapsing into the green hell of the forest, Harris writes affirmatively of the jungle's power to undermine the blinkered perceptual frameworks of the modern isolated individual: "The Wilderness comes into its own as extra-human territory which unsettles the hubris of a human-centred cosmos that has mired the globe since the Enlightenment."⁴⁰ In *The Secret Ladder*, the protagonist Russell Fenwick's journey into the interior involves just such an unsettling of anthropocentric hubris alongside a radical transformation in consciousness. The novel registers more than just a change in Fenwick's psyche, however. Set sometime in the mid-twentieth century, it mediates the localized expression in Guyana of the revolution in world-ecology underway in the post-war period as the core capitalist powers sought to expand the supply of 'cheap' nature in the interests of accumulation.

Following the Second World War, large parts of the Caribbean underwent economic modernization, encouraged to an extent by the colonial powers as they sought to recalibrate their hold over the region. In Guyana, the 1950s and early 1960s saw the restructuring of the struggling sugar industry. Transnational corporations intensified the process of land and capital consolidation. Sugar output was boosted by the modernization of factories, transport links, and storage facilities, as well as the greater application of science and technology to the production process and the rationalization of work routines.⁴¹ This ratcheting up of the

³⁹ Maes-Jelinek 2005, p.249.

⁴⁰ Harris 1996, p.97.

⁴¹ Thomas 1984, p.145.

exploitation of human and extra-human natures contributed to the creation of a worldwide ecological surplus that helped drive the expansion of the capitalist world-economy between 1945 and the early 1970s.

In *The Secret Ladder*, Fenwick is a government surveyor leading a crew of men up the Canje River in order to chart its flow. Reflecting the greater application of science and technology to sugar production, his efforts form part of a scheme to build a reservoir designed to aid the irrigation of coastal estates. The scheme will have inimical consequences for a community of peasant farmers that occupies the land earmarked for the reservoir. Descendants of runaway slaves, the community is led by the elderly Poseidon. For Fenwick, at least initially, the peasants' resistance to the flooding of their territory is misguided. Stressing that they will be compensated, he maintains that "[t]he land isn't all that rich up here – in fact it's a mess – and they wouldn't want to keep it in face of a scheme that would do untold benefit to the sugar estates and rice-lands of the Courantyne and Berbice coasts' – he found himself speaking as if he were recounting an obsession and a lesson – 'which draw their irrigation supplies catch-as-catch-can mostly from an unaided river now.'"⁴² Fenwick's attempts to downplay the dispossession of the peasants only draw attention to the way his expedition reproduces the colonial-capitalist dynamics of past intrusions into the interior.

When Fenwick and his surveying team 'invade' the community's land, therefore, they do so as agents of the latest in a series of ecological revolutions aimed at appropriating fresh streams of nature's bounty. It is in this context that the masscouraman makes an appearance in the novel. The occasion is Fenwick's first encounter with Poseidon; and it is the old man himself who takes on the appearance of the folk-spirit:

There was the faint hoarse sound of an approaching body swimming in the undergrowth. Fenwick adjusted his eyes. He could no longer evade a reality that had always escaped him. The strangest figure he had ever seen had appeared in the opening of the bush, dressed in a flannel vest, flapping ragged fins of trousers on his legs. Fenwick could not help fastening his eyes greedily upon him as if he saw down a bottomless gauge and river of reflection. [. . .] The old man's hair was white as wool and his cheeks—covered with wild curling rings—looked like an unkempt sheep's back. The black wooden snake of skin peeping through its animal blanket was wrinkled and stitched together incredibly. [. . .] Poseidon addressed Fenwick at last.

⁴² Harris 1985, p.381. Hereafter cited in the text.

