

Wasted Lands:

Waste Theory and Modern Dystopian Fiction

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Abstract

This thesis uses waste studies as a methodological framework to analyse modern dystopian literature written by authors from marginalised communities. In paying attention to stories and ontologies from outside the canon, from people who have lived experience of nightmare societies and wasted worlds, we can better understand what dystopia is and how we can survive, salvage from and mutate it. Yet the genre is still theoretically defined by canonical texts which set dated, imperialistic generic conventions. This thesis aims to expand theoretical understandings of the genre outside of the mid 20th century western confines and concerns to which it has, to date, been limited. It does so by selecting non-canonical texts, and by engaging with them through a methodology that interrogates the creation and destruction of value (with a particular focus on what happens to those things not valued).

The texts analysed here show how dystopia is signified through unjust processes of wasting: through the corruption of a utopian ideal, the state's miscarriage/s of justice, the creation of scapegoats and sacrificing of these people in the name of the dystopian ideology. However, they trouble the genre convention of dystopia as a strategy of warning: they insist that the orthodox criteria of cognitive estrangement be broadened into holistic engagement; they distort the emotional, temporal and spatial distance we feel from the protagonist's world; they show that dystopia is alive here and now – that if we are not suffering it ourselves, we are complicit in enacting it on others. In this way, these texts re-write dystopia's function as a strategy of solidarity. Furthermore, they show how waste itself troubles the genre convention that dystopian states control, bury or contaminate the memory of the past; waste and wastescapes refuse to co-operate, they linger, they insist that there is no *away* place or time.

Acknowledgements: A tapestry of thanks

‘My knowledge is limited to the leavings that fell off from their wisdom’¹

The idea of authorship – of a singular self, of that self somehow *owning* a piece of work – is inaccurate, incomplete, inappropriate even. We are all composites and parts of composites, interconnected and interdependent, and neither I nor this thesis would exist without the whole world of humans and nonhumans with which I am entangled. Jane Bennett would call this an assemblage; I call you my collaborators, and am so grateful for you, and for all the work – academic, emotional, domestic, care work, resistance work, resistance to work, work as play – that we have done together, for each other, knowingly and unknowingly.

I would like to thank my family, blood-kin and surrogate, and my supervisors and university staff, academic and operational. I am grateful also to the authors, theorists and critics whose thinking and dreaming and writing tapestries this thesis, and to their people – the Russians struggling against feudalism old and new, the generations of pan-African descendants enduring and challenging enslavement in North America, the Waayni nation in Queensland and the Northern Territories refiguring sovereignty, the basti-dwellers of Bhopal and the Adivasis of Kerala insisting against global capital on their right to dignified life – for the richness of their worldviews, the lessons they teach on survivance and salvage. I am grateful every day to have food in my belly, central heating and electricity and indoor plumbing, public transport, welfare and health care: I know that the functioning and fullness of my life is underwritten by nonhumans and humans undertaking gruelling jobs, dirty jobs, dangerous, exploitative and overlooked jobs. Utopia is an action, and if, as Ursula Le Guin argues, words *are* actions, I hope that this thesis can contribute to speculating us into equitable worlds, where abundance is available to all.

¹ Ambikasutan Mangad, *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale*, trans. by J. Devika (Delhi: Juggernaut Books, 2017), p. 25.

Introductions

Disasters reveal us. They peel away pretence, to lay bare the underlying values of society, the previous priorities of politics and the preparedness of institutions.¹

We tend to think that we are familiar with waste because we deal with it every day. Yet, most aspects of waste are entirely hidden from common view and understanding²

We are living in dystopian times

In 2017, when this project was just a blank PhD application form, I felt that the world, or at least the world that I knew, was becoming ever-more dystopian. Policies of austerity, deregulation and rampant extractive capitalism were leading to the destruction of our living, liveable planet, and to unprecedented levels of inequality and immiseration within and between nations.³ As a genre – or subgenre of utopian fiction, or sub-subgenre of science/speculative fiction (SF) – dystopian fiction reflects the foremost concerns of its author's present day. I had the idea that it would be a comfort and an education to read dystopian fiction –that it would show dystopia *could* be survived and teach lessons on *how* to survive it. And this is exactly why scholars advocate for the study of it: 'it is precisely in dark times that the dystopian [...] as a narrative strategy is most useful. [...] Its] highest function is to "map, warn and hope."⁴

I had read the 'classics', the work of Orwell and Huxley, many years before beginning this project and found them, paradoxically, both pertinent and dated. I had also read the works of Suzanne Collins, Veronica Roth and Phillip Reeve which, targeted at the young adult (YA) market of which I was a part, spoke to me in more visceral ways. Although these texts were written in different times and focus on different societal apprehensions, they are united in their positionality within Anglo-American contexts and concerns. I wanted to expand my scope

¹ Daniel Voskoboynik, 'A Guide to Climate Violence', *The World At 1°C*, 10 February 2019. <<https://worldat1c.org/a-guide-to-climate-violence-4cfbc5a7648f>> [accessed 13 May 2021].

² Max Liboiron, 'About', *Discard Studies*, <<https://discardstudies.com/about/>> [accessed 13 May 2021].

³ See, for example, the work of Tariq Ali, Naomi Klein, George Monbiot, and Benjamin Kunkel.

⁴ Junot Díaz, quoting Tom Moylan in 'Editor's Note', *Global Dystopias*, Boston Review (Boston Critic; Cambridge, 2017), pp. 5-6.

beyond the canon and the mainstream, to look to authors from other contexts, from communities which have lived experiences of societies wasted, ecologies broken down, worlds ruined.

I was conscious, however, of how problematic it is to first benefit from and be complicit in the dystopia wrought on colonised, subjugated, marginalised peoples and then to turn to them for teachings on how to endure it. Bruno Latour, in his book of collected essays *Down to Earth*, speaks about this as an extractive practice, critiquing those of us from the Global North who mine tragedy porn and cultural knowledge from those in the Global South to enhance our own careers and/or bank accounts.⁵ On the other hand, it is also problematic, never mind deeply, wilfully unwise, to ignore ‘the work of Indigenous [and other marginalised] scholars and activists who see the need to prepare for the incoming flood of challenges as the structures of modernity-coloniality begin to falter.’⁶ I wanted to find a way to listen and to learn without imposing or encroaching. And so I chose to read the works of people who were subject to dystopia and were themselves electing to write about it.

There are issues here. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reminds us, we must be careful not to rely solely on any one voice to properly understand a narrative. It is a mistake, and a damaging one, to tokenise authors, to ask them to be the voice of every diverse person within polyethnic communities. And we must be careful with reducing an author to their ethnic or national group – even if we make the huge assumption that those groups are clearly defined and homogenous; or that an author only belongs to one group; or that after colonial policies of assimilation and disinheritance and de-racialisation they know who they belong to and *feel* that they belong; or that they think of belonging in these ways. Although I conduct close readings of texts, I do not ignore these questions; each chapter considers the relationship

⁵ Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

⁶ The Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective, ‘Preparing for the end of the world as we know it’, *Open Democracy*, 24 August 2020 <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/preparing-end-world-we-know-it/>> [accessed 2 May 2021].

between author and text and context, considering the cultural, social and political reality in which the novels were written, taking seriously what they say but emphasising that they speak only for themselves. Furthermore, although the chapters are organised geographically, I have paid attention to the oppression and injustice about which these authors write, so that they are grouped by theme as much as they are grouped by national identity.

There are also issues such as gatekeeping in the publishing industry,⁷ the industry's reluctance to translate 'world literature' into English,⁸ as well as questions around whether and why those who have survived apocalypse would be interested in inventing new and fictional ones. Indeed, as Hassan Blasim explains in his foreword to the short story collection *Iraq +100: stories from a century after the invasion*, 'it was difficult to persuade many Iraqi writers to write stories set in the future when they were already so busy writing about the cruelty, horror and shock of the present, or trying to delve into the past to reread Iraq's former nightmares and glories.' Nevertheless, the anthology exists – Blasim was able to compile it because, as the contributing authors demonstrated, 'writing about the future [gives writers] space to breathe outside the narrow confines of today's reality'.⁹ Or, when writers are faced with authoritarian censorship and strict stylistic and thematic regulations, as they were in the Eastern Bloc for example, SF can be a means of coding reality, of smuggling contemporary stories of practical and political import, which would otherwise be prohibited, within and across and beyond the Soviet Union.¹⁰ Indeed, since the 19th century Russian writers (of all genres) took and were given the role of functioning as society's conscience. Perhaps because of 'the vacuum of possible political engagement', authors commented and were expected to

⁷ See, for example, Ursula K. Le Guin's acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters at the 65th National Book Awards, 19 November 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Et9Nf-rsALk>> [accessed 2 May 2021].

⁸ See Ken Liu, 'Introductions: China Dreams', *Invisible Planets: 13 Visions of the Future from China* (London: Head of Zeus, 2016), pp. 13-17 (p. 14).

⁹ Hassan Blasim, 'Foreword', *Iraq +100: stories from a century after the invasion* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2016), pp. v – x (p. v).

¹⁰ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001), chp. 5.

comment on political issues by depicting them in fiction, through protagonists with whom we can identify, or if not, then at least understand.¹¹

'relentlessly real and inescapably fabulated'¹²

Another decision necessary to explain is my choice to study fiction rather than pursue 'real world' work. 'Whether we're talking about our cannibal economics or the rising tide of xenophobia or the perennial threat of nuclear annihilation' or gender-based violence or mass extinction, there is endless, tangible work to be done on the ground, in the field, from grassroots organising all the way up to lobbying world governments.¹³ Over the course of researching this PhD I have had many conversations, with myself and with others, about the role of academia in this. We question whether it is useful to put so much time and energy here; whether our work is more help or hindrance to the causes we support – or purport to support. At the conferences I attended, particularly those which were specifically utopian, I listened to scholars with feet in both worlds and learnt that the relationship between academia and activism, although strained at times, is nuanced and complex, with both informing and expanding the other.¹⁴ Ultimately, I think, any justice movement is engaging in utopianism: they are envisaging an alternative world, and in working to achieve it they are materialising it. They are enacting it. While these movements may come with an army (sometimes figuratively, sometimes literally), they are fundamentally *imaginative* projects – they are ideological, they start as fictions, they grow (from) theory, they make believe.

¹¹ Boris Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature and the Search for a Russian Identity*, Studies in European Culture and History (Amsterdam: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 3-4. See also Simon Dixon, Sarah Hudspith and Shane O'Rourke in conversation with Melvyn Bragg, 'The Emancipation of the Serfs', *In Our Time*, BBC Sounds, 17 May 2018, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b0b2gspd>> [accessed 25 June 2021].

¹² Donna Haraway, 'SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far', *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media and Technology*, 3 (November 2013), <<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-haraway/>> [accessed 19 May 2021].

¹³ Díaz, 'Editor's Note', p. 5.

¹⁴ For example, Aisling Walsh highlighted her experiences of attempting to walk with the Zapatistas as an academic in her presentation 'Imagining other possible worlds as creative research practice', given at NUIG's Speculative Art and Spatial Justice conference, 16-17 April 2021.

Such imagining, such story-making, has always been an important part of human identity and society – from paintings on cave walls to oral epics to Ministries of Propaganda. Contemporary discourse is no different in emphasising the potency and far-reaching effects of stories:

Without the corporate press, without spin doctors and lobbyists and think tanks, the unnecessary programmes of austerity that several governments have imposed would be politically impossible. [...] This apparatus of justification, or infrastructure of persuasion, and the justifying narratives it generates allow the rich to seize much of our common wealth, to trample the rights of workers and to treat the planet as their dustbin. Ideas determine whether human creativity works for society or against it.¹⁵

The stories we tell about ourselves and others have the power to make those selves, those others. As Donna Haraway puts it, 'It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories'.¹⁶ Fiction has always known this; speculative fiction has always taken this as an imperative to imagine beyond the contemporary consensus reality, to offer 'alternatives to the status quo which not only question the ubiquity and necessity of extant institutions, but enlarge the field of social possibility and moral understanding'.¹⁷ SF, then, has a bifold effect: it provides a cognitive distortion which allows us to look at our present reality with new eyes, with clear eyes, and it allows us to think/feel/dream/manifest other realities.

The genre has mutated, the theory has not

The dystopian stories which are now being told have moved a long way from the stories which established (or officialised) the genre during the first half of the 20th century. Yet still, in the 21st century, genre scholarship focuses on these early texts. Adam Stock, for example, makes the same points that I have made about the cultural currency of dystopia, the feeling that we are living in it in this moment, the role of dystopian fiction as a vital tool in commenting on these social anxieties.¹⁸ I agree with his analysis and admire his critical thinking, and while

¹⁵ George Monbiot, *How Did We Get Into This Mess?* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 1.

¹⁶ Haraway, 'SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far'.

¹⁷ Ursula Le Guin, 'A War Without End', *The Wave in the Mind* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2012).

¹⁸ Adam Stock, *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought: Narratives of World Politics* (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), see 'Introduction'.

he does extend his study to 'dystopian allegories that differ formally in important respects from the more well-known and strongly dystopian dictions of Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell', he very much puts these texts outside the genre. He considers them '*characteristic*' of but not '*definitive* of dystopian fiction'.¹⁹ These authors may have defined the genre, but they were writing a hundred years ago. Not only do things change over such a period, technological advancements and climate breakdown have greatly accelerated all change. It is astonishing that dystopian literary theory has not progressed in line with the literature it theorises.

I do not mean to imply that scholarship is ignoring the works of 21st century authors, or that there is no decentralising or decolonising impetus within the academy. But this scholarship is found in isolated conference papers and journal articles looking at specific texts: in the SF and utopian studies readers which outline the narrative methods and conventions of the genre, dystopia is calcified in the last century, in the western mode. Indeed, rigid generic classification has acted as a structural block for Latinx SF writers and SF writers from Afrodiasporic traditions who find that their work is pushed into the label/market of magical realism or fantasy, rather than being categorised as SF or dystopian.²⁰ Without updating our definition of the genre we will continue to see non-canonical works, which do not readily satisfy all or enough of the genre conventions, denied their place within the family of dystopian literature. Anthology editors and scholars alike take a short-cut route to solving this problem: they outline in their introductions that they will take a broad approach to dystopia. It is fiction which issues a warning, they say, or it is fiction which is concerned with justice, or it is fiction which 'reflects a vision that is two-headed in view and intent, looking forward as much as looking back [...] to cast a reading, a new vision that illuminates as it engages.'²¹

¹⁹ Stock, *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought*, p. 11. Emphasis mine.

²⁰ See Frederick Luis Aldama's elucidating conversation on this in 'Introduction: Confessions from a Latin@ Sojourner in SciFiLand', *Latin@ Rising: An Anthology of Latin@ Science Fiction & Fantasy*, ed. by Matthew David Goodwin (San Antonio: Wings Press, 2017), pp. xv – xx. See also Sheree Renée Thomas' 'Introduction', *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* (New York: Warner Books, 2004), pp. ix – xii.

²¹ Thomas' 'Introduction', p. x.

What's waste got to do with it?

Waste theory provides a fitting and fruitful theoretical framework for analysing dystopian fiction. It is a field of study concerned with value systems: it interrogates the valuation of objects, people, behaviours and ideas, with a particular focus on what happens to those things not valued. It acknowledges that value both is and is not located in utility: fashion moves objects from possessions to discards while they are still functionally useful, whereas humans and human relationships are regularly judged based on their use-value, whether this is done formally by employers and immigration officers, or more privately in the context of personal relations. Time also plays a large role in moving something in and out of value. Michael Thompson identifies 'two major categories' of object value: 'transient', for which value decreases over time and 'durable', for which value increases over time. Waste acts as a third, 'covert' category, a liminal place between the two in which an object can wait to be made valuable once more. Age, and signs of age, can affect an object's value. Simultaneously, the quality of disposability can be attributed to an object so that, even when it is new and unused, it appears as something on its way to the bin: for example, a single-use plastic cup.²²

Zygmunt Bauman extends this thinking by applying it sociologically: drawing on Giorgio Agamben's theory of *homo sacer*, he posits that some (groups of) humans, those who make up 'surplus populations', are treated as inherently disposable and therefore valueless. Waste theory focuses as much on disposal as it does on consumerism and the ramifications of this, compounded by globalisation, on formations of self, interactions with other people, objects and environments, and the organisation of human societies. Using waste theory as a framework for literary analysis allows me to explore alternative perspectives on the literature itself, and also on what that literature can tell us about resisting, altering, surviving catastrophe.

²² Thompson, referenced in Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 78.

Research aims and questions

Equally, I hope to add to the emerging field of waste studies by applying it to dystopian fiction. Following Lyman Sargent, Darko Suvin, Tom Moylan, Peter Fitting and Erika Gottlieb,²³ I define dystopia as an envisioning, extrapolated from historical and contemporary concerns, of a wasted world, a nightmare society, which the author wishes to warn against. While dystopian fiction is usually considered in historical terms, I aim to develop a materially-focused approach. Stephen Herring argues that 'we need a critical reassessment of traditional models of materialism and narrative [...] in order to develop a new model which transcends the limits of social, economic, and gender bias.'²⁴ By conducting research which is interdisciplinary and intersectional I hope to further this argument.

I employ the language, metaphors and theoretical frameworks of waste theory, including the branching fields of new materialism and ecocriticism to analyse texts in relation to the following research questions:

1. How does waste theory provide a common thread across diverse societies and a framework for comparison between dystopian fictions?
2. How do dystopian fictions use literary techniques to portray language and human subjects being disassembled, fragmented and wasted?
3. What can we learn from literature which foregrounds alternative narratives of social, political and environmental governance?

²³ See Sargent, 'Colonial and post-colonial utopias,' *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 201-22; Suvin quoted in Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2000), p55-57; Fitting, 'Utopia, dystopia and science fiction,' *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Claeys, pp. 135-53; Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (Montreal: Mc-Gill-Queens UP, 2001).

²⁴ Stephen Herring, 'Information Salvage.' *Discard Studies: social studies of waste, pollution and externalities* (20 February 2017) <<https://discardstudies.com/2017/02/20/information-salvage/>> [accessed 24 January 2018].

Overview: chapter outline

I find the prefix 'post' to be a quick yet effective way of signifying the ambiguity of beginnings and endings. 'Post-' says that something happened in the past, and that time has moved sentiment onwards or outwards. But it also says that once something has happened it cannot un-happen – that what happened Before has caused Now's mutations and manifestations, that we must know our history to understand our present, to have any chance of predicting or shaping our future.

In each chapter of this thesis, I visit a different nation, culture, history, geography, experience and expression of dystopia. From Russia I move to the United States, then to Australia, and then to India. Each text I study draws on the lived experience of their author, embodied in a variety of characters and cultural, political and ecological climates, to speak in their own ways about catastrophe, about nightmare societies, about the processes that trash and squander individuals, cultures, ideas, languages, ecosystems, lands. Dystopia is a genre deeply concerned with the relationship between past, present and future. By labelling each chapter with the prefix 'post', I mean to signal the importance of these historical contexts in framing and forming these anxious imaginings of the future, which is to say: imaginings of what was, what is, and what could come.

Chapter 1. Post-Soviet: mutation and the immaterial

This chapter focuses on the novels *The Living* by Anna Starobinets (2011) and *The Slynx* by Tatyana Tolstaya (2003). Both authors are female, both are Russian, both published their works after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The rationale for this grouping could then simply be because of the authors' shared experiences of material, cultural, social and political life in Russia during and after these turbulent, transitional times. Both draw on elements of Soviet and post-Soviet society – the wasting of potential and hope placed first in communism, then in all that *glasnost* and *perestroika* promised. Indeed, this is in part the rationale. But I have also paired these texts because they both speak about time in the processes of wasting. Though both texts move in different directions, they offer a fascinating comparison of

regression and progress when taken together. The dystopian world of *The Slynx* degenerates the future backwards in time; *The Living* extrapolates current anxieties of technological ‘advances’, mixed with Huxley-like hedonism, into the dystopian future.

In their interest with the material world, these novels also offer rich explorations of the ways in which our relationship with materiality can be threatened, contaminated and trashed. In *The Living* this is done through abstraction, in *The Slynx* this is done through radiation and genetic mutation. With their protagonists figured as dehumanised, wasted people, as shit, living in ruined political, social and physical landscapes, both texts show how waste can speak back.

Chapter 2. Post-slavery: ruination and reclamation

The second chapter analyses ‘The Broken Earth’ trilogy (*The Fifth Season*, 2015; *The Obelisk Gate*, 2016; *The Stone Sky*, 2017) by N.K. Jemisin. The chapter title ‘post-slavery’ is used to foreground the horrors of hereditary chattel slavery as practised in the United States, and the continued discrimination and subjugation of black communities in the US today. Indeed, the construction of race in order to justify the exploitation and oppression of certain groups of people is a prominent theme in these texts. It is not, however, intended to imply that enslavement and suffering and resilience are the only black experience of interest: indeed, the chapter follows the novels in exploring black joy, magic, community, and power both within and beyond the lens of race.

The trilogy envisions a world which frequently experiences and rebuilds from ecological apocalypse. Extractive empires which built their ‘utopia’ with a growth mindset, with an entitlement problem, have crumbled into a feudal society, stratified along racial and urban/rural lines. It is, therefore, a society living among the physical detritus of civilizations which came and fell before them; living with the scars and remnant social structures of imperialism; living on a violent and vengeful earth. In proposing that some worlds *should* be destroyed, Jemisin fulfils some of the criteria of the dystopian genre (outlined in full in the methodology chapter). Yet she also offers alternative responses, such as the reclamation of

subjectivity and rights, the reuse of discards, and the audacity to imagine that it is possible to salvage a partial and plural justice, or utopia, out of the ruins. Thus, Jemisin challenges normative ideas of dystopia by instead offering unorthodox visions of how value can be created and destroyed; she has reimagined the dystopia as a site not only of ruin, but also of regrowth, repurpose and reuse.

Chapter 3. Post-settler: polluted possibilities

In this chapter I explore the novel *The Swan Book* (2013) by Waayni author and activist Alexis Wright. Set in a near-future Australia which mirrors very closely the political and environmental real world currently, the novel posits utopia as home and dystopia as the displacement and pollution of belonging, whether geographically through forced migration, either as a result of climate change or neo/colonial policies of ghettoization, or culturally as a result of forced assimilation, genocide and disenfranchisement. *The Swan Book* incorporates elements of Aboriginal storytelling, worldviews, and dreamtime, thus broadening understandings of story and storytelling, dystopia/utopia (as both literary form and historic/current/possible reality), and the construction and destruction of material and metaphoric worth beyond the Eurocentric, colonial, white (Australian) framework. By drawing from the dialogic and dialectic processes of Indigenous oral traditions, Wright has challenged and destabilised established and conventional (western) narrative forms such as the novel, and the dystopia, and allowed for alternative ontological explorations of how 'waste' is conceived of, constructed, lived with, put-to-use, survived.

There is debate around whether Australia was settled or invaded. If we call it *settlement*, we contribute to the narrative of *terra nullius*, the convenient belief that the land was empty and unowned before Europeans took it. Whereas if we call it *invasion*, we acknowledge the resistance of Aboriginal peoples to land grabbing and genocide.²⁵ It is an important distinction to make as it combats the colonial version of history. I have not chosen

²⁵ See Stan Grant, *Talking To My Country* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2016), pp. 2-4.

to name this chapter ‘post-invasion’, however, because while I can offer acknowledgement of Aboriginal warriors (such as Pemulwuy, Jandamarra and Windradyne, for example) who fought during Australia’s Frontier Wars, the novel I analyse in this chapter does not focus on invasion and armed insurrections. Rather, it is set centuries after the invasion – centuries into settlement. It deals, therefore, with the continuous oppressive policies of the settler state: despite having their own councils and governing bodies, Aboriginal people still live under the wider contextual power and control of the (descendants of) settlers who stole their lands.

Chapter 4. Post-satyagraha: corporate chemicals and corporeal corruption

Ambikasutan Mangad’s *Swarga* (2009, trans. to English 2017) and Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007) make up the final analysis chapter. These show the trajectory of waste making alongside the production line of poverty: the dystopia wrought on India by globalisation and neoliberal economic and agricultural policies, as well as neo-colonialism and waste colonialism following on from the legacy of British colonialism. We see both the urban experience of pesticide manufacturing in Khaufpur/Bhopal and the rural experience of pesticide use on human and animal bodies, human societies, and bodies of land in Kerala. They highlight how privatised, corporate and exponentially growing capitalism has displaced dystopia onto the Global South; and how the shady malpractices of the chemical industry, bribing and/or bullying sovereign states, has displaced dystopia through generational time.

As they are based on lived experiences of ecological disasters – the explosion of a chemical engineering plant in an impoverished and densely populated area, and the long-term poisoning of an inhabited agricultural area – they are fitting for my thesis. But they also raise issues around authenticity and co-option, generating a discussion on who can speak for whom. At the same time, they allow non-humans to speak, to have agency, and so help mutate the dystopian genre away from its classical western-centric and human-centric framing. These texts also raise important questions about bodily norms and disability, conceptualisations of harm, and the pursuit of justice, thus offering pertinent and fascinating avenues of thought for waste theory to explore.

Methodology

What is waste / studies?

Trite, yet true: waste is defined differently depending on the person, place, time, and context. Equally as trite and true, waste is what is not valued in the moment. When we speak of waste then, we are essentially speaking about value systems. As a verb 'to waste' can have slightly differing meanings: to not use or to misuse something so that its (full) potential is not reached (as in 'to squander'), or to over-use something in a way which degrades its worth (to waste away in old age, for example, or to become so inebriated that one *is* wasted and cannot function).¹ I use the noun 'waste' as an umbrella term to describe any thing – physical and non-physical (including electronic waste such as, for example, spam emails), organic and inorganic – which is intended to be discarded. Waste, therefore, is not only concerned with actions or objects, but rather is a reflection of ideology and attitude: waste is about relationships. Waste studies is an emerging field of literary and cultural critique, yet since the beginning of civilisation human societies have tried to perfect practices of discarding and disposal, and waste has consistently featured in our literature.² In *On Garbage*, John Scanlan shows how waste (or 'garbage', to use his preferred term) has been a subject discussed by philosophers since Plato and Aristotle, through to the founders of modern (western) philosophical and governmental thought such as Locke, Kant and Heidegger. Likewise, in *The Literature of Waste* Susan Signe Morrison explores the traces of waste in western literature from the Bible, *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales*, through to *Hamlet* and the works of Dickens and Beckett, to contemporary films such as *The Examined Life*, to name only a few. These two texts, alongside Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives*, Rachele Dini's *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction*, Gay Hawkins' *The Ethics of Waste*, and Martin O'Brien's *A Crisis of Waste* inform my understanding of waste studies as a critical

¹ Martin O'Brien, *A Crisis of Waste? Understanding the Rubbish Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 5.

² 'If we did not organize this production and consumption [of waste] in the most inspired, imaginative and technically sophisticated ways, we would die.' O'Brien, *A Crisis of Waste?* p. 4.

framework with which we can analyse literature and the cultures in which literature is born. They begin, as I have, with attempting to define waste. Both Scanlan and Hawkins look first to the most obvious: '[t]he simplest definition of waste is discarded, expelled, or excess matter',³ however they quickly move from there to a more nuanced understanding that waste has no singular or fixed identity, but rather is fluid and plural. Dini posits 'that through commodification, objects inevitably become signs that refer back to the people who made, used, cast them away, or re-purposed them'.⁴ Bauman further progresses this line of thought by including humans as objects which can be considered as, and so made into waste. This is succinctly expressed in Morrison's assertion that 'waste is always material (first) and figurative and metaphoric (second)'.⁵

Shit, self, sewers and the state

Shit, especially human shit, is a prime example of waste matter and has consequently received much critical attention. Shit can, of course, be useful as compost, but it must undergo additional processes outside of the body, and usually outside the home, before this is possible. In western society a fresh, single, human stool is considered waste – something disgusting to be removed quickly and unconsciously from personal spaces. In discussing shit, theorists are careful to emphasise the substance itself (including the potential of and problems with managing it) as well as investigating socio-political, cultural, literary, figurative and psychoanalytical elements. Even the etymology, intersecting with class hierarchies to distinguish those 'higher' from those 'lower', plays a part. Words rooted in French and Latin, *faeces* and *excrement*, for example, assume prestige through their association with science and medicine. Waste scholars tend to prefer the Germanic-rooted word *shit*, associated with vulgarity, as a way of acknowledging the connection between class and the substance of shit,

³ Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. vii.

⁴ Rachele Dini, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction: Legacies of the Avant Garde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 9.

⁵ Susan Signe Morrison, *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 8.

as well as the characteristics attributed to the substance.⁶ We all defecate, regardless of semantics and social factors, but this is not to say that social factors are unimportant: we do not all defecate in sanitary and/or private conditions, and scatology can tell us much about a person's access to food and nutrition. Indeed, in his discussion on the industrial uses of by-products, O'Brien talks about a scale of quality of 'pure' (dog shit) used in the Victorian production of leather goods: the better the food the dogs ate, the better the shit they produced, and this, just as with their humans, varied depending on wealth and class.⁷

Sewage systems, of course, play a vital role in large scale management of human shit. Chadwick's infrastructural developments in the 19th century brought much needed sanitary reform to London, but the regulatory, privatizing and moralising effects were also significant. Certainly, excrement as a biological substance can spread disease, but, as Hawkins and O'Brien show, attitudes and feelings towards shit are concerned with placing boundaries and separation as much as they are about physical infection and illness. Referencing Mary Douglas, Morrison claims that we 'justify our pollution avoidance by fear of danger,'⁸ when our fear is based much more on the hybridity of waste, the ambiguous position it holds between Self and Other.⁹ One consequence of domestic indoor plumbing (as part of infrastructure managed by the state) was to remove from the public the necessity of directly engaging with their intimate waste and so, as Scanlan says, '[gave] added impetus to certain ways of abstract thinking as well as to ways of organising society.'¹⁰ This separation of ourselves from our bodily waste, this alienation from the material world, has heightened our disgust towards waste and resulted in present day 'rituals of self-purification [which] are linked to more ethical and visceral anxiety than to real biological danger' so that we feel an 'exaggerated sense of

⁶ Morrison, *Literature of Waste*, pp. 48-9. Dini furthers this argument by asserting that 'language and narrative have a unique capacity to reclaim meaning out of waste, even when that waste resists logical interpretation.' Dini, *Consumerism*, p. 20.

⁷ O'Brien, *A Crisis of Waste?* pp. 60-3.

⁸ Morrison, *Literature of Waste*, pp. 17-8.

⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 23.

¹⁰ John Scanlan, *On Garbage* (London: Reaktion, 2005), p. 124.

personal purity.¹¹ Furthermore, 'the discomfort people feel about their smelly [...] bodies has ubiquitously and monotonously been projected outward onto groups who can serve as, so to speak, the surrogate dirt of a community, enabling the dominant group to feel clean and heavenly.'¹² The bathroom has become the site where we construct the Self by removing that which we no longer need or want to be connected to us, whether this comes from inside us such as shit, urine, menstrual blood and vomit, or outside, such as facial and bodily hair, nails, body odour. It is also a site of creation, the place where we use make-up, dyes and products to alter and augment our appearances. Through this combination of subtraction and addition 'we have become objectified – or reified – to a new extent.'¹³

Another consequence of establishing public works was that 'sewers link us to the state [but] without any sense of direct intervention', so that going to the toilet is now 'caught up in the formation [not only] of self [but also] *subjectivity*.'¹⁴ In his thinking on rootless populations, Scanlan highlights how itinerant people are able to remain separate from their shit, and thus separate from obligation to the state, by constantly moving away from their waste.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Beckett offers us characters who resist the state system of capitalism by dwelling in waste and delighting in time-wasting, and in so doing refuse to be put to use.¹⁶ Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of biopower and Dominique Laporte's *History of Shit* (1978), Hawkins argues that 'the state shows its power by demanding that shit be private' so that 'the relationship between shit and power [is expressed] in terms of exclusion and repression,' and that this is paralleled in the state's separation from the market economy: the state is 'inviolable and therefore able to purify dirt' – whether that is physical or financial.¹⁷ Chadwick's sewer systems removed a source of income from the most marginalised poor (selling urine to

¹¹ Hawkins, *Ethics of Waste*, pp. 58-9.

¹² Martha Nussbaum, quoted in Morrison, *Literature of Waste*, p. 37.

¹³ Dini, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use*, p. 168.

¹⁴ Hawkins, *Ethics of Waste*, p. 49. Emphasis is mine.

¹⁵ Scanlan, pp. 31-2.

¹⁶ Dini, pp. 91-4.

¹⁷ Hawkins, pp. 50-1.

tanneries, faeces for fertiliser), redirecting any profit instead towards the man who envisioned that system and enforced it with law.¹⁸ In developing infrastructure during the 19th century, the state was continually making deals and trade-offs which ensured big business and industrial companies profited¹⁹ and this still holds true in contemporary neoliberalism, which 'cloaks the concentration of wealth in [a] few hands under the rhetoric of individual freedom [...] and makes the state the protector of financial institutions rather than of its citizens.'²⁰ Bauman, in a similar vein, sees the relationship between states and populace as one predicated on power imbalance. Tracing the transition from 'cosmic fear' (fear of a universe in which we are powerless and to the power of which we are subjugated) to 'official fear' (fear of human power based on vulnerability and uncertainty), Bauman shows how states must keep their subjects terrified and imperilled in order to keep them subservient.²¹ The welfare state acted as insurance against any unknown individual tragedy, but with the deregulation of markets the state abdicated its role as socio-economic protector so that, 'as Ulrich Beck put it, individuals are now expected to seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions.'²² The 'contemporary state must now seek other, non-economic varieties of vulnerability and uncertainty on which to rest its legitimacy' or itself risk becoming redundant. It accordingly concocts international terrorism and evidences its success in protecting us against this with the lack of attacks²³ in much the same way as Victorian plumbing removed the 'threat' of excrement.²⁴

¹⁸ O'Brien, *A Crisis of Waste?* chp 1. O'Brien also expands the discussion to include similar systems which had similar effects, such as Alfred White's New York City municipal waste management, and transnational recycling organisations such as the Salvation Army.

¹⁹ O'Brien, p. 23.

²⁰ Dini, p. 182.

²¹ Bauman, pp. 46-8.

²² Bauman, p. 51.

²³ Bauman, p. 52.

²⁴ I do not mean to imply that in densely populated cities a centralised sewage system is unimportant, but the depositing of raw sewage in oceans and waterways still occurred under Chadwick's system, and indeed is still practised by some present day, highly developed cities. The physical threat of disease is not necessarily negated and cannot therefore be used as a compelling argument of state protection.

Bodies, regulated

We see here an interplay between self and waste, and self and state. The personal body and the social and civic body are often conflated, and defecating is again one important aspect: human bodies produce human waste, human societies produce wasted humans. Automation of labour renders workers 'redundant' and yet simultaneously creates jobs for other workers in producing those automated inventions: '[t]he capitalist machine produces new workers in the same breath as it spits others out, resembling nothing so much as an immense and insatiable metabolism.'²⁵ Extending this, Bauman suggests that the state passively allows and actively perpetuates the transformation of humans into waste, not only through unemployment and redundancy, but also through the intensification of ghettos and prisons in the Global North, and through the extraction of resources from and dumping of toxicity onto countries in the Global South. In other words, a system is created in which value (and the security with which it comes) is bestowed upon some and denied to others – although remaining in the valued category is precarious: at any time, any of us can be rendered 'waste'. Scanlan looks to the relics of old political regimes, statues of Stalin torn down at the end of the Soviet era for example, and claims that the civic body, like the human body, is 'a site of order which breaks apart at the end.'²⁶

This rhetoric is also applied by the media, and indeed by some politicians, to migrants: they are considered to be contaminated bodies carrying disease into healthy states,²⁷ or, once they become 'foreign nationals', are themselves considered as an autoimmune disease, attacking the body from within.²⁸ Taking a different approach, Hawkins turns to waste

²⁵ Dini, p. 11.

²⁶ Scanlan, p. 53.

²⁷ Aaron Klein, 'Syrian Refugees Spreading Flesh Eating Disease, Polio, Measles, Tuberculosis, Hepatitis', *Breitbart Jerusalem*, 31 May 2016 <<http://www.breitbart.com/jerusalem/2016/05/31/syrian-refugees-spreading-flesh-eating-disease-polio-measles-tuberculosis-hepatitis/>> [accessed 10 November 2017].

²⁸ see, for example, Rick Noack, '2,000 men "sexually assaulted 1,200 women" at Cologne New Year's Eve party', *The Independent Online*, 11 July 2016 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/cologne-new-years-eve-mass-sex-attacks-leaked-document-a7130476.html>> [accessed 10 November 2017].

practices, linking the affront of littering to notions that morality and civic duty have disintegrated. She then turns to the example of new waste practices imposed on citizens by the state. Citizens, however, cite their feeling of personal responsibility and conscience rather than legislative obligation for participating in new habits of recycling and composting: they feel they are actively choosing to recycle for ethical reasons and so are enacting their autonomy.²⁹ Referring to Foucault, Hawkins highlights that conscience is a way in which personhood can be formed and utilised by the state: it is 'when subjectivation becomes subjection'³⁰ in everyday life. We experience emotionally charged campaigns aimed at vilifying commodity culture's wanton use of single-use commodities and disposable items (including packaging), and dutifully internalise guilt. These campaigns proclaim that everybody, across societies and within societies, is equally complicit in the overproduction of waste and must therefore be equally responsible for the solution and management of waste.³¹ Waste scholars in North America often quote the statistic that municipal waste consists of only three percent of all waste in the US, often in a bid to shift the focus of blame for excessive waste production back onto industrial waste:³² shame is placed on the consumer's shoulders, while the industrial producers are free to continue large-scale pollution with very little accountability. Aside from this smokescreen, the ways in which governments deploy conscience around their public's personal waste practices is problematic because it 'undermines senses of ethical connection' between us and our waste by changing the way we live in the world without changing the way we engage with it.³³ We are taught to feel virtuous or culpable about our recycling habits, but do not question any fundamental self/other relation with waste, and so are restricted from the possibility of engaging with it differently.

²⁹ Hawkins, p. 32.

³⁰ Hawkins, p. 34.

³¹ O'Brien, p. 87.

³² Max Liboiron, 'Municipal versus Industrial Waste: Questioning the 3-97 Ratio', *Discard Studies*, 3 February 2016 <<https://discardstudies.com/2016/03/02/municipal-versus-industrial-waste-a-3-97-ratio-or-something-else-entirely/>> [accessed 18 November 2017].

³³ Hawkins, p. 37.

Bauman makes a markedly similar observation about humanitarian workers in refugee camps: we feel that their presence in these camps absolves us without any change in our behaviours, and that this mitigates the sense of urgency to take action, allowing us instead to maintain a rationale against granting asylum to refugees.³⁴ They have a place to be, which is not here in our society, and so does not need to be here. He highlights how crucial the right of exemption is for the state, quoting Giorgio Agamben:

the world powers take up arms to defend a *state without a people* (Kuwait), and on the other hand, the *people without a state* (Kurds, Armenians, Palestinians, Basques, Jews of the Diaspora) can be oppressed and exterminated with impunity, so as to make clear that the destiny of a people can only be a state identity and that the concept of *people* makes sense only if recodified within the concept of citizenship.³⁵

In the UK the right to deny or revoke citizenship applies not only to migrants, but also to British nationals.³⁶ Indeed, Bauman traces the history of colonisation back to a need not only to exploit resources from colonised lands, but a need to transport 'surplus' populations from colonising to colonised lands.³⁷ Waste, then, for both self and state, is defined on a scale of inclusion and exclusion. We rely on boundaries, are dependent on otherness: 'our identity emerges in and through relations of differentiation.'³⁸ As Mary Douglas famously outlined, 'dirt [read 'waste'³⁹] is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.'⁴⁰

Consumption

³⁴ Bauman, p. 77.

³⁵ Giorgio Agamben, quoted in Bauman, p. 33.

³⁶ Marco Scalvini, 'The Secret War: British Nationals Stripped of their Citizenship', *Open Democracy UK*, 15 March 2013 <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/marco-scalvini/secret-war-british-nationals-stripped-of-their-citizenship>> [accessed 10 November 2017].

³⁷ Bauman, pp. 34–45.

³⁸ Hawkins, p. 120.

³⁹ While O'Brien is anxious to point out that waste scholars often use 'waste' synonymously with 'dirt' when discussing Douglas' work, I understand the following to be suitably representative for both. O'Brien, pp. 125-6.

⁴⁰ Mary Douglas, quoted in Scanlan, p. 42.

In consumer/commodity cultures, these 'inappropriate elements' are not merely the 'material degradation' of an object (or person) to the point of impaired utilitarian functionality.⁴¹ They are instead defined by the lack of ability to a) make profit for manufacturers, and b) confer social status on the consumer: commodities become waste 'simply in virtue of the fact that by contrast with some new or improved version they fail to match up to the latest vision of perfection.'⁴² Additionally, industrialisation and mass consumption have led to fetishizing, 'the cult of the new' and 'the shortening of desirability.'⁴³ When we lose our connection to production, our relationship with products diminishes.⁴⁴ One effect is that pre-industrial practices of thrift and care (termed as 'a stewardship of objects' by Susan Strasser) are replaced with an ethos of disposability and replaceability – what O'Brien refers to (and, it should be noted, contests) as the 'throw-away society,' what Bauman terms (when he extends this sociologically to encompass humans as commodities) 'casino culture.'⁴⁵ Another is that because we are a society of consumers,⁴⁶ consumption has become a means of self-formation: you are what you buy.⁴⁷ The problem here is that, as our lives become oversaturated with commodities, we cannot identify with so many objects and thus experience 'a gradual unbinding of the self.'⁴⁸ It is also problematic because 'consumables embody an ultimate non-finality and revocability of choices':⁴⁹ when we equate ourselves, humans, to

⁴¹ Furthermore, it is important to note that 'we remove objects before they decay and so avoid the psychological intrusion of dealing with this fact.' Scanlan, p. 37; 35.

⁴² Scanlan, p. 37.

⁴³ Hawkins, p. 129; 27.

⁴⁴ Extending this, Morrison makes the excellent point of highlighting our alienation from the production and consumption of food, claiming that we are distanced from it through the convention of processing meat so that when it reaches the table it no longer resembles the animal, through using cutlery rather than our fingers to eat, and through the modern habits of dining which are private and individuated compared to the older customs of communality. Morrison, pp. 48-9.

⁴⁵ Susan Strasser, quoted in Hawkins, p. 97; Hawkins, pp. 24-9; O'Brien, chp. 4; Bauman, pp. 116-7.

⁴⁶ Bauman, p. 16.

⁴⁷ Or, to quote Scanlan directly: 'in consumption we *buy the self* rather than simply buying a product.' Scanlan, p. 133. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ Scanlan, p. 173.