His mouth moved and made frames which did not correspond to the words he actually uttered. It was like the tragic lips of an actor [. . .] galvanized into comical association with a foreign dubbing and tongue which uttered a mechanical version and translation out of accord with the visible features of original expression. (371)

The way Poseidon (whose name, of course, alludes to the Greek sea-god) ‘swims’ out of the bush to confront Fenwick brings to mind the massacouraman’s tendency to erupt out of the river. The old-man’s hairy, part-human, part-aquatic appearance reinforces this association, as does the reference to his “wooden snake of skin”, which not only emphasizes his connection to the landscape, but also recalls the frequent descriptions of the massacouraman as having snakes entwined in its hair. Poseidon’s body thus displays that same conjunction of different orders of existence that characterizes the folk-spirit. In contrast to the contained corporeality of the isolated individual of capitalist modernity (represented here by the bourgeois Fenwick), this is a body open to the world, blended with its surroundings, and at odds with the separation of the human from the extra-human. No wonder Fenwick, facing a “reality that had always escaped him”, struggles to comprehend Poseidon’s “visible features of original expression.” Indeed, the gap between this expression and the “mechanical version” heard by the surveyor underscores the disjunctive quality of their encounter. Fenwick, working in the interests of the coastal estates, and Poseidon, as leader of the peasant community, embody the historic tension between plantation and plot, sugar and subsistence crops. But the gap in understanding between them also stands as a sign for the disjunctions that will accompany the ecological revolution with which Fenwick is associated. The discontinuity between their modes of discourse suggests the particular breaks and ruptures attendant upon the disaggregation and reorganization of existing ecological unities in this period.

The encounter, then, between Fenwick (representative of the modernizing state) and Poseidon (representative of an alternative social logic) is emblematic of the new and highly visible forms of unevenness generated by the post-war ecological revolution. Poseidon’s embodied amalgam of multiple orders of existence, moreover, speaks to the felt experience of the period as one in which human and extra-human natures are being re-combined in strange new ways with the reorganization of work routines and environments. The allusion to the massacouraman is entirely apposite in this context since its conjoining of human, animal, and vegetable qualities gestures to the very thing at stake in an ecological revolution: the re-making of the whole web of life. Indeed, this is one possible reason why writers responding

to such revolutions are drawn to the massacouraman as a rhetorical figure. During an ecological revolution, the disaggregation and reconfiguration of the existing structure of ecological relations makes the historicity of the intertwining of human and extra-human natures more readily apparent than it might have been while the preceding ecological regime was firmly in place. Shapiro suggests that in the transition between long-waves of accumulation, the paradoxical foreclosure and return of a capitalist-driven cycle “enables a spatial telethasthesia, the ability to apprehend what is beyond the immediate reach of the empirical senses, because the large-scale nature of dramatic changes momentarily facilitates a greater perception of the world-system’s effects in ways otherwise unavailable to individual subjects within the mental horizon of that system.”⁴³ For world-system here read world-ecology, so that the massacouraman might be said to function as a figure for the phenomenal experience of such moments of transition: its intermixed form, suggestive of the web of life, offers a means by which to register the alteration in structures of feeling brought about by the access to a greater sense of the co-production of nature enabled during ecological revolutions.

It is worth comparing the massacouraman-like Nondescript with the massacouraman-like Poseidon. As noted, the Nondescript can be viewed as representing something like a return of the repressed, with its bizarre scrambling of body parts serving as a displaced expression of the violent scrambling of bodies associated with the colonial intrusion into the Guyanese interior. Poseidon, too, albeit in a very different way, represents a return of the repressed and alludes to the brutal reorganization of bodies under colonialism. By way of his difference from Fenwick’s surveying crew, the old peasant’s corporeality indirectly registers the deformations wrought on the working classes by the ecological revolution of the mid-twentieth century. The crew bear the disciplined, isolated bodies imposed by capital to ensure they function as productive units of exploitable energy. Reflecting the increasing atomization and rationalization of work routines in this period, the crew have been reduced to their allotted, specialized roles: foreman, boatman, cook, and so on. Commenting on his own experience of surveying teams, Harris writes of how each member “operated within a rigid function and [. . .] were excellent within that function”, yet in order to exercise it had to “eclipse a great deal”: they “accepted themselves within a certain kind of hierarchy [. . .] [and] to extend themselves beyond this was a matter that aroused uneasiness.”⁴⁴ In *The Secret Ladder*, Fenwick’s men are similarly unable to “extend themselves” beyond their isolated individualism; the social relations that determine their interactions remain obscure to them, as

⁴³ Shapiro 2008, p.43.

⁴⁴ Harris 1999, pp.77-78.

does their connection to the landscape in which they work. Poseidon, meanwhile, stands as the determinate negation of this enclosed, monadic condition, his massacouraman-like blurring of species boundaries and the openness of his body to the environment gesturing to all that has been suppressed in the crew.

In this regard, the return of the repressed represented by Poseidon is of an alternative history and a radically different social logic, one resistant to the reifying thrust of capitalist development. As Fenwick himself comes to recognize: “in this creature [. . .], the black man with the European name, drawn out of the depths of time, is the emotional dynamic of liberation that happened a century and a quarter ago [. . .]. Something went tragically wrong then. Something was misunderstood and frustrated” (385). This submerged history of liberation – Fenwick seems to be talking specifically here about emancipation and its unrealized promise – is presented in the novel as a legacy that must be brought to light and concretized. Significantly, at least part of what went “tragically wrong” at emancipation was the failure to pursue genuine land reform and break the stranglehold of the plantations. This would have necessitated supporting, rather than stymieing, the peasantry and the communal village movement, the potential of which is emblemized by Poseidon’s group of subsistence farmers. Poseidon-as-massacouraman, then, might be read as signifying the possibility of a form of the production of nature different to that instantiated under the plantation regime, his body a figure for a way of organizing nature in which the human and the extra-human are experienced as a dialectical unity.

With this in mind, I want to turn to Roy Heath’s *From the Heat of the Day*, in which a brief reference to a massacouraman-like figure assumes similar significance. Set in the 1920s and early 1930s, Heath’s novel registers the unravelling of the ecological regime that preceded the emergent post-war dispensation to which *The Secret Ladder* responds. On a global scale, the economic slump of the late 1920s marked what Arrighi calls the “terminal crisis” in the (British) systemic cycle of accumulation of the long nineteenth century.⁴⁵ For Guyana, this slump manifested itself in a “period of depression and severe crisis for the sugar industry”, which lasted until World War II.⁴⁶ Moore has drawn attention to the way capitalist regimes of commodity production periodically exhaust the whole range of socio-ecological conditions – the “very webs of life” – that had originally sustained them. These conditions are not simply biophysical; scarcities emerge through “the intertwining of resistances from labouring classes, landscape changes, and market flux – all specific bundles of relations

⁴⁵ Arrighi 2010, pp.220-21.

⁴⁶ Thomas 1984, p.23.

between humans and the rest of nature.”⁴⁷ Certainly Guyana’s sugar industry had reached something like this point of exhaustion by the 1920s, with the result that the planter class was forced into a restructuring of its economic model, the uneven effects of which were felt throughout society. As Clive Thomas observes in a compelling summary:

[T]he long period from emancipation to the end of indenture (1838-1921) saw attempts by the planter class to resist the final collapse of a mode of production based on legally sanctioned servitude. In the process, its policies on immigration, its struggle against the peasantry, and the intimidatory use of state power were to become the source of most of the present contradictions within the sugar economy, the rest of the rural economy, and the national economy of Guyana. With the final defeat of this modified form of slavery, the period up to World War II witnessed attempts to convert absentee landlordship into modern capitalist corporations. In this the planters were successful. A labour market, consolidation of land and capital, diversification, the greater use of scientific cultivation practices and factory processes all heralded new departures in plantation organization. But among the newer forms, the old bases of exploitative social relations continued.⁴⁸