⁴⁹ Bauman, p. 131.

consumables, we bestow upon humans these characteristics and conditions. We find that the traditional, mutually-beneficial bonds of loyalty and reliability, whether in personal, professional or political relationships, have been destabilised and that 'a human is of use to other human beings only as long as she or he can be exploited to their advantage.'⁵⁰ Like commodities, our value to society and so inclusion in it (under capitalism), relies on our potential to be used, which is to say, on our marketability: 'the depiction of characters as objects [in western literature] literalises the marketplace's obscuring of the human.'⁵¹ Additionally, this is a reciprocal process: we not only turn humans into objects, but also confer 'human' concerns upon objects: 'the ecological view of waste [...] stands in for or occludes the socio-economic view of the object itself [so that] we worry about discarded plastic in lieu of worrying about the cheap labour that went into making the plastic' to begin with.⁵²

By approaching relationships with such mercenary attitudes, we dispose of any sense of responsibility to both individuals and community. Waste scholars try to challenge this use-value worldview through exposition and awareness raising – by calling on us to rethink our behaviours, actions, interactions. One way of doing this is to draw attention to objects themselves: if we treat people like things, let us re-evaluate how we treat things.⁵³ Indeed, new materialists are calling for paternalistically anthropocentric hierarchies to be flattened out, encouraging instead a worldview which sees the power of nonhuman 'actants' alongside and implicated in human agency.⁵⁴ The distinction between objects and things has been made by Bill Brown in his theorising of our material world. *Objects* perform certain functions. Once they stop functioning in their intended or familiar way they call attention to themselves and so become *things*: 'the story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is a story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less

⁵⁰ Bauman, p. 131.

⁵¹ Dini, p. 71.

⁵² Dini, p. 145.

⁵³ This is an inversion of Timothy Morton's claim that by 'raising the status of objects to the level of people,' we can unsettle the centrality of the human. Quoted in Morrison, p. 123.

⁵⁴ See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham; Duke UP, 2010).

an object than a particular subject-object relation.⁵⁵ Jane Bennett argues that objects are not simply passive sites onto which we can dump meaning, but rather that they have their own (non-human) agency. She goes on to wonder, though, whether waste is an object which has lost its 'thing-power.' In answering this she claims that just as 'inanimate things have a life of their own, that deep within them is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other things,' so too does waste '[manifest] the potential to resist us.' While complicating the subject/object relationship, Bennett, nevertheless critiques the 'the sheer volume of commodities, and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones [which] conceals the vitality of matter'.⁵⁶ Conversely, O'Brien takes issue with the belief that we in 21st century 'developed' countries are more profligate than our predecessors: he highlights the complicated processes we engage with rather than simply and mindlessly throwing our unwanted, even our disposable, things into landfill.⁵⁷ He argues that first and second hand consumption work alongside each other, helping to make sense of each other: we have a plethora of charity, vintage, retro, pre-loved, collectable shopping options both in high-street and independent shops, and, increasingly, online. But beyond this, there is an argument to be made that people already cherish their possessions, and indeed imbue those things a type of agency. In the first episode of his 'Objects of Desire' radio series, Matthew Sweet interviews two people on opposing ends of this spectrum: the hoarder and the minimalist.⁵⁸ For the latter, the ideal relationship between person and thing is one in which things have a specific function, and therefore a particular lifespan. Listeners are presented with the example of a pair of shoes: the minimalist replaces the old with new when they become, in his opinion, too worn to wear. For the hoarder, objects move beyond this limit, and instead exert their own vitality: their ability to bring joy or evoke emotions is counted

⁵⁵ Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory.' *Critical Inquiry* 28. 1 (2001), p. 4.

⁵⁶ Jane Bennett, in Morrison, p. 122.

⁵⁷ O'Brien, p. 107-18.

⁵⁸ Matthew Sweet, 'Objects of Desire: Such Stuff' *BBC Radio 4*, 10 October 2016, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07x2s1r>> [accessed 17 November 2017].

towards their functionality and usefulness. It is interesting to note here the difference between hoarding, which is belittled for its apparent lack of discernment, and collecting, which seemingly adheres to systemic order: one is considered culturally acceptable, laudable even, and financially lucrative, where the other is considered a reflection of poor taste and inferior knowledge.⁵⁹ Recently, queer theorists have opened up the discussion on the 'politics of hoarding, which show how cultural understandings of waste collection and scavenging have changed and been shaped by heteronormative, capitalist interests' so that hoarding, a relatively new 'pathology', is a radical tool in upsetting 'normative social boundaries.'⁶⁰ Extending this in a fascinating application of genes to the category of object, Morrison discusses how Beowulf is condemned for 'hoarding' his heroic genes, and the behaviours or characteristics believed to be attendant to these, by not reproducing: he not only dooms his own lineage, but also that of his society.⁶¹ Such is the extent to which damage can be caused by the non-conformity of hoarding.

Disposal

Waste scholars are not only concerned with the over-production of waste resulting from consumer cultures, but also with the habits and processes of removing waste: as Hawkins says, 'dispossession, or the active decision to remove something from one's life and discard it, is as complex a process as possession.'⁶² The Garbage Project were a group of scientific researchers who approached the study of waste using the techniques of archaeology, and in so doing set out the new field of 'garbology'.⁶³ They noted that discarded sexual and pornographic materials were distinguishable from all other rubbish which is unified

⁵⁹ Dini, p. 158. See also Heather Love, 'Queer Messes,' *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 44 (2016), 345–349, <www.jstor.org/stable/44471> [accessed 9 July 2021].

⁶⁰ Scott Herring, quoted in Dini, p. 15-6. This builds upon Michel Foucault explanation that 'Power asserts itself by the putting of things in their proper place: people and objects are designated roles to play and rules to follow according to social norms and practices. To question or exceed these categories is to challenge authority' quoted in Dini, p. 76.

⁶¹ Morrison, pp. 73–4.

⁶² Hawkins, p. 77.

⁶³ Scanlan, pp. 137–9.

in its sameness (a sameness that groups items as disparate as, say, a margarine tub and cat litter in the same bin bag): pornographic materials were kept out of private curb-side bins and disposed of instead in public waste sites. Echoing theories on our psychological fear of our own shit, Scanlan uses this as evidence of ‘the power [that] garbage has to compromise one’s carefully constructed identity.’⁶⁴ Hawkins is also concerned with the implications of our waste disposal habits, and while she offers a fascinating discussion on the ethical dimensions of recycling,⁶⁵ Morrison broadens the discussion by raising the issue of a waste disposal hierarchy.⁶⁶ In this hierarchy, recycling is relatively low, being part of the waste *management* category, and therefore less environmentally sustainable than waste *avoidance* practices which ideally call for re-designing before production, and re-thinking production itself.⁶⁷ Even within the waste management category, other practices such as re-purposing and re-using have less environmental impact: unlike recycling these practices do not require energy-consumptive processes for transformation or transform materials into degraded versions of the original. Examining re-use in literature from western capitalist societies, Dini claims that re-use ‘can be redemptive, practical, aesthetic, ecological’ and so can provide an alternative way to be ‘in a world that runs on desire and speculation.’⁶⁸

Scanlan looks at the role of time in moving an object (or concept, as in his discussion on the development of western philosophy), from useful, and therefore valued and desirable, to rubbish, and therefore inferior and unwanted. As previously outlined, our current habits of following (eternally) new fashions are a result of industrialisation’s flair for disconnecting

⁶⁴ Scanlan, p.140.

⁶⁵ See Hawkins, *Ethics of Waste*, chp. 5.

⁶⁶ Morrison, p. 10.

⁶⁷ see Max Liboiron, ‘Recycling Reconsidered: A Must-Read Text for Discard Studies’, *Discard Studies*, 6 May 2017 <<https://discardstudies.com/2017/06/05/recycling-reconsidered-a-must-read-text-for-discard-studies/>> [accessed 10 November 2017]. Also see Jenni Downes, ‘We Can’t Recycle Our Way To “Zero Waste”’, *Discard Studies*, 24 July 2017 <<https://discardstudies.com/2017/07/24/we-cant-recycle-our-way-to-zero-waste/>> [accessed 10 November 2017].

⁶⁸ Dini, p. 156; 197.

humans from production, and production necessarily involves time.⁶⁹ The Industrial Revolution saw industrial language filtered into the domestic sphere, so that it became commonplace to associate words such as ‘efficiency’ and ‘labour-saving’ to household appliances; and ironically, by heightening ‘standards of cleanliness’, these devices actually increased the amount of time (women) spent undertaking domestic labour.⁷⁰ Yet even before mass production, time was conceptualised in terms of labour – as something that is used wisely by the diligent and squandered by idle ‘wasters’.⁷¹ The Digital Revolution has exponentially accelerated this trend, so that we live in a world of instant access and consider this a thing beneficial, if not a right (granted us by consumerism): online shopping and applications such as *GrubHub*, *Tinder*, *Netflix*, *Kindle*, and *Spotify* have conditioned us to expect everything, from romantic relationships to a new garden hose, to be on demand immediately, or after a very brief wait for delivery. Bauman points out the lack of commitment and accountability in this:⁷² the ability to return the clothes, ‘unmatch’ a potential partner or delete the conversation, or over-eat without anyone witnessing.⁷³ He also points out the insecurity provoked when we are made to wait: we fear it means we are not in demand, and take this as a sign that we will soon be discarded.⁷⁴

As I stated in the opening, waste is that which is not valued in the moment. But what is meant by ‘value’? There are, after all, different types of value. In economic terms there is

⁶⁹ This, of course, is drawing on Marx’s theory of alienation. See Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. by Martin Milligan, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm>> [accessed 10 June 2021].

⁷⁰ Hawkins, p. 58.

⁷¹ Dini posits that indulging in the ‘constipated sitting still’ of idleness, or actively *time-wasting* is one way in which we can resist capitalism’s drive to turn all time into work-time, imbuing waste with a positive quality. Dini, p. 71. See also Scanlan, p. 31.

⁷² Bauman, pp. 122-5.

⁷³ It is interesting and important to note that the majority of food available online is fast food, or ‘junk’ food, which is not only nutritionally useless, but also in ‘exemplifying capitalist excess [...] functions as the waste matter that circulates through the system “just because” – serving no function other than a kind of inane self-affirmation (i.e. I eat therefore I am), and merely fuelling further desire [as evidenced by the] dissatisfaction following junk food binges.’ Dini, p. 150.

⁷⁴ Bauman, pp. 104-9.

value in use and in exchange. At the same time, commodity economies rely on consumers purchasing new objects on a regular basis: manufacturers shorten a product's life-span through planned obsolescence, as well as using the concept and social pressure of fashion to promote the disposal of still functioning products and the purchase of new ones. While the fashion industry ensures that 'desire [is] never [...] allowed to self-extinguish,'⁷⁵ the ideal commodity nevertheless 'must not obsess the owner' and must '[allow] itself to be thrown away' after 'losing its lustre.'⁷⁶ We also value things for sentimental reasons, regardless of their financial worth or fashionable status. Value can be related to ideology, our moral and ethical values. It is this subjectivity, plurality and fluidity which makes waste, as something without value or with negative value, so difficult to define. Indeed, not being valued and being valued negatively are decidedly different and can signify different categories of waste: 'valueless' things, possessions we keep in our homes and garages and storage spaces, but which are 'wrecked', 'no longer desired' or 'in excess of demand', are not threatening. Negatively valued things, shit for example, challenge boundaries and so must be removed from our personal spaces as quickly and quietly as possible.⁷⁷

O'Brien challenges the rationale that waste is something which has no value by outlining the myriad ways in which industry profits and has profited from its use of waste products in production since at least the middle ages.⁷⁸ 'Petroleum spirit', for example, was burnt in huge pits as an unstable by-product of paraffin refinement before it was applied in the combustion engine to revolutionise transportation: in a role reversal, petrol is now the desired product and paraffin the waste.⁷⁹ Value, then, is not intrinsic, and objects, concepts, people, can move along a scale of being valued and valuable.⁸⁰ Michael Thompson identifies 'three realms of value against which objects are judged': durable, for which (monetary) value

⁷⁵ Scanlan, p. 50.

⁷⁶ Dini, p. 7.

⁷⁷ Hawkins, p. 76.

⁷⁸ O'Brien, chps. 1 & 3.

⁷⁹ O'Brien, pp. 64-5.

⁸⁰ Hawkins, p. 78.

increases over time, such as in the case of antique furniture; transient, for which value decreases over time, like modern computers; and rubbish, which is a liminal category, a site of 'covert value' or 'value-in-waiting', offering possibility for objects to move between the other two categories.⁸¹ For example, first editions of print books might not be worth much financially when first published, but can, after time, accrue more value as evidenced by the inflated prices of the *Harry Potter* first print editions.⁸² Time is also a significant factor in deciding which literary works will be included in the canon and which books, not making the cut, will be discarded as having little literary merit. In both these cases value increases or decreases depending on various cultural factors coagulating in a certain way. For Hawkins, some objects will always be transient, using the example of a plastic cup, because they are *designed* to be disposable; yet O'Brien takes issue with the implication that consumers buy wholeheartedly into the philosophy of disposability – even if we are a society of consumers, we are *savvy* consumers, who try to 'hack' life by repurposing single-use everyday objects into cheap alternatives.⁸³

Reminders and remembering

Memory is another element of the relationship between time and waste. Nietzsche saw forgetting as essential to self-formation, a claim which is supported by current neurology: the human brain has finite neurons, meaning that there is an upper limit in our capacity to store the past which cannot be breached.⁸⁴ Our brains must dump old information in order to make space for the new. In his thinking on the uncanny, Freud sees our relationship with the past as more complicated than the clean finality that this memory 'dumping' implies: the uncanny is 'the eerily familiar object, image or phantom that continually resists any of our attempts to

⁸¹ O'Brien, p. 137.

⁸² Harry Cockburn, 'Harry Potter First Edition Sells for £60,000', *The Independent online*, 18 September 2017 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/harry-potter-first-edition-price-value-sells-how-know-you-have-one-hardback-bloomsbury-a7961726.html>> [accessed 18 November 2017].

⁸³ Take, for example, this list, although there are multitudes available online: Brian Koerber, '19 hacks to make your life easier around the home', *Mashable UK*, 7 March 2015 <http://mashable.com/2015/03/07/household-life-hacks/#fNHg_ZptROqi> [accessed 18 November 2017].

⁸⁴ David Eagleman, 'The Brain with David Eagleman', *PBS* (October – November 2015) [on DVD].

disconnect from it,⁸⁵ and so is everything we wish to throw away but cannot remove from our lives. While Freud problematizes waste through the uncanny, O'Brien, in his reading of *The Waste Land* (1922), claims T.S. Eliot sees remainders and memory as the only hope in an otherwise devastated (post Great War) world. Eliot 'seeks hope outside of the waste land: in classical literature and mythology, primarily, but also in the remembered minutiae of everyday life,'⁸⁶ warning Europe not to forget its roots. O'Brien juxtaposes the Victorian concept of waste, or 'dust', as something positive, full of potential, the very stuff of everyday life: in *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens' characters do not need to remember their past, as 'life's foundations are not in the memory or recuperation of things past but in the decay and rebirth of the present.'⁸⁷ Hawkins looks to Australian Aboriginal concepts of waste to examine the importance of living with our remainders and the positive implications this can have for our engagement with it. In the Aboriginal cultures she discusses, 'remains are evidence of the reciprocity between country and people. *In contrast [...] self-erasure [is seen] to be the equivalent of sneaking around the country.*'⁸⁸ Thinking of waste in this way can alter our ideas about the waste/nature binary that posits nature as a passive entity which humans master (and destroy) through the dumping of our rubbish.⁸⁹ In this way rubbish is not unnatural, not antithetical to nature, and not a source of shame which must be buried out of sight to be forgotten: it does in fact 'express a personal longing for fixity and stability, for a meaningful link with past actions and relationships.'⁹⁰ It is a way of 'bearing witness' to a people's presence in a place, and renders waste 'always available for transformation' through reclamation, repurposing and reuse.⁹¹ Waste shifts from being the uncanny, with its provocation to fear and

⁸⁵ Sigmund Freud, quoted in Scanlan, p. 36.

⁸⁶ O'Brien, p. 46.

⁸⁷ O'Brien, p. 47.

⁸⁸ Hawkins, p. 89. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁹ Hawkins, p. 8; 101.

⁹⁰ O'Brien, p. 118.

⁹¹ Hawkins, pp. 87-90.

disgust, to being the 'potential to *charge*, catalysing ethical behaviour and profound insights, even compassion.'⁹²

Dystopia(n difficulties)

As with waste, the concept of dystopia resists clear and easy categorisation. It may be considered a genre in its own right; it may be a sub-genre of SF or a sub-sub-genre of utopia under SF. Or it may indeed not be a genre at all but rather, as China Miéville says, '[d]ystopia and utopia are themes, optics, viruses that can infect any field of genre.'⁹³ As for distinguishing between the two, it is not as simple as saying that if utopia is the good place, dystopia is the bad. This presents an immediate and familiar problem: the meaning of good and bad varies depending on time, place, people and context.

In a humbling reminder of inequality and poverty, Lyman Tower Sargent notes that the most fundamental utopia is to have our basic material needs met – sufficient food, accommodation, clothing and 'a better future for ourselves and our children.'⁹⁴ But, as he goes on to discuss, attaining this for ourselves has been, and certainly still is, to the detriment of others. Many of the settlers who emigrated to the colonies were leaving extreme poverty for lands of plenty, yet colonisation for Indigenous populations brought enslavement, genocide, disease, the pillaging of natural resources and the destruction of their way of life. After all, in any dystopia, real or fictional, the elites are living in their version of a utopia,⁹⁵ just as in any utopia there is the possibility of a dystopia. In her discussion on *Brave New World* Erika Gottlieb says that there is nothing inherently harmful about the state motto 'Community,

⁹² Morrison, p. 3. Emphasis in original.

⁹³ China Miéville, 'A Strategy for Ruination,' interviewed by *Boston Review*, *Global Dystopia*, ed. by Junot Díaz (Cambridge: Boston Review/The MIT Press, 2017), p. 181.

⁹⁴ Lyman Tower Sargent, 'Colonial and post-colonial utopias', *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 201.

⁹⁵ Gregory Claeys, 'The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley, Orwell,' *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 108. Peter Stockwell notes that stylistically, in works intended as dystopia, readers are 'discouraged' from identifying with the elites by the 'focalisation [...] of the novels through one of the oppressed group', *Poetics of Science Fiction* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), p. 212.

Identity, Stability.’ These qualities are, in fact, often upheld as ideals worth striving for. It is how this motto is understood and carried out which makes a utopian sentiment a dystopian one, so that we are unsure for a number of chapters in which type of place, good or bad, the novel is set.⁹⁶ Over time ideals can move along the spectrum of good-bad, or utopia-dystopia. Industrial mechanisation, for example, was seen as a solution to the moral problem of slavery until the 20th century, when the reality of it on a large scale provoked anxieties of humanity becoming enslaved to the machine.⁹⁷ Similarly, the medieval vision of hell as a foul-smelling, squalid site, and the association of cleanliness with godliness, has been replaced in this century with the conceptualisation of the nightmare place as a ‘[domain] of nothingness’, the overly sanitised and anonymous spaces such as airports and shopping centres.⁹⁸ Sargent sees the problems presented by the ambiguous nature of defining utopia/dystopia as a call to action, claiming that

we must *commit* Eutopia knowing that it is *not* perfect and that [...] it contains within it the seeds of its own destruction. We must commit eutopia again and again because [...] not believing in the possibility of betterment, however flawed, condemns us to live in someone else’s vision of a better life, perhaps one forced on us.⁹⁹

In her own attempt to answer this conflict between universal good and freedom of choice, Gottlieb proposes that the principles of humanism can act as a guide to the ‘better life’, and a better life for all. She is, however, wary of committing fully to a utilitarian philosophy, which sees utopia as the greatest good for the greatest number of people: instead, she figures a ‘good place’ as a place where each person has the ‘right to the unhampered *pursuit of justice*.’¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopia East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (Montreal: Mc-Gill-Queens UP, 2001), p. 65.

⁹⁷ Peter Stockwell, *The Poetics of Science Fiction*, p. 205.

⁹⁸ Scanlan, pp. 20-1.

⁹⁹ Sargent, quoted in Alcena Madeline Davis Rogan, ‘Utopian Studies’, *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), p. 315. Miéville extends this concept of ‘utopia as a verb’ to processes and politics of radical change, an overturning of the existing exploitative and oppressive system in ‘A Strategy for Ruination’, pp. 189-90.

¹⁰⁰ Gottlieb, *Dystopia East and West*, p. 203. Emphasis in original.

Another issue encountered when defining dystopia is the debate among scholars over classification and terminology, with some using terms interchangeably and others distinguishing them. 'Dystopia' was first used as a literary term in 1952 by Glenn Robert Negley and J. Max Patrick to distinguish between SF's futuristic good place and bad place.¹⁰¹ This thinking was influenced by Malthusian anxieties that population would exceed food production,¹⁰² the accumulated anxiety and guilt of empire leading to the fear of colonisers themselves being colonised,¹⁰³ and the fear that new technologies, especially nuclear ones, would lead to the apocalypse.¹⁰⁴ While Gregory Claeys outlines the 'pre-history' of dystopia,¹⁰⁵ the consensus among scholars is that prior to the 20th century western speculations of the future had, comparatively, a more utopian bent, and that the dystopian variant is a 20th century product.¹⁰⁶ Tom Moylan lists the reasons for this as: 'a hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity' through a new, intense phase of capitalism, which he describes as 'the buying and selling of everyday life.'¹⁰⁷ Peter Fitting, while agreeing with the general consensus, cites 'negative reactions to the prospect of socialism' as a major cause for the dystopian turn.¹⁰⁸ As well as evidencing this with the 'many hostile responses to Bellamy's work',¹⁰⁹ the greater, more convincing fear of socialism came from the revolutions in Russia in 1905 and particularly 1917 (as well as, of course, the still lingering spectre of the French

¹⁰¹ It was, however, used as early as 1868 by John Stuart Mill in a non-literary context. Mattias Ågren, *Phantoms of a Future Past: A Study of Contemporary Russian Anti-Utopian Novels* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2014), p. 6.

¹⁰² Brian Stableford 'Ecology and dystopia', *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, p. 261.

¹⁰³ Aris Mousoutzanis, 'Apocalyptic SF', *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, pp. 459-60.

¹⁰⁴ Mousoutzanis, 'Apocalyptic SF', p. 458.

¹⁰⁵ Claeys identifies five prototypes including: war, slavery, despots, prisons and 'ostracism of diseased populations from healthy [ones]', *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 10-14.

¹⁰⁶ This is excluding a more hopeful phase of utopian writing, especially among feminist authors, in the late 1960's and 1970's.

¹⁰⁷ Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2000), p. xi.

¹⁰⁸ Peter Fitting, 'Utopia, dystopia and science fiction', *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, p. 139.

¹⁰⁹ Fitting, 'Utopia, dystopia and science fiction' p. 139.

Revolution). The authoritarian system which co-opted these revolutions from their original socialist goals dealt a blow to the utopian vision of communism, but also more widely to utopian imagining and writing.

Over time the concerns of dystopia have, naturally, shifted, swollen and seized to build upon or disregard established concerns and take up new concerns. The early dystopias of Zamyatin and Orwell were 'concerned with how plutocratic or collectivist regimes emerge and function': in the second half of the 20th century the fear of control was inspired by corporations rather than government, and, moving through the 21st century, the belief that it is neoliberalism rather than totalitarian dictatorships which will destroy us. While fears of nuclear holocaust have persisted since the testing and dropping of the atomic bomb (sustained not only by continued threats of nuclear war, but also by the disasters at Chernobyl and Fukushima), new fears of environmental collapse caused by climate breakdown (including deforestation and desertification, extractionist policies and toxic dumping, melting icecaps and rising sea levels, and the societal consequences of all this) also emerge and flourish. Concerns around gender issues, as they came to the fore in the 1970's and 1980's, took 'the form of both claims of right, queries about the identities of masculinity and femininity, and statements of historical oppression.' Anxieties and hopes around advances in technology also fluctuated, oscillating between the fear of mechanisation, whereby machines enslave us or we become reduced to little chunks of data making up a hive mind, and idealisation of the machine as a perfected human (see here Skinner's *Walden Two*, in which "consciousness" and "free will" are [considered] less valuable than moral behaviour').¹¹⁰

Although works of 'negative utopia'¹¹¹ existed prior to the categorisation of dystopian texts, it is still remarkable that there is a span of four centuries between this and Thomas

¹¹⁰ Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, pp. 490-5.

¹¹¹ The negative utopia was defined as 'a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived' by Sargent, quoted in Graham J Murphy, 'Dystopia', *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, p. 473.

More's foundational text in 1516.¹¹² Utopia, a pun on the Greek 'eu' (good) and 'ou' (no) compounded with 'topos' (place), creates an ambiguous duality: utopia can either signify a paradise land where ideals are realised (sometimes written as 'eutopia' as in the above quotation from Sargent), or it can point to a no-place (such as in Samuel Butler's anagram *Erewhon*), a place that does not and indeed cannot exist, or it can invoke both ideas simultaneously.¹¹³ Both Stockwell and Gottlieb discuss the result of actually achieving a '[perfect] and coherent society.'¹¹⁴ It leads, they say, to boredom and entropy.¹¹⁵ A real utopia cannot sustain itself, and a fictional utopia cannot meet the requirements of narrative action (kinesis) to stave off stasis,¹¹⁶ and indeed this has been used to explain, even perhaps to justify (if justification be necessary), the reactionary turn towards other types of -topia.¹¹⁷ Alcena Madeline Davis Rogan argues that it is not More's intention for 'no-place' to 'represent his idea of the ultimately ideal, attainable place', but rather that it is 'a blank slate' onto which a different world can be painted so that 'the contemporary reader [becomes estranged] from their [own world], thus allowing them to see [it] in a new light'.¹¹⁸ Indeed, this is an apt outline of the baseline aim of works in the utopian (sub)genre. A more detailed classification depends on further aims and methods: for example, Peter Fitting distinguishes the dystopia from the anti-utopia by suggesting that 'the critique of contemporary society expressed in the dystopia implies (or asserts) the need for change; the anti-utopia is [...] explicitly or implicitly a defence of the status quo'¹¹⁹ and the rejection of utopia as a possibility. Peter Stockwell makes a further

¹¹² More, inventing the word, may have initiated the literary genre, but the idea of utopia in political and literary texts existed prior to this both in western traditions and outside: for a brief overview see Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chp. 4.

¹¹³ Graham J Murphy, 'Eutopia', *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, p. 478.

¹¹⁴ Stockwell, *Poetics of Science Fiction*, p. 205.

¹¹⁵ Gottlieb, discussing Konwicki's *A Minor Apocalypse* says that 'in the monotony [...] the proletariat is dehumanized' so that people do terrible things just to break the boredom, and points, in line with Waste Scholars, to 'the irreversible tendency of an organism to disintegrate', p. 233.

¹¹⁶ Stockwell, p. 205.

¹¹⁷ Miéville, 'A Strategy for Ruination', p. 181.

¹¹⁸ Rogan, 'Utopian Studies', p. 309.

¹¹⁹ Fitting, 'Utopia, dystopia and science fiction', p. 141. See also Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, pp. 124-7.

distinction between anti-utopia and what he terms 'heterotopia', which also criticise the notion of utopia but which do not abandon the ideal altogether. He states that it 'is the struggle *towards* utopia that is the motivating force behind heterotopias', despite all they do to 'foreground the problematic issues of creating [that utopian world].'¹²⁰ In other scholarship this is referred to as a heuristic utopia,¹²¹ or, most commonly, a critical utopia: a work which '[reflects] the socio-political concerns of an era characterized by the demands for change in the areas of global exploitation, gender [and] race inequality, and class antagonism.'¹²² It is a text which, moreover, '[explores] the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration.'¹²³ Discussing the difference between the 'meta-utopia' (read: critical utopia, heterotopia, heuristic utopia etc.) and dystopia, Edith Clowes points to the limits of dystopias. These, she claims, are restricted to a polemical either/or, rely too heavily on a nostalgia for the past, and offer only a 'nihilistic attitude toward both the present and the future, closing both off to a new imaginative possibility.'¹²⁴ This, to me, reads like a description of anti-utopia. Similarly, Rogan, despite stating that the boundary is blurry, claims that any point of difference between the critical utopia and the dystopia is that the latter 'contain the *least* promise for the change or growth of the posited future or parallel space.'¹²⁵ Gottlieb rejects this, saying that on close inspection most works classified (by Clowes) as dystopias, however bleak and paralysing, would indeed fall into the definition of the meta-utopia as a work which 'countenances and challenges all kinds of authoritarian ideologies, each with its own vision of the ideal society, that insist on their own version of rightness, justice and truthfulness to the exclusion of all others.'¹²⁶ In short, while the anti-utopia is a distinct category, trying to adhere to rigid classifications and strict

¹²⁰ Stockwell, p. 208.

¹²¹ Murphy, 'Eutopia', p. 479.

¹²² Rogan, 'Utopian Studies', p. 313.

¹²³ Moylan, p. xv.

¹²⁴ Edith Clowes, quoted in Gottlieb, pp. 4-5.

¹²⁵ Rogan, p. 313.

¹²⁶ Clowes, quoted in Gottlieb, p. 203.

boundaries between critical utopia and dystopia is often unproductive.¹²⁷ Most works within the utopian genre in the 20th and (early) 21st centuries are not prescriptive. Rather, they tend to be pluralistic, hybrid and ambiguous.¹²⁸ Indeed, works written after the emergence of a cyberpunk imaginary, with their disregard for 'the *merely* human', 'defy classification as eutopias or dystopias precisely because the societies they describe are posthuman, and therefore exceed the capacity of terms designed to reflect the extremes of human ambition and anxiety.'¹²⁹

Style

Stockwell posits that the world created in dystopian novels must be recognisable to the reader as that of their own 'base-reality'. He argues that 'a more ambivalent metaphoric strategy would allow too much reader-interpretation in which the central [socio-political] message might be lost'.¹³⁰ In other words, if the metonymy of the fictional world with our world is unclear or too loosely connected, the reader would not be able to draw the conclusions the author intended. I find it curious that Stockwell gives so little credit to both author and reader. Can an author not make their point with metaphor? As Gottlieb highlights, writers in the Soviet bloc were incredibly adept at getting their subversive writing past censors, and yet readers 'successfully' understood their message. Indeed, the entire premise of SF, fantasy and magical realism is that readers are capable of connecting dots, making leaps, identifying double or hidden meanings. In 'The Broken Earth' trilogy, for example, characters have telekinetic abilities, there is a race of people made of stone who can move through the earth, and some humans themselves have the latent ability to turn into stone. The reader is able to

¹²⁷ In an essay concerned with typology, the authors explicitly note the plasticity of boundaries and flexibility that this then requires of scholarship. Ann Bergman, Jan Ch Karlsson, Jonas Axelsson, 'Truth claims and explanatory claims — An ontological typology of futures studies', *Futures*, 42 (2010) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2010.02.003>>, pp. 861–865. It is worth noting, however, that in Russian scholarship 'anti-utopia' is the preferred term for dystopia, as outlined and understood in this thesis: see Ågren, *Phantoms of a Future Past*, p. 6.

¹²⁸ Murphy, 'Eutopia', p. 481.

¹²⁹ Stableford, 'Ecology and dystopia', p. 276.

¹³⁰ Stockwell, p. 211.

draw connections to the real world, to black history and present day scars of chattel slavery in the US even though this dystopia is not an 'extension of our base-reality, closely related to it or [a] caricature of it.'¹³¹ Certainly, without this 'capacity to picture *other* worlds (while indirectly showing our own)', worlds which Stockwell calls 'disjunctive alternatives', novels like Jemisin's would not be 'able to image *better* worlds.'¹³² Or, indeed, to create what Moylan calls the 'enlightening triangulation between an individual reader's limited perspective, the estranged re-vision of the alternative world on the pages of a given text, and the actually existing society.'¹³³ Moreover, the position of the author is questionable, as Barthes pointed out long ago. Even if the reader is unable to draw the author's intended conclusions, what is to say that their own conclusions, different to those of the author, are incorrect? Are not useful? Surely this is the beauty and relevancy of literature – that it can speak across its confines of time and culture, that others can interpret and reinterpret it to fit their own contexts.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all utopias/dystopias are SF, and that not all SF embodies the utopian/dystopian critique of the present and the imperative to change it.¹³⁴ Some of the primary texts studied in this thesis toe the 'realism' line more closely than others; some are situated in and originate from cultures in which 'reality' does not toe the line of western ontology.

Defining dystopia

Referencing Darko Suvin, Tom Moylan writes that a fictional dystopia is:

'a community where socio-political institutions, norms, and relationships between its individuals are organized in a significantly less perfect way than in the author's community' but it does so and is so judged, from the explicitly oppositional standpoint of 'a representative of a discontented social class or faction, whose value-system defines "perfection"'¹³⁵

¹³¹ Stockwell, p. 211.

¹³² Fitting, p. 144.

¹³³ Moylan, p. xvii.

¹³⁴ Fitting, pp. 143-50.

¹³⁵ Suvin, quoted in Moylan, pp. 155-6.

In this definition, dystopian fiction is concerned with the relationship between the imagined world and the real world (of the author/reader), between better and worse worlds and versions of utopian ideal. Gottlieb's definition, clearly heavily influenced by the authoritarian state as it manifested in Europe in the 20th century, sees dystopia as a strategy of warning which forces us to dwell in and on 'hellscape from which the [characters] can no longer return so that we realize what the flaws of our own society may lead to for the next generations unless we try to eradicate these flaws today'.¹³⁶ Drawing on both descriptions, and being mindful of keeping broad parameters, I have chosen my primary texts based on the understanding of dystopia as an envisioning, shaped by historical and contemporary concerns, of a nightmare world which the author wishes to warn against.

Dystopia now

I began this project in 2017. In casual conversation, when telling people about my topic, they knew dystopia either as *The Hunger Games* trilogy, and the tsunami of similar Young Adult (YA) fiction from the previous decade, or as *Brave New World* and *1984*. The internet is littered with think-pieces about the rise of the YA dystopia and the differences between this wave of dystopia and previous waves, both in terms of intended audience and authors' intended messages. Some cite the socio-political climate of extremes and polarisation, post Great Recession, as fertile ground for dystopia, drawing attention to the rise in sales (on Amazon, ironically) of *1984* after Donald Trump was elected US president.¹³⁷ But this, as Miéville notes, marks 'the sheer arrogance of despair, the aggrandisement of thinking that one lives in the Worst Times', when outside of our own centrality *some* people are living and have lived dystopia: it just seems closer now for those of us 'who had thought [our]selves insulated' from it.¹³⁸ Others attribute the trend in monotonous, mimicking YA dystopias to

¹³⁶ Gottlieb, p. 4.

¹³⁷ Jill Lepore, 'A Golden Age For Dystopian Fiction: What to make of our new literature of radical pessimism', *The New Yorker*, 5 June 2017 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/05/a-golden-age-for-dystopian-fiction>> [accessed 13 April 2018].

¹³⁸ Miéville, 'A Strategy for Ruination,' p. 182.

neoliberalism's disintegrating of our imagination through decades of the reiteration that *there is no alternative*, and capitalism's eagerness to make money by reproducing ad infinitum what has previously proven profitable.¹³⁹ Some see these latest dystopias as a call to action and an attempt at youth empowerment, highlighting the necessity to allow an enduring kernel of hope for young adults which had been denied adult readers of older dystopias;¹⁴⁰ contrastingly, others read them as consolidations of free-market conservatism and an anti-utopian insistence on the status quo.¹⁴¹ Yet all this thinking and writing, fictional and critical, produces and is a product of the concerns of the dominant culture in the UK and USA. My project aims to move away from this, towards literature from cultures and peoples who have been marginalised. That the genre of utopia/dystopia is exclusively, somehow innately, western has been posited (see Krishan Kumar, for example) but is rejected by Jacqueline Dutton and Lyman Tower Sargent: they argue that, while 'it [does not make] sense to expect different cultures to produce precisely the same version of depictions of nonexistent good (or bad) societies', utopias and utopian traditions (of which dystopia is one) nevertheless 'existed in many cultures before those cultures discovered the western genre.'¹⁴² I do note, however, that western culture is not a monolith, that the spirit of inclusivity and plurality expressed by Dutton and Sargent can and does extend to the plethora of marginalised groups within 'the west.'

Wasted worlds: dystopia and waste

¹³⁹ Mark Bould, drawing on Frederick Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, 'Dulltopia,' *Global Dystopia*, ed. by Junot Díaz, (Cambridge, Boston Review/The MIT Press, 2017), p. 191.

¹⁴⁰ See Lepore, 'A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction' and Syreeta McFadden, 'Dystopian stories used to reflect our anxieties. Now they reflect our reality', *The Guardian*, 25 October 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/26/dystopian-stories-margaret-atwood-walking-dead-zombies>> [accessed 13 April 2018].

¹⁴¹ See Laura Miller, 'Fresh Hell: What's behind the boom in dystopian fiction for young readers?' *The New Yorker*, 14 June 2010 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/06/14/fresh-hell-2>> [accessed 13 April 2018] and Ewan Morrison, 'YA dystopias teach our children to submit to the free market, not fight authority', *The Guardian online*, 1 September 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/01/ya-dystopias-children-free-market-hunger-games-the-giver-divergent>> [accessed 13 April 2018].

¹⁴² Jacqueline Dutton and Lyman Tower Sargent, 'Introduction: Utopias from Other Cultural Traditions, *Utopian Studies*, 24.1 (2013), 1-5 <<https://muse.jhu.edu/>> [accessed 17 April 2018], p. 1.

Gottlieb outlines several characteristics of (20th century, European) dystopian fiction.¹⁴³ For each characteristic I will demonstrate how this relates to, indeed how it echoes, the concerns of waste studies. First, these works explore the ambiguity between utopia and dystopia which I have touched upon above: '[they] make us ponder how an originally utopian promise was abused, betrayed, or, ironically, fulfilled so as to create tragic consequences for humanity'. Here we see a dystopia created through the wasting of a utopian possibility. 'Broken utopian promises' are also inherent in physical waste. Commodities are marketed as the solution to our problems and the fulfilment of our desires, they are the best, the fastest, the strongest, the most reliable, and yet we (must) constantly buy newer and better commodities to replace the previous ones.¹⁴⁴ As waste scholars such as O'Brien, Dini, Hawkins and Thill have noted, discards often find their way back into circulation as second-hand commodities. Waste, being 'neither truly "alive" nor "dead,"' 'exists somewhere between these two states [...] but [seeks], at every turn, to be made a commodity once more.'¹⁴⁵ We see this also in (utopian) Indigenous writings from North America and Oceania. To speak in overarching terms about the plethora of Indigenous peoples is reductive; in my third chapter I will look in more depth at a select, specific culture. For the moment, I accept Dutton's conclusion from her comprehensive study that Indigenous traditional worldviews, on the whole, 'insist on the status quo and resist change'. Gottlieb is speaking with the Soviet Union in mind, which tried to impose 'utopia' onto diverse communities within and across the vast Soviet region. In the context of European colonisation, we can consider that Indigenous utopias existed prior to invasion and were wasted by colonisation so that this insistence on the status quo is not anti-utopian, but rather is a dystopian imperative to *change by returning* to the status quo – by

¹⁴³ Gottlieb, pp. 8-16. I have re-ordered her list slightly so that I can discuss more concisely how it relates to waste.

¹⁴⁴ Julian Stallabrass, quoted in Dini, p. 9.

¹⁴⁵ Dini, p. 9.

restoring (or *repurposing*) the old, pre-colonial ideal.¹⁴⁶ It is the commodity of the utopian dream struggling to find its way back into circulation.

Second, there is a miscarriage of justice perpetrated by the state against the protagonist during a trial which exemplifies the simultaneous lawlessness and law of the nightmare society. Appositely, Adolf Hitler describes how dystopian worlds can be created out of the wasting of (legal) systems and the way in which (unjust) systems can waste humans: there are 'two stages in any revolution: the first phase concentrates on salvaging the appearance of a legal process by maintaining some of the previous conditions [and in] the second phase, revenge takes over without any further camouflage.'¹⁴⁷

As previously outlined, Hawkins draws the link between the legal system, following Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, and Chadwick's sewer systems. Both the penal state and the sewer system are engaged in processes of social regulation. Reforms to civil engineering in the 18th and 19th centuries were not concerned with the welfare of the masses or improving the living conditions of the poor. The aim was rather to 'rationalise all of the institutional structures by which society was organised and controlled and thereby establish the conditions for progressive efficiency and rationality in political economy.'¹⁴⁸ O'Brien demonstrates the ways in which privatisation of waste management took employment away from the most impoverished and marginalised people, and how, once state systems were in place, governments coerced industrialists into complying with controls and regulations by offering ways in which they could abuse the system. Industry could continue polluting public waterways and bodies of water, but it could first profit from this by turning pollutant by-products into marketable commodities. One particularly pertinent example of this is 'the transformation of waste hydrochloric acid [produced by chemical companies] into commercial products such as bleach for the textile and paper-making industries', and, later, for everyday use in domestic

¹⁴⁶ Jaqueline Dutton, "'Non-western' utopian traditions', *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, pp. 247-8.

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Gottlieb, p. 263.

¹⁴⁸ O'Brien, p. 20.

cleaning.¹⁴⁹ Or, in the case of Alfred White, the New York City Inspector who oversaw the city's sanitation services, we see the abuse of power and political position. Using public money to construct a waste management system, White then used public funds to extract and sell for private profit any useable elements, and to flush for free all unusable, toxic elements into public rivers. Further, we see the private use of that system. Where 'waste dumping had previously been democratic' it was now 'part of civic empire building', but still unconcerned with better worlds for anyone other than the elite.¹⁵⁰ The state perpetrates a miscarriage of justice, not only against a subversive protagonist, but against its whole public.

Third, humans and human potentials are wasted through the sacrifice of people by the state in the name of the state and its ideology, causing the protagonist to experience a loss of control in the face of an unknowable, unstoppable and unjust authority. This loss of control is a reflection of Bauman's comments on cosmic fear and official fear: Gottlieb outlines how satire is emphasised over tragedy in modern dystopian literature: '[both] genres make us question what it is to be human' and 'what can make us lose our humanity', but satire focuses on the socio-political, whereas tragedy cries out against the cosmos.¹⁵¹ Again paralleling Bauman, Gottlieb discusses the state's need for and use of scapegoats. In dystopias, both real and fictional, a representative of the authoritarian state sacrifices individuals deemed subversive (this can include the protagonist or other central characters) in order to ensure the continuation of the authoritarian state. It is a continuation which the representative claims to be in society's best interests.¹⁵² The category of scapegoat is constantly growing, subsuming more groups of people as previous groups are eradicated. Interestingly, in Ivan Klíma's *The Castle*, the representative, called the General (a Stalin figure), chastises the protagonist for being 'profligate with [his] Jews'. His mistake was failing to recognise that scapegoats (in this

¹⁴⁹ O'Brien, pp. 20-26.

¹⁵⁰ O'Brien, pp. 26-7.

¹⁵¹ Gottlieb, pp. 14-5.