In narrating the gradual decline of its protagonist, Sonny Armstrong, *From the Heat of the Day* speaks both to the enervation of the “webs of life” that had underpinned the economic organization of Guyana, as well as to the new forms of uneven and combined development that emerged as a consequence of efforts to stave off the sugar industry’s collapse. Not only does the novel make explicit reference to the impending crisis: “Armstrong told his wife that there were rumours of the sugar market collapsing. [. . .] Several sugar estates were in danger of closing down and the government had drawn up plans for retrenchment and suspended recruitment to the Civil Service.”⁴⁹ The text is also infused with an atmosphere of decay and degeneration, of suppressed violence and thwarted desire, of the “dark angst” that characterizes Heath’s work generally.⁵⁰ Equally characteristic of Heath’s work is his combination of social and psychological realism with mythic and folkloric idioms and materials, such that he “creates his own form of ‘magical realism.’”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Moore 2011, p.46.

⁴⁸ Thomas 1984, pp.25-26.

⁴⁹ Heath 1994, p.49. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁵⁰ James 2009, p.73.

⁵¹ James 2009, p.74.

Thus, the plot of his first novel, *A Man Come Home* (1974), is structured around the fairmaid legend of Guyanese folklore, while in *The Shadow Bride* (1988) the character of Mrs. Singh is associated with the blood-sucking witch Ol' Higue. In *From the Heat of the Day* such explicitly mythical devices are largely absent. Nevertheless, in its depiction of the psychic deformations of its protagonists, its accumulation of descriptive detail, and its “abrupt and frequent shifts in point of view”, the text assumes a hallucinatory, estranging air.⁵²

Tellingly, this hallucinatory quality is at its most intense at a pivotal moment both in Armstrong’s decline and in the unravelling of the prevailing ecological regime; and it is at this point too that the massacouraman is invoked. Armstrong is rushing down the street, following a sudden urge to visit a prostitute, when he collapses and has “a vision of himself lying on a bed, arms crossed on his chest, being stared at by his wife’s relations. [. . .] Without warning [his sisters-in-law] both bent over and placed flowers on his eyes, on his cheeks and on his mouth, yellow daisies that grew in profusion by the roadside” (125). The vision climaxes (literally) when the eldest sister-in-law puts her hand around “his ungodly erection” (126). On regaining consciousness, Armstrong recalls “a curious conversation” he heard when he was younger between his father and a fisherman friend, in which the fisherman explains how “one night we haul up the net and what you think we find inside? Something looking just like a man, but with webbed feet”:

Those words had aroused something slumbering deep within Armstrong, which he could share with no one else. It was as if someone inside him had spoken, uttering hidden feelings. And this second experience, the one he had just had [the vision in the street], far from frightening him, had comforted him, reassuring him, as it were, of the continued existence of an inward companion, who was still capable of asserting his presence. (126)

Immediately following Armstrong’s musings, the next chapter, “Retrenchment”, opens with the declaration that: “The wind of fear was blowing through the post office and government departments. [. . .] Retrenchment was in full swing” (128). As the restructuring of socio-economic relations gathers pace, Armstrong loses his job, which further disrupts his mental equilibrium. His wife, meanwhile, becomes increasingly emaciated as the family struggle to

⁵² Boxill 1989, p.110.

survive in reduced circumstances. She begins to suffer from dizzy spells before collapsing and dying on the kitchen floor, “her face ashen grey and her hands dry as tinder” (143).