¹⁵² Gottlieb identifies the root of all dystopia, east and west, in Dostoyevsky's 'Legend of the Grand Inquisitor' parable in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The Inquisitor, whether a representative of Catholicism or Socialism, seeks to 'make man happy by relieving him of his personal responsibility', p. 50. See chp 2.

case the traditional European scapegoat, the Jewish people) are a valuable and finite commodity. And so this authoritarian state must turn, with a Kafkaesque absurdity, to subsuming into the scapegoat category the group 'bald men'.¹⁵³ The nightmare society is one in which the safety of inclusion within the in-group is precarious, where anyone can be made disposable. Gottlieb also discusses the Messianic sacrifice of individuals rebelling against the state/authority, in what the rebels believe to be society's best interests. The dystopian hero, she says, fulfils the role of *homo sacer* more than that of scapegoat. While the protagonist may die for her/his cause, s/he 'is not able to sacrifice [her or] himself' as the revolt is defeated and the memory of it is erased from the 'enslaved population'.¹⁵⁴ This effective suicide, having not achieved its intended purpose of catalysing change, is figured more as a throwing-away than a sacrifice. It is squandered; it is a waste.

Fourth, through policies which prohibit private bonds and loyalties (including parent-child relationships and romantic relationships), as well as the spreading of propaganda and processes of indoctrination (often through mind-altering drugs and/or electronic means), the individual's private world is destroyed so that the private self is implicated in the state and vice versa. Liquid modernity, outlined by Bauman as 'a civilization of excess, redundancy, waste and waste disposal',¹⁵⁵ has seen human relationships and interconnectedness deteriorate under capitalism's commodification of self, push for individualism over collectivism, the individualising of social problems, and the consumerization of community. Neoliberal globalisation wastes consumers as well as producers. Commodities '[come] before us, no questions asked, as [things] we could not begin to imagine doing ourselves',¹⁵⁶ cutting us off from engaging even imaginatively with production so that we 'forget about the exploited labourers involved in producing [our] things.' Social relations are not only rendered transactional, 'reification in late capitalism [has] effectively [annihilated] our sense of

¹⁵³ Ivan Klíma, quoted in Gottlieb, p. 225.

¹⁵⁴ Gottlieb, pp. 31-2.

¹⁵⁵ Bauman, p. 97.

¹⁵⁶ Frederick Jameson, quoted in Dini, p. 145.

responsibility towards others.¹⁵⁷ Accountability, and the reliability with which it is associated, in the private and professional spheres has dissolved, replaced instead with planned obsolescence, suspicion of long-term commitments and the need for an easy escape clause.¹⁵⁸

Fifth, the memory of the past gains vital importance, especially as it is destroyed or altered beyond recognition by the authoritarian state: a society's mental wellbeing relies on having access to its own historical records, which in dystopia usually take the form of (canonical) literature and/or newspapers, letters, diaries written prior to the novel's dystopian era. Memory, as previously outlined, is a crucial element in waste and waste studies. Consumer cultures and cultures of disposability rely on *actively* forgetting our discards. We can continue to consume-discard-repeat because, mimicking (although on steroids) the natural cycle of life and death and re-birth, fashion removes the past and adorns us instead with something new and better.¹⁵⁹ Environmentally, the innate disposability of single-use plastics (most commonly in the form of plastic bottles and packaging)¹⁶⁰ constructs our ability to instantly forget these objects once discarded.¹⁶¹ This, combined with the longevity of plastics, culminates in an crisis of over-flowing landfill and ocean pollution.¹⁶² Sociologically,

¹⁵⁷ Dini, p. 145.

¹⁵⁸ Bauman, pp. 92-3; 140.

¹⁵⁹ Scanlan, pp. 34-7.

¹⁶⁰ Hawkins, quoting Thomson, categorises single-use plastic products as permanently 'transient', unable to occupy the liminal space of other wastes, because it is considered disposable from its inception. Hawkins, pp. 77-9.

¹⁶¹ There is, of course, a growing popular concern around plastics, as evidenced by the UK government's announced intent to reduce plastic usage: see 'Environment Secretary pledges action on ocean plastics', *Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs*, 21 July 2017 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/environment-secretary-pledges-action-on-ocean-plastics>> [accessed 10 July 2021]. However, plastic is a by-product of the oil refinement industry: unless the government also announces it is divesting from dirty energy, plastic will continue to be produced.

¹⁶² For a brief but concise overview of the detrimental impact of plastics in oceans see Max Liboiron, 'LA Shade Balls: the environmental impact of plastics in water', *Discard Studies*, 16 August 2015 <<https://discardstudies.com/2015/08/16/las-shade-balls-the-ecological-costs-of-plastics-in-water/>> [accessed 12 January 2018], or Eurostat, 'Packaging Waste Statistics', *European Commission* (December 2017)

disposability and excess take the form of what Bertrand Ogilvie terms '*les hommes jetables*' (throwaway men), and '*populations poubelles*' (garbage-bin populations) to name the transformation of people into matter, and the disregard or disgust for that matter which prompts us to turn a blind eye to how it is treated – or rather, how *they* are treated.¹⁶³ It is interesting then that the fixation on remembering is a concern so central in dystopian worlds. Gottlieb figures

the act of memory [as] an act of resistance against a totalitarian state with its insistence on changing history, on eradicating the very concept of historical records, because knowledge of history would form the very basis for a fair comparison between the past and the new regime – a comparison [that] dictatorships cannot afford.¹⁶⁴

Consumer culture relies in a similar way on an eradication of the past. Much like Hawkins' *Bush Mechanics*, Don DeLillo sees this as unethical and posits that resistance lies in holding discards actively in mind by '[investigating] waste for historical clues [about individuals and societies]. While perhaps not legitimising our excesses, such investigations allow us to redeem them, or at least find redemptive aspects in them.'¹⁶⁵ While hoarding has a negative connotation in contemporary society, as the lack of discernment over what is of value and therefore worth keeping, Dini, conversely, argues that 'hoarders' homes are places where the past is kept and examined critically'.¹⁶⁶ Holding on to memory is both personal and political, and in both cases vital.

Sixth, there must be a literary device which enables us, the reader, to sympathise and identify with the protagonist, yet remain distanced from them so that we can see the effect caused by whichever threatening trend in our present reality the author has chosen to emphasise. Sometimes this takes the form of two time-planes, or sometimes it is figured as

<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Packaging_waste_statistics> [accessed 20 February 2018].

¹⁶³ Quoted in Ranjana Khanna, 'Disposability', *differences: Psychoanalysis and the Question of Social Change*, 20.1 (1 May 2009), 181–198. <<https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2008-021>> [accessed 28 November 2017], pp. 186–7.

¹⁶⁴ Gottlieb, p. 104.

¹⁶⁵ Dini, p. 152.

¹⁶⁶ Dini, p. 17.

two realities.¹⁶⁷ Waste studies also issues the imperative to seek and enact alternatives to our present culture (of consumption and disposability). Hawkins argues that we must critically examine our behaviour and that waste, with all its associated questions of value and worth, inclusion and exclusion, challenges us. In her view it has a 'transgressive power to disrupt boundaries that we take as "natural" [which] is a stark reminder of the political power of disturbance.'¹⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin considers destruction, as do some post-apocalyptic authors and dystopian scholars, as one way in which 'new relations to things and new insights' can be produced.¹⁶⁹ The argument goes that a system which is built on oppression and exploitation cannot be reformed into utopia: utopia can only come about after the wreckage. It is an argument for radical change, for the death of our system of neoliberal centrism which 'deserves to die, and [which sees] the jeremiads about its passing [as] overwhelmingly predicated on elitism and nostalgia.' It is not, however, an argument which presumes that 'whatever rises in the rubble is an improvement'.¹⁷⁰ Yet Hawkins does not call for destruction. Instead, she argues for change on a micro-level: change in attitude and everyday behaviours. Similarly, while 'The Broken Earth' trilogy, for example, is set in a post-apocalyptic scenario, it is primarily concerned with altering the reader's worldview and vision of the present, and 'the creative potential of change' (towards a better world) on a macro-level achieved through (both macro- and) micro-practices.

Moylan outlines the ways in which dystopias can conclude. Either the protagonist meets others who are resisting, and the resistance may be successful to varying degrees and in various ways. Or the protagonist fails alone, or makes the situation worse so that 'the best that can happen is a recognition of the integrity of the individual even when the hegemonic power coercively and ideologically closes in.'¹⁷¹ Moylan sees the latter as a conservative argument,

¹⁶⁷ Gottlieb, pp. 8-16.

¹⁶⁸ Hawkins, p. 48.

¹⁶⁹ Benjamin referenced in Hawkins, p. 130.

¹⁷⁰ Miéville, 'Strategy for Ruination', p. 186.

¹⁷¹ Moylan is writing here on the 20th century. Claeys updates this: 'By the twenty-first century, however, projections in this linear form are rare.' Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, p. 495.

an anti-utopian argument for the status quo, as it posits that there is no alternative or potential for positive change.¹⁷² I believe that new materialism, specifically Bennett's thinking on vibrant matter, can be of use here. Just as seeing 'waste as dead objects throws up few possibilities', so too does framing wasted worlds as inevitable inhibit us from resisting the wasting of the world. Re-coding, re-framing, cognitively estranging ourselves from our known world and assumed norms of attitude and behaviour means that things can become actants, 'full of promise', and wasted worlds can become sites of potential, 'full of the possibilities' of alternatives.¹⁷³ 'Rather than thinking of the movement toward social change in terms of autonomy, ego enrichment, or a self-contained subject,' Ranjana Khanna advocates instead that we '[stress] the moments of vulnerability of the subject' which she sees as being deeply implicated, both psychoanalytically and sociologically, with waste and waste matter.¹⁷⁴ Waste scholars argue against a binary approach to waste, urging us instead towards integration, an active relationship in which self and waste 'are implicated in each other.'¹⁷⁵ I quote here, at length, Richard Slaughter, who captures what I hope to explore in my selected dystopian, wasted world fictions:

a viable future for humankind cannot be created on the ruins of the industrial age. We should not therefore uncritically carry over existing cultural commitments from this era to the next [but rather] let go of some earlier commitments and consciously take up others. We need grounded visions, designs if you will, of a world that has experienced a recovery of vision, meaning and purpose; one that has moved beyond the disastrous conceits of industrialism – particularly the obsession with material growth, the subjugation of nature and the marginalisation of non-Western cultures. Such a world is likely to be fundamentally a post-materialist one which embraces stewardship and the needs of future generations. Intrinsic value would become more dominant than use-, or exchange value.¹⁷⁶

There are, then, many ways in which dystopian fiction lends itself to a waste studies reading and vice versa. Seeing dystopian literature as a reflection of contemporary society,

¹⁷² Moylan, p. xiii.

¹⁷³ Hawkins, p. 75.

¹⁷⁴ Khanna, p. 196.

¹⁷⁵ Hawkins, p. 41.

¹⁷⁶ Richard A. Slaughter, 'Futures Beyond Dystopia,' *Futures*, 30.10 (1998), pp. 1000-1.

rather than a place distanced enough from it 'to generate the cognitive estrangement upon which SF's political potential hinges', Mark Bould proposes that modern dystopian fiction has been 'reduced to a spectacular commodity, to obscene surface [...] on narrative, thematic, and affective levels, [and] again through its very form as a commodity' to be consumed and discarded.¹⁷⁷ As concepts, waste and dystopia are fluid and plural; both are concerned with value systems and the impact these have on relationships between self and other, between subject and object, between states and their subjects, between people and environment. Both are concerned with the conceptualisation, production and disposal of waste, whether that be in the form of things, people, peoples or ideologies, as well as ways in which we can challenge the status quo of this conceptualisation, production and disposal.

¹⁷⁷ Bould, 'Dulltopia', pp. 194-5.

Writing Rubbish: Rubbish Writing

In the summer of 2019, I proposed a paper to a Discard Studies conference at New York University. Daunted by the prominence of the organisers in the field of waste theory, I had been anxious that my proposal should meet – and indeed exceed – academic convention, standards, artifice. I stuck to an orthodox proposal of secondary literature: ‘this paper will undertake an analysis of x and y texts using the framework of discard studies, speaking to the conference themes.’ Because of this, I believed the organisers when they cited the reason for rejection as an inundation of proposals, rather than an issue with ‘quality’, and my ego was not bruised. But I was very aware of my preoccupation with quality: how I conceived of it, how I have internalised historical and cultural value-systems, stratification and snobbery, as well as how I project this outward, and how these conceptualisations have impacted my work – the criteria I set out to fulfil, the risks I am willing or unwilling to take. The irony here is that waste theory aims to highlight, question, and trouble our structural processes of creating and destroying value. What a wasted opportunity, I felt, what a missing of the point, to be so entangled with veneration and imposter syndrome that I did not offer something more radical, something contaminated, something *disruptive*.

From this realisation came a small existential crisis. Until that point, my entire thesis had been the same as the paper proposal. This was only in part due to my anxiety with proving my scholarship worthy: largely it was because the remit was the same. Undertaking a PhD within the English Department of a university, receiving funding from a government body, this thesis must discuss certain books using a certain framework. These are the bare bones of it, and they cannot be changed. But I started to wonder, going into my final year, what value or worth a thesis could have which preached one thing and practiced its opposite. I read Jane Bennett and Donna Haraway and fell in love with them because they talk about flattening hierarchies, about the importance of inclusivity and permeability; and yet it takes weeks to read and wrap one’s head around a single chapter. They are philosophers and scholars, and in order to discuss their complex ideas they need to use difficult, often technical, language.

Yet still, I think, there is a dissonance between what they say and how they say it. And I feared that this dissonance was in my work too.

Over the course of my final year, I started to pay attention to scholarship that was knowledgeable and insightful and important but also, crucially, easy to be with, easy to understand, to access. Arundhati Roy, Audre Lorde and bell hooks are good example of this, as are Afrofuturist and Australian Indigenous scholars like Ytasha L. Womack and Anita Heiss whose work I encountered while writing my second and third chapters. I was also deeply affected by the way in which Disability scholars disseminate their work. Aware of how diverse the human experience is, they underscore accessibility on multiple levels, taking into consideration physiological impairments such as blindness and deafness and conditions which exacerbate levels of fatigue, for example, as well as neurodivergences such as autism, dyslexia, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Both in written work and organising work they create holding yet breathable spaces for thinking-feeling-learning-being. Common throughout these various fields of scholarship – disability justice, Indigenous scholarship, new materialism, anarcho-feminism, Afrofuturism – is an emphasis on alternatives to worldviews which are entrenched in Enlightenment beliefs: the rejection of a Cartesian split, of Human separate from Nature (or, to follow Jason Moore, the web of life), of rationality separate from emotion, of the West separate from the Rest. These scholars write about complex issues with clarity and empathy, but most strikingly, they marry form and function. They say that there is no divorcing *how* we know from *what* we know. Indeed, the primary texts themselves demand a cognitive shift: not only in the political sense that dystopia has traditionally exuded, but also shifting into thinking emotionally, corporeally, spiritually.

Such ways of thinking are contagious. Having come into contact with this storytelling and scholarship, my thinking and my writing began to mutate towards something less concerned with satisfying and upholding the academy and more concerned with opening it up. I wanted my writing to be as accessible, as challenging to clear-cut boundaries, as full of potential, and as injudicious in its entanglements as waste is. And so, I set about to rubbish my work. The most obvious and easiest step was to rummage in my laptop's 'trash' for the off-

cuts from my editing process. I set myself a limit, in the same way that a bin bag comes with a maximum capacity, of space that this rubbish could fill. You will find at the end of every chapter a one-page jumble of discards; I invite you to dumpster-dive. I want to draw attention to personal and societal wasting practices: mine, yours, ours. I want the reader to consider where 'away' is when we throw things away; what used up and scrapped and forgotten things constitute any finished, chosen product; how radically charged with potential these discards are. Mixed in with the crisp packets and soiled sanitary pads there are broken mugs which can be glued back together, envelopes which can be recycled if the cellophane window is removed. Useful things can be found if you only dig a little, if you look askance with an eye to *maybe...*

But this is also an effort to challenge the prioritising of use-value, to say that we are indoctrinated to think, always think, in terms of valuation. Whether these trash-can offerings are any worse or any more a waste of time than the crafted, intentional chapters which proceed them may well be debatable. There is, perhaps, a danger of reductivism in flattening our systems of valuation, so that everything ceases to lose meaning: rather, I want to re-evaluate our evaluations, so that we do not take for 'natural' what we consider 'normal'. Perhaps the experience of reading this thesis is that of having wasted precious time, and the fact that I have added in extra pockets of junk is only adding insult to injury. Or perhaps, taken together, the selected and deselected, reselected, material can shed light on the processes we engage in which create and destroy value, and can hint us forward into more open, ethical, tenacious, entangled, flattened pathways of thinking about and being with ourselves, our societies, our discards, our material things. The project of researching and writing this thesis has done so for me, as I discuss in my conclusion.

Yet another idea was to challenge the prioritising of text itself, of words even. I began to wonder about other methods of communicating, and how it would be possible to speak *viscerally*. Influenced heavily by a visit to the Wellcome Collection's exhibition entitled 'Dirt: the filthy life of everyday reality' displayed during the spring and summer of 2011, I

contemplated constructing and including scratch-and-sniff panels to accompany my writing.¹ Another concept was to allow the primary texts to decide the material on which my analysis of them was written: bark for *The Slynx*, an encoded SD card for *The Living*, stone slabs for 'The Broken Earth' trilogy, an oral rendition for *The Swan Book*, pesticide-laced banana leaf or cotton pulp paper for *Animal's People* and *Swarga*. Ultimately, these ideas proved to be large projects in themselves and have, for the moment anyway, been binned. Instead, I chose to contaminate my academic writing by personalising it. With a nod to reader-response theory, I include 'I' and 'you' to entangle us both – writer and reader as complex, feeling beings with all our histories and contexts and fears and hopes – in the works written about, and in the making of this work.

¹ I also owe thanks here to my colleague Jan Uprichard at Ulster University for sharing fascinating insights into the philosophy and practicalities of smell and smellscape.

Chapter 1. Post-Soviet:

Mutation and the immaterial in Tatyana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* and Anna Starobinets' *The Living*

Introduction

Waste studies interrogates our concepts and constructions of value. It does not ignore or deny the negative aspects or effects of discarded things. Indeed, it is a vital field of research in large part because it draws urgent attention to the ruinous processes of production, consumption and disposal which are employed on a global level and scale. Single-use plastic, for example, is now synonymous with leaching, dead marine life, and contaminated food chains; commodity fetishism uses finite resources to produce mountains of unwanted no-longer-possession, and sees the workers who produced them buried under collapsed factories.¹ Waste studies does not seek to transform the negative to positive, although it looks at processes where this is enacted: this is the role of waste management, rag-pickers, artists, up-cyclists, muckrakers, mushrooms, trees and worms. Waste studies is more concerned with interrogating the boundaries between negative and positive, destruction and creation, value and worthlessness. It insists on the potential of all things to be all things. It works to nuance established readings and understandings of literatures and cultures. It is, therefore, a pertinent methodology to use in approaching dystopian texts. In this chapter we will see how two Russian novels, *The Living* (Anna Starobinets, 2011) and *The Slynx* (Tatyana Tolstaya, 2003), speak to and about waste and wasting. Although grouped together here because of their common national origins, their coupling works well to speak about various aspects of our changed and changing global world, our fluctuating value systems. In other words, the discussion in this chapter does not stem from the authors' shared political, cultural, and literary

¹ One is reminded of the catastrophic collapse of a textile factory in Dhaka used by many and varied western clothing brands: 'Bangladesh factory collapse toll passes 1,000' *BBC News*, 10 May 2013
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22476774>> [accessed 1 October 2018].

heritage, but rather from the corroborating and contradictory, multifaceted ways in which they figure rubbish, ruined landscapes, discarded cultures, mutation and hybridity, othering and fear of the other, systemic wasting of people, relationships and hopes. Previous scholarship on pre- and post- Soviet dystopia has focused on the specificity of Russia, including its relationship with and depiction in the West. Though I will draw on this pertinent scholarship, this chapter takes a different approach, side-stepping slightly the iron curtain and remainders of it, that border between us and them, to draw from the homogeneity of discards, to focus instead on the material and the universal.

Yet these texts *were* chosen deliberately because of their origin. While I think it problematic and prescriptive to over-emphasise the link between author, identity and the cultural conditions of a text's birth, I have set out in this project to consider works by writers who have lived experiences in and of dystopian places and nightmare societies. Incongruous, yet fitting – waste studies collapses dichotomies while simultaneously, in a deconstructionist vein, insists on them: not an 'either/or', but a 'both/and'. The authors and environments from which these texts come are both important and unimportant, informative and uninformative, exceptional and ordinary, dystopian and utopian. Both texts utilise the classic conventions of the dystopian genre, yet, as we shall see in this chapter, they also complicate and advance the standard 'strategy of warning'.

Selected texts

The Slynx, Tatyana Tolstaya, 2003

Written over a fourteen-year period in which Gorbachev's reforms gave way to Yeltsin's capitalism followed by Putin's reign, *The Slynx* spans a time of significant political and cultural shifting. Tolstaya gives the year 1986 as the novel's start date: in January 1986 Gorbachev announced a 15-year plan for denuclearisation; in April that year a reactor in Chernobyl's nuclear power plant exploded, releasing its radioactive material into the air and land. Set in Moscow two hundred years after a nuclear 'Blast', *The Slynx* is pervaded by themes of mutation, radiation, destruction, and intellectual and cultural regression. Furthermore, it

allegorically considers, from the Russian (layperson's) perspective, the meaning of Fukuyama's contention that the collapse of the Soviet Union signalled 'the end of history'. By mutating language, physical bodies and interpersonal relationships, Tolstaya explores what happens to the people and practices discarded by such an ending: and, indeed, whether discarding something really means the end of it. Furthering this, Boris Noordenbos highlights that

the phrase "we didn't have time to catch our breath" evokes everyday talk about the overwhelming impact of sociopolitical transition in the post-Soviet era. The remark "we lived better back then," in turn, calls to mind the popular nostalgic discourse about "the good old days" of the socialist past.²

Tolstaya frustrates and problematises conceptualisations of worth by featuring mutant humans ('*Golubchiks*'); indentured, crossblood human-non-humans ('Degenerators'); toxic food staples ('worrums', 'firelings'); banned, irradiated books (read: knowledge); bastardised language; social interactions reduced to extreme yet normalised physical violence (particularly prevalent in gender relations); an ignorant and superstitious people; and a tyrant presiding over a corrupt class system. Such features make *The Slynx* profoundly unsettling: it is a place where waste is speaking back. Throughout the novel, Tolstaya questions the devaluation of a history, a language, a world, a culture, and individuals – and in so doing, allows space for re-valuation. Although she may ask questions, any answers she provides are partial, multifaceted, and uneasy.

The plot follows Benedikt, protagonist and intermittent narrator, from his beginnings as an everyman, a *Golubchik* working as a 'Scribe', employed by the state to transcribe official decrees and propaganda, to a position amongst the elite KGB-style 'Saniturions' through his marriage to Olenka, the beautiful daughter of Head Saniturion Kudeyar Kudeyarich. Ultimately, he is seduced by the easy-living and free access to 'Oldener' books (those printed before the Blast) which this elevated position offers him, and, in order to secure and expand

² Boris Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature and the Search for a Russian Identity*, Studies in European Culture and History (Amsterdam: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 50.

it, aids Kudeyar Kudeyarich in orchestrating a governmental coup against 'The Greatest Murza' Fyodor Kuzmich, Glorybe. Indeed, Fyodor Kuzmich consolidated his power by plagiarising the knowledge and language found in 'Oldenprint books', those written and printed before the Blast, and utilising the Saniturations to violently control their presence and circulation in the public sphere.

The Living, Anna Starobinets, 2011

Another dystopian novel set three hundred years after global catastrophe, *The Living* features technological advancement rather than regression. Published ten years after *The Slynx*, it is a product of a market-economy Russia.³ Unlike Tolstaya who, in *The Slynx*, voices (vestiges of Cold-War) concerns about the relationship between Russia and The West, Starobinets creates a dystopian Russia indistinguishable from any other part of a globalised world. As Mattias Ågren highlights, the post-Soviet dystopian genre has, generally,

been modified in ways which can be seen to be responding to social and political changes on a global scale. The waning power of the nation state, in particular, and its broken monopoly as the bearer of social projects marks a new context, which is not shared by the classic works of the genre.⁴

In interviews Starobinets has said that she feels herself part of a world composed more of an international citizenry than entrenched in the uniqueness of a Russian national identity: 'The borders have long been open—world literature is accessible and, in the end, we all have one internet.'⁵ Indeed, *The Living* centres around an internet system, 'socio', which connects all citizens via a slot implanted in the brain.

The population is fixed (at three billion) with each citizen allotted a number, or 'incode', which is assigned to a new foetus after each 'Pause', the state-mandated death of all bodies upon reaching middle age. The concept and construction of self, then, is disembodied and

³ Julian Cooper, 'The Russian economy twenty years after the end of the socialist economic system', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 4.1 (2013), 55-64 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2012.07.002>> [accessed 1 October 2018].

⁴ Mattias Ågren, *Phantoms of a Future Past: A Study of Contemporary Russian Anti-Utopian Novels* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2014), p. 4.

⁵ Anna Starobinets quoted in Elizabeth Kiem, 'Anna Starobinets', *The Morning News*, 30 July 2012 <<https://themorningnews.org/article/anna-starobinets>> [accessed 1 October 2018].

dematerialised. All public, professional, and private life is conducted through the 'socio' system, and so rights and subjectivity are dependent on access to it. Following the protagonist Zero, the first person to be born without an 'incode', *The Living* explores how society creates and treats 'surplus' humans. Denied access to 'socio' for fear admitting him could, like a virus, contaminate the system, Zero is forced to live entirely in 'first layer', the material world. Physically, he is also isolated: housed in a juvenile detention centre, or 'House of Correction' until, with the help of genius hacker and fellow 'correctee' Cracker, he escapes by faking his own (eternal) death.

As with Benedikt in *The Slynx*, Zero finds himself manipulated and used by a powerful, older, male figure, already seated within the establishment, to support a coup. As part of a council member's manoeuvre to subvert the reigning ideologies, traditions, and social policies of the Living, Zero is instated as a member of the elite leadership. Ultimately, a second apocalypse takes place in which Zero has the opportunity to destroy entirely the system ('the monster' of the Living), but chooses instead to reinstate it. Following classic dystopian fiction, the text ends with the failure and disillusionment of the protagonist, and the sense that the worsening of the world will repeat ad infinitum. It draws on and exaggerates elements of both spheres of influence: capitalist consumerism and reification, communist collectivism and eusociality, and rejects them both. Dystopia is a call to change, not a blueprint for that change. Accordingly, Starobinets does not offer an alternative, but she makes clear that the status quo must be challenged.

'Russia! Everything gets twisted up in knots'⁶

Descending from Zamyatin's foundational text *We*, the Soviet dystopia features two 'genre defining' aspects:

⁶ Tatyana Tolstaya, *The Slynx*, trans. by Jamey Gambrell (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), p. 211.

firstly, it [is] monolithic and [has] one – and only one – officially sanctioned utopian vision; and secondly, its raison d'être [lies] in the promises of a better future, where one either [shares] this utopian vision or not, since there [can] be no intermediate position.⁷

However, as Ågren goes on to argue, and as I will expand on below, any clear definition of the dialogic utopian/dystopian genre established by More, Bacon, Butler, Zamyatin, Orwell and Huxley has since been blurred. It is a genre which works heuristically to achieve cognitive estrangement, a shifting in how we view our present reality and how we envision a better one. Ågren claims that what we find in post-Soviet dystopias is 'displacement in time/space', the '[dystopian] reading of texts through direct or allusion to predecessors in the genre'⁸ and with reference to lived history. Noordenbos highlights that the socio-political setting of *The Slynx*

is presented as a recycling of myriad elements of twentieth-century totalitarianism [...] which [...] add up to a portrayal of Russian history (and its future) as a series of revolutions that repeatedly fail to live up to their promise to shock the country forward on its path toward modernity.⁹

The Living can also be seen as a muddling and re-using of previous (centralised, autocratic) regimes, social identities and values, along with 21st century experiences of Cyberspace. Combining this with Erika Gottlieb's criteria of dystopia, we can see how both *The Living* and *The Slynx* work within and contribute to the genre.

1. *Miscarriage of justice*

One component of the dystopian tradition is a 'conspiracy of the elite against their own people'.¹⁰ Gottlieb identifies the dystopian trend of the state providing immortality to the individual through relocating the concept of self from the individual into the wider project of the state. Starobinets amplifies this by refiguring what is meant by immortality. The state has eradicated death: it wields power because it has established itself as divine provider of eternal life by holding the infrastructure which recycles self into new bodies. In a world which asserts

⁷ Ågren, *Phantoms of a Future Past*, p. 149.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature*, p. 54.

¹⁰ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopia East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (Montreal: Mc-Gill-Queens UP, 2001), p. 10.

that 'self' is fixed and repeated in new bodies, positions of inequalities are entrenched and compounded: the state assured right of immortality is here exposed as a cynical system of keeping control rather than the benevolent act of ensuring individual or social welfare. The dystopian elements are also drawn from the terrors of late. 'Socio' is a system which pushes consumption and commodifies everything. It is an opt-out service from which nobody can opt-out: activity on 'socio' is mandatory, unavoidable advertisements intrude on both the narrative and characters' mindscapes, all public and private life is conducted through this programme. The system has complete hegemony of both the entertainment and information that is disseminated among users, and, unsurprisingly, monitors users' emails and chats. In one instance the state engages in a phishing expedition, allowing a dissident to have a public voice (online) in order bait and hook any users replying with sympathetic comments. In the following passage a doctor writes an open letter exposing the practice of carrying out abortions on women in early stages of pregnancy, concealing both pregnancy and abortion from the mothers, and, crucially, not having equipment to 'reanimate' (reassign) the incode of the terminated foetus, or that of the mother if she 'temporarily ceases to exist' due to blood loss:

I have recently been having more and more doubts about whether the wise Council is aware of the unlawful acts currently being carried out in ordinary, run of the mill centres like mine by SPO [intelligence] officers hiding behind the 'law'.¹¹

The state bases its power on its ability to provide eternal life to its subjects: the number of bodies is limited because the number of incodes/subjects is limited. Towards the end of the novel, however, the equilibrium of birth and death has spiralled out of control, and so the state must take extreme measures to regain control. It cannot allow subjects to question its metanarrative of a fixed population: death cannot be permanent.

Although a less sophisticated apparatus, the 'lawlessness of the law' is equally apparent in *The Slynx*. In a passage describing how Benedikt murders a *Golubchik* during his first Saniturion mission to confiscate books he describes the retributive law as practiced between *Golubchiks*:

¹¹ Anna Starobinets, *The Living*, trans. by James Rand (London: Hesperus Press, 2012), p. 348.

You get him, he gets you, and you're quits. A bruise here, a sprain there – the usual. And before hitting a Golubchik you have to get yourself worked up against him, store up a gloomy weight in your heart. The bruises or sprains balance out the gloominess like weights on scales: goods on one side, weights on the other. Then you belt him one – *and it's justified*. But he'd never even met this Golubchik, the one he'd crushed.¹²

When he acts as a Sanituron, a state sanctioned law enforcement officer, he understands that he is carrying out the law (books are banned), but instinctually knows that he has perpetrated a crime against the murdered *Golubchik*: 'Benedikt choked on his tears. He wailed softly, delicately'.¹³

This lawlessness of the law does not become apparent to the protagonists through a trial, as was the custom in 20th century dystopia,¹⁴ but instead as they ascend the ranks of authority within the state. In so doing they become complicit in the injustice, embracing the hypocrisy of the elite – their power to live antithetically to their governing rules and dominant ideology. Benedikt's motivation for participating in a coup is entirely based on his pursuit of access to Oldener books, yet he immediately '[puts] aside his emancipatory ideals'¹⁵ and decrees that books will remain banned to the general populace, whereas the new cache discovered during the coup will remain available solely to him. Likewise, in *The Living*, Cracker enables Zero's escape so that he can 'destroy the Monster': instead of dismantling the technology, Zero is willingly put to work maintaining the system, to which he is still denied access, and maintaining the metanarrative of the elite by executing 'familials'¹⁶ while living as one himself. As is the case with Benedikt, Zero's position within the elite offers him, and the reader, an insight into the workings of the unjust state. His psychological deterioration demonstrates the effect of his own duplicity, but further, it demonstrates the duplicity of the dystopian state.

¹² Tolstaya, *The Slynx*, p. 198. Emphasis mine.

¹³ Tolstaya, p. 198.

¹⁴ Gottlieb, *Dystopia East and West*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁵ Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature*, p. 61.

¹⁶ Those who live within a nuclear family.

2. *Barbaric state religion*

Gottlieb marks how a dominant state ideology is crucial in dystopian fiction, and how it is cemented through processes of public ritual. While this continues to be true, by the end of the 20th century the ways in which rituals were depicted in dystopian literature had changed:

The information society, where the creation, distribution, use, integration (and manipulation) of information are significant economic, political and cultural activities, has ritualistic aspects which are made manifest primarily through the digital media. In an increasingly commercialized society, it could be argued, commodification and consumption acquire a ritual dimension as paths to happiness[.]¹⁷

Although Benedikt's obsession with Oldener books is an extreme example of how *Golubchiks* consume booklets, the implication is that any *Golubchik* put in his position would pursue the acquisition of books with as much violent fervour and absolute belief that books (or The Book) can teach us how to live the good life. As Noordenbos puts it, Tolstaya has in *The Slynx* 'examined Russians' unhealthy faith in the written word' through Benedikt's obsession with books.¹⁸ In much the same way, the people of *The Living* ritualistically consume bodies, not solely because it is state ordered, but because they have a deep and genuine faith in the state's ideology. For example, Zero's mother participates in reproductive and self-sacrificing death festivals despite having an official exemption: 'My medical certificate allows me to take precautions, but it does not absolve me of my duty to the Living.'¹⁹

In keeping with the genre tradition, both texts feature the ritual of human sacrifice by the state: this includes the repression of dissenting voices as well as the creation and persecution of scapegoat groups. The protagonist experiences a loss of control in the face of an unknowable force, demonstrating that ritual sacrifice 'cannot be understood through reason, but it becomes clear there is a peculiar logic of a mythical, ritualistic way of thinking'.²⁰ Drawing on folkloric conventions, Tolstaya depicts ritual as intimately connected to health, both of individual bodies and of the (very loosely collated) public body, which typically insists

¹⁷ Ågren, pp. 32-3.

¹⁸ Noordenbos, p. 61.

¹⁹ Starobinets, *The Living*, p. 20.

²⁰ Gottlieb, pp. 10-11.

on placing boundaries between Self and Other.²¹ For example, describing the differences between 'Illness' and 'Consequence' Benedikt, using language imbued with superstition, asserts that:

Sometimes the hiccups get ahold of you – but that's not Illness, God forbid, God forbid. If the hiccups get you, you say three times:

Hiccup, Hiccup,
Go see Jacob,
From Jacob to John,
From John on and on.

They'll go away [...] That isn't Illness. [...] Varvara Lukinishna also has an affliction: [...] Only one eye, not a hair on her head, and cockscombs growing all over it [...] But that's not Illness either, God forbid, God forbid. It's a Consequence. She's a nice woman all the same[.]²²

This fear of 'Illness', opposed to the acceptance of 'Consequences', is rooted in the state reaction to it: *Golubchiks* with Illness are disappeared by the Sanitutions, so that warding off Illness is equated with warding off the state police.

Nevertheless, the significance of Consequences should not be understated. Take, for example, Vasiuk the Earful who has:

so many ears you can't count them: on his head, and under his head, and on his knees, and behind his knees, and even in his boots. All kinds: big, little, round, long, and just plain holes, and pink pipes, and something like smooth slits, with hair[.]²³

Again, this may also function as a commentary on the KGB's surveillance apparatus – indeed, Vasiuk is a known eavesdropper, and Benedikt fears he will overhear an illicit, 'Freethinking' conversation he has with Varvara. But it is also illuminating to dwell on the materiality of this. The description of this man is horrific and distressing, evoking in the reader a mixture of disgust and pity; the characters in the novel, however, accept these mutations as a normal part of life. They bully Variuk by 'stick[ing] a piece of bone or a rusht butt or some other kind of rubbish in

²¹ See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2002), and further, Julia Kristeva's response to Douglas in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 65-75.

²² Tolstaya, pp. 28-9.

²³ Tolstaya, p. 29.

one of his ears',²⁴ but physical violence is so normalised that this is a standard social interaction. In other words, Vasiuk is not bullied because of his embodied abnormalities, but because he is a *Golubchik*, a person (as evidenced by his abnormalities). Mutation and hybridisation are the norm: cats have human hands, Degenerators are humans half-turned into pack animals, Benedikt has the atavistic trait of a tail. Certainly, this society is stratified along lines of class and gender, and there is seemingly a collective standard of beauty. But there is, at the same time, a general acceptance of physical difference and oddity, and this works to flatten hierarchies. Vasiuk is no less a *Golubchik* than Varvara or Benedikt. By combining radioactive mutation with fairy-tale traits of transformation and anthropomorphic nonhumans, Tolstaya challenges concepts of human, of Otherness, and of societal acceptance, both insisting on boundaries and at the same time blurring distinction into redundancy. Indeed, the only clearly defined, persecuted scapegoat group are the *Cocynorks*, and only because they live in a separate encampment within the town.

More conventionally, *The Living* figures poor people, mentally disabled people, and criminals as its Others, with the human-non-human dimension played out in the virtual space, and by drawing on termite eusociality to envision the dystopian/utopian society. The societal structure in *The Living* prioritises the community over the individual: nations have been dissolved into a global community, children are separated from parents and raised together as common property of the Living, monogamous relationships are prohibited. The state's metanarrative is that everyone is equal, yet the distinctions of class, gender and ability are very much entrenched:

They're not planning on correcting anyone here. They don't let us read letters from early predecessors so we don't go mad. Because all our predecessors rotted away in Houses of Correction. All of them, get it? I was here before the pause and I'll come back here after [...] There's no escape from this place[.]²⁵

²⁴ Tolstaya, p. 29.

²⁵ Starobinets, p. 90.

An incode who dies as a criminal is born with a stain on their record, condemned to perpetually be a criminal. An incode born in a poor area will be re-embodied in the same area, thus poverty, as with criminality, is an endless reiteration which supports the systemic ordering of accepted/rejected, pure/dangerous, external/internal.²⁶

3. *Destruction of private worlds*

In the dystopian tradition we see the state employ two main strategies for creating uncritical obedience in the populace. Firstly, through the spreading of propaganda and indoctrination. Often, as in *The Living*, this is achieved through electronic means, although it can be done through censorship and the control of print media as in *The Slynx*; and secondly, through policies which prohibit the forming of any private bonds and loyalties. In these ways the demarcation line between the public and the private spheres is blurred out of existence, so that the private self is implicated in the state and vice versa. Tolstaya comments on the cyclical nature of Russian politics by featuring an individual despot as a representative of the tyrannical state. Yet she creates a society so regressed that sophisticated mechanisms of control are not necessary; power is held and wielded by the state through the Saniturions, but what comes across more strongly in *The Slynx* is the extent to which an individual deteriorates in a society where 'brotherhood, love, beauty. Justice. Mutual respect. Lofty aspirations' are replaced with 'brawls and altercations', when 'the fire of love for one's fellow man [does not] burn in the soul.'²⁷ The wasting of the individual is linked with the wasting of the social contract.

Outlining the evolution of state power, Zygmunt Bauman marks how the necessity of the state hinged on the populace depending on it for the provision of rights and welfare. As the Russian state has moved from socialism to deregulation and free market economy, the state has withdrawn from this social role and so 'must now seek other, non-economic varieties

²⁶ See Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, chps. 1, 7, 9.

²⁷ Tolstaya, p. 128.

of vulnerability and uncertainty on which to rest [their] legitimacy'.²⁸ Regarding the way this is represented in literary genre, Tom Moylan explains:

in the dystopian turn of the closing decades of the twentieth century, the power of the authoritarian state gives way to the more pervasive tyranny of the corporation. Everyday life in the new dystopias is still observed, ruled, and controlled; but it is also reified, exploited, and commodified[.]²⁹

Indeed, we can see this pattern, manifested in contrasting ways, in both selected texts. While the state's power in *The Living* is well consolidated through its control of the mandated network 'socio', the intrusions in the characters' mindscapes, and therefore the narrative, come from commercial sources. Mirroring ways in which targeted advertisements function in our own reality, Starobinets alludes to the debates around internet access being a state-enshrined right, and the buying and selling of personal data, as well as the blank-cheque we as individuals grant when we (are forced to) agree to cookie policies. Of course, as Martin O'Brien outlines, there has long been a history of industry and state working together to enforce policies that ensure and/or increase commercial profit, regardless of the effect those policies have on society.³⁰ In *The Living*, Starobinets extends this to figure state and business as indistinguishable: for example, 'autodoctors', functioning like apps built in to everyday living, constantly monitor citizens and advise, unsolicited, on diagnoses and treatments – which usually require citizens to make purchases. Indeed, throughout the text we see the intrusion of the system onto the mindscapes of characters wired into 'socio', to advertise and seek profit, as much as to threaten and exert control. Both state and business are intimately, cerebrally connected to the individual, and individuals likewise connected to each other so that Self both is and is not located individually, is also a communal and commercial entity.

4. *Record of the past*

²⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 52.

²⁹ Tom Moylan, "'The moment is here ... and it's important": State, Agency, And Dystopia in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Antarctica* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Telling*', *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. by Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 135–6.

³⁰ See Martin O'Brien, *A Crisis of Waste? Understanding the Rubbish Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

Particularly pertinent to waste studies is the vital importance dystopia places on memory: dystopian fiction proposes that the mental wellbeing of a society is dependent on access to records of the past. In the dystopias of Orwell and Atwood, for example, the dystopian state destroys or withholds historical records, forcing and enforcing a nightmare society; in Miller Jr.'s and Hoban's societies these records are lost due to environmental disaster.³¹ At the same time, the anxieties we feel around waste are rooted in the fact that our discards are the record of a past we would rather forget, the spectre of that past come to haunt us. Both selected texts follow the traditional route of figuring these records as literature (including letters and diaries written before the dystopian era): *The Living* is written in epistolary form, accentuating the metanarrative emphasis on passing forward to new generations of Self the record of past generations. As we shall see, this emphasis on the psychological Self contributes to the wasting of the physical Self by including human bodies as serial, fetishized goods.

While *The Slynx* places great emphasis on the censorship of literary books, oral memory keeping is also important. 'Oldeners', those born before the Blast, are fated to live forever in the morphed remnants of contemporary civilisation, knowing that Fyodor Kuzmich did not invent the wheel, for example, or write Pushkin's poetry. They are unable to convince *Golubchiks* of this, however, or influence human progress in any significant way. For the most part, they are uninterested in passing knowledge on to the next generation, and therefore contribute to the degradation and wasting of civilization. The exception is Nikita Ivanich, who employs 'the act of memory [as] an act of resistance against a totalitarian state with its insistence on changing history',³² or in this case *recycling* history. Despite the resistance and irreverence with which *Golubchiks* treat his efforts, Nikita Ivanich commissions Benedikt to carve a statue of Pushkin, and erects signs on streets with their Moscow names: 'I want to

³¹ Gottlieb, p. 12.