This series of odd, discontinuous episodes – climaxing, significantly, with the image of Gladys Armstrong’s devitalized and “desiccated” body (144) – emphasizes the sense of fragmentation and confusion engendered by the exhaustion of the dominant ecological regime. The reference to the massacouraman-like creature in the fisherman’s net is less obviously associated here with a radical transformation in the co-production of nature than is Poseidon in *The Secret Ladder* (perhaps reflecting the fact that Heath’s novel, set in an earlier historical moment, is more attuned to the fading of the established order, rather than the emergence of the new). Nonetheless, Heath’s allusion to the massacouraman still brings with it a suggestion that the unravelling of the dominant ecological regime opens up the possibility of perceiving reality anew. Armstrong’s enigmatic statement that the web-footed being in the net aroused “something slumbering” within him recalls how Poseidon represents a return of the repressed, a figure for that which has been destroyed by the reifying thrust of capital over the course of successive ecological revolutions. In oblique fashion, Heath’s massacouraman-like creature signals the memory or the hidden possibility of a different kind of existence – a different way of being human. Specifically in this instance, it might be understood to manifest Armstrong’s suppressed desire for freedom from the cloistered world of middle-class mores in which he became enmeshed with his marriage to Gladys. In the carriage on the way to the latter’s funeral, Armstrong thinks back to the evening when

he had stood on the edge of a crowd of people who were taking part in a Salvation Army meeting in Bourda. Carried away by the infectious singing and the sounds of tambourines he forgot for a while that he was waiting to make his first visit to Gladys’s house in Queenstown. [. . .] No, her family would not have approved of tambourines or singing at street corners. Yet, such things stirred his heart. And these very things that separated them, these impulses, he suppressed for her sake, or perhaps for his own, believing that they were the signs of a defective upbringing. (147)

This suppressed longing for collectivity, for escape from the disciplined, isolated subjectivity of the bourgeois individual, is implicitly connected to the massacouraman-like figure as a similarly suppressed “inward companion”. This connection strengthens the inference that the web-footed creature Armstrong evokes is representative of an alternative social logic. Like Poseidon, it flashes up at a moment of crisis, at a moment when the kind of collectivity

Armstrong desires yet resists is rendered even less attainable as a new ecological revolution intensifies the atomization and reification of ecological relations.

The implication in Harris's and Heath's novels that their masscouraman-like figures represent a suppressed part of oneself receives explicit elaboration in Cyril Dabydeen's *Dark Swirl* (1988). Set in a Guyanese East Indian village in a remote part of the Canje, Dabydeen's narrative features a European naturalist, usually referred to as "the stranger", who has arrived in the region to collect specimens of the local fauna. After a village boy, Josh, and later his father, Ghulam, catch sight of the masscouraman in the village creek, the stranger sets about trying to capture it, hoping to send it back to a zoo in Europe or the United States. That the masscouraman appears in response to the naturalist's incursion into the region suggests that this folkloric figure is again being deployed to mediate the experience of an ecological revolution. Certainly Dabydeen's novel makes plain that the twinned appearance of the stranger and the folk-spirit is tied to a moment of transition in the life of the villagers: "Ghulam was involved with his own thoughts, the feeling that he was changing, becoming closer to the outside world. They were all changing [. . .]. But if they were changing, was it because they were being touched by all that was bad and evil in the outside world?"⁵³ The naturalist's plundering of specimens from the local environment is plainly indicative of the colonial penetration of Guyana, its forcible integration into the capitalist world-ecology, and the ransacking of its ecological resources. But it might also be read as mediating the impact of a more recent ecological revolution: that associated with the emergence of the neoliberal regime of accumulation in the 1970s.

Faced with falling profit rates in the late 1960s, the core capitalist powers unleashed a new imperialist offensive against peripheral regions, seeking to secure an ecological surplus in the form of cheap food, energy, raw materials, and labour power. Much of this was carried out under cover of IMF and World Bank initiatives such as Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), which, among other things, required countries to slash government spending and to pursue export-led growth by substituting agro-exports for staple foods and prioritizing the extraction of raw materials. Guyana was subject to the depredations of structural adjustment in the late 1970s, when a balance-of-payments crisis and mounting arrears on its external debt forced the government of Forbes Burnham to seek financial assistance from the IMF.⁵⁴ The subsequent aid package entailed a series of demanding austerity measures, including public sector cuts, the removal of food subsidies, and the

⁵³ Dabydeen 1988, p.62. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁵⁴ Gafar 1996, p.43.

driving down of wages.⁵⁵ Burnham, however, resisted the call to open the country to foreign capital, a stance that contributed to the IMF terminating its support in 1983.⁵⁶ Following Burnham's death two years later, his successor, Desmond Hoyte, "came under heavy pressure from the international development agencies to liberalize the economy" and to promote 'non-traditional' exports, specifically gold and timber.⁵⁷ Seeking a rapprochement with the IMF, Hoyte launched a liberalization programme in 1986, which saw the rapid expansion of logging and mining concerns.