³² Gottlieb, p. 104.

keep memory alive. As long as I'm breathing [...] and I'm planning on living forever, as you can see, I want to make my contribution to the restoration and rebirth of culture'.³³

5. *What -topia?*

The dialogue between utopia and dystopia asks that we consider how utopian promises are 'abused, betrayed, or ironically, fulfilled so as to create tragic consequences for humanity'.³⁴ *The Living*, very noticeably following Zamyatin's concern about technological progress, and presenting a clear utopian metanarrative, allows readers to take stock of the social media they use, and the drive for ever more integrated systems of information technology.³⁵ It speaks to contemporary concerns about the mis/use of our data by online companies, as well as exemplifying Foucauldian concepts of systems of power.³⁶ Comparatively, *The Slynx* asks 'what happens to the dialogue in a dialogic genre when [having had to refigure time and space after "the end of history"]', there is nothing to conduct a dialogue with?³⁷ On the utopian spectrum, with utopia being the most idealistic world and dystopia the least, both texts fall into the latter category. It is easy to recognise the nightmare elements of *The Slynx*, yet there are also elements in it which speak to the good life: there is a flattening of the human-non-human hierarchy, there is a return to the material world so advocated for in *The Living*, there is the quest, albeit unfulfilled, for comradeship and self-actualisation. Likewise in *The Living* we can see how the abandonment of 'first layer' leads to its wasting, but also how outcasts can make use of these wastelands. We can see the beneficial potential of 'luxury mode', a virtual space in which dreams can be realised.

³³ Tolstaya, p. 24.

³⁴ Gottlieb, pp. 8-9.

³⁵ For more on the tension expressed in *We* see Darko Suvin, 'The Utopian Tradition of Russian Science Fiction', *The Modern Language Review*, 66.1 (January 1971), 139-159 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3722475>> [accessed 17 November 2017] p. 148.

³⁶ See the Foucauldian reading of Chadwick's sewer systems as a means of controlling the public, and, equally, as a means for marginalised people to demand rights granted by the state in Hawkins, *Ethics of Waste* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 45-70.

³⁷ Ågren, p. 42.

6. *Strategy of warning*

Perhaps the most quintessential element of dystopian writing, and what sets it so crucially apart from anti-utopia, is that it is intended as a call to action: dystopia criticises 'specific aberrations in our own present social-political system by pointing out their potentially monstrous consequences in the future'.³⁸ Traditionally, the whole utopian genre has relied on the idea of future time, with the future being a space in which the anticipated betterment has been achieved, while the dystopian sub-genre uses it to show the actualisation of a nightmare society. A juxtaposition of *The Living* and *The Slynx* is especially interesting in this context because, while both are set a few hundred years after their publication dates, they root the cause of the wasted future in oppositional ways: the former sees it as technological progression, the latter, both challenging and enforcing our understanding of linear progress, figures it as regression. Gottlieb notes that in order for dystopia's strategy of warning to be effective, there must be an emotional distance between the reader and the protagonist.³⁹ We feel frustrated and dejected that Benedikt and Zero do not and cannot achieve any positive change in their dystopian societies, yet we recognise that the dystopian worlds they live in can only produce wasted people, and that these are created by our in/action in the present. The responsibility for the tragedies to which the protagonists are subjected lies, ultimately, with us.

The central message of all dystopia, then, irrespective of how it is envisioned, is that once the nightmare society puts down roots it is nearly impossible to pull them out, so that the emphasis is on us to prevent such roots taking hold in the first place. Both selected texts follow the tendency in dystopian fiction to suggest that the only hope of bettering the world is to pull it down and build again. Waste studies, on the other hand, challenges value systems by considering the radical potential in all things, no matter how abject – often, indeed, *because* they are abject.⁴⁰ With such an insistence that the abject is always available for transformation, waste studies opens up new ways of reading dystopian worlds. Both written and set after the

³⁸ Gottlieb, p. 13.

³⁹ Gottlieb, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, chp. 1, 3.

world was damaged (by the Chernobyl disaster, feudalism and authoritarianism, the Cold War, 'the Blast'), *The Slynx* does not ask how the past could have been lived differently, but rather what potential there is in engaging differently with the consequent toxicity in the present. *The Living*, written after the rise of social media – its ubiquity, our dependence on it, the power and profit of data as seen, for example, in the Cambridge Analytica scandal – and the commodification of the self, also complicates the warning it issues. The colonised, colonising digital world is a worrying trend, but in Cracker's hacking and hijacking, re-purposing and re-claiming, we can see the resistance to such systems of wasting, and the implication that, if we are clever and creative enough, we can disrupt the system – we can even possibly, eventually, topple it. Through a waste studies reading, both texts make possible new ways of thinking about how we conceptualise past, present, and future: certainly, they exhort us to re/consider and attempt to alter how we are in the present, but beyond that, they hint at ways in which we can dumpster-dive and salvage from the ruins. Indeed, read in such a way, they suggest that it is only *after* the wasting of idealised utopian promises into dystopian nightmares that there is the potential for more inclusive, fluctuating, achievable and multifaceted eutopias.

Mutation

'await misfortune! Furry stars, a bad harvest'⁴¹

Environmental conservationism, or human management of the 'natural' world, is often argued as necessary in order to counterbalance the destruction caused by the behaviour of certain humans.⁴² Despite this, or perhaps because of it, we are fascinated by how the earth would look and function were we to disappear (see, for example, the popularity of the TV documentary series 'Life After People', or the non-fiction book *The World Without Us*). The Chernobyl exclusion zone offers a real-world example of what happens in the absence of humans to lands which were once inhabited, altered, and, indeed, wasted by us. While there has been much research into the effects of radiation on the contaminated areas, there are

⁴¹ Tolstaya, p. 223.

⁴² Melissa McDaniel and others, 'Conservation', *National Geographic Society*, 26 August 2011
<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/conservation/> [accessed 1 October 2018].

various interests and agendas funding and publicising these studies, including nuclear and anti-nuclear energy lobbies, the Soviet and succeeding national governments, as well as numerous international governments. The findings, then, are conflicting. In 2000 the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) issued a report which insisted that there was no accredited evidence proving the disaster had had a long-term impact on increasing birth defects, human mortality, or cases of cancer.⁴³ This lack of accredited evidence does not necessitate that no causal link exists, but rather that the evidence has not been collected and/or is not verifiable. The Soviet state was notoriously secretive about the incident, and present-day health record keeping is in no better condition, albeit for different reasons. It is also worth noting here the existence of the European Committee on Radiation Risk (ECRR), an ‘unofficial’ body of scientists publishing studies insisting on Chernobyl’s harmful effect on multiple and various aspects of human, animal, and plant health.⁴⁴ The official findings, as outlined in the UNSCEAR report, are that the psychological, economic and cultural impact of the meltdown, and the poor handling of it by authorities at all levels, was detrimental to human health.⁴⁵ The state’s silence created an information vacuum which proved fertile ground for rumours, falsehoods and fear to thrive. Chernobyl teaches us that in the absence of humans (and the presence of radionuclides) nature is allowed to flourish (and, perhaps, mutate). More broadly, it teaches us that in the absence of trusted authorities issuing scientific facts, populations form opinions and behaviour according to inaccurate second-hand rumours: suicide rates among liquidators were high in

⁴³ Excepting the epidemic of thyroid cancer in children, which may be partially attributed to ‘[i]nadequate distribution of potassium iodide/ iodate tablets for preventative thyroid blocking of radioiodines’ in Mati Rahu, ‘Health effects of the Chernobyl accident: fears, rumours and the truth’, *European Journal of Cancer*, 39.3, p. 297. See also V. Saenko and others, ‘The Chernobyl Accident and its Consequences’, *Clinical Oncology* 23 (2011), p. 240.

⁴⁴ see *Chernobyl: 20 Years On*, ed. by C.C. Busby & A.V. Yablokov, (Aberystwyth: Green Audit Press, 2006).

⁴⁵ Rahu, ‘Health effects of the Chernobyl accident’, p. 297; see also Nicholas A. Beresford and David Copplestone, ‘Effects of ionizing radiation on wildlife: What knowledge have we gained between the Chernobyl and Fukushima accidents?’, *Integrated Environmental Assessment and Management*, 7.3 (2011), 371-373 <<https://doi.org/10.1002/ieam.238>> [accessed 1 October, 2018].

the following years, birth rates dropped as locals feared fetus abnormalities. Tolstaya parallels this in *The Slynx*, fictionally elaborating on the mutation of reality caused by such absences. As readers recognising in the novel the characteristic cognitive estrangement of (environmental) post-apocalyptic fiction and folktales alike, we are primed to suspend credulity. In the opening passages we accept that rabbits ‘flitted from treetop to treetop’⁴⁶ fairly easily: it is abnormal, it indicates we are in a strange world, but as the narrative voice frequently slips from an omniscient third person into that of Benedikt we lose confidence in distinguishing between the reality of this new world and the superstitions held by its ill-informed characters. Is it true that these flying rabbits cannot be eaten unless ‘[you] [g]ive the meat a good soaking, bring it to boil seven times, set it in the sun for a week or two, then steam it in the oven’?⁴⁷ We are sceptical: the nonchalant vagueness of ‘a week or two’ is so at odds with the specificity of boiling the meat seven times. But this advice is given with such assuredness that it is clear characters live their lives by these beliefs: having sound knowledge of food preparation is vital in such a hazardous world, and this knowledge is folklore.⁴⁸

Abstraction

‘However deep you go, don’t lose sight of the surface’⁴⁹

The Slynx considers a world and a people abandoned to the workings of radiation, yet it is in *The Living*, a novel which makes no allusion to nuclear holocaust, where wasting through abandonment is a key focus. The shifting from ‘first layer’ to ‘socio’ has resulted in the deterioration of buildings and urban spaces constructed before the apocalypse. Moreover, it has caused the deterioration of human interest in and interaction with the material world, resulting in essential, produced goods being neither functional nor aesthetic. Physical things bring no pleasure, have no purpose, and therefore no value. This privileging of cerebral

⁴⁶ Tolstaya, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ The link between religious food rules and systems of order, purity and defilement are well documented and discussed by Douglas, and following from her, Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 75-6 & 95-7.

⁴⁹ Starobinets, p. 217.

experience over material things can be traced throughout western philosophical thought back to Aristotle and Plato. John Scanlan draws the link between sophisticated ‘technologies of expulsion’ and abstract ways of thinking: once humanity moved from throwing excrement out of windows to state-provided invisible sewer systems, we no longer had to confront decay, and by extension, time, embodiment, death, rejection.⁵⁰ The abandonment of the material world in *The Living* is merely a continuation of this.

The novel features several physical ‘wasteland[s]’,⁵¹ including depopulated residential tower blocks, an empty zoo, a looted shopping mall, and a rusted amusement park. For example:

Megalopolis [...] is one of those hideous abandoned malls which are listed in the ‘to be demolished’ column in the local office of Plan for a More Beautiful World, but still never get demolished because they’re located in uninhabited districts and no one gets round to it. [...] At one time activists from the movement ‘Memorial’ wanted to turn shopping centres like this into museums of antiquity and run tours to them as part of the ‘Let’s Go for a Walk in First Layer’ initiative and show people what commerce looked like before *socio*[.]⁵²

The spaces here are left standing and left derelict because they are the unthreatening waste of this world, invisible and insignificant.⁵³ It is waste which humans are capable, even content, to ignore and live alongside. It is also in these waste(d) spaces where waste(d) humans go to take refuge: *Megalopolis* is available for reinterpretation. While the only tenuous value it holds for the wider society is in its curiosity as a relic, it offers sanctuary to those who are themselves considered relics – not in the holy and exalted sense of the word, but in the embarrassing and outmoded sense. It is where Matthew, an elderly ‘madman’⁵⁴ chooses to hide from pursuing SPO officers as he resists the decommissioning of his body. This custom of continually recycling Self into new, disposable bodies reifies the individual, mirroring consumer culture’s trends of seriality and ‘the cult of the new, which deny the fact of death at the same time as

⁵⁰ John Scanlan, *On Garbage* (London: Reaktion, 2005), pp. 122-124.

⁵¹ Starobinets, p. 189.

⁵² Starobinets, p. 131.

⁵³ See Hawkins’ distinction between valueless things and those things negatively valued, and her discussion of Thompson’s categories of object value, *Ethics of Waste*, pp. 76-78.

⁵⁴ Starobinets. p. 223.

they fuel destruction.⁵⁵ Society in *The Living* has abandoned the idea that the physical human body is distinct from any other physical object, and instead accepted it as something which comes in different models, each with an expiration date independent of functionality or sentimentality. In his discussion on the creation of waste, Scanlan discusses how

The planned obsolescence of certain consumables will render them superfluous prior to any actual or obvious material degradation. When this occurs objects come to represent imperfection simply in virtue of the fact that by contrast with some new or improved version they fail to match up to the latest vision of perfection.⁵⁶

Human bodies in the text are thrown away as frequently and casually as consumers in contemporary developed societies discard mobile phones (another body which acts as a portal, a tool for engaging with the 'outside' world, and a housing of Self).⁵⁷

Given the equivalence of body with object, it is unsurprising that such negligence is extended towards materiality in general:

[Zero] could never cure her of this stupid habit of throwing rubbish on the floor and then going to sleep in the exact same place. 'So what? Everyone does it.' [...] She didn't even bother to understand why he was so annoyed by this lack of respect for first layer. For his layer.⁵⁸

Littering here is not considered a degradation of the social contract, an affront to the public body emblematic of disregard for society, environment, and Self as it for the reader.⁵⁹ Indeed, rubbish, being material in a world where any concern with materiality has been discarded, does not hold power to disturb and disgust anyone other than Zero. Littering also features in *The Slynx*, where Tolstaya plays with this concept to complicate our perception of orderliness and usefulness. How can littering be a display of moral degradation in a setting where everything is degraded? Benedikt purposefully sweeps crumbs into the floorboard cracks to

⁵⁵ Hawkins, p. 129.

⁵⁶ Scanlan, *Garbage*, p. 37.

⁵⁷ For more on the significance of mobile phones as both material and more-than-material things, see Tom Fisher's 'The death and life of plastic surfaces: Mobile phones', *Accumulation: The material politics of plastic*, ed. by Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins and Mike Michael (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 107-120.

⁵⁸ Starobinets, p. 365.

⁵⁹ See Hawkins, *Ethics of Waste*, pp. 28-35.

act as bait for mice, which he can then eat, skin for fur, and use to barter for provisions which, in a parody of cyclical economy, will eventually become crumbs once more.⁶⁰ In both texts the society is simply doing what all societies must do with material waste in order to function, which is to tap into its potential. Benedikt's use of breadcrumbs as mice bait echoes our historic and current practices of turning waste materials into revenues of profit.⁶¹ Cleo's readiness to sleep in her discards challenges a value system which says that furniture and rubbish are really so different without following the thought through to the conclusion that all furniture contains within it the future of being rubbish, and all rubbish contains within it the possibility of being valuable.

The Living also features landscapes materially wasted by the *mis*-use of human attention. Unlike *Megalopolis* which has fallen into ruin through disuse, the 'roboslums' are squalid and brutal precisely *because* they are lived in. Specifically, because they are lived in by 'robots', who are doomed to the material degradation of 'first layer':

In filth, in delirium, on the bare earth or on the polyethylene-cardboard floor, [...] slaves to blind instinct not knowing what they are doing, they mate and in pain do they bring forth children.

Someone comes diving out of a heap of dirty boxes and rags right at my feet. He strikes his forehead against the toe of my boot, rolls onto his back and lies there, looking up at me with festering eyes and arms wagging tiredly[.]⁶²

The unsanitary living conditions and continual (sexual and reproductive) use are both cause and consequence of the rubbishing of the human body and societal attitudes towards it. Being embodied without recourse through 'socio' to living cerebrally means living 'not knowing what [one is] doing'; it means being a 'slave'.

In contrast to the roboslums, the residential complex which houses the ruling class elite is depicted as a large, airy space. For all the attention given to the abandonment of 'first layer', Starobinets does not focus her world-building on explanations of material reality: how can there be luxurious dwellings, or even simply habitable ones, without people attending to

⁶⁰ Tolstaya, pp. 80-91.

⁶¹ See Martin O'Brien, *A Crisis of Waste?* pp. 23-28 & 71-74; and Hawkins, *Ethics of Waste*, pp. 98-107.

⁶² Starobinets, p. 191; 190.

building and repairing, cleaning and disposing of waste? How are food and essential goods produced unless some people are involved in agriculture and production? An obvious answer might be full automation, yet Starobinets only mentions mechanised labour in the form of ineffective 'electronic cleaners' (machines shaped as women and dressed in bikinis) in a feminist parody of the role of women as domestic servants and sexual objects (even while they are cleaning). She offers instead human characters who, as their job requires, experience the material world in an intimate way. Mentioned only briefly, these jobs are undertaken by the few robots who are able to maintain cognition and concentration in 'first layer':

if you can hold first layer, you can take up a useful and necessary profession. For instance, you could become a toilet cleaner or bin man, or go to work at the filling station or take dung from the farm or skin the corpses.⁶³

Mirroring the current real trends in abstraction from the material world and heightened senses of purity, this quotation provides a key in understanding the repugnance characters feel towards 'first layer'. Waste, here manifesting variously as shit, rubbish, and carcasses, is unsettling because it connotes mortality. 'First layer' is the place where things die: it is 'the domain of death, the domain of the mortal.'⁶⁴ Individual death may have been eradicated through the continuation of 'Self' uploaded into successive bodies, but these uploads still rely on the physical body (and the physical 'socio slots' or microchips): they cannot escape the material, and only increase their fear of it through their attempts to escape it.

Even when forced to experience life materially, citizens try to insulate themselves as much as possible. Physical sex is mandatory, although usually reserved for 'The Festival of Assisting Nature', which safeguards the continuation of the populace by ensuring they continue to conceive. Sex in 'first layer' is an impersonal and indiscriminate act: using a single-use, skin-tight, latex suit covering the entire body excepting the genitals, participants maintain the purity and boundaries of Self. Likewise, we see the use and anxiety to use 'non-contact gloves' to avoid directly touching another person's body in a variety of situations ranging from

⁶³ Starobinets, p. 191.

⁶⁴ Starobinets, p. 67.

contact between strangers to contact between a mother and her sick baby. Yet Starobinets extends this type of wasting beyond the material world. *The Living* also features abandoned landscapes in VR – specifically in the ‘luxury mode’ of ‘socio’ where sexual desire is satisfied cerebrally. Luxury mode enables users to construct any world and enact any fantasy they can imagine, both individually and with others participating. Starobinets describes VR intercourse between two characters in which one, suspecting the other has seduced him in order to gather clandestine information, puts the other through a trial by abandoning her for a thousand days in what she terms ‘the Wastes of Solitude’. This is a space which can take on various forms: ‘[n]ormally it’s something like an abandoned building site or warehouses in some wasteland. Bits of stones, the rusted skeletons of cars, concrete blocks... Solitude.’⁶⁵ Unlike the *Megalopolis* shopping centre, this wasteland has no redemptive potential for re-use or re-purpose, despite the infinite options made possible by ‘luxury mode’:

There’s nowhere for me to go, nothing to think about and no one to talk to. I can’t invite any of my other real friends to visit me in the Wastes – Ef only likes *luxury* for two, and group *acts* are blocked in his settings. Sometimes I *create* phantom friends for myself in the Wastes. [...] They always end up somehow flat and boring, with indistinct narrow faces [...] They give voice to my thoughts with my words, they seem to me like hungry ghosts, heralds of my madness. I cancel them and wait for Ef. I’m powerless.⁶⁶

This sadistic use of ‘luxury mode’ draws on the broken promises of our real world Internet Age, demonstrating the corruption of utopian dreams. At the dawn of this age, Cyberspace was figured as a new frontier. Indeed, in ‘A Declaration for the Independence of Cyberspace’, John Perry Barlow proclaims Cyberspace to be ‘the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you [governments] seek to impose on us.’⁶⁷ Echoing this, Cees J. Hamelink outlines how Cyberspace’s promise of global advancement and betterment through democratising access to information and knowledge, increasing connectivity, communication, creativity, and civic engagement, was (and is) complicated and

⁶⁵ Starobinets, p. 60.

⁶⁶ Ibid. Italics in original

⁶⁷ Quoted in Cees J. Hamelink, *The Ethics of Cyberspace* (London; SAGE Publications, 2000), p. ix.

corrupted by powerful actors for their own ends. But on an individualistic note he highlights that '[a]ll the immoralities of physical life occur in virtual reality: censorship, lust for power, treason, stalking, lying, gossiping, peeping, stealing, cheating, seducing, breaking promises, insulting, and being unfaithful, unreliable, uncivilised or abusive.'⁶⁸ Juxtaposed with another sex scene in luxury mode, in which sex is depicted as an animalistic yet tender experience which connects people and enriches their lives, the scene quoted above reads as even more damaging and corrupt. Additionally, as the motivations of both characters (to spy and to catch/punish a spy) are unclear at this point in the narrative, the Wastes passages read like a description of toxic relationships: an abandonment of human decency, and a deterioration of the bonds of personal loyalty.

Food and books

'Mice are our mainstay'⁶⁹

Conversely, the populace in *The Slynx* is completely engaged with the material world; without recourse to agricultural industry *Golubchiks* catch their own food, brew their own alcohol, build and tend their own homes, weave their own cloth and run an economy based on barter and trade. While there is a currency of 'chits', paid by a state-run apparatus to those like Benedikt with white collar jobs, this is not a living wage. Most people rely on subsistence living. The significance of food in the novel is unsurprising given the combination of Russia's experience of famine in the first half of the 20th century, and the scarcity of choice in the second half, with the emphasis placed on Russian cuisine in the great literature of the 19th century. Tolstaya's treatment of food brings together the superstitions and everyday hardships of acquiring and preparing it with the glorification and nostalgia of it, to both affirm and subvert the connection between Russian national identity and diet. Dill, for example, is continually denigrated as a 'weed', and is not used in cooking. More striking, however, are the worms and mice which constitute the staples consumed by the populace: 'Worrums are blind, stupid. You

⁶⁸ Hamelink, *Ethics of Cyberspace*, p. 33.

⁶⁹ Tolstaya, p. 208.

can catch a couple dozen, put 'em on a stick, dry 'em out, and then pound 'em into a powder. They're so salty! The best flavouring for mouse soup.'⁷⁰ Nikita Ivanich connects the lack of nutrition and radiation of such a diet with the society's cognitive degradation. In a passage which describes the superstitious logic leading *Golubchiks* to destroy the only chicken to produce edible eggs, Nikita Ivanich is distraught and angry. The reader shares his frustration. But through this destruction, coupled with the spells they cast over the coup to ward off the curse, the *Golubchiks* have ensured there will be no more abnormal chickens: they have mitigated what they perceived as a threat, avoiding contamination and degradation of their flocks. *The Slynx* continually offers us examples of *Golubchik* folklore – a knowledge which limits progress and embeds their way of life, but which enables them to make sense of and live in a mutated world. We both do and do not believe the rituals actually work: 'it is not a false belief but rather [... it shows that] ritual acts are not simply about practical efficacy and manipulating future events, but involve imposing a sense of just order on the world.'⁷¹ Radiation reduces life's possibilities, superstition sets protocol which enables reclamation.

This is not to say that Tolstaya is unconcerned with abstraction. Where *The Living* points to digitisation as culprit, *The Slynx* looks to books. As with food, the fixation on books throughout the novel can be seen as rooted in the Soviet experience (of censorship, exile, and the enforced prescriptions of Socialist Realism). But, as with food, Tolstaya's treatment of books both cements and challenges dominant narratives of books as gatekeepers of knowledge, and therefore power, as well as the control exerted by gatekeepers (in publishing and in political spheres) in constructing narratives by which worldviews are formed and reinforced.

There are three categories of book in *The Slynx*: 'The Book', a mythical and holy book which Benedikt seeks in order to learn 'how to live, where to go, where to guide the heart'; Oldener books, those written and printed before the Blast; and booklets, which are

⁷⁰ Tolstaya, p. 32.

⁷¹ Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Pádraig Belton (London: Macat Int., 2017), p. 39.

transcriptions of Oldener books, work carried out by Scribes and content attributed entirely to the leader, Fyodor Kuzmich. These distinctions are important from a waste studies perspective for the hierarchy they form, the emphasis they place on materiality and its connection to dirt/iness, and the fluctuations in attitude and values Benedikt experiences regarding them.

Materially, booklets are rudimental objects, crudely produced with ink on bark. Nevertheless, their production supplies an income to workers, and, like mice, they are an essential part of the barter economy. Their content is also a crude rendition of a pure source material: booklets reflect a literature existing out of context, they are Oldener books recycled into degraded material. Again, Tolstaya complicates this wasting by figuring booklets as essential to *Golubchiks*' wellbeing: 'That's what they say about booklets: food for the soul. And it's true: you start reading and your belly doesn't growl as much.'⁷² Oldener books, on the other hand, are feared – only partly for their supposed radioactive danger, mostly because the illegal possession of an Oldener book results in 'treatment' by the Sanitoriuns. With the threat of the Sanitoriuns removed, the value and regard Benedikt places on booklets is subsumed to Oldener books: 'Reading something like that [a booklet] was like eating dirt and rocks. [...] It made him feel sick, he despised himself'.⁷³ It is a reverence which the reader is also positioned to feel, but again, Tolstaya challenges such a privileging. Benedikt, looking at a collection of Oldener books, concludes that books with worn-out pages and binding reflect poor-quality content. He equates use with dirtiness and disregard, not with veneration or popularity, and considers pristine, untouched books to be superior.⁷⁴ This flattening of literary hierarchies is seen in other places. For example, when Benedikt tries to systematise a library:

At first he arranged them by color: yellow books in this corner, red books in that corner. That wasn't quite right. Then he organized them by size: big ones over there, little ones over here. He didn't like that either. Why? Because every book said who wrote it on the cover. Jules Verne, for instance. He wrote a big brown book, and a little blue one. [...] They

⁷² Tolstaya, p. 74.

⁷³ Tolstaya, p. 240.

⁷⁴ Here, inverting the prestige, Koptiaeva is exalted above Chekhov: 'Take Anton Chekhov. His book was so worn! Seems he was all thumbs, a real loser. [...] Now Koptiaeva, you see, is a clean woman', Tolstaya, p. 180.

should be together. Then he tripped up: there are books called journals, and more than one Golubchik wrote in them [...]⁷⁵

The method of ordering books alphabetically (mirrored in Tolstaya's use of the Russian alphabet for chapter titles) is made to seem arbitrary by being thrown into relief alongside other arbitrary methods. Systems of order and classification are challenged: Benedikt cannot develop a Dewey Decimal system because, while he can notice a difference in the subjects addressed by books, he has no critical reasoning and so cannot distinguish them into different categories. When he boasts to Nikita Ivanich about having a book which 'teaches how to make freedom' it transpires that he is referring to *'Plaiting and Knitting Jackets'*, from which he quotes: 'When knitting the armhole we cast on two extra loops for freedom and movement.'⁷⁶ His struggle prompts us to question boundaries: is there really a difference between fiction and non-fiction, is Chekhov always and objectively brilliant, is the materiality of a book less significant than its contents? Indeed, freedom of movement is as important in a jumper as it is in a society.

Yet it is not only Benedikt who collapses our current hierarchies. The Oldeners, in their powerless efforts to restore their 'Lofty past',⁷⁷ take and treasure an instruction manual for a meat grinder in a tragi-comic funeral scene. What initially seems overwrought and farcical becomes ostensibly more significant and poignant: 'The time of the meat grinder will come. Though at present it may seem as mysterious as the secrets of the pyramids [...] it will rise before us, tangible and weighty'.⁷⁸ This return to a pre-Blast world, this journey to the land of Cockaigne, the garden of Eden, is utopian dreaming. It does, however, posit as utopia the 20th century luxury of being able to take domestic appliances for granted, challenging the idea of linear progress as much as the notion of the Soviet Union as a total dystopia.

⁷⁵ Tolstaya, p. 179. It is pertinent that Tolstaya chose Verne here: during his career, his commercial success and popularity (or 'trashiness') diminished his reputation as a writer of literary note and excluded him from the French Academy.

⁷⁶ Tolstaya, p. 213.

⁷⁷ Tolstaya, p. 119.

⁷⁸ Tolstaya, p. 121.

Conclusion

Waste, with its stench and contamination, with its broken, dirty provocation, with its insult to what is trending, is all that which is no longer wanted. But waste, with its radical potential for re-use, re-purpose, and reclamation, is also all that which has hope. It is a second chance: a second-hand store, a Dadaist's muse and medium, a home among the Pacific plastic soup, a shit among the worms being made into soil. Both verb and noun, passive and active, self and other, universal and specific, 'waste' can have multiple meanings. It can connote squandering, a lack of use (or resistance to use-putting) and non-achieved fulfilment of potential. It can connote over-use, the using-up of a thing's potential, the degradation of it until it can no longer fulfil its purpose (to waste away in old age, for example, or to become so inebriated that one *is* wasted).⁷⁹

In this chapter I have outlined ways in which *The Living* and *The Slynx* deal with waste and wasting. They conform to the conventions of classic dystopia, and in various ways they challenge and progress it. Of the two texts, *The Living* adheres more strongly to genre conventions, issuing a clear warning about the wasting of the material world through abstraction, the wasting of individuals and scapegoat groups through systemic ordering, and the dangers of allowing rampant capitalistic consumerism to colonise our ways of thinking and behaving, living and dying. Calling attention to our destructive processes, Starobinets portrays the nightmare society as inevitable should we fail to alter these. *The Slynx* also issues warnings about the nightmare future, yet even while satisfying this convention, Tolstaya contorts it by collapsing past, present and future, clear boundaries of Other, and normative understandings of worth. Reading these two texts together, and through a waste studies framework, allows for re-conceptualisation of the scope of the genre, the established understanding of what dystopia means, does, looks like.

⁷⁹ O'Brien, p. 5.

Trash Can

Old man Degenerator who can't stop coughing, won't run no matter how much you whip him → Nikita calls him out on it, telling him he should be ashamed and he is but for different reasons (not because it is inhumane, but because not having a fast steed shows how lowly he is in the family/society) p237 [Mieville quote on not being able to build utopia on the ruins of imperialist civs], but burning produces waste. Indeed, waste theory, in its challenging of value systems, argues that burning anything *is* a waste, as there is a radical potential in all things no matter how abject they are [even ashes though – O'Brien]. decay of the physical body: transcript for a crime show about old-livings p326-7 → shows the aging process in vivid images eg 'We see the brain "decomposing" in the skull...' fly out of the body and see the old-living again in the r. He is coughing violently. We realise that the tour we have just been on was through his body' 328 'Bread, peace and land': the ideological underpinning of the 1917 Revolution was that the autocratic system, which saw the labouring classes starving, conscripted, and powerless in land ownership and use, while the profits from their labour went to a minority few, was immoral and untenable. It believed that a more equitable social and economic system was possible and could be realised. With the end of the Cold War, the hegemony of twentieth century American capitalism seemed victorious – proclamations of the end of history ensued, along with the idea, in some quarters, that communism had failed – and would therefore always fail.⁸⁰ Countering this, those on the left often reiterate the assertion that communism has never really been tried, at least not in the Soviet Union. Sovietism, Stalinism, Khrushchev's consumerism [more history] are not communism. As for the slippage between communism and utopia, Susan Buck-Morss specifies that the collapse of the Soviet Union collapsed the idea of 'mass utopia', rather than utopia as a whole: the political regimes in both spheres of influence had the same "utopian dream that industrial modernity could and would provide happiness for the masses". 'What has happened subsequently [in imaginings of utopia] is that the individual has started to take precedence over the mass, and the economy has become increasingly separated from state politics.'⁸¹ Link here to energy recapture (through destruction)?

- The town is burnt down by Nikita 'we'll just have to make a new one'
Recycling (degrading materials) – Plagiarism

⁸⁰ This of course disregards examples of fledgling communist governments, like the Congo, Chile and Nicaragua, destroyed in their infancy through the intervention of profiteering powers in the Global North. It also disregards these powers strangling communist states such as Cuba, North Korea, and Venezuela, and their various, although partial, successes despite trade embargoes and heavy US funding of anti-communist groups.

⁸¹ Ågren, quoting Susan Buck-Morss, p16

Chapter 2. Post-Slavery:

Ruination and reclamation in N.K. Jemisin's 'The Broken Earth' Trilogy

Magnifying the marginalised

'All things change'¹

One of my aims in this project is to read narratives coming from marginalised peoples, to hear the voices of those who have deep, lived experience of dystopia. For the most part, this means studying works which have received little critical or popular attention in mainstream US-Eurocentric culture. The inclusion of N.K. Jemisin's 'Broken Earth' Trilogy in this project, then, requires some explanation. Each book in the trilogy won a Hugo award; *The Stone Sky* won, additionally, a Nebula and a Locus award (the previous two were nominated without winning). A television adaptation of the trilogy was announced shortly after the release of the third book. Jemisin has her own website, and her Twitter account is followed, at the time of writing, by 92,700 people. Alongside this popular success, she is lauded by literary critics. Below is a description of Jemisin written as an introduction to an interview between her and Jessica Hurley for an article in *ASAP/Journal*; it is representative of how most journal and newspaper articles speak about her:

N.K. Jemisin is one of the most inventive speculative fiction writers working today. Writing against the flattened social worlds that are typical of much canonical science fiction and fantasy, she creates fictional worlds that are alive to and structured by questions of race, gender, sexuality, and class to produce profound meditations on the nature of power, violence, resistance, and solidarity.²

Additionally, her works are increasingly featured in academic literary analyses. While these usually group her with Nnedi Okorafor and Nalo Hopkinson as the avant garde of (queer)

¹ N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (London: Orbit, 2015), p. 78. Subsequent references in footnotes as *FS*.

² Jessica Hurley, 'An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing: An Interview with N. K. Jemisin', *ASAP/Journal*, 3.3, <[doi:10.1353/asa.2018.0035](https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2018.0035)> [accessed 28 September 2019], p. 467.

Afrofuturism, Jemisin's lineage is the speculative imagining of Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia E. Butler. Her pedigree, her popularity, her commercial success and the reach of her novels indicate that Jemisin is a voice speaking and heard in the mainstream. Yet her work, for reasons outlined in the above quotation, is incredibly pertinent to this project.

As a woman of colour, her path to success was beset by systemic misogyny and racism. There have been, and indeed still are, extensive problems with white male dominance, both in authorship and readership, in the SF genre. Jemisin herself has written about the representation and creation of race in SF,³ and has been outspoken about the harassment and exclusion of writers of colour, black writers, queer writers and disabled writers within SF fandom's little boys' online clubs, especially where this directly affects awards results. It makes her success all the more satisfying, and all the more important: if the genre is shifting away from imagining only our status quo of patriarchy, violence and oppression, it is because of writers like her (and those among whom she is positioned). It is also important to note, as she does, how prescriptive and restrictive it is to tokenise non-white, non-male, non-hetero, non-western writers for the fulfilment of 'diversity'. She argues against the sequestering of African American works in separate sections of libraries, markets, target readerships, just as she (among other SF thinkers like Le Guin, adrienne maree brown, Donna Haraway) argues against the creation of and insistence on genre.⁴ I am conscious of my own selection of authors and rationale here, but I believe that in mainstreaming the marginalised Jemisin is achieving that to which this project aspires. As she puts it, '*In the future, as in the present, as in the past, black people will build many new worlds. This is true. I will make it so. And you will help me.*'⁵

³ N.K. Jemisin, 'Creating Races', *N.K.Jemisin.com* <<http://nkjemisin.com/2015/08/creating-races/>> [accessed 28 September 2019].

⁴ See Jasmine A. Moore's thesis chapter on 'Blending SF and Fantasy in N.K. Jemisin's *Fifth Season*', in 'Sankofa: Framing Afrofuturistic Dialectical Utopias in N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*, Nisi Shawl's *Everfair*, and Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti*', Master of Arts Thesis, (Huntsville: University of Alabama, 2018) pp. 12-34.

⁵ N.K. Jemisin, 'Dreaming Awake', *N.K.Jemisin.com* <<http://nkjemisin.com/2012/02/dreaming-awake/>> [accessed 28 September 2019], italics in original.

By refusing to give up the realms of speculative fiction to materially wealthy, politically and socially powerful white men she reclaims dystopia (and its opposite on the spectrum, utopia) for those against whom a nightmare world has been waged – and by whom a more just world is dreamed of. As Hurley outlines in the quotation above, ‘The Broken Earth’ trilogy considers ways in which oppressed and exploited peoples can resist and reclaim their humanity, it explores anthropogenic climate breakdown and ecology out of balance and posits alternative and competing visions for what might come after apocalypse. She imagines the apocalypse not as a singular event, or on a linear timeline, or as an ending: rather, she acknowledges what all subjugated peoples know – ‘the world has already ended [...and not...] for the first time.’⁶ Beyond playing thus with the concept of apocalypse, ‘The Broken Earth’ trilogy plays with the genre of apocalyptic fiction and the issues of valuing raised in fiction on the dystopian-utopian spectrum. In her essay ‘A War Without End’, Le Guin talks in broad strokes about the impulses and purposes of ‘imaginative’ (read speculative/science) fiction:

To me the important thing is not to offer any specific hope of betterment but, by offering an imagined but persuasive alternative reality, to dislodge my mind, and so the reader’s mind, from the lazy, timorous habit of thinking that the way we live now is the only way people can live. It is that inertia that allows the institutions of injustice to continue unquestioned.⁷

In this sense, Jemisin is working within the utopian tradition, which is in essence concerned with justice: she pushes us to question the value systems of our current institutions, the traditions on which they are built, and the limited presents and futures that they offer.

The creation and destruction of value is central to waste studies, which thinks in terms of abjection and rejection, remainders and reminders, lives and after-lives, and the power of the overused, unwanted and discarded to disrupt the status quo. In ‘The Broken Earth’ trilogy, the plot is concerned with systemic injustice – with peoples whose humanity has been stripped from them in order that they can be exploited; with the dangerous relics of dead civilizations come back to haunt us; with different versions/visions of a better world.

⁶ Jemisin, *FS*, p. 1.

⁷ Le Guin, ‘A War Without End’, *The Wave in the Mind* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2012).

Plot summary

'it's my duty to go with you. To write the tale of what happens – and if I survive, to make sure the world hears it.'⁸

The setting of 'the Stillness' allows Jemisin to explore the relationship between human and more-than-human, between living and dead, between dystopia and utopia, between society and environment, and between past, present and future. It is a physical world which is prone to extreme and devastating seismic and meteorological events called 'Fifth Seasons' – the vengeance of Father Earth for the extractivism of Syl Anagist, the Stillness' ancestral civilization. For this reason, societies in the Stillness tend to be small, protective, and function with a siege mentality. Communities, or 'comms', are arranged by 'use-caste', and are guided by 'stone lore', a set of practices passed down through generations to help comms prepare for and survive a Fifth Season. Society here is stratified in many and complicated ways, with race, class, caste, ableism, and gender intersecting the five major human(ish) groups. These groups are: 'stills', or humans as we would recognise them, the name drawing attention to their sole unquestioned right to subjectivity in the Stillness; tuners, a group 'decanted' from Niess lineage, an ancient peoples, who can perform sophisticated magic, or 'geoarchantry', by interacting with purpose-built obelisks; orogenes, known derogatorily as 'roggas', the subjugated descendants of tuners who carry the gene of orogeny, the magical ability to move and manipulate rock; Guardians, a state sanctioned group who have magical and official control over orogenes; and finally, stone eaters, humanoid figures made of stone with an array of magical abilities.

The trilogy initially places the reader in the midst of dystopia; at the opening of the first novel, Alabaster, a powerful orogene, deliberately triggers a Fifth Season, an apocalypse within the post-apocalypse – an apocalypse he hopes will bring an end to dystopia. The plot then follows three timelines, the story of orogene Damaya/Syenite/Essun as she struggles against the racism and enslavement to which she and her people are subjected, and later her

⁸ N. K. Jemisin, *The Stone Sky* (London; Orbit, 2017), p. 222. Subsequent references in footnotes as SS.

daughter Nassun, who hopes to finish the breaking that Alabaster started. Jemisin further charts intergenerational trauma by travelling backwards in time to the roots of dystopia, to Hoa/Houwha's group of tuners, before they are changed into stone eaters, as they learn the truth behind their origin and state appointed purpose: they learn the story of the Niess enslaved by Syl Anagist for their magic. Jemisin presents us with a story about how things – objects (man-made, organic and hybrid), identities, communities, power/s, dystopias – are valued and devalued, lost and found, created and destroyed.

Narration & narrator

'me, when I was I'⁹

Much is made of the narrative voice used in the trilogy. In *The Fifth Season* we follow three protagonists; Damaya and Syenites' stories are written in third person present tense, but Essun's is written in the second person present. When asked about this in interviews, and speaking of it on her blog, Jemisin links it to the player position familiar to gamers, claiming that, as a gamer herself, working in second person felt natural to her. But she stresses that her writing process is one of trying to find the right form for the content (or of keeping matter in place), saying,

I used second person because it felt right for the story. The impact I hoped for was simultaneously a sense of detachment that would replicate Essun's level of disassociation (I was trying to convey her PTSD) and a level of intimacy that second seems to handle well.¹⁰

Disassociation is often a necessary defence in response to trauma: it is, however, also the basis on which late capitalism perpetuates its cycle of consumption and disposal. Reading this narrative choice from a waste theory perspective then, it implies the disposability of Self: Damaya could be shed to don the new person of Syenite, who could in turn be discarded and replaced by Essun. In Starobinets' *The Living*, discussed in the previous chapter, we saw

⁹ SS, p. 1.

¹⁰ Jemisin speaking to Emily Temple, 'N.K. Jemisin on Craft, Advocacy, and Ignoring the Naysayers', *Literary Hub*, 1 September 2017 <<https://lithub.com/n-k-jemisin-on-craft-advocacy-and-ignoring-the-naysayers/>> [accessed 28 September 2019].

bodies being used and dumped while the 'Self' remained constant, simply by being uploaded, or re-used, in new bodies. Here we see an inversion of that: excepting the process of aging and the consequences of warring, the body remains the same, whereas the Self is abandoned when it is deemed broken beyond repair:

You're still trying to decide who to be. The self you've been lately doesn't make sense anymore; that woman died with Uche. She's not useful, unobtrusive as she is, quiet as she is, ordinary as she is. Not when such extraordinary things have happened.¹¹

What happened before does not matter. That was a different Schaffa. He has another chance now. And if being less than himself means being less than the monster that he was, he cannot regret it. [...] He heads for the ridge that overlooks the town, and stands there for the rest of the night grinding his teeth and trying to forget the last of who he was and promising himself a better future.¹²

A name, a personality, a self, these function like fast fashion: they are wearable and 'useful' signifiers of an individuality, as well as position in society (each person has a given name, a 'use-caste' name, and a 'comm name'). But they come with a limited lifespan. 'Essun' and 'Schaffa' must be cast aside when the environment, or trend, for which they are suited has expired. The fashion industry releases new styles quarterly, a marketing ploy which is effective, as Scanlan outlines, because it mimics the natural seasonal cycles which have determined the rhythm (and indeed, in an agriculturally based society, the continuation) of our lives.¹³ However, 'seasons' in fashion are out of sync with the solar year; as seasonal lines are released ahead of time, our understanding of 'natural time' (in the northern hemisphere, four distinct and predictable seasons) is dislocated and accelerated in capitalism's pursuit of profit. Seasonal dislocation is also happening, again as a consequence of rampant extractive capitalism, as global temperatures rise and phenological mismatch compounds into climate feedback loops. In the Stillness, the earth, given personhood as a living entity in itself, takes revenge for the limitless greed of humans by inflicting a Fifth Season, a period in which our notions of 'natural' are collapsed. And it is in the Fifth Season that Essun and Schaffa must

¹¹ Jemisin, *FS*, p. 42.

¹² N.K. Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate* (London; Orbit, 2016), p. 180. Subsequent references in footnotes as OG.

¹³ Scanlan, *On Garbage* (London; Reaktion, 2005), pp. 126-130.

reckon with their past Selves, when the parts of themselves which they have discarded can no longer be left half-buried, denied or ignored. The toxicity of trauma from the past leaks into the present and demands attention: 'Death is the Fifth [season] and master of all'.

Self, then, shares with waste the liminal space of disposability and potentiality. It is also, like waste, plural: 'After all, a person is herself, and others.'¹⁴ While the narration is omniscient, it is not impartial. Multiple voices speak throughout, so that we hear variously the child voices of Damaya, and in the later novels her daughter Nassun; the causticness of Syenite; the battered rage and grief of Essun; the affection and indulgence of Hoa. This acts to further our attachment to them as individuals, and to see them as distinct people – discovering that they are the same woman (filtered through Hoa's rendition) is, initially, a jarring experience; like Douglas' dirt, it disturbs our assumptions, forcing us to think consciously about the norms we take for granted – it feels like matter out of place. But as the trilogy progresses and the disturbance settles into acclimatisation and acceptance, we see the intention of this disjunct and reattachment. Jemisin is careful to iterate and emphasise that Essun is 'not used to having a life follow [her] when [she] leave[s] it behind',¹⁵ but that none of us can be without our past:

So much of your past keeps coming back to haunt you. You can never forget where you came from, because it won't rusting *let* you. But maybe Ykka's got the right of it. You can reject these dregs of your old self and pretend that nothing and no one else matters... or you can embrace them. Reclaim them for what they're worth, and grow stronger as a whole.¹⁶

If the narrative voice implies disposability, it is done so in order to subvert and reject the notion that a Self, a person, is a disposable thing. By the third book Essun/Syenite/Damaya, and indeed Hoa/Houwha, have turned back to their past lives, endeavouring to scavenge the ruins of these for anything 'worth' keeping, for anything that will 'grow' again. The language here is

¹⁴ Jemisin, *OG*, p. 1.

¹⁵ *FS*, p. 401.

¹⁶ Jemisin, *SS*, p. 128.

the language of waste: 'haunt,' 'rust,' 'reject,' 'dregs.' But it is also the language of utopian action: 'embrace,' '*reclaim*.'

In *The Stone Sky*, the third in the trilogy, a 'lorist' travels with Essun to record for posterity the story of how she ended the Seasons by bringing the moon back into 'Father Earth's' orbit. Here we are reminded of Jemisin's choice of narration: she has chosen not to tell the story from the perspective of the lorist, as an (oral) epic, but rather to present it, as we discover in *The Obelisk Gate*, as Hoa recounting the story of Essun's life to her/us. It is, therefore, a story not only of reclamation (of Self, of rights, of human survival, of the moon), but also a reclaimed story; a personal history forgotten and now being relearned. In the materialist analogy of Human as Thing, it is the salvage and restoration of something deemed valuable. It also points to the potential of waste: an object can, in its life, and pre- and post-lives, be many different things with different uses, figurations of value, and characteristics.

Reminiscent of the ways in which Octavia Butler explores adaptation and exchange in her *Xenogenesis* series, and of the ways in which Lynn Margulis explores evolution as mutation, or 'being by living together', in her work on symbiogenesis,¹⁷ Damaya/Syenite/Essun have the possibility of forming or framing Self in alternative ways depending on what is required by the situation, by who else is around them. On the larger, societal scale this woman, as an orogene, is part of a race which is not classified as human, and which can therefore be justifiably exploited, abused, and trashed. 'The Broken Earth' trilogy insists on the inherent value of such people, not (only) because they are inherently necessary for human survival in a geologically volatile world, but because, where life is concerned, value is inherent. As outlined in the methodology chapter, a central aim of waste theory is to highlight the fluctuating and complicated ways in which value is created and destroyed: waste is, in its simplest definition, something which is not or no longer valued. If the value of a thing is not inherent then the valuing of human, which both historically and in Jemisin's trilogy is interchangeable with thing, cannot be either.

¹⁷ Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (Amherst: Basic Books, 1998).

New materialism works to decentre humanity, to highlight the vitality in nonhumans (objects) as well as in humans (subjects). There is a critique here, that we should put our efforts into seeking equality between subjects, rather than seeking to elevate objects. Jane Bennett's response to this highlights that new (or 'vital') materialism does not endeavour to make the human (or post-human) worth less, but acknowledges that it is by keeping narrow and limited the criteria for what we allow to have subjectivity, and therefore the right to life, that we commit ecological breakdown, mass extinction, and, by extension, perpetuate inequality among humans.

Each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter. If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. [...] Vital materialism would thus set up a kind of safety net for those humans who are now, in a world where Kantian morality is the standard, routinely made to suffer because they do not conform to a particular (Euro-America, bourgeois, theocentric, or other) model of personhood.¹⁸

Furthering this along racial lines, Kathryn Yusoff remarks:

If the first stake at redressing [the Anthropocene] is to call for the disruption of the connotative powers of language – the exchangeability between human and thing, subject and matter – then the second is to follow this suspension with an orientation that acknowledges the afterlife of this disruption as an ongoing struggle of reorientation in valuing black life[.]¹⁹

Chattel slavery, as practiced in the United States, saw black life 'exchanged for and as gold';²⁰ black bodies were resources to be mined and exploited. In her multifaceted allegory of subjugated races Jemisin works to reorient our thinking around the subjectivity of things and the valuation of black life.

¹⁸ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, pp. 11 – 12.

¹⁹ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 7.

²⁰ Yusoff, *Black Anthropocenes*, p. 5.

Ain't I a human?

'Should I take your word for it? Or listen to what I feel myself to be?'²¹

Racial differentiation is marked in the trilogy by skin colour, hair, facial and physical features, language and customs, clothing and body adornment practices. Emphasis is repeatedly put on the ethno-centralising of the Sanzed people, descendants of a warrior race defined by their dark skin, 'ashblow hair', and a genetic predisposition to having large, muscular bodies. In the Stillness a person's worth, whether for caste purposes or for beauty, 'is measured by their standard deviations from the Sanzed mean.' Jemisin here ties a person's usefulness to their genetic adaptation to environment, mimicking the bio-determinism which has historically been used to justify racially informed atrocities.²² The superiority this gives the Sanzed over other races, such as 'Westcoasters', 'Eastercoasters', and 'Arctics', is reinforced through an interwoven militaristic and cultural dominance. Take, for example, the practice of filing teeth into points, a practice that harks back to 'the Season of Teeth', a post-apocalyptic period in which the Sanzed cannibalised 'lesser races' out of necessity, but which continued as a delicacy, as a marker of cultural superiority, in times of abundance.²³

Race, including racial breeding, mixing and segregation, exists in the Stillness in the same ways as it has and does in our world, except that our bias is toward a white standard rather than a black one. This type of inverted racial hierarchy and valuation has been used by other authors to play out profound and painful discussions about how racial classifications determine a person's humanity.²⁴ Jemisin's exploration of race, however, is more challenging than simple inversion: even though 'races and nations haven't been important for a long time [because communities/comms] of purpose and diverse specialization are more efficient [...]

²¹ OG, p. 282.

²² Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: the world of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, (Chicago; Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), pp. 29-38. She cites as examples the Tuskegee experiment, and Henrietta Lacks (HeLa cells).

²³ Jemisin, SS p. 142; p. 112.

²⁴ See for example Malorie Blackman's 'Noughts and Crosses' series (2001-2019), Steven Barnes' *Lion's Blood* (2002) and *Zulu Heart* (2003), and Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2009).

No comm wants roggas'.²⁵ In other words: society is stratified along racial lines determined by skin colour and somatic characteristics, yet orogeny, an invisible racial marker, supersedes skin in determining a person's desirability, worth, and indeed humanity. Explaining the impetus behind creating a world in which certain groups of people are figured as inhuman, Jemisin says it was a means for her to 'process [the] systemic racism' in which she lives:

One of the ways in which the orogenes were kept in line was that they were told repeatedly that if you act right, if you are respectable enough, then you won't be hurt. And it's a lie. It's always a lie when you hear that kind of thing, because being respectable didn't stop Skip Gates from being arrested for trying to get into his own home and so forth. So, that was me processing real world events.²⁶

By illustrating the processes of injustice which are used to trash orogenes, and by aligning us so intimately with this group of people, Jemisin is able to acknowledge, and thereby validate, the anger and fear felt by black communities within the US, and to make their experience felt as a potent reality for non-blacks.

I am reminded here of Darko Suvin's eminent assertion that SF cognitively disrupts or 'estranges' the reader from their reality in order to teach profound lessons about that reality. But, as Indigenous-futurist scholar and author Grace Dillon notes, it is by only and overly focusing on the cognitive that we move away from myriad other ways of knowing, learning, experiencing and growing that are available to us.²⁷ The potency of 'The Broken Earth' is not achieved by Jemisin limiting herself to the cognitive alone, but by allowing the visceral and embodied knowledges she has gained through her own subjugation to seep, leach, toxify into her writing. We cannot talk about this trilogy, then, without talking about systemic racial injustice. And we cannot ignore that race has been constructed and used as a process of exploiting and stripping value through dehumanisation, and of imposing value through the

²⁵ Jemisin, OG, p. 22.

²⁶ N.K. Jemisin speaking to David Barr Kirtly and John Joseph Adams, 'Interview: N.K. Jemisin', *Lightspeed Magazine*, 69 (February 2016) <<http://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/nonfiction/interview-n-k-jemisin/>> [accessed 28 September 2019].

²⁷ Grace Dillon, 'Bahwering: Gathering Indigenous Futurisms', Presentation at the 2nd Annual Symposium on the Future Imaginary, Kelowna B.C., (5 August 2016) <<https://vimeo.com/205552204>> [accessed 28 September 2019].

commodification of people. As Cauleen Smith points out, 'Blackness is a technology': race is a cultural construct invented in order to justify slavery, and the subsequent construction of racism has infused our ways of valuing human ability, beauty, societal function, worth, personhood.²⁸ It wastes the lives and potential of individuals and groups of people, and, as happens in societies predicated on hierarchy, precarity and oppression, it ultimately works against a better society for all.²⁹ From the opening chapter of *The Fifth Season* we are made aware that in this world there is a long legacy of enslavement and subordination, and that the apocalypse which acts as the backdrop to the novels is a direct consequence of having 'bred' orogenes, a slave class, 'through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection', of having 'brainwashed and backstabbed and brutalized' those slaves.

The systems of racialised control are diverse and multi-layered. Wider society polices orogenes, killing them or turning them over to the Fulcrum, a training residence under the governance of Guardians; 'if a Guardian has doubts about an orogene's willingness to follow the rules, that orogene doesn't make it to the first ring, let alone the fifth.'³⁰ Fulcrum orogenes police each other with corporeal and corporal punishment, with a hierarchical 'ring' system, and with internal politics which includes co-operation in assigned 'breeding': 'she is a slave, [...] all roggas are slaves,[...] the security and sense of self-worth the Fulcrum offers is wrapped in the chain of her right to live, and even the right to control her own body.'³¹ And orogenes police themselves by 'collaborat[ing] in their own internment',³² and by accepting the lie that they are not human:³³ 'How dare you expect anything else?' Essun chastises herself, 'You're just another filthy, rusty-souled rogga, just another agent of the Evil Earth, just another

²⁸ Quoted in Womack, *Afrofuturism*, p. 28.

²⁹ I am thinking here of Paolo Freire's assertion that through the act of oppression, the oppressors are themselves oppressed. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 50th Anniversary Edition*, trans. by Myra Bergman Ramos, read by Dennis Kleinman (Old Saybrook: Tanor Audio, 2018) [Audible].

³⁰ FS, pp. 63-4.

³¹ FS, p. 348.

³² SS, p. 5.

³³ FS, p. 354.

mistake of sensible breeding practices, just another mislaid tool.³⁴ Thus Jemisin exemplifies Fanon's concept of colonised body, colonised mind; or following Freire, how the oppressed are made complicit in their oppression.

While the denial of orogenes' humanity is deliberately fabricated in order to ensure that they can be used and abused, the extension of their rights to life, subjectivity, freedom and dignity are dangled as a carrot in order to keep them in line:

Tell them they can be great someday, like us. Tell them they belong among us, no matter how we treat them. Tell them they must earn the respect which everyone else receives by default. Tell them there is a standard for acceptance; that standard is simply perfection. [...] Then they'll break themselves trying for what they'll never achieve.³⁵

Waste theory is deeply interested in systems that contrive and use an idea of perfection to keep people enslaved: capitalist markets thrive on the pursuit of 'perfection', resulting in the rampant consumption and turnover of the new, and an ever-growing pile of the discarded. This is redolent of planned obsolescence, in which perfectly fine things are rendered 'superfluous prior to any actual or obvious material degradation' in order to make way for 'the latest vision of perfection.'³⁶ But in a racial context this is particularly pertinent. It sets apart certain groups as fundamentally and forever excluded from achieving perfection, framing them as single-use items are framed: inherently disposable, things which can be cheaply produced and unconsciously consumed, made *in order* to be discarded.³⁷

Analogous to America's one drop rule,³⁸ orogeny is a genetic trait which denotes that the lineage is polluted, and relegates the individual with orogenic abilities to the social and

³⁴ FS, pp. 271-2.

³⁵ FS, p. 76.

³⁶ Scanlan, *Garbage*, p. 37.

³⁷ The inherent quality of disposability is discussed by Gay Hawkins in 'Made to Be Wasted: PET and topologies of disposability', *Accumulation*, ed. by Gabrys, Hawkins and Michael (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 49-67.

³⁸ See Winthrop D. Jordan, 'Historical Origins of the One-Drop Racial Rule in the United States', *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies*, 1.1 (2014), 98-132 <<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/91g761b3>> [accessed 28 September 2019]; and Nikki Khanna, "'If You're Half Black, You're Just Black": Reflected Appraisals and the Persistence of the One-Drop Rule', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 51.1 (2010), 96-121 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2009.01162.x>> [accessed 28 September 2019].

legal status of sub- or non-human: 'He's ordinary, except for a drop of undesirable ancestry.'³⁹ Figured like an endocrine disruptor, the genetic mutation of orogeny can 'skip' generations, and so the threat that it can manifest in a child is an ever-present possibility: parents fear their children will be born with it. Likewise, orogene parents fear their child will be born without it, as those with the ancestry but not the ability are taken to be recycled into Guardians. The reactions of stills to discovering orogenes in their family are violent and extreme. Jija, Essun's husband, beats their son Uche to death upon discovering that he is an orogene; similarly, when they discover her orogeny, Damaya's parents imprison her in a barn and then turn her over to a stranger who they believe will kill her. The concept that blood can be tainted by previous deviant 'breeding' invokes the same visceral feelings we have about the toxicity of our waste, the fear that our pasts can come back to haunt us; think of leaky nuclear sludge storage pits, or human fetuses floating in their embryonic sacs with plasticisers already in their bloodstreams, or clogged sewers emitting our intimate stench; think of abjection. There is an insistence in the Stillness that belonging is construed in the essentialist notions of race; take, for example, the comradeship of the Fulcrum or Found Moon, or Essun's sense of duty to train Castrima's orogene children, despite her contempt for and wariness of them, because they are her people. By focusing on and framing genetics in this way Jemisin has created a hybridised system of determining lineage, defined partially by family ties (as in western worldviews), but also, where orogeny is concerned, defined by a sociological kinship (as in Afro- and Indigenous worldviews). Yet this is set against a challenging and collapsing of such essentialism; it is only through forming kinships outside the gene-pool, or *species-pool*, with a variety of orogenes, stone eaters, stills and obelisks that the destruction of the world can be mended, that a new world can be salvaged from the rubble.

Further upholding and problematising the reader's assumptions about race, Jemisin shows the relationship between genetic determinism and mythmaking by tracing lineage and

³⁹ SS, p. 206.

the fear of it back thousands of years to Syl Anagist, the last advanced civilization of which Essun's Stillness is the corroded remnant:

The experiment was to see if I could be human. [...] See if, raised among decent, natural folk, I might turn out at least decent, if not natural. And so my every achievement was counted a Sylanagistine success, while my every failure or display of poor behaviour was seen as proof of genetic degeneracy.⁴⁰

Credit is taken by the oppressors when the oppressed achieve success (according to the dominant norms or demands); equally, the myth of bad blood is invoked to explain and blame any 'failure'. Held to this double standard, the individual is not given agency in either case, but is rather treated as a result of breeding or up-bringing.

Making myths and telling tales

'I've given up on trying to stop you people. Just taught my children to remember and learn and survive'⁴¹

Throughout the trilogy Jemisin shows how the orogene origin story was polluted, mutated, buried, or destroyed. Under a somewhat biblical allegory of 'Misalem and Shemshana',⁴² society is taught that orogenes are, in their essence, evil, and that they can only gain goodness by co-operating with the authorities (whether emperors or Guardians) in undermining other orogenes. But the historical, or genetic, roots of orogeny trace further back in time than the events on which the Misalem myth are based, and a large portion of *The Stone Sky* is spent mapping this story. Sanzed ancestors, Syl Anagist, feared and envied the Niess, for 'their magical peculiarity' (the ability to endlessly produce powerful and efficient 'magic', or life energy), and so enslaved, forced into diaspora, destroyed and 'made [the Niess] over in the image of their fear'.⁴³ Clearly mirroring real world racial concerns, certain markers of Niess ancestry remained and carried a stigma that determined not only what orogenes could be, but whether they could exist at all:

⁴⁰ SS, p. 207.

⁴¹ SS, p. 29.

⁴² FS, pp. 88-92.

⁴³ SS, pp. 208-11.

It became easy for scholars to build reputations and careers around the notion that Niess sessapinae were fundamentally different somehow – more sensitive, more active, less controlled, less civilized – and that was the source of their magical peculiarity. This was what made them not the same kind of human as everyone else. Eventually: not as human as everyone else. Finally: not human at all. Once the Niess were gone, of course, it became clear that the fabled Niess sessapinae did not exist. [...] This was intolerable [...] After all, if the Niess were just ordinary human beings, then on what basis had military appropriations, pedagogical reinterpretation, and entire disciplines of study been formed? [...] If the Niess were merely human, the world built on their inhumanity would fall apart.⁴⁴

Jemisin here is pushing back against the idealisation of white beauty, the privileging of Eurocentric thought and worldviews, and the positioning of the powerful as being more valuable than those from whom they have stripped power. Following in the Afrofuturist tradition of paralleling imaginative narratives with real-world history to reframe and empower, she shows that her subaltern people have a long and rich history of being steeped in magic, intelligence, skill, and power by refusing the narrative that the ‘conquerors’ are ‘superior’, insisting instead that they were ‘simply lucky.’⁴⁵ But she also complicates this reclamation: ‘A legacy is something obsolete, but which you cannot get rid of entirely. Something no longer wanted, but still needed.’⁴⁶

The history of the Niess, which is that of the orogenes, is the key to their significance in the world – their ability to influence or control geological phenomena – and their place in society – they are held responsible for the Seasons and are vilified as evil in order to be kept enslaved.⁴⁷ This history, therefore, puts power within their reach as something available for them to reclaim. And yet, Jemisin also rejects this; perhaps such a legacy is something to which we should want to hold on, but perhaps it also gets in our way. She says ‘Let the Niess go’ in a bid to put to rest the horrors, the indebtedness, the fraught feelings with the past. Although she asserts that ‘you need to know where you’ve come from to know where you’re

⁴⁴ SS, p. 211.

⁴⁵ SS, p. 210.

⁴⁶ OG, p. 111.

⁴⁷ OG, p. 258.

going,⁴⁸ emphasis is equally placed on coming to terms with histories of trauma rather than allowing them to shackle the potential of the present, or to ruin the hope of a better future. Reynaldo Anderson identifies this as an Afrofuturist impulse: these themes are not explored in order 'to get lost in traumas of the past or present [...] The alien framework is a framework for understanding and healing.'⁴⁹ 'Right relationship' with memory, that is balancing the need to remember with the need to 'let go', is a key concern not only of waste theory, but also of peoples, such as black communities in the US, who have historically been and continue in the present to be, subjected to dystopia.⁵⁰

Stone lore is an excellent example of how 'The Broken Earth' trilogy figures and explores the role of memory. Playing with the phrase 'written in stone', Jemisin exposes as fallacy the immutability of dominant historical narratives. The purposeful destruction of stonelore, executed on a systemic level, satisfies one of the hallmark criteria of dystopian fiction: the destruction of historical records and the distortion of social memory. Explaining this to the uninitiated Syenite, Alabaster outlines how:

Stonelore changes all the time [...] Every civilization adds to it; parts that don't matter to the people of the time are forgotten. There's a reason Tablet Two is so damaged: someone, somewhere back in time, decided that it wasn't important or was wrong [...] Or maybe they even deliberately tried to obliterate it, which is why so many of the early copies are damaged in exactly the same way.⁵¹

Here we see that survival knowledge in this persistently apocalypsing world is imperative for the continuation of humanity. But also highlighted is the oft-repeated adage of the Stillness, 'all things change in a Season': what was 'important' or right at one time is not in another.⁵²

⁴⁸ SS, p. 397.

⁴⁹ Womack, *Afrofuturism*, p. 38.

⁵⁰ I am here citing conversations which took place at a workshop entitled 'Rewriting the Future' facilitated by the Octavia's Brood Project in *The Duncairn*, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 16 February 2019.

⁵¹ FS, pp. 124-5.

⁵² Alistair Iles discusses this point, drawing parallels to the lessons taught but ignored in Japan, where certain coastal cities expanded in the 21st century beyond the limits advised by 17th century tsunami survivors. 'Repairing the Broken Earth: N.K. Jemisin on race and environment in transitions', *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene*, 7.26 (2019) <<https://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.364>> [accessed 28 September 2019], pp. 6-7.

We see then that there is no inherent value in the historical knowledge, but rather that it is contextual, and therefore limited and open to error. At the same time as challenging the immutability of knowledge established as fact (paralleling the way in which we conceive of the hard sciences, for example), Jemisin also represents the control of knowledge by those in power in order to keep themselves in power; the consistency of the damage to stonelore attesting to the construction and destruction of certain histories so that the status quo of the present can be maintained.

Into this setting, however, Jemisin adds a caste of 'lorists', a sect that predates the writing of stonelore. Ostensibly they are tasked with continuing the oral tradition of story-telling as entertainment ('Soldiers might get a comm through a Season, but storytellers are what kept Sanze going through seven of them')⁵³ and to communicate the approved stonelore to each new generation of creche students, but this is a 'distor[tion] of their role into near-uselessness.'⁵⁴ Traditionally they have been needed as a balance to the authoritarian control of memory, speaking truth to power, as the lorist Danel tells Essun, 'Those of us who come out of the old Lorist families train in hand-to-hand, the arts of war, and so forth. It makes us more useful [...] in the task of defending knowledge.'⁵⁵ In this world the histories of reclamation, the histories which can be reclaimed, survive where written histories do not. I see this as a comment on the distinction between high and low literatures, the privileging of written culture over oral culture exemplified in the favouring of canonical works over old wives' tales, gossip, and bedtime stories. It calls into question western arrogance that literate societies are more developed than cultures with oral traditions, and that the ontologies and knowledges we have are more reliable or objectively true. It also speaks to the Afrofuturistic concern with improvisation as a skilful, didactic, and respected way of life: 'In the Western world, improvisation is a failure; you do it when something goes wrong. But when black people

⁵³ SS, p. 221.

⁵⁴ OG, p. 2.

⁵⁵ SS, p.221.

improvise it's a form of mastery.⁵⁶ As a novelist Jemisin herself uses material books and the written word to disseminate her ideas, yet in questioning the privileging of material literature she works towards flattening the hierarchical notions underpinning dominant ways of valuing narrative, narrator, and the purpose of stories.

Stonelore can also be understood as the tales told by stone eaters. Given that the books are written with Hoa as the narrator, the trilogy itself can be considered a sort of stone lore. Alongside the tablets, the lorists and the obelisks, then, we have another group charged with keeping memory, 'serv[ing] as a living reminder that others have survived worse through the ages':⁵⁷ stone eaters.

Alien Nation

'The stone eater is folly made flesh. Learn the lesson of its creation, and beware'⁵⁸

While the narration style positions us to identify with orogenes and feel outrage at being turned subaltern, Jemisin also, conversely, aligns us with those who deny the humanity of others – such as the marketeers of the transatlantic slave trade – by framing stone eaters, at least initially, as a group so alien that we struggle to respond to them without revulsion and fear. Drawing thus on postcolonial concerns with the classic SF alien motif,⁵⁹ stone eaters challenge our ability to empathise.⁶⁰ Alabaster posits that their uncanniness is rooted not in their strange bodies, but in their longevity or durability – in the knowledge that accumulates in and sticks to/with them, and the knowledge that is lost or discarded over the centuries. In other words, they are disturbing because they are remainders, reminders, and remember-ers: 'I

⁵⁶ Womack, *Afrofuturism*, pp. 37-8.

⁵⁷ OG, p. 3.

⁵⁸ FS, p. 296.

⁵⁹ Womack, pp. 29-88.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Essun claiming that 'No matter how hard you try, you cannot imagine Antimony as having once been human. Too many things work against it: the stillness of her face, the dislocation of her voice. The fact that you hate her.' OG, p. 171.

don't think it's what they're made of that makes stone eaters so different. I think it's that no one can live that long and not become something entirely alien.'⁶¹

I do not want to diminish here the importance of the materiality of stone eaters. *The Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* defines plastic (in the adjectival) as having the ability to mould, to deform, without giving way.⁶² We saw earlier how the Self is viewed as being plastic, here we see this in the material – in the body. Stone eaters 'possess some sort of kinship with humanity, which they choose to acknowledge in the statue-like shape we most often see, but it follows that they can take other shapes'.⁶³ Although tangibly or molecularly stone, they are metaphorically, adjectively *plastic*. Before David Attenborough's *Blue Planet* stoked up anxieties around plastic pollution in our oceans and endocrine systems, our disdain for plastic was founded on a mistrust of plastic's capacity to mimic other, more financially or socially valued substances.⁶⁴ The 'versatility and multipurpose nature' of early plastic in the mid to late 19th century 'was viewed as a major imperfection' because it was believed that a superior quality material should be paired with only one function (a drinking glass with water, for example) – a philosophy rooted in Aristotle's view that 'multifunctional instruments are for barbarians who don't care for perfection, whereas distinction and discrimination signify the perfection and generosity of nature.'⁶⁵

Plastic has an element of unnaturalness, inauthenticity, duplicity. This is mirrored in the plasticity of stone eaters shapeshifting, exemplified most prominently when we discover Hoa, who has been disguising himself as a young child to gain Essun's (read: our) trust, is an ancient and complex 'more-than-human'.⁶⁶ 'Why did you make yourself like this?' she asks him, 'Why not just be...what you are?' In response 'He gives [her] a look so sceptical that [she]

⁶¹ OG, p. 168.

⁶² 'Plastic', *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, ed. by A M Macdonald (Edinburgh: W & R Chambers, 1979), p. 1024.

⁶³ FS, pp. 82-3.

⁶⁴ See Bernadette Bensaude Vincent, 'Plastics, materials and dreams of dematerialization', *Accumulation*, ed. by Gabrys, Hawkins and Michael, pp. 17-29.

⁶⁵ Bensaude Vincent, 'Plastics, materials and dreams of dematerialization', p. 19.

⁶⁶ Gabrys, Hawkins and Michael 'Introduction: From materiality to plasticity', *Accumulation*, p. 6.

realizes what a stupid question that is.⁶⁷ It is not only the alienation of stone eaters that prevents Hoa being candid – it is also the difficulty in explaining what he is: stone eaters, like plastics, ‘epitomize the ephemeral, the ever changing [while simultaneously inviting] us to experience the instant for itself as detached from the flux of time’.⁶⁸ Stone eaters are not bound, in the way that their descendant orogenes are, to the social stasis of subjugation, but rather ‘stone eaters do as they please, go where they will.’⁶⁹ As Hoa tells us: ‘You see what was lost in us, *but we gained too*’.⁷⁰ By embracing their more-than-humanity, stone eaters are able to discard the carrot and stick methods of control used on orogenes. If the authorities ‘have no idea what we really are [then] it’s up to us to determine our own fate and future.’⁷¹

The matter of vibrant rubbish

‘Put enough lives into a storage matrix, and they retain a collective will, of sorts. They *remember* horror and atrocity, with whatever is left of them – their souls, if you like.’⁷²

I have thus far explored waste studies, new materialist, post-humanist concerns in relation to race in the trilogy. I turn now to an exploration of such concerns in the figuring of obelisks as sentient beings, with likes and dislikes, as well as in the figuring of subjects (people) as matter (magic) through Essun and Nassun’s ability to see and interact with the molecular makeup of living/lively things, both animate and inanimate.

At the same time as we see people denied their humanity, we see the anthropomorphising of obelisks. First mentioned in the opening chapter of *The Fifth Season*, the obelisks are quietly deemphasised and immediately forgotten as the first half of the book continues with exposition. The focus is entirely, conspicuously, off the obelisks. It is only when the narrator pointedly calls our attention back to them, as Syenite and Alabaster make their way to the broken obelisk in Allia, that we remember their presence. Thus, in both the reality

⁶⁷ FS, p. 396.

⁶⁸ Bensaude Vincent, ‘Plastics’, *Accumulation*, p. 23.

⁶⁹ FS, p. 284.

⁷⁰ SS, p. 27. Emphasis mine.

⁷¹ SS, p. 212.

⁷² SS, p. 332.

of the novel as well as in the reader's experience, the obelisks fulfil an essential criterion of waste: its invisibility. Like all good litter, 'no one really pays much attention to the things at all [...] they are irrelevant.'⁷³ There is an element of use-value motivating this blindness. The obelisks are 'huge and beautiful and a little terrifying [...] but purposeless',⁷⁴ and therefore unobtrusive and forgettable. But there is also an element of shame here – they are seen as evidence of past failure, as 'just another grave-marker of just another civilization successfully destroyed by Father Earth's tireless efforts.'⁷⁵ The people of the Stillness can turn their eyes away from the obelisks because they feel no accountability – they were built by another civilization, one from which they are descended but one to which they feel disconnected and distanced. Functioning in this way, as a reminder of the impermanence of life, including the life of empires and nations, the people of the Stillness *need* the obelisks to be invisible in order to avoid confrontation with their own existential fear. Thus, the obelisks fulfil a second criteria of waste: its abjection.

Alongside invisibility and abjection, a critical characteristic of waste is its ability to disrupt. The obelisks fulfil this in multiple ways. They first come into the foreground of our thinking when Syenite accidentally resurrects Allia's damaged, dormant obelisk. It is the brokenness of this obelisk that distinguishes it from the other, background obelisks, and acts as a catalyst in both the plot and character development. Once the knowledge of the obelisks' power is discovered, they disrupt the status quo of Fulcrum taught orogeny by opening up to (certain) orogenes the possibility of using 'magic' instead of orogeny. And, beyond this, they disrupt the status quo of a world which is both geologically and societally violent by functioning as the key to reinstating a harmony of balance. They offer a means for those kept powerless to access power in much the same way as waste objects have historically offered an income for the poor: marginalised people, restricted in the resources to which they have access, turn to the things unwanted or deemed useless by those who have more material wealth. Essun

⁷³ FS, p. 8.

⁷⁴ FS, p. 8.

⁷⁵ FS, p. 8.

and Nassun have been trained by Schaffa and other Guardians to look solely and specifically to the earth and rocks and energy below their feet as sources of power, and so, initially, only turn to the obelisks when this is not available, out of the panic and desperation of having limited options. Using the obelisks comes at great personal risk – on different occasions both mother and daughter are nearly killed when working with them, reminding us that working with waste, with objects and substances which can be highly toxic and harmful to the human body, is a dangerous, often life-threatening endeavour.

In various ways obelisks blur the boundaries between subject and object, Self and Other. They are physical, manmade, seemingly inanimate objects. But so are the tuners who have been told they were created by Sylanagistine ‘biomists’: we discover that they are the genetic descendants of the Niess, a people firmly established as part of the human race. The tuners, the stone eaters, the orogenes, the planet itself (‘Father Earth’) are used to show us how sentient, intelligent, living things can be seen as, and so treated as, and therefore made into objects. Inversely, objects can be subjects: the obelisks each have personalities, they ‘bond’⁷⁶ to certain orogenes and refuse others: both Houwha and Essun experience the rejection of the onyx when, upon looking at their intentions and deeming these unworthy, it refuses to cooperate with them. The fluidity and plurality of subjectivity is further explored when Nassun, while ‘connecting’ to/with the sapphire obelisk, is shown its memories and ‘beliefs’ so potently that she not only ‘trusts’ it, but she *becomes* it: ‘I think I was an obelisk for a moment.’⁷⁷

On the physical plane, this fluidity of boundaries is most obvious in the encapsulating, or ‘trapping’ of stone eaters within obelisks: Syenite first meets Hoa when she releases him from the prison of the garnet obelisk at Allia, Essun tranquilises the enemy stone eaters in the war with Rennanis by incarcerating them in Castrima’s geodes. But the distinction between the two entities is still intact here: the stone eater bodies are ensconced in the obelisk and

⁷⁶ FS, p. 393.

⁷⁷ SS, pp. 190-1; p. 192, emphasis mine.

geode bodies, but do not merge and meld. It is at a molecular level that borders truly become a site of permeability and transformation. Obelisks flicker in and out of physical existence; they can radically change shape, from gigantic constructions to wieldable 'glassknives'; they tend to travel slowly behind their chosen orogenes or float aimlessly, but when needed can move from one side of the planet to the other within seconds. Orogenes and tuners can magically align with an obelisk, a process whereby they enter and 'submit to [its] current', 'drift[ing] through its interstices', but equally where the obelisk enters them.⁷⁸ Jemisin is anxious to distance herself from SF which sets up magic as a kind of science descended from Enlightenment thinking: she instead lauds, and indeed emulates, the magic found in Le Guin and Tolkien, saying,

magic [for these authors] was an experiment whose results were *never* repeatable, *never* predictable, and even the most accomplished wizard could only make an educated guess about what would happen any time magic was used. And in fact, magic itself could change as its caster changed. It was an intuitive thing, not an empirical thing, and an intuitive wizard could build a spell out of guesses — or leaps of faith — based on nothing more than gut feelings. Also, feelings mattered.⁷⁹

It is not, therefore, explained exactly, clinically, *how* the magic, or geoarchanity, of obelisks and obelisk-workers works, but as we observe Alabaster teaching Essun, and Nassun teaching herself, we see that 'magical alignment' is a state in which the 'silver threads' between the cells of beings can be manipulated, transforming people into stone and gemstone. Echoing our processes of recycling, we see that this transformation requires large amounts of energy, and results in an end-product which is a downgraded version of the original. In our world, recycling has gained a cultural status as a means of virtue signalling – it is a phenomenon constructed to green-wash, to act as a smoke screen of climate-consciousness while allowing big business and industry to continue their environmentally devastating practices of resource extraction and production, and as a sedative for the masses

⁷⁸ OG, p. 372.

⁷⁹ Jemisin, 'But, but, but – WHY does magic have to make sense?' *N.K.Jemisin.com*, 15 June 2012 <<http://nkjemisin.com/2012/06/but-but-but-why-does-magic-have-to-make-sense/>> [accessed 28 September 2019].

now anxious about pollution and ecological breakdown.⁸⁰ Recycling is considered as management, not prevention ('dematerialization') of further waste creation: in the Stillness the transformation of people into semi-precious stone is the wasting of a limited, finite, and more precious resource: human life.

Further, the opposition between Fulcrum orogeny and 'geoarchanity', that is, magic-working, mirrors the difference between miasma and germ theory as outlined by discards scholar Max Liboiron. She posits three principal reasons for using miasma theory to discuss waste.⁸¹ Firstly, it allows us to look holistically at problems, and at the interactions and relations between thing and environment. Magic, like miasma, is not bent towards individualism, atomisation and isolation, but rather seeks a broader, more inclusive picture. Taking into consideration the surrounding environment, geoarchanity is 'multidirectional, variegated and indiscriminating, work[ing] in concert with other mechanisms',⁸² or with other parts of one overarching mechanism. Secondly, it allows us to act even when the causes or sources of a problem are uncertain: magic-work, even the knowledge of magic's existence, is purposefully suppressed by the Fulcrum to keep orogenes on a tight leash. Alabaster, Essun and Nassun therefore must find their own way into this type of work, acting regardless of their lack of knowledge. By offering her orogenes an alternative method to conceptualise and practice orogeny, Jemisin reminds us that there are alternatives ways in which we, too, can approach and interact with the world, particularly when that involves interacting with things considered dangerous and/or disgusting. By grounding in her alternatives inter-dependence, community and co-operation, she advocates a world of equity and socialism. Thirdly, and perhaps most interestingly, miasmists work on the precautionary principle: 'the principle that an action, policy or material is assumed guilty of harm and therefore banned or abandoned until it is proven to

⁸⁰ See Samantha MacBride, *Recycling Reconsidered: The Present Failure and Future Promise of Environmental Action in the United States* (Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 2013).

⁸¹ Max Liboiron, 'Plasticizers: A twenty-first century miasma', *Accumulation*, ed. by Gabrys, Hawkins and Michael, pp. 145-6.

⁸² Liboiron, 'Plasticizers', in *Accumulation*, p. 136.

be innocent'. Geoarchanity allows orogenes to restore the world, to reclaim their power and their autonomy, and find a dignity in their identity by showing the prestige of the people from whom they are descended. However, the ecological lesson is quite clear: it was on account of over-reaching, co-opting and extractive drives that Syl Anagist genetically modified the tuner's ability to perform magic; the Obelisk Gate is not something to be admired and emulated, but rather is the machine that caused the first and continuing ruination of the world. Magic, awesome and awful, is not something to be trusted. In mirroring the difference between miasma theory and germ theory, Jemisin is again holding tension between two worldviews, insisting on the binary even as she muddies it, as we saw during the above discussion on lineage.

Use-putting, use-resisting

'Everyone understands perfectly well how to *use* us.'⁸³

In *The Stone Sky* we learn that the Obelisk Gate, or the 'Plutonic Engine', is a powerful tool developed to do greatly ambitious things, but that it is, ultimately, just a Sylanagistine own-brand version of Niess skill, creativity and competency:

Magic could not be owned, [the Niess] insisted, any more than life could be – and thus they wasted both, by building (among many other things) plutonic engines that did nothing. They were just...pretty. Or thought-provoking, or crafted for the sheer joy of crafting. And yet this 'art' ran more efficiently and powerfully than anything the Sylanagistine had ever managed.⁸⁴

This juxtaposition of Sylanagistine seizing of potential with Niess 'wasting' of it is used to highlight the dangers of a utilitarianist mindset paired with exponential growth: the Sylanagists sought to develop an incredibly advanced system of energy exploitation, whereas the Niess, for whom this system would have been more easily accessible, would not have thought of reaching for it. Hoa, in his role as narrator, repeats the refrain 'life is sacred in Syl Anagist'. But as the narrative progresses it becomes clear that this sanctity derives from the ideology

⁸³ FS, p. 333.

⁸⁴ SS, pp. 209-10.

that all life must always be used, and therefore ensures it *is* used. Because magic (here working as a metaphor for dirty energies such as coal, oil and gas) draws its potency from life, the Sylanagistine drive to ever-expand the scope of their technology requires them to squeeze every drop of life out of every living and once-living thing. Although I understand this is speaking to ethical debates around technological advancement, I am wary of straying into the territory of the noble savage; the positing that Indigenous peoples are somehow inherently more moral than settler colonialists, disallowing individuals the ability to be flawed, to make mistakes, and placing their ontologies and practices beyond critical questioning or rejection. It does, however, allow Jemisin to comment on our liquid modernity. It reads not only as a critique of brown energy dependency, but also as a critique of late capitalism. Jemisin's figuring of a society tiered by a 'use-caste' system also sheds light on hierarchical ontologies which evaluate the worth of a thing or a person by a narrow concept of their functionality. As Rachele Dini posits in her monograph, resisting use-putting can be a (utopian) means of resisting capitalism, a system which insists on the efficiency of exploitation. We see this with the briar patch of Syl Anagist, where disobedient tuners are buried alive; we see it with node maintainers of the Stillness, those orogenes who have power but no control of it, drugged into submission and used as parts in the wider imperial energy mechanism: 'You think any of us matter beyond what we can do for them?'⁸⁵

Over the course of the trilogy, Nassun is engulfed by nihilism: '*I want it all GONE, [...] I want it to BURN, I want it burned up and dead and gone, gone, gone, NOTHING I-I-left, no more hate and no more killing just nothing, r-rusting nothing, nothing FOREVER*'.⁸⁶ Eventually this leads her to follow the advice of the stone eater Steel – to 'Put [all] us broken monsters out of our misery' by obliterating the entire world and everything on it.⁸⁷ Moving away from the biopolitical, David Halperin's philosophical meditation on wasted life is instructive here. He proposes that 'life has no equivalent' since 'it cannot be hoarded, or cashed in for something

⁸⁵ FS, p. 143.

⁸⁶ SS, p. 90.

⁸⁷ SS, p. 309.

else, or fixed in some state of permanent meaningfulness', and that therefore, we cannot waste life but only '*throw it away*'.⁸⁸ Concluding that 'The choice we have is whether to throw our lives away for nothing, or for something',⁸⁹ Halperin, like Dini, challenges assumptions about the use to which we can put our lives, or indeed, our deaths, and the extent to which this is informed by capitalist systems of efficiency and profit-driven purpose or ethical imperatives of collective good writ over generational time. Playing with scales of space and time, Jemisin melds the personal with the social, the small with the large: the despair and hope driving daughter and mother at the climax of *The Stone Sky* are the result of the ways the world has used and trashed them, and conversely, valued and cherished them. It is only fitting that their choices made and actions taken in turn affect the wider world. Essun throws her life away, but not for nothing, and not at the command of any external authority or society. She is no *homo sacer*. She sacrifices herself to save the world from her daughter, for her daughter: in so doing she opens up the possibility and begins the process of salvaging utopia from the ruins.