Dark Swirl seems to register the impact of these policies, although it was published so soon after they took effect as to make such an interpretation potentially problematic. That said, even if Dabydeen's novel is not a direct response to the neoliberal revolution, its clear evocation of the colonial penetration and plunder of Guyana resonates with this later moment of ecological restructuring. If the naturalist stands for the long history of resource imperialism in the region, the consternation caused to the villagers by the masscouraman's appearance suggests the disruption to communities and environments this history has entailed, including in its most recent, neoliberal guise. At the level of form, the generic discontinuities generated by the narrative juxtaposition of folkloric and fabular elements with more realist techniques emphasizes the violent, disjunctive effects of imperialist plunder. In this regard, it is worth highlighting a number of references in the text to the villagers suffering from dry throats and strained speech, which tend to feature in conjunction with references to the naturalist's removal and cataloguing of the local fauna. After encountering the stranger's crates full of specimens, for instance, the villagers look to Ghulam for advice: "'Speak, Ghulam, speak,' they urged, their throats dry, their voices rasping like sandpaper rubbed against glass" (61). Similar descriptions are present throughout the text: "Ghulam rasped" (48); "sand-paper voices" (62); "He clutched at his throat as he felt an intense pain there" (72). Such imagery suggests the depletion of human and extra-human nature – the sapping of vital energies – as exploitation is ratcheted upwards under conditions of ecological revolution.

Dabydeen's novel thus underscores the ecological weight of the masscouraman motif. The eruption of this strange, anxiety-inducing creature from the village creek bespeaks the uncertainty and sense of unreality generated by the disaggregation and reorganization of existing ecological unities. Simultaneously, however, the masscouraman comes to figure the

⁵⁵ Spinner 1984, p.167, p.184; Colchester, 1997, p.38.

⁵⁶ Spinner 1984, p.206.

⁵⁷ Colchester 1997, p.2.

possibility of resistance to the imposed ecological regime. This is suggested initially by the effect had on the naturalist by his encounter with the creature:

There were eyes, like those of an old man's with corrugated skin around them, webby eyelids like flaps. His heart beat faster; he looked carefully. He studied what ought to have been a mouth, but was merely a crevice. A nose, the contours of a face. [. . .] He saw the outlines of an entire body; a huge protuberant stomach like a giant black tube, floating. An extended torso next, a back, and a tail wagging lazily, creating bubbles all around it. (75)

The masscouraman throws the naturalist's taxonomic model into confusion. "How could he measure or classify what was before him?" he wonders (75). This confirms a nagging doubt that has arisen in him since he first heard about the masscouraman, and which finds fullest expression just prior to his encounter with it in the creek. He is in his hut, studying a captive monkey:

[A]s he looked at the range of expressions on the monkey's face, he saw himself as in a mirror. [. . .] He checked himself; he was a man given to empirical investigation; to the study of habitats, measured, documented, recorded in a journal at regular intervals. He didn't try to wrestle with the deeper meanings of objects, with the value of existence. [. . .] But like an ingrained habit, he returned to the immediacy of his specimens, to the monkey's facial twitches so like his own [. . .]. His mind hummed with such correspondences. He felt troubled because he had always wanted things defined, pigeon-holed, classified. What was happening to him? (73)

The breakdown in the stranger's classificatory mind-set is exemplified by the blurring of the boundaries between himself and the monkey. The recognition of his 'correspondence' to the animal disrupts his radical separation – as the archetypal isolated individual of capitalist modernity – from a 'nature' posited by this very separation as an alien externality.