Dystopia/Utopia

'some worlds are built on a fault line of pain, held up by nightmares. Don't lament when those worlds fall. Rage that they were built doomed in the first place.'⁹⁰

A central discussion within dystopian literature and waste is the role of destruction: can we transform our world into a better one, or must we destroy everything and start from a Year Zero? Can we repurpose and recycle our way to utopia, or must we, as Alabaster rationalises to justify instigating apocalypse, accept that 'Some things are so broken that they can't be fixed. You just have to finish them off, sweep away the rubble, and start over.'⁹¹ Embedded in this debate is the acknowledgement that paradise is not paradise unless it is so for everyone.

⁸⁸ David M. Halperin, 'Out of Australia', *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, ed. by Gay Hawkins, Stephen Muecke, (Lanham; Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 5-6. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁹ Halperin, 'Out of Australia', pp. 5-6.

⁹⁰ SS, p. 7.

⁹¹ SS, p. 299.

'The Broken Earth' trilogy speaks about the multiple ways in which apocalypse is relative, or delineated. In drawing on the 'postapocalyptic metaphor of the transatlantic slave trade', Jemisin recognises that for enslaved African people (and North American Indigenous communities) the world has already ended.⁹² Likewise, in showing how those who are not 'useful' to a comm are 'ashed out' of it in a Season, a policy which is effectively a death sentence, she highlights how it is the most vulnerable and disadvantaged who receive the least help. This fact is particularly apt when discussing climate in/justice, the disparity between how rich and poor experience climate catastrophes, both within and between the Global North and South:

What follows won't be good, but it'll be bad for everyone – rich and poor, Equatorials and commless, Sanzeds and Arctics, now they'll all know. *Every* season is the Season for us. The apocalypse that never ends. They could've chosen a different kind of equality. We could've all been safe and comfortable together, surviving together, but they didn't want that. Now nobody gets to be safe. Maybe that's what it'll take for them to finally realise things have to change.⁹³

Although thus rejecting an anti-utopianism which says that this is the best of all possible worlds, Alabaster's embittered speech and nihilistic actions are, nevertheless, only one of many responses to the discrimination of dystopia. Nassun, just as disillusioned, leans instead towards petrification: her choice is not to destroy the world, but rather to remove humanity, which is to say, human *time*, from the world. She chooses 'a different kind of equality': to change everyone into stone eaters, so that 'The Seasons could come and go, and they wouldn't matter. No one would starve to death ever again.'⁹⁴ Essun, as discussed above, comes to a different conclusion. For her, as for Jemisin, the anger and hurt that comes from 'exploitation and degradation' can be harnessed rather than put towards destruction. Despair is not enough, instead Essun shows us that we must '[seek] something more', to '[commit ourselves] to making, of all this wrongness, something right [...] *Justice*'.⁹⁵ A better world

⁹² Womack, *Afrofuturism*, pp. 37-8.

⁹³ SS, p. 300

⁹⁴ SS, p. 304.

⁹⁵ SS, pp. 332-3.

comes through shifting our personal, interpersonal and societal philosophies; it comes through transformation.

While the end of the trilogy thus offers a way forwards into a balanced and equitable world, Jemisin has, throughout the post-apocalypse of the novels, outlined ways of creating heuristic utopias in such a setting – which is to say, in the present. As shown, ‘The Broken Earth’ series follows the criteria of 20th century dystopian fiction outlined in the methodology chapter, namely: people sacrificed by the state to uphold its own ideology; the destruction of the private world or self; the destruction of the past including historical records and social memory; a strategy of warning. Another convention of literary dystopia is the ambiguity between utopia/dystopia, which Jemisin satisfies with her presentation of Syl Anagist as the achievement of our most idealistic eco-topian dreams: ‘Once, cities were not just dead themselves, stone and metal jungles that did not grow or change, but they were actually deadly, poisoning soil and making water undrinkable and even changing the weather by their very existence. Syl Anagist is better’.⁹⁶ By bringing to mind real life examples of how deadly our civilization is, such as (in the American context) the leaks of the Dakota Access Pipeline, the use of Monsanto’s Roundup, the tapwater of Flint made flammable through fracking, the escalating frequency and intensity of wildfires and hurricanes and superstorms, Jemisin speaks to our current climate breakdown. The technological fixes found and enacted by Syl Anagist are those we often push for when talking about moving from brown to green energy, from deadly to lively existence:

Sustainability transitions tend to be seen as technical, not social, affairs. To feed the world’s rapidly burgeoning population, technical experts tell us, we must intensify agricultural production to provide 50 to 70 percent more food by 2050 (Royal Society, 2009; Godfray, 2010). To power the world without violently warming its atmosphere, we need to design workable carbon capture and storage technologies, and to manufacture solar panels and wind turbines more cheaply (Gibbons and Chalmers, 2008; Ellabban et al., 2014). Such transitions to sustainability are frequently analyzed in terms of processes of technological change, such as advancing from innovative ‘niches’ to ‘landscapes’ (Geels,

⁹⁶ SS, p. 144.

2002). Academic research, business strategies, and government policy can accelerate this movement.⁹⁷

As Jemisin points out, technological fixes are not true fixes since they do not recognise the rights of the earth, nor do they address and alter the mentality of entitlement and ever-expanding growth. We are shown how the apparent utopia achieved by Syl Anagist is, for all its sensitivity to nature, merely a green washing of exploitative practices.

But beyond this criterion of an ambiguous utopia/dystopia, 'The Broken Earth' trilogy makes murky any clear definition of the dystopian genre. Among the themes of ecological devastation, enslavement, genocide, imperialism, cannibalism, filicide and murder, there runs through these works a conversation about what a better world means, and what it would mean to build such a world. We are shown various intentional communities, including the Fulcrum, Corepoint, Found Moon, Meov, and Castrima. The latter two are of particular interest as they demonstrate alternative ways of organising society that are predicated on giving power to the powerless, or as Alabaster says: 'They don't kill their roggas, here. They put them *in charge*.'⁹⁸ By choosing orogenes as their leaders both Meov and Castrima defy convention, but more than this, they have chosen a type of governance that breaks with the status quo. Hjarka, a woman born into the Leadership caste and educated to take such a position, contemplates the pertinence of Ykka operating as Castrima's headwoman:

'the playbook I was taught to follow [...would...] be stupid to try [...] here. There's never been anything like this Season ... or this comm. [...] Tradition's just going to rust everything up, in a situation like this. Better to have a headwoman who doesn't know how things *should* be, only how she *wants* them to be. A headwoman who'll kick all the asses necessary to make her vision happen.'⁹⁹

The autocratic bent this implies of Ykka is balanced with 'her vision' for 'things' to be fairer for all, rather than stacked in favour of a few. Here we see Jemisin playing with another binary: the one between dictatorship and democracy. For example, Ykka offers the comm a vote on

⁹⁷ Iles, 'Repairing the Broken Earth', p. 1.

⁹⁸ FS, p. 296.

⁹⁹ OG, pp. 213-4.

whether to save themselves by delivering Castrima's orogenes to the Rennanis army in response to their tactic of divide and conquer. Essun intervenes, however:

'no part of this comm gets to decide that any other part of this comm is expendable. [...] This is a community. You will be unified. You will fight for each other. *Or I will rusting kill every last one of you.*'¹⁰⁰

We see the people being denied a vote or a voice in the decision-making processes of their community, and that the decisions which are made for them are enforced with threat of a death penalty. Yet this tyrannical impulse is driven by a desire for equality, communality, and inclusion. The principle that people should be self-determining is outweighed by the principle that everyone has a right to life, to the same full life as anyone else, regardless of how sub-human that life has conventionally been considered. It is a leadership style that flattens hierarchy and historical methods of evaluating (human) value, even while upholding it.

Conclusion

'This is the way a new world begins.'¹⁰¹

Applying a waste theory reading to the dystopia of 'The Broken Earth' trilogy allows us to refigure self, to see how identity markers such as race and use-caste are constructed so as to impose systems of order, to designate certain lives and forms of life as less-than, impure, dangerous, and so to allow those groups to be subjugated, exploited and trashed. Without discarding the consequences of societies organised in this way, Jemisin rejects the tyranny of any singular, fixed identity, offering instead a utopian visioning of flattened hierarchies, muddled binaries, tapestry communities, formations and conceptualisations of self which are plastic, hybridically human and non-human, insider and outsider, discarded and salvaged, useful and resistant to use-putting, accumulations of history and potentialities of future. It allows us to explore the ways in which personal histories and social memory are variously buried and wielded to enforce the status quo, and to disrupt it. Likewise, the trilogy shows the processes of waste-making and waste-using, and the power of material and metaphoric waste

¹⁰⁰ OG, p. 335.

¹⁰¹ SS, p. 398.

to haunt and through this haunting to affect change. Reading these novels for waste, it becomes clear that our discarded objects, practices, stories, peoples will catch up with us in ways we may not expect, or like. They will linger, ever available to corrupt and be corrupted, to be repurposed, reimagined, reclaimed.

The trilogy also contributes to the mutation of the dystopian genre by both fulfilling generic conventions and distorting them. Drawing from feminist and Afrofuturistic traditions, these texts vibrate with magic, dislocating us not only in time, as the other dystopias explored in this thesis do, but also geographically into a different, fantastical earth. By emphasising these magical elements, Jemisin troubles the hegemony of cognitive estrangement in the genre, insisting instead that emotional reasoning is of equal importance when exploring dystopian themes. These works contribute to the genre by proposing an acceptance that there are many things – magic included – which lie outside human understanding, ownership and control. To dismantle dystopia, to enact utopia, we must decentralise the human, Jemisin says, and learn to cooperate with the wider world/s both around us and within us. There are always alternatives; there is always salvage.

Trash Can

Tease this out -- trashing with / reclaiming language (parallel between rogga / orogene and n*gger / negro)

- Syenite at Allia → 'Coral builds on itself. New creatures grow on the bones of their predecessors' p221 like kibble / rubbish
- Damaya in the unused parts of the Fulcrum p301-2: disused signifies dump / unwanted, yet there are parts with (objectively?) valuable things which have also been abandoned (should this prompt us to wonder whether the people left intentionally? ie. sinister undertones?)

mutation than adaption: in the books, though, the binary of pure and contaminated remains – Jemisin figures both as problematic and evil, but shows the contaminated Schaffa as being more loving. There is no symbiosis of pure and tainted guardians, they embody two sides of a multi-sided war, but they also show how much variation and complexity is involved in both. Ultimately, the 'pure' Guardians are less compassionate and figured more negatively. The breeding of orogenes also brings purity into question. Alabaster was bred to order, but 'midlatter mutts' Essun and Nassun are also incredibly powerful, and shown in some ways to be more (emotionally/mentally) resilient.

The question which emerges time and again in dystopian thinking is this: 'for *whom* is it a dystopia?'. There is a tendency in those books within the genre that have made it into the mainstream (1984, Silent Spring, The Hunger Games) to focus on white people. Dystopian fiction is on the rise, the pundits say, because since the Crash dystopia has felt closer to those for whom it had always been at a remove ie. middle class white people in the global north.

But as the trilogy progresses, we realise that knowing the past of her helps us understand the present of her

- Schaffa's pact with the Evil Earth to save himself from drowning p40 it works as a 'seducer's voice', using the same arguments he's used with himself to do terrible things. Beginning of Guardian contamination BUT not fully → 'he's still Scaffa' but 'He loses so much else.' P41
 - Greed of the contaminant: '*Take more*, whispers the rage at the back of his mind. *Take the others.*' P51
 - not even the best genengineers can stop plants that live on waste from smelling a bit like what they eat.' P145 "Do you mean to show us the waste infrastructure?" Remwha asks Kelenli. "I feel more contextual already." P146
- profligate with scapegoats: orogene gene has been nearly bred out (Schaffa speech)

→ Surplus status of guardians during Seasons; linking back to use-value

Writing Rubbish: Leaky Things

Granted that disorder spoils pattern; it also provides the materials of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power.¹

Plastics leech. Nuclear sludge seeps. Bins juice. Like waste itself, the study of waste is a leaky thing. It permeates and pollutes, infiltrates and mutates, rusts and ruins; it disrupts. Writing this in the final stages of my PhD, I have been living and working with waste for three and a half years. To qualify: I have not been living in an area so polluted that the water is undrinkable and the air unbreathable, nor working as a flusher in an urban sewer system, as a domestic or corporate cleaner, as a refuse collector. Waste scholars emphasise, rightly and repeatedly, that waste is always material first and metaphoric second. By this we mean that those who have to deal with material waste substances are endangered and harmed by it over and again: physically through the toxicity and contamination of waste materials; economically through low pay, as well as medical bills and reduced capacity to earn as a result of waste's damaging health impacts; mentally and emotionally through the stigmatisation, targeting and isolation resulting from being associated (or conflated) with reviled materials. As an academic, and a literary one at that, I deal primarily with the intangible, with waste and wasting as societal, psychological, philosophical, political concepts. I do not face the same hazards as a Dalit street-cleaner, or a resident of the Michigan city of Flint, and I do not mean to co-opt their experiences as my own. I mean that although the effects of it manifest and play out differently, waste also leaks metaphorically. I mean that these societal, psychological, philosophical,

¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 94.

political concepts of waste and wasting are entangled messily with material, molecular, hard scientific ‘fact’.

This page marks the midway point of writing a thesis oriented towards, attuned to, steeped in waste and processes of wasting. One cannot spend so much time with (conceptual) waste without internalising its language and doctrines and applying these to oneself. Shitting on, rubbishing, trash-talking myself: I have found that boundaries between self and waste are permeable. Conversely, though, waste is also a language of reclamation and salvage. There is radical potential in waste’s ability to disrupt, intrude, haunt, reclaim, alter, defy. Feeling rotten, I can look at rotting things and know that there is so much growing there. This page marks the midway point of my writing: it then, therefore, also marks the midway point of your *reading* this thesis. ‘All that you touch you change,’ says Octavia Butler, ‘all that you change changes you’. In discard studies we look at this bilateral exchange as it applies to unpleasant, unwanted things. What has leaked from this thesis into you – including and also beyond what you intended to take from it? How does your personal positioning, the academic or ethical criteria with which you approach it, in turn leak into it? In short: how has it contaminated you, and vice versa? In this short inter-chapter essay I would like to explore the leakiness between metaphor and material, individual and community, molecule and harm. What are the gaps between these, and how do things percolate between them?

At the moment of writing, human societies are in the midst of a global pandemic. It is a time of infection, of rapid transmission, of dangerous touch. While Covid-19 has unequally impacted different countries and different communities within those countries, and while there have been outbreaks of other communicable diseases (with higher infection and mortality rates), Covid-19 is cited as potentially ‘the deadliest pandemic since the Spanish Flu’.² Since the mid 19th century, as we have moved through decades of public and private health policy governed by germ theory, a model of disease which ‘privilege[s] linear causal links between a

² Sofia Anyfantaki, et al. ‘COVID-19 and other pandemics: a literature review for economists,’ *Economic Bulletin* 51 (2020), 1-36 <<https://cepr.org/sites/default/files/CovidEconomics57.pdf>> [accessed 16 April 2021], p. 9.

discrete pollutant and its pollution', hygiene practices in the Global North have favoured atomisation of illness, 'quantification of harm' and individualisation of responsibility.³ Hygiene has become a fetishized and reified thing, hyper-sanitised but nevertheless abstracted from material risk. Fear of contamination has focused more heavily on the figurative, tilting towards racism, xenophobia, homophobia and misogyny as politicians and mass media scapegoat people from BAME/BIPOC and migrant communities, from LGBTQ communities, and people employed in sex work as sources of a catching moral decline and/or economic hardship. Covid-19 has reminded us of *molecular* threat. In response, we have had to think very carefully, very literally, about what we touch and do not touch. We have had to think about how pathogenic disease becomes viral – how it seeps in and seeps out, how it evades containment. It reminds us that fears of infection are not only metaphoric or moralistic, but leaking out of and into, both shaping and shaped by, medical science.

Leprosy, as an age-old communicable disease, is an excellent example of this type of leakage. Nancy Waxler outlines how different understandings of the infliction are determined not only (or not at all) by its medical characteristics, but by the moral, 'social and historical conditions in which the disease exists.'⁴ In Hawaii, for example, leprosy had traditionally been understood as an unfortunate, hereditary malady rather than a contagion necessitating segregation. Afflicted families were not secluded, shunned or stigmatised but instead continued with everyday social and economic life. It was only when an influx of migrant workers from China coincided with an outbreak of leprosy in the 1850's and 1860's that the occupying Anglo-American authorities established leper colonies separate from the majority of the population. Waxler posits two reasons for the shift from a belief in inheritance to a belief in contagion, and consequential change in treatment of and policy around the disease. Firstly, Chinese migrant workers offered cheap labour and were thus an economic threat: blaming

³ Max Liboiron 'Plasticizers: A twenty-first century miasma', *Accumulation: The material politics of plastic*, ed. by Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins and Mike Michael (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 134–149 (p. 134).

⁴ Nancy Waxler, 'Learning to Be a Leper: A Case Study in the Social Construction of Illness', *Understanding and Applying Medical Anthropology*, ed. by Peter J. Brown (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 147-157 (p. 149).

them for the leprosy outbreak legitimised white employers denying them work and kept jobs secure for the white settler labour force. Secondly, associating Chinese people with disease, particularly a disfiguring disease, confirmed the ideology of white superiority that social Darwinism's contemporary popularity had established.⁵ Waxler suggests that the contempt with which Chinese migrant workers were treated was transferred to the disease itself, so that being a leper was stigmatised not because of the disfiguration or risk of leaking from one body to another, but because it aligned the leper with non-whiteness.⁶

This example shows how molecules (of bacteria) can be weaponised for the financial, political and ideological agendas of those in power. But this example also shows that bacteria, and bacterially infected/infectious bodies, need not be a threat: lepers can and have lived among non-lepers without ostracization or outbreak. Prior to this research, my conception of leprosy was, I believe, typical for a layperson raised in the Christian Global North. If I thought of lepers at all I thought of them as people who existed elsewhere – in the Bible, in poor countries: far away in time or place. I thought of leprosy as an incurable, highly infectious illness made drastically visible by the loss of fingers, nose, and ulcer-covered skin. The reason that Hawaiian lepers pre-1850 could live their lives enfolded in the wider community was because leprosy is in fact only mildly infectious, because the symptoms take years to manifest physically, and, presumably, because society was tolerant of bodies which deviated – in this way at least – from the standardised norm.⁷ Through this example, Waxler highlights the temporal and spatial aspects of leakiness, and introduces us to a critique of what Angela Willey calls 'capital S science', the sanitisation and sanctioning as fact of colonial ideology.⁸

Let us first turn to the role of time in leakage. The Chinese workers migrating to Hawaii in the mid 19th century made for convenient scapegoats, but it is very unlikely that they were

⁵ Waxler, 'Learning to be a Leper', pp. 151-2.

⁶ Waxler, p. 152.

⁷ Waxler, p. 149.

⁸ 'A World of Materialisms: Postcolonial Feminist Science Studies and the New Natural', *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 41.6 (2016), 991-1014 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243916658707>> [accessed 16 April 2021], p. 994.

a source of the outbreak since their arrival coincided with rather than preceded it.⁹ Leprosy, although leaky, is slowly so: it can take decades to see the effects of it.¹⁰ There is a phase of incubation, of latency, as Michelle Murphy explains:

Latency is a synonym of lag. It is the period of time between a stimulus and a response, the gap between one event and another [...] it is the wait between [molecular] exposure and symptom. To be latent is to be 'not yet': a potential not yet manifest, a past not yet felt.¹¹

During the Covid-19 pandemic we have become familiar with thinking in terms of incubation periods, calculating days between contact and test, thinking that we could be asymptomatic but contagious, fearing latent symptoms, waiting to learn to what extent our pasts will haunt us and for how long.

The crucial difference, however, is that Covid-19 is a virus, while leprosy is a bacterial infection: the speed with which the former spreads through individual and social bodies is far more rapid than the latter, and this is unusual to see in discard studies. Typically, what we see when we look at pollutant non-human bodies, whether microscopic parasites such as bacterium, or toxic chemicals from industrial processes, is a slow and persistent leaching into and out of human/animal bodies: harm done not with a bang but a long, low-key whimper. In chapter four I discuss in more detail the temporality and spatiality of chemical pollutants by looking at specific pesticides in specific bodies and environments. For now, it is helpful for our conversation on latency and leakiness to speak generally about pollutant non-human bodies, be that pesticide, plasticiser, or parasite, under the umbrella term 'endocrine disruptor'.

Endocrine disruptors have the same molecular shape as hormones. When they leak into a living body, they slot into hormone receptors like keys into locks and turn on or off DNA

⁹ Waxler, p. 152.

¹⁰ 'Leprosy', *World Health Organisation*, 10 September 2019 <<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/leprosy>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

¹¹ 'Distributed Reproduction, Chemical Violence, and Latency', Life (Un)Ltd: Feminism, Bioscience, Race, *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, 11.3 (2013) <<https://sfoonline.barnard.edu/life-un-ltd-feminism-bioscience-race/distributed-reproduction-chemical-violence-and-latency/>> [accessed 28 July 2020].

work which would not have otherwise been triggered at that time, or in that way, or at all. Thus, they can also be considered as participants in latency: they do not create new characteristics in bodies but rather manifest characteristics which were already present. Endocrine systems are ever shifting and, broadly speaking, differentiated by age and gender. Endocrine disruptors therefore affect different bodies differently depending on what stage of the daily, seasonal, and annual hormone cycles the body is at when it encounters them. In short, this means that ‘foetuses, children and women are [disproportionately] affected’.¹² But other factors such as the longevity of exposure, the number of particles per billion (ppb) of an endocrine disruptor in a body, and a person’s ‘bodily knowledge’ also play a role.¹³ For example, Nicholas Shapiro’s study of the industrial chemical formaldehyde outlines how men and women experience formaldehyde-rooted illnesses differently because of pervasive, normative gender roles. This difference is caused by ‘the feminization of body care, domestic care, health care—seeking and self-monitoring for bodily dysfunctions [... and] increased exposure to domestic chemicals encountered in the course of many of these labors’.¹⁴ But Shapiro also proposes that men do not consider themselves harmed by endocrine disruptors leaking into their bodies because admitting that their bodies are ‘permeable and vulnerable’ would challenge concepts of their masculinity. Men, he says, are more likely to attribute illnesses triggered by formaldehyde to natural processes of aging, enacting an ‘active indifference to slight somatic abnormalities’.¹⁵

Just as we saw in the case of leprosy in Hawaii, we see here again that illness is socially constructed. Waxler explains the difference between the bio-medical approach to illness, which, typical of germ theory, would reduce leprosy and formaldehyde-poisoning to

¹² Liboiron, p. 142 & 145-6.

¹³ Nicholas Shapiro, ‘Attuning to the Chemosphere: Domestic Formaldehyde, Bodily Reasoning, and the Chemical Sublime’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 30.3 (2015), 368–393 <<https://doi.org/10.14506/ca30.3.02>> [accessed: 28 July 2020], p. 370.

¹⁴ Shapiro, p. 374.

¹⁵ Shapiro, p. 374.

their molecular parts, and social labelling theory, which is more closely aligned to miasma theory. Following labelling theory

who is to be called 'ill' is determined by the individual's social position and society's norms rather than by universal and objectively defined signs and symptoms. Further, a person is labeled as 'ill' in the course of social negotiations between himself, his doctor, his family, sometimes ward staff and others. The outcome of such social negotiations is influenced by each person's beliefs and training and also by the social and organizational contexts in which the negotiation occurs. Once labeled as 'ill' the individual may find himself caught in the midst of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Depending upon his social position he may find that de-labeling is difficult, that continued illness is expected and therefore that his symptoms continue.¹⁶

Hence, we see how people move in and out of the classification of 'ill' based more on the social structures in which they live than on the molecular structures in their bodies. And we see how an understanding of trouble in/with a body can leak from the classification of 'an inconvenience' into the classification of 'illness' over a period of time, as cultural understandings of it change, and as these changing understandings dictate how those labelled as 'ill' must live and experience life.

Another crucial note to make on the temporality of endocrine disruptors is their tendency to leak across generations. Rather than (just) triggering unusual DNA work in a mother and/or in the foetus of a mother who comes into contact with them, endocrine disruptors trigger unusual DNA work in the eggs and sperm, and therefore future child, of that foetus. In other words, the effects of these molecules will continue to manifest after two generations, even if there is no further immediate exposure to pollutant non-human bodies. Research shows sexual imbalances and abnormalities in populations of human and non-human animals which have, over a long durée, persistently been exposed to low levels of endocrine disruptors. These populations are disproportionately female, a result of the feminisation of male embryos caused by hormonal disruption in mothers(-to-be), as well as

¹⁶ Nancy Waxler, 'The Social Labeling Perspective on Illness and Medical Practice', *The Relevance of Social Science for Medicine*, ed. by Leon Eisenberg, Arthur Kleinman (Springer: Dordrecht, 1981), 283-306
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-8379-3_13 [accessed 19 April 2021], p. 283.

the disproportionate death of male embryos. Let us look, for example, to the waste colonialism enacted against the Aamjiwnaang First Nation, a Canadian Indigenous people who have been confined to a reservation along the industrially polluted St Clair river.¹⁷ The Aamjiwnaang First Nation have seen 'a dramatic reduction in [their] birth ratio of boys to girls [...]. Between 1999 to 2003, of the 100 children born in the community, only 35 were boys'.¹⁸ Thus, we see another form of lag: the absence of what should be, the loss of populations not manifested, 'lives not born'.¹⁹ We see that the compounded effect of this across multiple generations is the community's inability to continue reproducing: leakage here functions as a quiet, unhurried genocide.

But, staying in the St Clair river and directing our attention to different animal species, we see, equally, permutations of sex outside the male-female binary. We see lives which would not otherwise have been born. Murphy pays particular attention to the round goby fish, an invasive species brought to the Great Lakes from Europe as an unintended consequence of globalised trade. Scientists have found multiple male genders among goby populations in the St Clair river, distinguished from normative male bodies by characteristics such as 'the presence of eggs and sperms in male goby testes' and 'a shorter length of the male urogenital papilla'.²⁰ Despite endocrine disruptors causing such intergenerational changes to the expression of sex in goby bodies, goby reproduction has not suffered and, indeed, they have thrived in these polluted waters where native fish have not. They are, to use Murphy's expression, 'queer survivors'. However, their position as an invasive species is easily politicised with anti-immigrant sentiment: they are foreigners, immigrants, illegal, unwanted. Because gobys feed off 'benthic zone mussels which [are] filter-feeding invertebrates known to bioconcentrate contaminants', they bring back into circulation polluting particles which had

¹⁷ For an in-depth definition of the term see Max Liboiron, 'Waste Colonialism', *Discard Studies*, 11 January 2018 <<https://discardstudies.com/2018/11/01/waste-colonialism/>> [accessed 20 April 2020].

¹⁸ Murphy, 'Distributed Reproduction', p. 2.

¹⁹ Murphy, p. 2.

²⁰ Ibid.

theretofore been contained.²¹ Like the Chinese migrant workers in Hawaii, also a product of western trade expansion, gobys are accused both of being contaminated and of contaminating.

In this way migrants, both human and non-human, are analogous as molecules of contagion and pollution; where migrants move across continents, molecules move across bodies. The body itself, then, becomes a site for leakage. I read reproduction in Murphy's work as a form of leaking in the same way that I see infection as such. In questioning and troubling heteronormative ideas about reproduction, Murphy follows on from Haraway's cyborg politics, which challenges conceptualisations of bodies as 'natural' and contained within the skin. Murphy thus broadens understandings of reproduction from something that (only) 'happens in bodies' to something that (also) happens *beyond* bodies. In the Anthropocene, 'when all life, all ecosystems, and the entire planet has been rearranged by human activity' and 'conditioned by the chemical distributions of industrialism', reproduction can no longer be seen 'primarily as an embodied, forward-moving, anticipatory, generative process'.²² Instead, we must employ a miasmatic, labelling theory approach to the body as a site networked within the larger social and cultural body. We must acknowledge that past, present and future are all wrapped up together in the here and now. We must learn from public health crises like Covid and endocrine-disrupting chemicals that even when the pollutant is the same, different bodies can react to it with a wide range of symptoms and unusual mutations which we cannot with certainty predict.

Grouping these disparate theories and fragment examples together within a framework of leakage has allowed me to explore contagion as a miasmatist might. Such an approach allows us to think 'creatively, capaciously, pluralistically, and thus irreverently with respect to the rules of science and about the boundaries and meanings of matter, life, and "humanness"'.²³ It is an effort to 'destabilize rather than reconsolidate Eurocentric stories

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Willey, 'A World of Materialisms', p. 994.

about the relationship between “materialism” and “Science”,²⁴ and thereby open us up to leaky knowledge about leaky things.

²⁴ Willey, p. 994.

Chapter 3. Post-Settler:

Polluted possibilities in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*

This chapter focuses on *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright, a Waanyi writer and activist. The novel looks at waste in relation to Indigenous life, and Indigenous life which has been wasted or trashed: it presents Aboriginal ontologies which, filtered through the beautiful, polluted poetics of protagonist Oblivia, or 'Oblivion Etyhl(ene)', are mutated, leaky, toxified, hybridised and multiversal. These ontologies are situated in a near-future world of extreme ecological breakdown, in an Australia subjected to drought and flooding which acts as both paradise and prison for its inhabitants, Aboriginal and settler, including climate refugees from a devastated northern Europe as well as internally displaced people. *The Swan Book* deals with concepts of belonging, Country,¹ nationhood, sovereignty and self-determinism on macro- and micro- levels. It looks at understandings of story and storytelling, dystopia/utopia as both literary form and historic/current/possible reality. It explores the construction and destruction of material and metaphoric worth through Eurocentric, colonial, white Australian, Indigenous and hybridised value systems. The narrative, coiling serpentine around itself, follows Oblivia from her home in a rusted hull on a putrid 'Swan Lake' to her life in a flooded southern city

¹ Bawaka Country et al outline that 'Country is a word in Aboriginal English which includes not just the territorial, land-based notion of a homeland, but encompasses humans as well as waters, seas and all that is tangible and non-tangible and which become together in a mutually caring and multi-directional manner to create and nurture a homeland.' See Bawaka Country including Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Sarah Wright, Kate Lloyd, and Laklak Burarrwanga, 'Caring as Country: Towards an ontology of co-becoming in natural resource management', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 54.2 (August 2013), 185-197 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12018>> [accessed 10 July 2021]. For more (academic sources) on the meaning of Country in Aboriginal knowledge systems see Jill Milroy and Grant Revell, 'Aboriginal Story Systems: Re-mapping the West, Knowing Country, Sharing Space', *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, 5 (March 2013) <<http://occasion.stanford.edu/node/123>> [accessed 10 July 2021]. See also Neil Harrison and Rebecca McLean, 'Getting yourself out of the way: Aboriginal people listening and belonging in the city', *Geographical Research*, 55.4 (November 2017), 359– 368 <[10.1111/1745-5871.12238](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12238)> [accessed 10 July 2021].

after her abduction and (en)forced (arranged) marriage to Warren Finch, Australia's first Aboriginal president, then her journey back to the swamp and life there after his assassination.

In this chapter I will explore how *The Swan Book* both satisfies and challenges utopian/dystopian concepts, as well as conventions within the dystopian literary genre. Wright shows us: the wasting of people through miscarriages of justice perpetrated by the state; the destruction of a private world through policies that dislocate people from kin and culture and obliterate sovereignty over one's own mind; the destruction of memory of the past, in part through the (attempted) annihilation of language. But this chapter also shows the contamination of dystopian criteria: the wasting of a utopian ideal is complicated by the reclamation of wasted ideals; the sacrifice and scapegoating of people in the name of state ideology is muddled by the complicity of 'sell-out' nations; the emotional distance from the protagonist and the protagonist's world is made blurry by an infiltrating, infecting poetic and the knowledge that the dystopia described is more real than fiction.

Setting the Scene

'country never leaves its people'²

From June 2019 to May 2020 Australia was ablaze. The wildfires moved over 170,000 square kilometres of land, killing a billion animals, human and non-human alike, devastating populations and pushing some species into extinction, destroying ancient ecologies of bush and billabong.³ Every day the news reports brought updates of more wreckage, suffering, and fear. I spoke with friends both in and outside of the country; their heartbreak and anger and despair reflecting my own. In an attempt to assuage my guilt and helplessness I donated money to the fire services – and felt no better. I heard stories of (Aboriginal) flags flown at half

² Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book* (London: Constable, 2015), p 26. Subsequent references in footnotes as *TSB*.

³ Lisa Richards, Nigel Brew and Lizzie Smith, '2019–20 Australian bushfires—frequently asked questions: a quick guide', Research Paper Series, Parliamentary Library, *Parliament of Australia*, 12 March 2020 <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/7234762/upload_binary/7234762.pdf> [accessed 12 September 2020].

mast, I read the poetry of grieving Australians written in response to the disaster, and wept.⁴ I am haunted, still, by the images of burned koalas.

Yet there is another image, one which was not photographed or shared widely and internationally on social media, that has been even more haunting. The wildfires coincided with my research for this chapter so that alongside the burning I was also learning about the Aboriginal experience of apocalypse: the end of the world brought by the First Fleet; the proclamation of *terra nullius*; the Indigenous struggle to gain/reclaim legal rights to land, or 'Native Title', which in practice actually diminished Indigenous rights and protections;⁵ and the ongoing atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples by the Australian state and society. As Wirlomin-Noongari writer Claire Coleman says, 'We don't have to imagine an apocalypse, we survived one. We don't have to imagine a dystopia, we live in one — day after day after day.'⁶ I do not mean to imply that there is a hierarchy here: it is possible to react with as much empathy and outrage to the torture and massacre of non-humans and more-than-humans by unmanaged bushfire as to the torture and massacre of humans by police. But where the former is tinged with the paternalistic idea that animals are helpless against us (and our anthropogenic, or *capitalogenic* climate emergency⁷), the latter is disturbing because it is deliberately constructed and directly enacted and has been met at every stage with strong and committed Indigenous resistance. To be clear, it is important to make a distinction between

⁴ Raphael Kabo, 'Quiet Australians', *Instagram*, 4 January 2020 <<https://www.instagram.com/p/B64VLYPB35I/>> [accessed 10 January 2020].

⁵ Mick Gooda, 'The Native Title Act 20 years on: where to from here? Themes from the Native Title Reports 1994–2012', speech given at AIATSIS National Native Title Conference, *Australian Human Rights Commission*, 5 June 2013 <<https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/native-title-act-20-years-where-here-themes-native-title-reports-1994-2012>> [accessed 25 June 2021].

⁶ Claire G. Coleman, 'First Nations Australians Survived an Apocalypse', *ABC*, December 2017 <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-08/first-nations-australians-survived-an-apocalypse-says-author/9224026>> [accessed 18 January 2020].

⁷ Jason Moore rejects 'anthropocentric flattening' and 'economic reductionism', relocating blame for climate breakdown away from those who did the least to cause it and suffer the worst from it, onto those who contributed most, benefit from this contribution, and bear the least burden of it: 'Capitalocene & Planetary Justice', *Maize*, 6 (Summer 2019) <<https://jasonwmoore.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Moore-The-Capitalocene-and-Planetary-Justice-2019-Maize.pdf>> [accessed 10 March 2021].

human and non- or more-than-human life here, as it was in the previous chapter, because of the use of race historically to deny humanity, and therefore basic human rights, to black and brown people. I will consider the imperative to value non-human life in greater depth later in this chapter, but for the moment let us stay with the trouble of devaluing and wasting humans.

In one article, detailing a dozen murders of Aboriginal people by law enforcement officers or state-protected civilians within the last few decades alone (and note that this is without touching on those killed through racialised public policy), I read the following:

On Australia Day, 2008 Mr Ward, a respected Aboriginal man, was picked up by Laverton Police in the West Australian desert for drink driving.

He was refused bail - illegally - and then transported hundreds of kilometres south to Kalgoorlie.

Mr Ward didn't survive the journey. He was cooked to death in the back of a privately contracted prison van, the air-conditioning of which was not working.

A coronial inquest revealed the heat was so intense in the back of the van that Mr Ward suffered fourth degree burns to his body. After collapsing to the floor, a hole was burnt through his skin, exposing his organs.

No-one has ever been held criminally liable for Mr Ward's death, despite several warnings delivered to the WA Department of Justice that the fleet of prison transport vans were dangerous.⁸

It is difficult to process the horror of this story, and when reminded of it I feel it hit me every time with full force. I am sorry that this happened and continues to happen. And I am sorry to share the knowledge and emotion of it with you. Within dystopian discourses there is a logic which says that even if we are powerless to end or change the suffering described, we must bear witness to the fact of it, to the injustice of it; that we must know and tell the details, vivid and gory, so that we suffer in solidarity alongside the victims/survivors.⁹ I am not sure that

⁸ Chris Graham, 'The Killing Fields of Australia – A Matter of Routine', *JohnPilger.com*, 23 July 2017, <<http://johnpilger.com/articles/the-killing-fields-of-australia-a-matter-of-routine>> [accessed 13 February 2020].

⁹ This was a discussion I had with attendees at the conference 'Utopian Acts', at Birkbeck University London, 8 October 2018. It is also seen in the conversation on whether we (non-black people) should participate in the viewing and sharing of videos showing violence against black people, exemplified in the reaction first to the footage showing a police officer murder George Floyd and then with the subsequent trial.

suffering spread is suffering cured, but to an extent I agree with this: the power of story is well established, discussed in part in this thesis while looking at black representation (in the previous chapter) and the committing of eutopia by acting the ideal into reality (in the methodology chapter). But I am wary of dystopia which is voyeuristic and gratuitous, which recycles suffering into an emotion cultivated expressly, it seems, to sell more books, to turn a greater profit.

I feel this tension now, looking on at the bushfires and the apartheid in Australia: how can I, standing on the outside, materially unaffected (so far), ethically say anything about this situation? Equally, how can I keep quiet? It feels so pertinent, so pressing, to acknowledge and discuss this, and yet I also feel I am fetishizing, complicit through my engagement with a cultural economy of compulsive consumption – emotionally gorging on horror stories, virtue-signalling my empathy. For two days I read the first-hand accounts given by survivors of the Stolen Generation, and cried throughout it, and afterwards asked myself what good my grieving was to anyone. Nayuka Gorrie offers advice for non-Indigenous people here, saying that the discomfort which comes from being informed, and being aware of one's complicity, is no reason to remain uninformed.¹⁰ Instead, I can use any privilege afforded by my platform to amplify the voices of those who have and continue to endure Australia's real-world dystopia.

To underscore the importance of this, it is worth noting the figures presented by Minter and Wheeler of the publishing of Indigenous authors and their conclusion that the 'virtual absence [of Aboriginal peoples] in the novel form correlates with the oppressions of colonization.'¹¹ Philip Mead expands on this, remarking that there has been a '[deep] reluctance to recognise or acknowledge the social work of literature and literary sociability that includes Aboriginal styles and modes, some of them radical adaptations or subversions of the

¹⁰ In conversation with Emeli Paulo, 'Being Uncomfortable with Injustice', *Collective Potential Podcast*, 2 June 2016 <<https://omny.fm/shows/collective-potential/being-uncomfortable-with-injustice-with-nayuka-gorrie#description>> [accessed 28 January 2020].

¹¹ 'The Indigenous Australian Novel', *The Novel in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the South Pacific Since 1950*, ed. by Carol Ann Howells, Paul Sharra and Gerry Turcotte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 284-299 (p. 285).

Western traditions.’¹² With Alexis Wright’s work it is difficult not to recognise or acknowledge the indigeneity, the conversation with western traditions, the engagement with society-building and social justice. It is difficult not to admire and celebrate it. I want my work to uplift hers, and I am not alone in this. In this chapter I am contributing to an existing body of secondary literature on Wright’s work, all of which helps to build the reputation and prominence of Aboriginal literary works within a white, Anglo-centric academia. But I do this work with an awareness that I am trespassing here, and that I am not entitled to this intrusion; I do so with an awareness that my understanding of other worldviews and other peoples’ struggles is limited. We should read Indigenous stories, directly and without a non-Indigenous intermediary, for ourselves.¹³

Brave New Dystopia

‘Mixture. Mixed up. Not straight this or that. Extract! Lost purity. Not purely trustworthy.’¹⁴

The novel opens with an introduction to ‘the only full pure-blood virus left in the land’ that ‘lives’ in Oblivia’s mind.¹⁵ It is a contaminant which has morphed her thoughts and thought processes, and thereby morphed both the telling of the story and the story itself. Indeed, it alters the very idea of story/telling: we are never sure who (or what) the narrator is, from which vantage point the story is being told, or even who we as readers are supposed to be. Throughout *The Swan Book* the poetry of Leonard Cohen, Shivanda Goswami, Seamus Heaney, Pablo Neruda, Banjo Patterson, Lord Tennyson, Wagner, and WB Yeats, the languages of Waayni, French and Latin, and English-Australian slang and culturally specific allusions quilt together to create a hybrid fabric of text (on paper) and sound (in the reader’s

¹² Philip Mead, ‘Unresolved Sovereignty and the Anthropocene Novel: Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book*’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 42.4 (2018), 524-538 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2018.1539759>> [accessed 12 September 2020] p. 525.

¹³ See ‘Bringing Them Home: The “Stolen Children” Report’, *Australian Human Rights Commission*, 1 April 1997 <<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/bringing-them-home>> [accessed 5 January 2020] and *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*, ed. by Anita Heiss, (Carlton: Black Inc., 2018).

¹⁴ Wright, *TSB*, p. 13. Italics in original.

¹⁵ *TSB*, p. 1.

mind or when read aloud). The narrative thus infiltrates and spreads through each reader differently, carrying partial meanings specific to various linguistic and/or cultural groups, yet disrupting through this hybridity the reader's assumptions and ideologies regardless of the group/s to which they belong. Like the contamination of Oblivia's Swan Lake, which has caused 'algal blooms, scum on the surface, and slime-covered waterweeds'¹⁶ and on which large bevvies of black swans have nevertheless made a home, it does not destroy meaning but rather *mutates* it. I will discuss the socio-political causes, harms and responses of contamination and toxicity later, as *The Swan Book* is highly critical of settler trashing of traditional lands and First Peoples. Here I note it in order to show how Wright marries her topic with her writing style, her style with her genre, and her genre with her ethics: mutation is deviation from the norm, but we must be conscious of what that norm is, who it includes and excludes, empowers and disempowers, and what it means to claim and embrace the pollution to which one is subjected. Wright's narrative, and the poetics of her narrative, eat away at a certain dogmatic understanding of how something *should* be: a lake should be pristine, clear, sweet, sanitised water; a mind should be rational, logical, pragmatic, knowing and knowable. It leaves behind – or shits out – a messy, partial, confused and confusing alternative.

Phillip Mead reads the virus in Oblivia's mind as a curse; it is an illness caused by the dissonance between her shutting out the external, real world which has abused, neglected and traumatised her and her 'utopian impulse' of 'imagining an "ideal world"'.¹⁷ While *The Swan Book* presents challenges to generic categorisation by lending itself to various genres including the gothic, magical realism, world literature, and Australian Indigenous storytelling, the novel also satisfies a number of dystopian genre conventions. It includes the typical themes of 'corrupt government, police control, and the use of vigilant media propaganda to critique a society with an ideal vision [and challenges the veneration of] technological

¹⁶ *TSB*, p. 70.

¹⁷ Mead, 'Unresolved Sovereignty', p. 528.

advancement'.¹⁸ It is, essentially, a conversation about dreamed-of worlds and nightmare worlds: it is a text which asks hard questions about the place in these for unwanted things.¹⁹ For Arnaud Barras *The Swan Book* affects a 'horizon change' which redefines Australian literature. When Oblivia quotes '*He who becomes a swan, instructs the world!*', he proposes that it

not only [...] mean[s] that [her] readings are transforming her and her world, but it also means that the material *Swan Book* is to instruct its 'world'—here referring both to its readership and to the body of works to which it belongs, in this case Australian literature. [...] The multilayeredness [...] and the transgression of epistemological and ontological borders produced thus become an impetus to rethink Australian literature.²⁰

I believe that this can just as credibly apply to the dystopian genre. Wright centres Indigenous understandings of the world and of telling the world, she upends current power structures (to an extent) by positioning middle-class Europeans as climate refugees, and yet she still positions the reader alongside Oblivia as she walks Country, polluted and ravaged as it is, and thus offers non-Indigenous readers a place in the future. By so doing, Wright infects dystopia/utopia with more than just social dreaming, whether optimistic or nightmarish, or strategy of warning. Mead makes the point that Wright is not lending concerns and forms of Indigenous storytelling to the dystopian tradition, but that the inverse instead is true – she 'remediates speculative fiction in Aboriginal terms.'²¹ I find it more helpful to ground my understanding of 'horizon change' (read: evolution) in the concept of symbiogenesis furthered

¹⁸ Adelle L. Sefton-Rowston, 'Hope at the End of the World: Creation Stories and Apocalypse in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*', *Antipodes*, 30.2 (2016), 355-368

<<https://doi.org/10.13110/antipodes.30.2.0355>> [accessed 21 February 2020], p. 361.

¹⁹ Philip Mead, 'The Injusticeable and the Imaginable,' *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 16.2 (2016)

<<https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/JASAL/article/view/11400/11064>> [accessed 13 February 2020], p. 1 & 8.

²⁰ Arnaud Barras, 'The Law of Storytelling: The Hermeneutics of Relationality in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*', *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 15.3 (2015)

<<https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/JASAL/article/view/10564/10442>> [accessed 17 January 2020], p. 10.

²¹ Mead, 'The Injusticeable and the Imaginable,' p. 8.

by Lynn Margulis. The theory of symbiogenesis is that evolution happens through the coming together of 'very different kinds of organisms'²² to produce something entirely different again, rather than 'through natural selection [...] by the gradual accumulation, over eons, of single gene mutations.'²³ The new entity is neither better nor worse than any of its original parts, although the change may – or may not – make the new entity more likely to survive. *The Swan Book* works to transgress the dystopian genre away from its classic concerns by collapsing binary conceptualisations into each other, so that while reading it we reside in a place which is *both* paradise *and* hell, *both* hopeful *and* hopeless, and is therefore *more than* either: it is a place always available for reclamation, which is to say change, which is to say *mutation*.

However, I am cautious about making this point without also emphasising the imbalanced power dynamics present both in real world Australia, and in the Australia of *The Swan Book*. Waste theory urges us always to ask what power structures are in place and on what ideology these are built when considering the value of anything, whether person, place, object, or idea. To this end Mead highlights the importance of *The Swan Book* and its foregrounding of its Indigenous storytelling techniques, apprehensions, worldview and material existence in our world. He positions the novel within the context of Australia's narratives about its national identity, its past and future, which are deeply racist in their consistent dismissal and denigration of the Aboriginal right to exist, care-take Country, and self-determine. The indigeneity in *The Swan Book*, he claims, is vital and necessary because it is through this that Wright disrupts white arrogance, anxiety and oppression and speaks back against it: 'The difficult issue with [...] *The Swan Book*, it seems, is that it imagines a complex Indigenous future not just for Australia, but for the planet.'²⁴

While she challenges and muddies binaries, Wright is nevertheless concerned with showing that this is not a binary of parity, that there is a vast imbalance of power between white Australia and Australian Indigenous peoples under current political and social systems,

²² Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution*, (Amherst: Basic Books, 1998), p. 33.

²³ Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet*, p. 8.

²⁴ Mead, 'Unresolved Sovereignty', pp. 526-6.

as well as in a future which is built upon the remains of those systems. As we saw with N.K. Jemisin's 'The Broken Earth' trilogy, this is a dystopian text which suggests that the only way to salvage a better world from fallen/ing imperial civilisations, from worlds which should never have been built in the first place, is to destroy them and begin again. Where and when these beginnings begin, however, is 'not always clear, [...] and Wright offers only partial visions for the future, speaking through chaos, destruction, and disorder in order to bring about social transformation.'²⁵ Contemporary utopian thinking emphasises that paradise is not a fixed and future place, but rather that it is an act/ion towards social justice which we must commit in the here and now. By both producing 'rubble fiction'²⁶ and through the alternatives that this fiction offers, Wright sidesteps the inevitable failure of attempting to dismantle the master's house with the master's tools, and in so doing makes social transformation possible. She commits eutopia.

Apocalypse Now

'like a cut letting in poison, and trying to steal the controls, and steering them around to do bad things to each other.'²⁷

In a piece which is as instructive as it is self-reflective, Emilie Collyer comments on dystopia's rising popularity in recent years, notably since the Great Recession, among white (Australian) audiences, particularly where the story follows white protagonists: 'It's quite a privilege to fear an imagined dystopic future of subjugation when you are living a life that stems from, depends on and continues to enact [...] the subjugation of others.'²⁸ Claire Coleman, referenced earlier, is one of many people from Indigenous communities, not only from Australia but also from North America, who speaks about the Indigenous experience as one

²⁵ Sefton-Rowston, 'Hope at the End of the World', p. 362.

²⁶ A term first used by Gunter Grass, in Mead, 'Unresolved Sovereignty', p. 535.

²⁷ TSB, p. 94.

²⁸ Emilie Collyer, 'The dystopia is real', *Overland*, 1 September 2017 <<https://overland.org.au/2017/09/the-dystopia-is-real/>> [accessed 10 February 2020]

of resisting and enduring dystopia.²⁹ And indeed, Wright's depiction of Indigenous subjugation in the text is more a representation of historical and current realities than it is an invention or extrapolation of a worrying present into its extreme in the future. This includes:

1. State intervention in the Northern Territories, which was done in the name of child protection, but which has never led to any prosecution. It has, however, led to 'one of the greatest mining and commodities booms in the 20th and 21st Centuries' as Aboriginal lands were forced open by the Commonwealth government 'if they wished to continue [receiving] federal welfare funding'.³⁰
2. The dislocation, ghettoization and excessive, targeted, and brutal policing of Aboriginal communities.³¹
3. The dumping of toxic waste into these ghettoized areas.³²
4. The removal of Aboriginal children from their parents.³³
5. The contempt and condescension with which Aboriginal governance and customs are treated, both officially and societally.³⁴

²⁹ Claire G. Coleman, 'First Nations Australians Survived an Apocalypse', *ABC*, December 2017 <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-08/first-nations-australians-survived-an-apocalypse-says-author/9224026>> [accessed 18 January 2020]. See also Nick Estes, *Our History Is The Future* (London: Verso, 2016) and the podcast series 'All My Relations', <<https://www.allmyrelationspodcast.com/blog>> [accessed 16 June 2021].

³⁰ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, 'Driving Across Settler Late Liberalism: Indigenous Ghettos, Slums and Camps', *Ethnos*, 84.1 (2018), 113-123 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2018.1487988>> [accessed 10 February 2020], p. 116. See also: Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, 'What is the Northern Territories Intervention?', *Monash University* <<https://www.monash.edu/law/research/centres/castancentre/our-areas-of-work/Indigenous/the-northern-territory-intervention/the-northern-territory-intervention-an-evaluation/what-is-the-northern-territory-intervention>> [accessed 3 March 2020].

³¹ See Povinelli, 'Driving Across Settler Late Liberalism'. See also Bond, Chelsea, Mukandi, Bryan and Coghill, Shane, "'You cunts can do as you like": the obscenity and absurdity of free speech to Blackfullas', *Continuum*, 32.4 (2018), 415-428 <[10.1080/10304312.2018.1487126](https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2018.1487126)> [accessed 12 September 2020].

³² Dr Jim Green and Sister Michele Madigan, 'Dumping On South Australia's First Nations', *New Matilda*, 14 February 2020 <<https://newmatilda.com/2020/02/14/dumping-on-south-australias-first-nations/>> [accessed 9 August 2020].

³³ 'Bringing Them Home', *Australian Human Rights Commission*. See particularly the testimonies provided by Aboriginal survivors themselves <<https://bth.humanrights.gov.au/our-stories/written-testimonies>> [accessed 12 February 2020].

³⁴ Mead, 'Unresolved Sovereignty', p. 525.

6. The disproportionately high levels of missing and murdered Aboriginal women.³⁵
7. The expectation that Aboriginal peoples should internalise and assimilate to white Australian ideals.³⁶

Wright's future fictional Australia wastes its Indigenous populations in much the same way as present-day Australia does. Taken point by point, we see parallels in the text:

1. The swamp is operated under army control: 'among the mix of political theories and arguments about how to preserve and care for the world's environment and people, the Army was being used in this country to intervene and control the will, mind and soul of the Aboriginal people'.³⁷
2. The swamp is land reclaimed, after decades of fighting, by the traditional landowners who had been displaced by white settlers. Legally, however, it is not theirs as 'their Native Title had been lost irredeemably and disappeared from the face of the planet'.³⁸ Furthermore, the swamp is, at the time of the novel's opening, also used by the state as a dumping ground for Aboriginal people from other parts of the continent: 'In this oasis of abandonment, home for thousands forcibly removed from other "more visible" parts of Australia by the Government, the swamp became a well-known compound for legally interning *whoever* needed to be secluded far away behind a high, razor-edged fence from decent people of mainstream civilization'.³⁹
3. Having been at the disposal of settler Australia, the swamp has become a place hazardous to life: the people of Swan Lake knew 'the contaminated lake caused

³⁵ Isabella Higgins and Sarah Collard, 'Lost, Missing or Murdered?', ABC, 8 December 2019 <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-08/australian-Indigenous-women-are-overrepresented-missing-persons/11699974?pfmredir=sm>> [accessed 21 July 2020].

³⁶ Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap, 'Closing the Gap Reports', 2009-2020, <<https://closingthegap.niaa.gov.au/>> [accessed 12 September 2020]. See also Pauline Hanson's parliamentary speech, which offers an insight into some of the ways in which such policy is problematic (the speech itself also being problematic): Pauline Hanson, 'Pauline Hanson's speech on Closing the Gap', 12 February 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhkO2ernG6w>> [accessed 7 August 2020].

³⁷ TSB, p. 47.

³⁸ TSB, p. 10.

³⁹ TSB, p. 52.

bellyaches, having to eye each cup of tainted water they drank from the lake, but drinking it anyway. There was not much choice about pure and pristine anymore'.⁴⁰

4. Oblivia's parents, stigmatised with accusations of alcoholism because she was deemed a 'failure to thrive' child, refuse to take her back when Bella Donna (under pressure from an Elder) finally informs them that she has found their child: '*It's the truth of what you get with white government social engineering intervention mucking up more blackfella lives*'.⁴¹
5. At the council meeting between Warren Finch and the Swan Lake Elders, a 'Canberra-imposed controller' who 'knew Aboriginal people better than they knew themselves' and has dictated the Commonwealth government's Aboriginal policy, patronises and ridicules the Elders for their initial silence because he does not realise or credit the protocol necessary before business can begin.⁴²
6. Bella Donna continuously reminds Oblivia that she is just one of many 'women and girls around the swamp who has gone missing forever', a fact which haunts Oblivia, and therefore the narrative, with the recurring motif of 'where are all the girls?'⁴³
7. Bella Donna's 'aim in life was to get the girl [Oblivia] to act normal: behave and sit up straight at the table and use a knife and fork properly, learn table manners, talk nicely, walk as a butterfly flies, dress like a normal person, learn something marvellous on a daily basis, and show some resilience.' Warren, on the other hand, has learnt this lesson. He is palatable as a Prime Minister because he has allowed his indigeneity to be tokenised and white-washed. While he has maintained his understanding of Aboriginal Law, and while he can dance with the Brolgas, Warren nevertheless is unable to visit other Indigenous communities without viewing them through the colonial lens. In his subsequent decision to destroy the swamp, we can see how white

⁴⁰ TSB, p. 11.

⁴¹ TSB, p. 47; 85-6; 82.

⁴² TSB, p. 136; 137.

⁴³ TSB, p. 87.

settler 'control proliferated until there was full traction over what these [colonised] people believed'.⁴⁴

In these ways, we see dystopia depicted, rather than imagined. The imaginary impulse ventures instead into what it means to survive such human-made suffering, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Skin system and Sad News, Sorry Business

Wright also depicts ways in which white populations, anxious to be (seen as being) culturally sensitive without engaging in any genuine or practical solidarity, add to these dystopian processes of wasting. The following passage outlines the responses of white dignitaries and public figures at Warren and Oblivia's wedding, and is quoted at length to show the cutting humour and strange clarity with which Wright outlines such insincerity, as well as the dangers of it:

they all wanted to know about customary law practices now: [...] *Look at them biting at the bit to say that they have always acknowledged arranged marriages. [...] Last week they all wanted to outlaw it. You watch: They will be racing and falling over themselves to get back to Canberra in the morning to dust the cobwebs off that old 1970s customary law report and scratching their heads to figure out how to be first to bring all your old laws and practices into legislation which they had previously outlawed to death. [...] Trying to be honourable. Such hypocrites. [...] Fancy trying to justify oblique practices from another culture they know nothing about and wanting to build it into the normal practice of Australian law.*⁴⁵

Wright is writing dirty here: *The Swan Book* disrupts the ideology of well-intentioned white readers by exposing the falseness, or the self-serving agenda, of our/their interest in Indigenous practices. The radical nature of dirt is its ability to disturb,⁴⁶ and in this way Wright unsettles her white (Australian) readers, speaking against the political and cultural power structures which maintain our/their privilege. Indeed, throughout the book we see the

⁴⁴ *TSB*, p. 21; 48.

⁴⁵ *TSB*, p. 225.

⁴⁶ Max Liboiron, 'Waste is not matter out of place', *Discard Studies*, 9 September 2019

<<https://discardstudies.com/2019/09/09/waste-is-not-matter-out-of-place/>> [accessed 7 January 2020].

hypocrisy of paying sympathetic lip service to Aboriginal rights, while simultaneously undermining those rights through an insistence on the centrism of a neoliberal ontology, enacted through personal behaviours and official policy.

The treatment of Warren's body after his death is a poignant example of this: government officials deny the Brolga people 'their right to take his body home', a stance which necessitates spurious insinuations that they do not 'really belong to Warren Finch's ancestral country' and leads to emergency legislation being 'bulldozed through parliament in the dead of night which claimed that Warren Finch was the blood relative of every Australian, which gave power to the government to decide where he was to be buried.'⁴⁷ While the Aboriginal Elders accept that '*His spirit is gone now. Up in Country*'⁴⁸, the denial of his death by the larger populace leads to city-wide rioting: 'The streets overran with picketing mourners spurred on by a bellyful of Government conspiracies in their heads. The mouth-to-mouth talk rampaging through the streets was very simply this: *Warren Finch was not dead*.'⁴⁹ John Scanlan posits that our fear of death is the root cause of our excessive, fetishist, or what he calls 'schizophrenic',⁵⁰ consumerism, proposing that 'although things are always dying away in the world of fashion,' whether that is an economy of material objects or abstract ideologies, 'the whole point of it is to reinvigorate life'.⁵¹ It is such a philosophy of fashionability, of being on trend with liberal ideas of inclusivity, which informs the decision made by *The Swan Book's* Australian government to incubate Warren's body in a food delivery truck and tour it around the country, with plans to go global, as a solution to having no appropriate place to bury him.⁵² 'For what was death?' the narrator asks, 'It was just a matter of continuing on, keeping his ideas [which were designed to appeal to white sensibilities] streaming out of centre stage in

⁴⁷ *TSB*, pp. 287-8.

⁴⁸ *TSB*, p. 287.

⁴⁹ *TSB*, p. 292.

⁵⁰ John Scanlan, *On Garbage* (London: Reaktion, 2005) p. 173.

⁵¹ Scanlan, p. 50.

⁵² *TSB*, p. 296.

perpetual memorials.⁵³ Where the Indigenous concept of death understands the continuation of a person through the lingering presence of their spirit, mainstream white society attaches value to the physical body and seeks to mimic immortality in order to capitalise on or commoditise it. Wright uses this episode to expose, tragically, the harmful ways in which the Australian government denies and co-opts Aboriginal traditional rights, all the while saying it does so in the name of and out of respect for those rights.

Black and White Thinking

'They could rock the grey matter'⁵⁴

Although it mocks white settler society, *The Swan Book* treats all its characters with the same dark humour, giving no blank cheques to any racialised or cultural group. Characters seem to be assessed against a criterion which is, although extended beyond the human only, essentially humanist. It is a standard which treats any authority, or indeed any stratifying value system, with irreverence, and which asks instead about motivations and consequences, flattening hierarchies of esteem by showing the complexities of these and the arbitrary ways of deciding worth. 'Nah,' Oblivia tells us, '*Treat people decent.*'⁵⁵ In this way, Wright does not stop at disrupting the hegemony of whiteness, but rather she goes on to problematise reductive narratives which glorify Indigenous peoples, showing the diversities of and rifts between and within Aboriginal communities, and outlining the nuances of the impossible dilemmas into which they are forced.

It is helpful here to compare Warren's Brolga Nation and Oblivia's swamp people. The former 'had been opportunistic. [...] They blamed themselves and others like the swamp people for their troubles [...] They had a long tradition of knowing how to say yes,'⁵⁶ and so gained profit from mining royalties and a treaty which allowed them to self-govern.⁵⁷ Wright

⁵³ *TSB*, p. 303.

⁵⁴ *TSB*, p. 96.

⁵⁵ *TSB*, p. 21.

⁵⁶ *TSB*, p. 105.

⁵⁷ *TSB*, p. 118.

exemplifies how such divide and conquer strategies work to waste peoples and people: the price the 'sell-out' nation pay for power is the psychological and cultural grief of partition from their kin and the Law of care-taking Country. They are coerced into dehumanising others in order to 'humanise' themselves. Having compromised their way to Treaty, to a restricted form of self-determinism, the Brolga Nation use this new (limited) power to educate Warren Finch, their 'hand-picked [...] brightest child' in both Brolga customs and western traditions so that he can become the 'fulfil[ment of] a vision primed for their own survival': the first Aboriginal leader of Australia who would 'connect Brolga values to the future of the world.'⁵⁸ But, since the Brolga traditions which Warren inherits and learns are spoiled forms of Aboriginal Law, and since he himself has been corrupted by power, his indigeneity does not prevent him from colluding with Big Business, multinational corporations and mining companies.⁵⁹ Rather, it is his indigeneity which provides the tragic wasting of the utopian ideal: when political power is still vested in structures founded on settler-colonialism, Aboriginal rule will be trashed through its assimilation.

Conversely, the swamp people of Swan Lake refused to assimilate, choosing instead to remain as 'just a second-hand, shit-cheap humanity'⁶⁰ in 'the Army's property and dumping ground'.⁶¹ Highlighting the reality of Aboriginal communities who remain in the isolated and impoverished sites to which they were dislocated as part of the missions and reserves schemes, Sefton-Rowston raises pertinent questions:

What does it mean when oppressed subjects refuse to move on from a place that has historically oppressed them at every level? How does the phenomenological existence of a people become more than a passivity of suffering? Does intelligible protest occur through pain by refusing to assimilate to mainstream society at any cost?⁶²

⁵⁸ *TSB*, pp. 106-107.

⁵⁹ Ben Holgate, 'Unsettling narratives: Re-evaluating magical realism as postcolonial discourse through Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*,' *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 51.6 (2015), 634–647
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2015.1105856>> [accessed 9 January 2020], p. 644.

⁶⁰ *TSB*, p. 106.

⁶¹ *TSB*, p. 105.

⁶² Sefton-Rowston, p. 360.

Wright's answers are, characteristically, incomplete and fragmented, leaky and slippery. Where the Brolga people adopt the ideology of white settlers, the swamp people reject the imposition that their right to exist should be dependent on the type of subjectivity constructed and enforced by the Australian state, which says that to be a 'healthy citizen', and therefore to be deserving of human rights, one must be 'properly' organised. It is an ontology which believes that everything can and should be disposed of, insisting that the right management of the home and public spaces, of the mind, and of time, is a management of neat categorisation, a rationality inherited from the Enlightenment, and an extreme use-putting or efficiency.⁶³ By remaining in the toxified Swan Lake, the Swamp people refuse to dispose of their trauma, their history, their identity. Instead, by living in it and with it, they allow for the transformations that toxification causes in all its horror and beauty and hardship and salvage: the rusting of the hulls in which people make a home, the melting together of disparate swan poetry and intrusions of it into an Indigenous narrative, the substance abuse which degenerates young Aboriginal boys into a rape gang, the virus which simultaneously allows Oblivia to survive on her own terms and mutates the meaning and appearance of survival so far away from both historic Indigenous and settler understandings of it.

Yet, in the case of Oblivia, the swamp people do not embrace the past.⁶⁴ Rather, they forsake her after her rape and disappearance. They can live with the belief that she is a 'foundling child'⁶⁵ more easily than they can live with refolding her back into the community (as they did with her rapists following their rehabilitation in an 'entertainment centre').⁶⁶ The search for Oblivia is abandoned when instead of discovering her

All they found were new tracks of possibilities for things that had once happened and should stay buried with the past. [...] Soon they were saying quite frankly, *Why can't she*

⁶³ Scanlan, pp. 176-8.

⁶⁴ For more on the relationship between forgetting and remembering in Australia (within and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians) see Chris Healy, *Forgetting Aborigines* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008).

⁶⁵ *TSB*, p. 84.

⁶⁶ *TSB*, p. 84.

*stay lost? All this searching and searching, they claimed, and the only thing discovered was shame.*⁶⁷

We need our waste to disappear because it carries in it too much of what we want to deny about ourselves. As if responding to plastic waste, or pornographic waste, or waste which reveals any socially transgressive behaviour, Oblivia's father responds to the rescuers' humiliation and ashamedly asks the community to abandon their search. This is presented as being in keeping with Indigenous customs: the stories the searchers told among themselves as they looked for Oblivia were 'new versions of old stories [which] did not fit the ground, because you know, old Law forms its own footpaths'.⁶⁸ This trauma is an imported story and there is no space within traditions of Aboriginal self-narration for such horror stories. It is not my intention here to insinuate that rape was non-existent in pre-colonial Indigenous cultures (or to elevate Aboriginal people so far above any harm-doing that I deny their humanity) but the problem of petrol and glue sniffing which fuelled these boys is both an example and a result of 'the devastation of culture and lifeworlds [, ...] of the violence and dispossession of colonisation and the poverty and despair that follow in its wake'.⁶⁹

Furthermore, this incident invokes the disaster of the Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle ('Little Children Are Sacred') report, which highlighted concerns about the sexual abuse of Aboriginal children in the Northern Territories, but which was used by the Australian state, 'in a manner contrary to the express advice of its authors' to escalate military presence and policing in the region.⁷⁰ It is notable that Oblivia is only found because Bella Donna, the lone white woman in Swan Lake, 'decided to make a nuisance of [herself ...] to step in, to plough the ground with her own eyes, and to be totally ignorant of the ins and outs of family histories'.⁷¹ Just as waste scholar Samantha MacBride compels us to scrutinize those in power

⁶⁷ TSB, p. 85.

⁶⁸ TSB, p. 85.

⁶⁹ Mead, 'Unresolved Sovereignty', p. 535.

⁷⁰ Barry Hindess, 'Unintended Rhetoric: The "little children are sacred" report', *Studies in Australian Political Rhetoric* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014) <[10.22459/SAPR.09.2014.04](https://doi.org/10.22459/SAPR.09.2014.04)> [accessed 1 March 2020].

⁷¹ TSB, p. 85.

who hide behind smokescreens of vague benevolence,⁷² Wright here compels us to scrutinize any power which does not act benevolently, including the power which guides Indigenous practices and customs.

Equally, the benevolence of Bella Donna is under question. She does not think to return Oblivia to her parents after finding her, but must be told to do so: '*you got to tell the parents, her nganja, her kin, ngada, murriba, haven't you heard of the stolen generations?*'⁷³ Bella Donna feels entitled to her 'do-gooding, saviouring and so forth'⁷⁴ and her possession of the girl, as much as the Swan Lake community feel entitled to their refutation of this trauma and abandonment of her. As stated above, the radical power of dirt lies in its ability to disrupt; both Oblivia's presence in the community and her residence with Bella Donna act 'like a bad smell [returning] from the grave'⁷⁵ – as something 'that has been forgotten, had to be forgotten, tucked away and hidden, but [that has] returned.'⁷⁶ This echoes the observations of waste theorist Gay Hawkins on how the demarcation between public and private conceptualisations of shit are thrown into new relief when one unexpectedly smells overflowing sewers after heavy downpour.⁷⁷

We have seen in this section how the dystopian state wastes people by polluting the memory of the past, by making the oppressed complicit in their oppression and in the wasting of the utopian ideal. We turn now to the ways in which Wright explores wasting in the context of Indigenous sovereignty.

Sovereignty

⁷² See Samantha MacBride, *Recycling Reconsidered: The Present Failure and Future Promise of Environmental Action in the United States* (Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 2013).

⁷³ *TSB*, p. 86.

⁷⁴ *TSB*, p. 38.

⁷⁵ *TSB*, p. 21.

⁷⁶ *TSB*, p. 83.

⁷⁷ *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 46. See also Rose George, 'The Blue Girl: Dirt in the City', *Dirt: The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life*, The Wellcome Collection (London: Profile Books, 2011), p. 161.

'This is where it begins [...] the quest to regain sovereignty over my own brain.'⁷⁸

Central to any discussion of an imagined or enacted Australian dystopia/utopia is a discussion about Aboriginal sovereignty, and indeed this is one of *The Swan Book*'s main themes. In the context of Indigenous peoples living in a settler-colonialist constructed society, sovereignty is understood to be:

the foundation of all Aboriginal rights, and responsibilities;

It's the inherent right we have to determine the future of our lands and lives;

Aboriginal sovereignty finds its roots in our connection to kin and country, the ancient reciprocal relationship we have with our lands;

It manifests in our song, dance and story, our language, ceremony and customary law;

Aboriginal sovereignty is shared by the individual, the family, the clan, the tribe, and the nation;

Our sovereignty has endured since the first sunrise; and

It's the vision for Aboriginal people to take our place among the nations and peoples of the world, not beneath them.⁷⁹

Sovereignty in *The Swan Book* is explored not only on and between the international and national level, but also as an important factor within states on a federal level, as well as within/between communities and families and, most strikingly, on a personal level. As we have seen in the above discussion, the novel shows the complex interplay between the Australian state and two different Aboriginal communities, one of which is formally recognised as sovereign and one of which is under military control; between the Brolga Nation and the swamp people; between the men and women within Swan Lake; and between the internal world of Oblivia and the external worlds of swamp and city. Sovereignty is shown as a means of controlling people and peoples, as well as a means of subverting, or attempting to subvert, that control. But by showing the constraints of working within the political and economic status

⁷⁸ *TSB*, p. 4.

⁷⁹ Callum Clayton-Dixon, 'I can't call myself an Indigenous Australian and also say Sovereignty never ceded', *The Guardian online*, 11 December 2015

<<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/11/i-cant-call-myself-an-Indigenous-australian-and-also-say-sovereignty-never-ceded>> [accessed 3 January 2020].

quo of ongoing colonialism, the compromises which must be made in order to achieve Aboriginal sovereignty as framed in western political thought (whether this is national, tribal, or personal sovereignty), Wright shows the corruption of the utopian dream. Her critique is, nevertheless, nuanced by the suggestion that there are sites of resistance and reclamation open to Aboriginal people/s, even if these are unexpected and contentious: these are wasted sites, and sites of waste.

The virus in Oblivia's brain demonstrates the struggle that any individual Aboriginal person may be forced, after the violence, dispossession and dislocation of settler-colonisation, to grapple with in order to have control over their own mind. Reading the accounts from survivors of the Stolen Generation, what becomes clear is that the trauma of Australia goes beyond colonisation and institutionalisation: these children were not only removed from their immediate families and communities, nor from their land, nor from their Indigenous ontologies, but from *any* family, community, land, ontology. It is not accurate to say that Oblivia's thinking lacks lucidity, or that she does not follow a logic: rather, this thinking and this logic are deviant, slippery, strange, permeable. Oblivia's mind is ruled over by a corrupting disease, which incorporates both European and Aboriginal canons, but which is uprooted and abstracted from both – from Europe geographically and from Australia through dispossession. The narration seeps into, or *is* seeped into, by Oblivia's consciousness so that the two can be conflated: *The Swan Book* is a difficult text from which to quote because no one sentence encapsulates the full sentiment, yet the sentiment is nevertheless always apparent and accessible. It is a narrative style which disrupts the neoliberal drive for efficiency, both of telling stories and understanding them.⁸⁰ One can understand *The Swan Book* (in various limited ways depending on linguistic and cultural knowledges) but only if one reads it holistically and allows

⁸⁰ The work of Sujatha Fernandes is instructive in highlighting the problems caused by western appetites and expectations in storytelling. See *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), chp. 1.

it time and space to ferment, to compost. It is a narrative of swampy water, of polluted water, and yet is a water which quenches. Wright's writing is clear, but it is a muddy clarity.

Notions of nation

'People tell stories all the time: The stories they want told, where any story could be changed or warped this way or that.'⁸¹

Additionally, the construction and expression of nationhood is integral to concepts of sovereignty. National identity is a story we tell ourselves and others about ourselves, but this story is the basis on which rights to self-determine or participate fully and equally in political, financial, material and cultural economies can be claimed or denied. It is important to note here Daniel James' distinction between nationhood as a conception of identity and land ownership as a tradition of responsibility: although 'this land always was and always will be Aboriginal land', (Australian) nation/ality is a mental and social construct and as such cannot be claimed as inherent or objective truth by any single, particular group.⁸² Nationhood was the mechanism used by the Australian state to deny Indigenous peoples' land (and human) rights: until the Mabo case(s) and the Native Title Act of 1993, Australian law operated under the seventeenth century claim of *terra nullius* – the fiction that Australia and the Torres Straits Islands could rightfully be controlled by Britain because no human societies already living there could satisfy the British criteria of ownership. Stuart Banner outlines how this claim was predicated on the invaders' perception that Indigenous peoples were too sparsely populated to fully utilise the land, that they were too ignorant and idle to build houses, undertake husbandry and develop a concept of property rights comparable to British concepts (as well as how this simply was not true).⁸³ In other words, British settlers saw what they wanted to see to legitimise their theft of the continent: they saw the lack of (individuated) use of land as

⁸¹ TSB, p. 84.

⁸² Daniel James, 'Bolt's Utopia is our Dystopia', *IndigenousX*, 3 August 2018 <<https://indigenoux.com.au/bolts-utopia-is-our-dystopia/>> [accessed 9 January 2020].

⁸³ Stuart Banner, 'Why Terra Nullius? Anthropology and Property Law in Early Australia', *Law and History Review*, 23.1 (Spring 2005), pp. 95-131.

land *wasted* – as land that was squandered. For the British and subsequent Australian governments, the concept of nationhood then was founded on a proprietary and use-putting relationship with a specific, physical land – with *territory*. By ruling in favour of Eddie Mabo and the Meriam people, the High Court found that the peoples of Murray Island did indeed have a history of ‘settled law governing occupation and use of lands’⁸⁴ for up to 75,000 years before British invasion and occupation.⁸⁵ This case highlights the importance of Indigenous ownership resembling settler concepts and narratives of nationhood: Aboriginal sovereignty is complicated, contaminated, by the necessity to work within the legal frameworks established by western settlers in order to claim it.

But the case also shows the difference between the ontologies: for Aboriginal peoples, the relationship between person or community and land is understood to be reciprocal. Wright’s own connection to Country is as intimate ‘as if it were her own flesh’.⁸⁶ What is done to Country is done to her, and vice versa. With body and land conflated in this way, we can read Oblivia’s rape metaphorically as settler-colonialism’s violation of Australian land and Aboriginal autonomy, but we also see how Aboriginal concepts of self, kin and Country surpass ‘cartographic, topographic, and anthropocentric bounds’.⁸⁷ Wright’s efforts are to disturb western ideas of sovereignty, nationhood and place, and to do so within the Australian Indigenous context. It is an effort to muck them up, to make them impure. We must be careful, however, not to fetishize such Indigenous ontologies by glorifying them as utopian alternatives to current or near-future dystopias. Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose ridicules the well-intentioned non-Indigenous proposition that Aboriginal peoples have never made mistakes,

⁸⁴ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), ‘Mabo Case’, 31 May 2019 <<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/mabo-case>> [accessed 21 February 2020].

⁸⁵ Rasmussen, Morten, and others, ‘An Aboriginal Australian Genome Reveals Separate Human Dispersals into Asia’, *Science*, 334.6052 (October 2011), 94-98 <[10.1126/science.1211177](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1211177)> [accessed 12 September 2020].

⁸⁶ Linda Daley, ‘Alexis Wright’s Fiction as World Making’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 10.1 (March 2016), Oxford University Press, 8-23 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpv028>> [accessed 3 January 2020], p. 11 & 13.

⁸⁷ Pheng Cheah quoted in Daley, ‘Alexis Wright’s Fiction’, p. 12.

nor have any holes in their knowledge about the living world around them.⁸⁸ Wright does something similar: when *The Swan Book*'s unnamed southern city is flooded, white urban refugees pour out of it and into the previously neglected rural spaces which have been used to ghettoise displaced Aboriginal peoples. They flee 'towards the mirage of the Aboriginal people's heaven they saw in the distance'⁸⁹ with the belief that these people's traditional knowledge offers a means to live sustainably on and with the land, disregarding all loss of knowledge through generations of forced assimilation and displacement, as well as the ecological devastation western capitalism has wrought to that land. What arises here is a question not only of how ownership of land is decided, but of how we appropriate ownership of *ideas* about land.⁹⁰ *The Swan Book* shows people transplanted territorially (both globally, nationally, and within communities), culturally, and psychologically; they carry with them divergent concepts of self, self-determination, nation, relationship with land and environment. Thus, boundaries between sovereignty and subjugation, between belonging and intruding, and between animate and inanimate are disrupted.

Rather than an anti-utopian insistence on the status quo, Wright works within the dystopian tradition of challenging calcified understandings and practices of nationhood. She works towards *change*. This change in part entails a restoration and safeguarding of past practices and cultures, as Jaqueline Dutton highlights is common across various Indigenous dystopian fiction.⁹¹ But it is a restoration of the respected status of Indigenous ontologies before colonisation and not necessarily a restoration of a pre-colonial status quo. In other words, respecting does not mean mummifying ontologies, nor seeking to erase the ways in

⁸⁸ 'Decolonizing the Discourse of Environmental Knowledge in Settler Societies' in *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, ed. by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, (Lanham; Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 53-71 (p. 63).

⁸⁹ *TSB*, p. 309.

⁹⁰ Adelle Sefton-Rowston, 'Sovereignty as a State of Crazy: Empowering Female Indigenous Psychologies in Australian "Reconciliatory Literature"', *HYPTIA: A Journal of Female Philosophy*, 32.3 (Summer 2017), 644-659 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12339>> [accessed 3 January 2020], p. 645.

⁹¹ Jaqueline Dutton, "'Non-western' utopian traditions', *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 223-258 (pp. 247-8).

which they have evolved as a response to colonisation and alongside colonialism. While acknowledging the criticality of engaging with Aboriginal national identity and sovereignty, Wright also insists on the claim to subjectivity that living in settler-colonial Australia affords her: Indigenous people have just as much a say in the story of Australian nationhood as they have in their respective Aboriginal national identities.⁹² Nationhood as a construct is a plastic thing. It is available for recycle, reuse, repurpose, reinterpretation. Nationhood can be shaped; we are able to shape it.

To this end, *The Swan Book* both upholds Daniel James' utopian ideal that Australia will '[continue] down the path of inclusivity and plurality, where we embrace various cultures and where the people of the first nations are meaningfully included',⁹³ and also problematises it within a future devastated by climate breakdown and a continued colonial legacy. By foregrounding refugees fleeing the disintegration of sovereign states in the Global North following loss of land to hungry tides and apocalyptic flooding, Wright is able to expose the non-truth of Australia's claim to being a successfully multicultural nation. State policy towards immigrants mirrors its policy towards Aboriginal peoples: in both cases it is based on racist attitudes and beliefs which work to dehumanise, to rubbish and to dump groups of people.⁹⁴ To this end, *The Swan Book* raises the pertinent question: 'If sovereignty is defined by markers of territory and the legality of biopolitics, what happens when those markers disappear under rising seas and the refugee-isation of whole populations erases any possibility of citizenship or belonging?'⁹⁵

One possible albeit incomplete answer to this is presented in the character of Bella Donna. Because of her connection to and faith in the guiding white swans, she eventually finds

⁹² Wright, quoted in an interview with Stephen Moss, 'Dream Warrior', *The Guardian*, 15 April 2008 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/15/fiction.australia>> [accessed 17 February 2020].

⁹³ 'Bolt's Utopia' <<https://Indigenousx.com.au/bolts-utopia-is-our-dystopia/>> [accessed 9 January 2020].

⁹⁴ For more on Fortress Australia, on the distinction between immigrants and settlers, and the economic and geo-political reasons for encouraging multiculturalism following the devastation of World War Two see: Luke Pearson, 'Australia is not a multicultural country', *IndigenousX*, 22 July 2018 <<https://Indigenousx.com.au/australia-is-not-multicultural/#.W2OQby2B0UE>> [accessed 3 January 2020].

⁹⁵ Mead, 'Unresolved Sovereignty', p. 536.

a place in the dumping ground of Swan Lake, uneasy as this place – and her place *in* it – is. When the black swans gather in the swamp, it is again through her embracing of otherness, *outsider-ness*, that she, like Oblivia and like the swans themselves, imposes her belonging on the community. Mead suggests that in ‘a nationless world’ where ‘climate refugees break the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality; they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis’.⁹⁶ We see not only the ways in which (the denial of) sovereignty is used to waste people, but also the wasting of the idea that sovereignty is a safety net of rights. Instead, we are left with the reminder that waste imposes itself: if a person has been made into waste, that person has been stripped of conventional social and legal power, but has, simultaneously, been given the disruptive, subversive power to intrude and linger – the power to *pollute*.

Dreaming (of) Stories

‘It is after all factual that terribly, terribly dry stories that flip, flop seven times in one hour are dangerous to the health of the mind.’⁹⁷

The Swan Book is a piece of literature, coming from and speaking to the imagination. Yet Wright’s fiction is a branch of her activism – both a result of and a way of expressing her politics. Her previous novel *Carpentaria*, also concerned with waste and processes of wasting, is a fictive exploration of Indigenous experiences of mining in the Gulf of Carpentaria instead of the non-fiction piece she was asked to write.⁹⁸ Had she answered that request, she notes, she would have likely been met with a law suit.⁹⁹ Alongside the duty of care felt by Aboriginal authors to safeguard their communities, families and selves from the apparatus of the settler state, there is also customary Law to take into account, which prescribes who can tell what, when, and to whom in order to safeguard traditional knowledge and culture. But legal action

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *TSB*, p. 35. Italics in original.

⁹⁸ *Carpentaria* could easily have been a primary text studied here, as it can just as easily satisfy the criteria of dystopia and is just as pertinent to waste studies. In the interests of time, however, I leave this for further / future study.

⁹⁹ Wright, quoted by Moss, ‘Dream Warrior’.

is not the only reason for turning to literature over theory or treatise. Fiction, she claims, is 'the best way of presenting a truth — not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either.'¹⁰⁰ Rather than set up a binary between empirical and imaginary, between real and non-real, this type of storytelling allows each opposite to infiltrate and infect the other: it attenuates the purity, and the idea of purity, in both. Such story-telling allows for exploration, for readers' minds to branch out of solidified, settled confines: it challenges the status quo, it shows that alternatives are possible, that we can 'dream far in all directions'.¹⁰¹ Such storytelling lends itself to ideas which are slippery and complex, ideas of sovereignty, identity, belonging, and constructions and denials of value. The power of story, both as a means of thinking through these ideas and as an influence on decision making is central to *The Swan Book* specifically, Wright's wider body of work, and indeed the dystopian/utopian project in general.

For Wright, story is a space to be reclaimed by and for marginalised peoples. Without a 'secure space', she says,

you are [un]able to ask yourself questions about what might make it better. At the moment we haven't got the space to dream a future for ourselves, or to imagine how we might want to be. A lot of our people are working so hard at the level of survival that we're not dreaming, not imagining, to the point of feeling that it's not even worthwhile to dream because we can't make our dreams come true. My role as a novelist is to explore ideas and imagination, and hopefully that will inspire people from my world to continue dreaming and to believe in dreams.¹⁰²

Story is an expression of imagining – whether that is imagining into pasts or into futures. It is important to note here the use of the word 'imagine' to mean 'to form an image of in the mind', rather than 'to think vainly or falsely', or 'to contrive or devise'.¹⁰³ At the same time, the word

¹⁰⁰ Alexis Wright, 'Politics of Writing', in *Southerly*, 62.2 (Summer 2002), 10–20, (p. 13).

¹⁰¹ Grace Dillon, 'Bahwering: Gathering Indigenous Futurisms', presentation at the 2nd Annual Symposium on the Future Imaginary, at the University of British Columbia-Okanagan, Kelowna B.C., 5 August 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDxitZic3t0>> [accessed 12 September 2020].

¹⁰² Wright, quoted by Moss, 'Dream Warrior'.

¹⁰³ 'Imagine', defined in *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, ed. by A M Macdonald (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1979), p. 651.

is used to suggest the imagination, the ability to dream, the blurring between and entanglement of the real and the unreal that distinguishes Aboriginal ontologies and cosmologies. Ian McClean cautions against arguing, in a bid to 'protect and preserve Aboriginal difference and, with it, the richness and mystery of Aboriginal culture', that Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews are incommensurable. All cultures, he notes, are accumulations of hybridity. But more importantly, this line of thinking 'is also paternalistic and blind to the policing function of its paternalism, which aims to preserve its own dominance. This policing is ideologically driven, the aim being to alienate Aboriginal thought from the modern world we all live in.'¹⁰⁴ Wright notes that to grow up Indigenous in Australia often means growing up with and in silence, either because the history (private or public) has been lost, trashed or buried through centuries of dispossession, dislocation and assimilation, or because the survivors feel too much shame to share those histories. Equally, Indigenous cultures in Australia are the world's oldest living cultures, and the customs and laws which have survived colonisation are passed onwards to next generations through stories. Wright talks about imagining the Law stories, Dreams and yarns told by her grandmother and other Elders, as much as she imagined the stories which are missing. This is a common thread through many lives:

Over many years in my work I had seen people who had been on the outside of life, not only from mainstream society but from Aboriginal society as well. Nobody knew their story. These are the people who don't talk and are treated like they don't exist.¹⁰⁵

In this way, the act of imagining is an act of remembrance, which is to say: it is a radical position that repudiates the obliteration of Aboriginal ontologies, the conceding of history to the victors, the acceptance of settler stories. It is the refusal to be consigned to – or contained within – the dustbin of history.