The disruption to the naturalist's self-understanding, and beyond this to the form of appearance of nature under capitalism, is underscored by the feeling he experiences of being drawn inexorably into the creek on seeing the masscouraman. The scene is redolent of the colonial explorer's fear of being sucked into the green hell of the jungle. For a moment the naturalist is tempted to let himself be "pulled down into the miry depths", before the "instinct

to survive, ingrained in him from early” reasserts itself (76). One might read this “ingrained” survival instinct in light of Fredric Jameson’s gloss on Theodor Adorno’s construal of humanity’s history of “mutual aggressivity, inevitable misery and unwarranted triumph” as being “grounded in the seemingly biological and Darwinian instinct of self-preservation.” The “philosophical subtext of this startling suggestion”, argues Jameson, “lies in the proposition that ‘self-preservation’ is not an instinct at all, but rather something like an ideology, or at the very least an ideological mechanism”:

All human societies, necessarily organized around scarcity and power, have had to program their subjects in such a way as to construct some seemingly primordial effort to preserve one’s self at all costs, which is to say at the cost of other people. This ‘self,’ which one then jealously hoards and protects against incursion, is something like a form of property, the very first form perhaps, around which all our personal and social struggles are organized. Adorno’s speculations thereby unexpectedly renew their ties with the oldest and most tenaciously rooted Utopian traditions: to abolish private property. Yet it is now the private property of the self which is to be abolished.⁵⁸

The abolition of the private property of the self would clearly entail the transformation of societies organized in such a way as to produce that ideological mechanism of self-preservation in the first place. Indeed, it implies a Utopian vision of the emergence of some radically new form of ‘human nature’, a possibility alluded to, suggests Jameson, in Adorno’s “only partly ironic ethical ideal”: “to live like good animals” – an ideal that resonates with the emphasis in *Dark Swirl* on the import of the naturalist’s recognition of his correspondence to the monkey.

Thus, when the naturalist is pulled into the creek – when he is almost sucked irretrievably into the Guyanese landscape and the histories and cosmologies it contains – not only does it signal a potential loss of self; it might also be understood to gesture towards the possible breakdown of the specific organization of human and extra-human natures upon which that self is predicated. As with Harris’s Poseidon, Dabydeen’s massacouraman embodies an amalgam of multiple orders of existence (man, fish, ape, plant) that points beyond the reifying thrust of capital. Significantly, the appearance of the massacouraman also

⁵⁸ Jameson 2007, p.174.

encourages Ghulam and the other villagers to reflect on their own connection to the landscape. Contemplating the folk-spirit, Ghulam in particular comes to see that “this thing was theirs” (72) and not the naturalist’s to capture and export. Once again, therefore, the massacouraman is associated with the possibility of an alternative mode of life and of a form of the production of nature conducive to self-determination.

Dabydeen’s novel brings together in relatively explicit fashion the various connotations attaching to representations of the massacouraman as charted in this article. From Waterton’s *Nondescript*, with its allusion to colonial anxieties over the jungle environment, to Dabydeen’s massacouraman as the embodiment of a different relationship to nature, images of this folk-spirit take on a peculiar significance in cultural responses to periods of ecological revolution. The creature’s admixture of species provides a means to express the felt experience of such revolutions, which are moments of historical transition marked by intense and highly visible forms of uneven development, as well as the recombination of human and biophysical natures in strange new ways. Precisely because ecological revolutions involve the disaggregation of existing ecological unities, however, they are also periods in which the potential for new modes of existence becomes more obviously apparent than it might otherwise have been. Again, the massacouraman is a highly apposite figure in this regard since it embodies a logic at odds with capitalist reification, not only preserving an alternative history, but also projecting the Utopian possibility of a different way of being human.

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