¹⁰⁴ Ian McClean, 'Dreamtime', *Artlink Magazine*, 29.1 (2009), 16-19 <<https://ro.uow.edu.au/creartspapers/363>> [accessed 3 March 2020], p16.

¹⁰⁵ Wright, 'Politics of Writing', pp.12 – 13.

But in *The Swan Book* we also find a hodgepodge-ing, a muddling together of stories. As a literary work, the novel acts like the fictional swamp featured in it. Both accumulate the world's flotsam and jetsam: in *Swan Lake* this manifests as animal, plant, mineral and chemical junk; in the text it takes the shape of the world's stories, whether these are Greco-Roman classical, Anglo-American canonical, or Australian Aboriginal yarns, Law and Dreaming. It scorns an isolationist expression of indigeneity: 'The swamp people said [Bella Donna's] stories were lies. The sovereign facts lying on their table said that there was nothing worth hearing about from anywhere else on earth'.¹⁰⁶ Wright is consistent in identifying herself not only as Waayni and Australian, but also as part of a global community of writers and storytellers. She explains that she had to embark on a trans-national search for understandings and experiences of blackness, of indigeneity, and of colonisation: 'I wanted somebody to speak to me because I could not find the words in Australian literature.'¹⁰⁷ There is solace, strength, salvage and solidarity to be found in stories, wherever those stories come from.

In *The Swan Book*, when Bella Donna comes to the swamp, she brings with her stories rooted in western European literature, as well as her personal stories of climate change refugeeism. Positioned thus as a story woman, she is allowed to stay in the community to yarn and pass on her traditional stories. It is only when she adopts the settler mentality and begins storytelling about 'closing the gap, moving forward as the way to become re-empowered, learning "lifestyle", of aesthetically pleasing houses and gardens' that the community dismiss her as no different from 'a local-bred redneck after all.' The response to this type of neo-colonialism, of colonising through poisonous stories, is stark and unflinching: '*We need our own practical measures to safeguard our culture.*'¹⁰⁸ Wright makes us keenly aware that the 'world is storied, and being able to identify, interpret and understand its stories is a skill that

¹⁰⁶ *TSB*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁷ Wright, 'Politics of Writing', p. 12.

¹⁰⁸ *TSB*, p. 34.

matters'.¹⁰⁹ Dystopian fiction has long known that it is crucial to know who has control over the stories that are being told, heard, believed, manifested.

Wasting words, wasted language

'it was not worth speaking.'¹¹⁰

The Swan Book plays with and poeticises English. Yet despite this linguistic dexterity, or perhaps as a comment on it, the novel positions the English language as an aggressor – a colonising force which has been used to wage dystopia against Indigenous people, trashing ancient ways of thinking and being. We see this play out in the tension between Bella Donna and Oblivia. When Bella Donna chastises her for not using her voice as an '*opportunit[y] for influencing people across the world*,'¹¹¹ Oblivia maintains her silence in part because English, as the language in which she must speak to be understood by Bella Donna, and indeed by the intended international community, is 'just a geological device to be transplanted anywhere on earth.'¹¹² Warren Finch, on the other hand, 'claimed to be one of those people who used the voice given to him by the spiritual ancestors of the land [...] to uplift Aboriginal thought to its rightful place of efficaciousness', and yet when he addresses the Swan Lake community, 'Nobody listened. Poor buggers in poor people's clothes were not the ideal crowd for the voice from Heaven.'¹¹³ Wright posits, but also parodies, the belief that we have a moral obligation to 'use [our] voice' in order to achieve utopia.¹¹⁴ The metanarrative here, of course, being that Wright is herself an anti-mining and land rights activist. The purpose of this activism is to alleviate the violent and systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples in Australia, part of which involves communicating to the world about the dystopia that they are forced to live in.

¹⁰⁹ Barras, 'The Law of Storytelling', p. 1.

¹¹⁰ *TSB*, p. 19.

¹¹¹ *TSB*, p. 23.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *TSB*, p. 130.

¹¹⁴ *TSB*, p. 23.

Although she does not engage in such work, Oblivia is intensely aware of the settler state and her situation within it, and her silence is both result of and response to it: 'by [...] saying nothing and stewing with hate and spitefulness in her guts, she reminded herself with a shiver down her spine that she would rather be dead, than waste her breath speaking to an idiot.'¹¹⁵ Wright highlights the importance of listening, of who is listening and to what end, when considering the value of speaking. At the same time, she shows how repressing language as a means of self-expression can cause (self) destruction: 'any of those screaming words that made it up to her mouth, crashed like rocks landing on enamel at the back of her clenched teeth.'¹¹⁶ Her silence keeps her ostracised and isolated from other (living) people, both in her native Swan Lake community and during her life as a presidential wife. Indeed, whether Oblivia's muteness is an ethical stance or whether she has lost the ability to speak is kept ambiguous. In some places it is framed as an active choice while in others it is framed as a consequence of ruination,¹¹⁷ and can be read as 'the denial of a voice to colonized Indigenous people', as well as the loss/eradication of Indigenous languages through colonisation.¹¹⁸ As Claire Coleman notes, 'Things cannot be explained or remembered if there are no words to talk about them.'¹¹⁹ Both author and protagonist, then, engage in a fraught relationship with English: they have been made dependent on it, yet they resist it – Wright by mastering and mutating it, Oblivia by abstaining from giving voice to it. 'Silence costs nothing just as silence means nothing',¹²⁰ we are told, and given that social injustice is as present in Wright's fiction as in her nonfiction writing, it is unsurprising that the novel foregrounds vocal protest. However, the political speeches preceding this claim, presented with a comic cynicism, undermines the sentiment: talk can also mean nothing. Thus, Wright muddies the binary of speaking versus silence, finding value in how a thing is said as much as what is said. By including cultural

¹¹⁵ *TSB*, p. 38.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *TSB*, p. 64.

¹¹⁸ Holgate, 'Unsettling narratives', p. 640.

¹¹⁹ Coleman, 'First Nations Australians Survived an Apocalypse'.

¹²⁰ *TSB*, p. 99.

references and other languages without translation, she challenges the entitlement of English speakers to omniscience, and challenges English as the dominant and domineering form of communication. But more than this, she suggests a radical alternative: language, *The Swan Book* hints, can extend beyond the human, can include and be shared between human and non-human.

Here we see how the dystopian state's attempts to destroy memory of the past can be frustrated. The language Oblivia speaks has been 'dredged from the soup of primordial memory' and imparted to her directly from the stump of a sacred eucalyptus tree.¹²¹ The words she voices are

within the range of bushland humming, such as leaves caught up in gusts of wind, or the rustling of the *wiyarr* spinifex grasses in the surrounding landscape as the wind flew over them, or sometimes the flattened whine of distant bird song, or a raging bush-fire crackling and hissing from *jujuu jungku bayungu*[.]¹²²

In *The Swan Book* we see key elements of language such as meaning-making, message-relaying, and the equal importance of listening as well as speaking, shared between (traumatised) human girl, (displaced) swans and (endangered) owls, (toxified) landscapes, (collapsing) ecosystems, (metaphoric) viruses, ghosts, manmade junk, and (colonially impacted) stories – all manner of more-than-human entities intricately connected with waste. In this way, we see Wright hinting at a 'planetary' language: a language based on alterity, which therefore dislocates us from an assumed position as subject, as speaker, as being able to know, traverse and control the world.¹²³ Such 'planet-thought' instead 'opens [us] up to what cannot be negated by human beings',¹²⁴ a decentralising of the human which permeates throughout the novel.

Waste/ing lands

¹²¹ *TSB*, pp. 7-8.

¹²² *TSB*, p. 20.

¹²³ Daley, drawing on Gayatri Spivak, p. 11.

¹²⁴ Daley, p. 11.

*'it was foreign people thinking in a pristine environment that was making this trouble'*¹²⁵

If we look at the southern city in which Warren Finch dumps Oblivia, for example, we see the city itself is 'an assemblage of relationally entangled agentic bodies' which comprises humans and non-humans, including 'warming air and seas, birds, water, wind, spirits, ghosts, flora, [and] stories.'¹²⁶ As Jane Bennett highlights: 'In each item on the list, humans and their intentions participate, but they are not the sole or always the most profound actant in the assemblage.'¹²⁷ Nevertheless, for the colonial-settler subjects, the right of these other agentic things to exist, to make demands of and exert forces upon the world is denied or vilified while their own is never questioned, nor is their right to exist *in comfort*. The 'burgeoning flora and fauna [is] dismissed as "mess," "obscure," "useless" and "redundant" for city living', and, in their unquestionable certainty that they have a home, that their home is secure, they are blind to the 'Homeless human multitudes [existing] in limbo: inhabiting ruined buildings, wandering flooded streets at night, sleeping on other streets during daylight'.¹²⁸ The difference in the Aboriginal community of the polluted Swan Lake is striking. The swamp is a dumping ground for displaced and discarded people, animals, and objects, but at the swamp waste is figured as a complex and shifting material which is as interconnected among human-non-human assemblages as any other:

it was strange what a view can do to how people think. The rotting junk clung to its secrets and in turn, the local people who did not really know what they were staring at or why the junk was staring back at them, also became secretive. [...] It was a foreign history sinking there that could not be allowed to rot into the sacredness of the ground.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ TSB, p. 63.

¹²⁶ David Harris, 'Urban Imaginaries, Homelessness, and the Literary City: Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* and Janette Turner Hospital's *The Last Magician*,' JASAL 18.1 (2018) <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/JASAL/article/view/12379/11765> [accessed 12 September 2020], p. 5.

¹²⁷ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), p. 37.

¹²⁸ Harris, quoting from Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*, 'Urban Imaginaries', p 5.

¹²⁹ TSB, p. 11.

And yet it does rot into the ground, and leech into the water, until 'The swamp [becomes] the place for reincarnation for all sorts living around the place.'¹³⁰ Whereas for the urban colonial-settler subjects, the homeless people who reclaim the city and the incessant rainwater which floods it threaten their security. As waste/d products of industrialised societies and liquid modernity, they can be wilfully ignored by those responsible for their existence but will eventually reach such volumes that they will inundate and sunder the status quo:¹³¹ through destruction they will cause transformation.

This is not Wright positing the kind of nihilism which tends to come from those in the Global North who are aware of but as yet fairly insulated from ecological collapse, who say that humans have caused this devastation and so deserve to be destroyed by it. Bella Donna is characteristic of this type of thinking: for her, evil men are responsible for climate breakdown, but she makes no differentiation for the ways in which one's positionality in hierarchies of race, class, gender, colonialism, and nationality affect how one will contribute to, experience and understand climate breakdown. Without an intersectional politics, environmentalism is doomed to perpetuate the climate crisis. The analogy of Bella Donna stealing every scrap of food from starving people and feeding it instead to the swans without 'a guilty thought in her head' captures this beautifully, especially in contrast with the wild 'homeland brolgas' who can '[walk] into any house without fear, [...] with every right to have a bit of food.'¹³² The community participates in integrated and radical conservation, of themselves and of Country, as well as they can under the conditions forced upon them. For them, Bella Donna's way of universalising the climate change story is itself 'a form of cultural violence' – an additional violence on top of the Australian Government using climate change as a weapon of 'cultural disenfranchisement, wherein Indigenous communities are removed from their ancestral land and, once departed,

¹³⁰ *TSB*, p. 25.

¹³¹ Timothy C. Baker, *Writing Animals: Language, Suffering and Animality in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (Aberdeen: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 162.

¹³² *TSB*, p. 70; 69.

are given no right of return'.¹³³ And even after the apocalypse, when the land had been burned and flooded and made barely habitable, the Bella Donna's of the world 'seemed to have no qualms that were obvious to you or me about walking away from what they called a useless pile of rubbish, and never looking back.'¹³⁴

As discussed throughout this chapter, *The Swan Book* offers nuanced and comprehensive criticism of the myriad ways in which Australian settler society has trashed land (both above and below ground), water, plant and animal life, and First Peoples. In this regard, Wright condemns anthropogenic destruction and the exclusionary, entitled, ego-centred mentalities which lead to it – the reach and power of extractive capitalism and colonialism, old and new, to corrupt. But *The Swan Book* is also in line with Bennett's advice to form an 'understanding of agency as distributive and confederate' as this 'reinvokes the need to detach ethics from moralism and to produce guides to action appropriate to a world of vital, crosscutting forces'. While we can and should be angry about humans doing terrible things, we should pay attention to the 'web of agent capacities' or else risk descending into moralising, vengeance, and violence as a first port of call.¹³⁵

The Swan Book presents us with a world of agentic assemblages, or 'reciprocal systems of planetary kinship', where this kinship is 'not automatic but flexible and often intentional'.¹³⁶ Because it is embedded with ethics, with this ontology, the novel is able to offer an alternative interpretation of destruction by challenging our drive towards finding a use for everything and maximizing the efficiency with which we exploit that use. This is Wright opening up space to re/consider our understanding of usefulness, of how narrow we set the parameters of Self when thinking of our self-interest, and of how we tie use to value. Take for example the Harbour Master, who comes to Swan Lake to remove a mountain of sand which has invaded and settled the swamp. When he is unable to remove it, 'He said his sand was welcome to

¹³³ Baker, *Writing Animals*, p. 160.

¹³⁴ *TSB*, p. 6.

¹³⁵ Bennett, p. 38.

¹³⁶ Baker, p. 160; 161.

stay regardless of all the inconveniences. *It will go away when it wants.*¹³⁷ It is, eventually, the swans who blow the sand mountain away by coming together in a large bevy, moving ‘as one living presence that shared the same vein of nervousness’ responding to some ‘shadow’ that was ‘menacing the swamp’.¹³⁸ Here we have agency given to spirit, mineral sediment, bird, human, and air, with power unevenly distributed within the assemblage, and yet with no one member-actant’s agenda or intention given more moral value than another.¹³⁹ To question a thing’s use-value we must question to whom is its presence constructive or destructive, helpful or hindrance, and in assemblages like this there are too many actors/actants with entangled existences and too many untold needs to fully understand or prioritise this. Wright moves us beyond ideas of functional and useless, of treasure and trash, of good and bad – she allows vibrancy to all matter, place to all things. To talk of and think in terms of use is not useful. Thus, the very idea of waste is rubbished.

Closing words, open invitation

‘don’t get stuck on your whacko solutions if you don’t want to live in whacko land’¹⁴⁰

As I come to the end of my research into the richness and abuses and resistance to that abuse of Aboriginal cultures and peoples; as I close the tabs and PDFs; as I put *The Swan Book* back on the shelf; as I search for words adequate enough to draw this chapter to a close; I think about time. I think about how I started this chapter, turning, entitled, to Indigenous cultures to teach me something about surviving dystopia. Or, to borrow from Gerald Vizenor to use a more appropriate term, *survivance*: the insistence on native ‘presence over absence, nihility, and victimry’.¹⁴¹ I started as just one more foreigner ‘flock[ing] to talk to the frail old spiritual man of the Brolga Nation Government who had lived forever on nothing but his own

¹³⁷ *TSB*, p. 63.

¹³⁸ *TSB*, p. 76.

¹³⁹ Bennett, pp. 23-4.

¹⁴⁰ *TSB*, p. 131.

¹⁴¹ Gerald Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), p. 1.

sustainability, the ancient intelligence passed down the generations'.¹⁴² I think about the haunting memory of Mr Ward, who suffered an excruciating death in the back of a police transit van. I think about Oblivia, petrified in time and adapted through symbiogenesis with her toxified physical, spiritual, cultural and emotional world. And I think about Alexis Wright, who says, 'All times are important to us. No time has ended and all worlds are possible.'¹⁴³ In thinking about time I think about dreams and memories – about what lingers and recurs, what is forgotten and lost, what we choose and do not choose to bring into the future or leave in the past. Rather than draw conclusions, then, I would like to allow this chapter to remain open ended, to '[sit] around all day long thinking about what was utopia'¹⁴⁴ or dystopia, and what place there is in it for unwanted things.

Note on terminology

While I have specified the community or communities to which individual Aboriginal people mentioned in this chapter belong, I have used the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous' and 'First Nations' interchangeably and broadly to speak about all peoples who can trace their ancestry to the time before the colonisation of Australia. I do not mean to homogenise these varied and disparate groups, but rather to follow in the way of the Aboriginal scholars, writers, and thinkers I have encountered in my research, who for expediency will speak about Aboriginal Peoples as a group with similar experiences, needs and cultures. When speaking of Alexis Wright's fictional/ised communities, I have used the names that she has: the 'swamp people' of 'Swan Lake' and the 'Brolga Nation', following her capitalisation and irony.

¹⁴² *TSB*, p. 106.

¹⁴³ 'Politics of Writing', p. 20.

¹⁴⁴ *TSB*, p. 105.

Trash Can

- 'As a mental traveller, Oblivia is one of the survivors of Wright's "rubble" or rubbish dump worlds[...]. Born in a tip, traumatised by abuse and neglect, rescued and befriended by a refugee from the post-apocalyptic North - her auntie Bella Donna - Oblivia is cursed with the virus of imagining an "ideal world" or "illusionary ancient homelands". Oblivia's utopian impulse exists in the face of her tragic experience of real places, including the "dystopia of dysfunction" that is Swan Lake, the huge contaminated marsh, a northern Australian ordinance dump, run by the Armed Forces, where she lives.' P528
- Talking about Indigenous critics who write and read against the notion of nations, borders, geo-unitary, mythic identity: important for me here because it is what I have been trying to insist: that I can hop from one country to another to look at how that people/nation deal with and envision dystopia p528

Homeless crisis – dispossessed Indigenous people, migrants, climate refugees and

colonising settlers: 'I might add that immigrants generally don't poison watering holes, drive Aboriginal men and women over cliffs, commit dozens of massacres, enact cultural genocide and herd those that remain into onshore detention centres colloquially known as missions.'

- Makes the point that multiculturalism was not embraced because of a drive for social diversity but for economic and geo-political reasons (after WWII), and that immigrants aren't settlers because colonialism was a (set of) structure(s) not an event
 - o Goes on to say that Aus is as old as its First Peoples and as young as the baby in the arms of a migrant fresh off the plane

'Having lived it all, they claimed to have at least ten, or possibly more generations of knowledge, packed up tight in their mentality about white people doing good for them. Seasonal crop farmers, harvesters of potatoes, cabbages, fields of beans, yellow pears, wheat for whiskey, wine grapes, dairy cattle or pigs, truffles and olives, death feuds, imprisonment, domination, the differences between rich and poor, slaves, war and terror – whatever celebrated their faraway ancestral districts.' P22-3

Discussing twenty-first century toxicity, waste scholar Max Liboiron highlights how ineffective 'traditional models of action against toxicants such as clean up, avoidance, or antidote' are given the unprecedented levels and entanglements of current pollutants and how traditional '[m]anagement via separation, containment, clean up and immunization [...] are premised on a politics of material purity that is no longer available or was never viable to begin with'. Moreover, these modes of action do not address the wider social, political, military and other power structures that engender toxicity to begin with.' Liboiron p332

Tim Dunlop on the power of storytelling: 'What annoys me about the emphasis on political

"narrative" is it presumes that if you can just get the story right, everything else will be OK.

But [...] narrative means nothing if it's contradicted by actions' ... politics is always going to

demand compromise, and such compromise - that is, veering away from the narrative -

always leaves a party vulnerable to charges of having sold out.'

Chapter Four. Post-Satyagraha:

Corporate chemicals, corporeal corruption in Ambikasuthan Mangad's

Swarga: A Posthuman Tale and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

Dilli Chalo!

'we won't just lie down and die'¹

In India, on the 26th of November 2020, two hundred and fifty million people went on strike. Consisting of 3.2 percent of the *global* population, this set the record for the world's largest ever general strike. India is a country jaw-dropping in its extremities, in the scale of its population, the richness of its cultures, the extent of the state's abuses, the dedication and the radicalism of its peoples' resistance. It has a long history of incredible protest. I do not just mean Gandhi's satyagraha, or the ongoing war in Kashmir, or the Naxalite comrades, or the immense numbers of farmers currently camping outside Delhi (February 2021).² While these are important examples of active dissent, deserving of careful attention, there are also countless examples of smaller scale resistances: localised struggles against caste abasement, against abuses of women, against Big Dams and mining. Regardless of the scale, however, regardless of how many zeros make up the figures or how horrific the abuse, injustice is injustice and resistance is resistance. This chapter focuses on two novels, both of which foreground dystopia committed by the state, in this case the Indian state, working in collusion with agrochemical corporations (foreign and Indian owned), against its own citizens and lands. One fictionalises the Union Carbide massacre in Bhopal, while the other showcases the atrocity of endosulfan spraying in Kasaragod. Taken in combination, these texts raise questions 'about who decides to build or dump what where and how these decisions affect

¹ Indra Sinha, *Animal's People* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2007), p. 112. Subsequent references in footnotes as *AP*.

² Zia Haq, 'Dilli Chalo: Why angry farmers want to storm New Delhi', *Hindustan Times*, 27 November 2020
<<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/dilli-chalo-why-angry-farmers-want-to-storm-new-delhi/story-jXPjzqOmTgxral skj1e7HI.html>> [accessed 12 January 2021].

[over generational periods of time] a disproportionate number of human and nonhuman beings who have little say in the matter'.³ But these texts also trace the efforts of humans and non-humans and indeed, the lands themselves, to have their say and have that say heard – to survive, resist, and rewrite their dystopia.

'What happened to you?'⁴

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) draws on the urban experience, where these toxic pesticides are produced, while Ambikasuthan Mangad's *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale* (2009/2017) focuses on the rural, where they are used. Both the corporate and the chemical culprits differ – in *Animal's People* we see the damage of the Kampani's (a fictionalised Union Carbide) methyl isocyanate gas (MIC); in *Swarga* it is the endosulfan of the Plantation Company of Kerala (PCK). Nevertheless, drawing a link between sites of production and sites of deployment is a fruitful way of showing the connection between processes of creation and destruction, highlighting how leaky the manufacture of waste is. There is a direct line, or indeed *loop*, between the overpopulated, over-urbanised '*bastis*' or slums around Union Carbide's Bhopal factory (slums produced by IMF and World Bank policies of indebting countries which are trying to reboot their postcolonial economies),⁵ the dream of India's Green Revolution corrupted by Monsanto's gene-theft and cycles of farmer debt, and the pesticides being sprayed over large areas of monocropping cotton, tea, banana, and cashew plantations. This linking allows us to take our noses off the page, from the specific, horrifying catastrophes in Bhopal and Kasaragod, to view not just the book but the library as a whole: to see the

³ Pablo Mukherjee, 'Tomorrow there will be more of us: toxic postcoloniality in *Animal's People*', *Postcolonial ecologies: literatures of the environment*, ed. by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, and George Handley, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 216-7.

⁴ Sagarika Chattopadhyay, and Amarjeet Nayak, 'Performing the Stare in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*', *Disability in the Global South*, 1.1 (2014), 29-43 <<https://disabilityglobalsouth.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/dgs-01-01-03.pdf>> [accessed 12 January 2021], p. 29.

⁵ Jina Kim, "'People of the Apokalis': Spatial Disability and the Bhopal Disaster', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 34.1 (2014) <<https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3795>> [accessed 2 January 2021], para. 6.

entangled mess of global capital; to see a postcolonial state colonising itself;⁶ to see the murky, neo-colonial dealings of an American corporation bullying and bribing a (legally, if not economically) sovereign state in the Global South, and in turn the state's surveillance, intimidation and harassment, sabotaging, and disappearing of dissenting workers, farmers and citizens. In other words, we see the fulfilment of dystopian criteria: the miscarriage of justice, the state's sacrificing and scapegoating of its subjects, the destruction of the memory of the past, the wasting of the utopian ideal, the destruction of a private world, a tension in how closely the reader feels connected to protagonists to ensure the strategy of warning is effective. As with other novels studied thus far, these texts complicate such criteria as much as they correspond with them.

The action of both books, like the real-world events on which they are based, takes place after an initial catastrophe – the fatal factory leak in *Animal's People*, the signing of a contract to buy endosulfan in Swarga – decades into the protracted, accumulative violence of pesticide warfare. In this context of waste and wasting, both novels ask the question: what does dystopia look like when one is in the thick of it, or on the other side of it? Indeed, where does it begin and end? If we look backwards, we can trace the seeds of present day Brahminical fascism via Gandhi to the crimes of colonisation, including the warping and cementing of the caste system;⁷ if we look forwards we can see 'slow violence' leaching out into the future with impunity.⁸

The texts pose questions, then, about the place of unwanted things in the worlds we have, in the worlds we want, and in the worlds we do not want: what can or should we do with

⁶ India 'is colonising itself, turning upon its own poor to extract raw materials', Arundhati Roy, quoted by Peter Popham, 'Arundhati Roy: "The next novel will just have to wait..."', *The Independent*, 23 October 2011, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/arundhati-roy-next-novel-will-just-have-wait-2371609.html>> [accessed 4 February 2021].

⁷ See the collected essays by Arundhati Roy in *My Seditious Heart: Collected Non Fiction*, read by Tania Rodrigues, (Penguin Book Audio Book, 2019) [Audible].

⁸ Rob Nixon, 'Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 55.3 (2009), 443-467 <<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/neoliberalism-slow-violence-environmental/docview/208045319/se-2?accountid=14775>> [accessed 2 January 2021].

poisoned forests and rivers, poisoned cities, poisoned animals, poisoned people? How can we argue against toxifying our environments without falling back on ontologies and rhetoric which is colonial, paternalistic and ableist? How can we say, as Mangad says, that pesticide spraying should not be allowed to continue because it causes severe physical and mental disabilities without undermining the value and dignity of people living with disabilities? How can we say, as Sinha says, that those disabled by toxic leaks should embrace their impairment rather than seek cure without invalidating their rightful claims to compensation, financial aid, medical treatment, or a home which has the infrastructure to facilitate *both* accessibility *and* dignity?

'The 5 D's of stigmatization: *demonized, deviant, delinquent, disabled, and dissenter*'⁹

If dystopia is a genre fundamentally concerned with justice and injustice, with who is trashed by whom and how and why, it is then a conversation on what qualifies as harm, and on what the right response to harm is. These novels are deeply engaged in these questions, asking us in turn to re/consider our understandings and definitions of harm. Following Mary Douglas' assertion that dirt signifies 'a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order', Max Liboiron prompts us towards a discard studies theory of harm:

Harm is also a contravention of order. What characterizes these orders and their infringement? How are definitions of harm challenged and what is being challenged, exactly? How do different metrics, modes of management, regimes of perceptibility, systems of power, and accountability co-define harm? What are the spatialities and temporalities of harm, and how do they co-construct harm? In short, what is harm and why?¹⁰

For the people of Khaufpur (*Animal's People's* figuration of Bhopal) and Enmakaje (the Keralite village in which *Swarga's* action is set), this struggle towards a definition of harm is

⁹ Nocella II, Anthony J., 'Defining Eco-Ability: Social Justice and the Intersectionality of Disability, Nonhuman Animals, and Ecology', *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation*, ed. by Anthony J. Nocella II, Judy K.C. Bentley and Janet M. Duncan (Peter Lang: New York, 2012), 3-21 (p. 5).

¹⁰ Max Liboiron, 'CFP: Theorizing Harm', *Discard Studies*, 13 January 2017, <<https://discardstudies.com/2017/01/13/cfp-theorizing-harm/>> [accessed 12 January 2021].

crucial in their pursuit of justice. The difficulty here is that the order in which Sinha's Khaufpuris and Mangad's Keralites¹¹ are trying to define harm is a neoliberal order: it is this order *itself* which causes degradation, deformation, disability, starvation, suffering. The genocide and ecocide committed against the characters in *Animal's People* and *Swarga* are made possible by, and then compounded by, 'the way, under cover of a free market ideology, powerful transnational corporations exploit the lopsided universe of deregulation, whereby laws and loopholes are selectively applied in a marketplace a lot freer for some societies and classes than for others.'¹² These places were chosen to be sites of toxicant-making and/or toxic-dumping because they were inhabited by people deemed less valuable than those who stood to profit from it due to their physical and economic distance from it – both within India and internationally. If the system is one which allows 'distant, shadowy economic overlords' to 'act with impunity' regarding 'the physical and environmental fallout of [their] actions',¹³ a challenging of this order becomes less an enactment of harm and more an attempt to rectify it. Transnational corporate capital, however, responds to local legal action by figuring itself as the victim and its victims as 'terrorists.' In other words, the power of the neoliberal order allows it to claim that the peoples' attempts to hold the Kampani and the PCK accountable are an infringement of order. But as Zafar, the leader of *Animal People's* grassroots movement asserts,

it's we who have suffered injustice, and the Kampani which has committed it. We are the ones who are asking for justice [...] Our people want justice in a court of law. Who sneers at justice by refusing to appear in court? Terrorists are those who cause terror, who endanger innocent lives, who don't respect the law.¹⁴

The infringement, he insists, is twenty years of the corporate elite's evading, bribing, and doing back-room deals with the Indian order of law.

¹¹ This is used as a broad umbrella term to describe the collection of peoples, including various Adivasi groups such as the Mogeyans, alongside Jains, savarna and avarna Hindus, with their distinct languages, customs, histories, and group identities, in the Kasaragod region of Madhya Pradesh.

¹² Nixon, p. 444.

¹³ Nixon, p. 450.

¹⁴ Sinha, *AP*, pp. 282-3.

To seek justice through an ineffective and often corrupt legal system, however, is to continue working within the framework of a self-favouring neoliberalism. For the courts to recognise a plaintiff, those who suffered the consequences of endosulfan and MIC gas must be recognised legally, which is to say medically, which is to say *molecularly*, as sufferers. They must prove that they have been harmed and quantify the extent of this, and they must prove that they have been harmed by a specific toxicant – processes which embroil them further in a medical industrial complex born out of and committed to preserving racist, sexist and ableist norms. Rob Nixon outlines how differing scientific methodology can cause differing findings of harm, and how these in turn can be cherry-picked to suit corporate or political agendas:

What emerges [...] is a contest over the administration of difference between those who gain official recognition as sufferers and those dismissed as nonsufferers because their narratives of injury are deemed to fail the prevailing politico-scientific logic of causation or, for that matter, because they lack the political contacts to gain admission to the inner circle of certified sufferers and thus to potential compensation.¹⁵

In this way, the metrics of harm are themselves harmful. They act as a divisive and exclusionary force which insist on a singular narrative of harm – whether that be an insistence on uniforming oral accounts given by sufferers, or the medical definitions of harm-as-molecule based on metrics of particles per million (ppm) – thus delegitimising and disregarding other practices of knowing and acknowledging harm.¹⁶

The first challenge for the activists of *Swarga*, for example, is to shift their people away from the belief that their suffering is caused by an ancient curse and raise awareness about the toxicity of pesticide spraying. Both a result of and a contribution to Mangad's campaign work, the novel shows the horrific devastation endosulfan causes in order to argue compellingly for a ban of it – but it cannot do so if it allows that a curse may, to any extent, be culpable. We must be careful not to allow a nuancing of causation to be co-opted by a neoliberal and neo-colonial order seeking to use this murkiness to abnegate accountability:

¹⁵ Nixon, p. 445.

¹⁶ Nixon, p. 447.

harm may be ambiguous, corporate capital's culpability is not. But we must also be careful not to relegate or sacrifice differing beliefs and worldviews, particularly those of people who have already been relegated and sacrificed. Waste theory argues for a more holistic understanding of cause and effect, broadening out the parameters of the former to include miasmic elements such as evil spirits and social relations and poverty, and the latter to include symptoms which do not appear on the manufacturer's established lists.¹⁷ As Nixon points out: 'For the majority of our planet's people [...] the two kingdoms of toxic threat and spiritual threat interpenetrate and blend, creating a hybrid world of techno-numinous fears.'¹⁸

Animal's People demonstrates another way in which the measurement of harm compounds the effects of harm. When Elli, an Amrikan doctress, arrives in Khaufpur six weeks after a judge rules that the Kampani's Indian assets will be seized if they fail to appear for trial, Zafar suspects her of compiling a study which will be doctored (excuse the pun) to legitimise the Kampani's legal defence:

Think like the Kampani. Thousands of people say that for twenty years their health's been ruined by your poisons. How do you refute this? We say that the situation is not as bad as alleged, that not so many people are ill, that those who are ill are not so seriously ill, plus of whatever illnesses there are, most are caused by hunger and lack of hygiene, none can be traced back to that night or your factory.¹⁹

Here we see the very reasons the Kampani chose to build their factory in Khaufpur, namely the lack of political and financial power held by the people who live in the surrounding bastis, used by the Kampani as a straw dog cause of Khaufpur's disease and disability. Zafar is not being paranoid in suspecting the Kampani of such dirty tactics: *Swarga* attests to the numerous fraudulent surveys and reports issued by research groups funded by endosulfan manufacturers claiming impartiality which are used to legitimise corporate activity by denying

¹⁷ See Max Liboiron 'Plasticizers: A twenty-first century miasma', *Accumulation: The material politics of plastic* ed. by Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins and Mike Michael (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 134 – 149.

¹⁸ Nixon, p. 458.

¹⁹ *AP*, p. 69.

the damage it does to life and land.²⁰ *Swarga* also shows how free medical clinics, such as the 'camp' that the protagonists Neelakantan and Devayani visit in Pedre, function as effective political propaganda to keep in power the people who are profiting from the very poison which necessitates such clinics.²¹ Indeed, it is striking that Sinha pivots the storyline away from exposing these miscarriages of justice, a key feature of dystopian texts, by confirming Elli's innocence. In this way he can demonstrate such cynical practices while maintaining that there is a use for white saviourism, so that instead of entirely alienating his western readers, he figures a practical way in which they can offer necessary support: fund free medical clinics.

'You know some goo' cure-all?' ²²

As disability rights activists are keen to point out, the modern western medical profession is 'one of pathology and policing',²³ operating on 'a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical self and body and therefore essentially, fully human'.²⁴ In other words, allopathic medical practice, to follow Mangad's terminology, dictates, gatekeeps, and enforces 'health', smuggling moral judgement into this categorisation in order to justify excluding, exploiting or exterminating those who do not meet the criteria. Western medical technology has made life possible where it might otherwise not be, but by viewing deviation from the norm as deficit, as defect, it is fundamentally ableist, pursuing an agenda of norm enforcement through a drive towards 'cure'. Cure contains within it the belief that we must undo harm, which is to say abnormalities, that bodies can and should be restored to some 'earlier and often better state of being'.²⁵ This is certainly true of the industrialised medical

²⁰ Ambikasutan Mangad, *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale*, trans. by J. Devika (Delhi: Juggernaut Books, 2017), pp. 172-3. Subsequent references in footnotes as *Swarga*.

²¹ *Swarga*, pp. 129-131.

²² *Swarga*, p. 83.

²³ Kim, "'People of the Apokalis": Spacial Disability and the Bhopal Disaster', para. 19.

²⁴ Fiona Kumari Campbell, quoted in Chattopadhyay and Nayak, 'Performing the Stare', p. 35.

²⁵ Eli Clare, 'Bodies As Home: Notes on Cure, Disability and Natural Worlds', Saul O Sidore Lecture Series: Inside Global Activism, *UNH Center for the Humanities*, YouTube (23 July 2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QplsiYMQiRo> [accessed 29 January 2021], 28.10.

practice Elli imposes (or tries to impose) on Animal's body, the bodies of poisoned Khaufpuris, and the body of Khaufpur itself. Elli sees Animal's twisted spine and four-footedness and, making the assumption that he must surely, *naturally*, want a non-disabled body, promises him a trip to America for a corrective operation. The picture in *Swarga*, however, is complicated both by a different set of impairments and by the presence of traditional, locally situated medical knowledge.

Where Animal is articulate and multilingual, and able to move and to live independently,²⁶ Pareekshit, the orphaned child adopted by Devayani and Neelakantan, has developmental disorders which make him non-verbal and non-mobile. He also has a physical condition which puts him in constant agony. For Animal, the conversation about cure is a conversation about the tension between rejecting and yearning towards normative understandings of (his) humanity and (his) disability. Although born on the night of the gas leak Animal was not born with physical impairments, rather these took years to manifest. He therefore has a normative, 'pre-damage' body to which he can hope to be 'restored' – or at least ostensibly he does, although we can question where exactly in time an impairment caused by toxicants begins: in our lifetimes, in utero, in conception, in our parents' genes? We can also question the focus on 'fixing' his corporeal difference rather than attending to his neurological disorder/s – Animal's neurodivergence is presented as genius and mysticism, and none of the characters, Animal included, propose treatment for his mania. For Pareekshit an able body-mind never existed, is only imagined by his adoptive parents, medical practitioners, author and reader: to what 'original' form would the medical industrial complex restore a body-mind which has genetically deviated from the corporeal standard?²⁷ For Pareekshit, then, harm management is not located in cure, but rather in *care*: it is about pain relief. With untreatable sores covering his entire body, antibiotics are ineffective and even the

²⁶ 'My hands and arms are strong, my chest is strong. The upper half of my body is like a bodybuilder's. I walk, also run, by throwing my weight onto my hands, hauling my feet forward in a kind of hop.' *AP*, p. 15.

²⁷ Clare, 'Bodies as Home', 31.15.

application of salve made from herbs collected in the surrounding area (which could then themselves contain the toxicant endosulfan) causes him extreme pain.²⁸

Mangad does not draw a clear hierarchy between industrial and folk medicine, but rather he positions both as important – and impotent. When Devayani and Neelakantan adopt Pareekshit they consult both the ‘vaidyar’ Panji (an Indigenous healer, also described as ‘an Adivasi elder, a tribal seer, a mooppan’)²⁹ and Dr Kumar, a clinical physician from ‘a good medical college...a good specialist [to] find a cure’.³⁰ Both Panji and Dr Kumar tell them the same thing: they have been treating this child for seven years and neither medical discipline is able to understand what is harming him, nor what could remedy the harm. There are no medicines, old or new, synthetic or plant-based, which can address or redress the pain caused by endosulfan poisoning: ‘These are diseases that they have never seen before or read about’.³¹ Discard studies draws on miasma theory as a model of action against harm, in muddy ethical spaces, in a climate of missing, obfuscated or buried information. Miasma theory allows us to look holistically at problems as inter-actions or relations between thing and environment, to act even when we are uncertain about causes or sources, to acknowledge that some human bodies are disproportionately affected because of their geographical location, their socio-economic status and their biology (women and children are particularly susceptible to pollutants due to their endocrine systems). ‘The notion of confederate agency’ which Miasma theory offers may ‘attenuate the blame game, but it does not thereby abandon the project of identifying [...] the sources of harmful effects. To the contrary, such a notion broadens the range of places to look for sources’.³² And so it allows us to work on the precautionary principle

²⁸ ‘the child jolted awake and began squirming, beating its hands and legs on the ground. Its mouth was open in a scream, but no sound came out’, *Swarga*, p. 60. Animal lives in poverty and hunger, but not in chronic pain: Elli asks him if he is often in pain, to which he replied, ‘Not at all’, *AP*, p. 93.

²⁹ *Swarga*, pp. 13-14.

³⁰ *Swarga*, p. 61.

³¹ *Swarga*, p. 146.

³² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), p. 37.

that an action, policy or material is assumed guilty of harm and therefore banned or abandoned until manufacturers can prove it innocent.³³

There is a similar precautionary principle in disability studies. Janet Duncan argues for a presumption of competence: 'if we do not know what a person is thinking due to an inability for "us" to understand "them," we *must* assume the person is competent, thinking, and feeling.'³⁴ While we must not diminish an understanding of harm as pain, we must also be careful not to diminish the value of life because of pain. It is an ableist, dehumanising stance to consider people, like Pareekshit, in a persistent vegetative state (PVS) as 'marginally human' because they cannot respond to stimulus response tests: these tests tell us more about the tester than the people being tested.³⁵ While *Swarga* advocates care-taking over euthanasia, it entangles readers in this ethical dilemma, showing starkly what Disability activists have been campaigning for for years: given the exceptional power care-takers have over the life of those in PVS, we must operate on a 'criterion of the least dangerous assumption'.³⁶ Pareekshit's death conforms to the ableist notion that death is the only happiness available for those in PVS, thus diminishing not only the right to life of those in PVS but also the boundaries of happiness: if we say disabled body-minds do not have as much of a chance of happiness as non-disabled body-minds, we are lead into arguing that anyone who is subjected to systemic oppression is less deserving of life because they cannot be as happy as a cis-het, white, middle-class, able-bodied man.³⁷ We see here how the dystopian state destroys the private world by denying that subjects have and are capable of having a private world.

³³ Liboiron, 'Plasticizers: A twenty-first century miasma', pp. 145-6.

³⁴ Janet Duncan, 'Interdependence, Capability, and Competence as a Framework for Eco-Ability', *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation*, ed. by Nocella II, Bentley and Duncan (Peter Lang: New York, 2012), 38-56 (p. 42).

³⁵ A. J. Withers, 'Disableism within Animal Advocacy and Environmentalism', *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation*, ed. by Nocella II, Bentley and Duncan (Peter Lang: New York, 2012) 111-125 (p. 114).

³⁶ Duncan, 'Interdependence, Capability, and Competence as a Framework for Eco-Ability', p. 42.

³⁷ Withers, 'Disableism within Animal Advocacy and Environmentalism', p. 114.

The best that the inhabitants of Enmakaje can do is to fight to stop the continued use of the pesticide, wait half a century for the land to become detoxified,³⁸ and in the meantime practice a mode of management which is entirely limited to the alleviation of physical suffering. *Swarga* was written with the clear agenda of banning endosulfan, and it effectively uses the horror and agony caused by the chemical to make this case. But in doing so, it diminishes the agency, the subjectivity, and so inevitably, paradoxically, the *value* of those worse affected by 'the poison'. Disability activists advocate strongly against environmentalists' campaigns run along these lines. I quote A. J. Withers at length here:

When people discuss 'birth defects' or babies born with 'deformities,' what they are really talking about is the birth of disabled *people*. The desire to prevent 'birth defects' is the (eugenic) desire to prevent disabled people from being born. It is deeply problematic to publicly advocate a reduction of disabled people in coded environmental rhetoric. There is a marked difference between advocating the reduction of harm and advocating for the culling of a certain population. It is very possible to condemn toxic chemicals, chemicals that cause harm to people (that cause, among other things, cancers) without devaluing an entire segment of society.³⁹

In *Swarga* we see this equating of disability with harm, and this use of disability as a cautionary tale, a strategy of warning. It is deeply problematic that Mangad denies his disabled characters a voice, although it does fulfil the dystopian criteria of creating cognitive investment yet emotional distance from the protagonist. Equally, though, Mangad does not claim to speak for his disabled characters. It is a positioning as fraught as it is honest. As an able-bodied and neurotypical writer who has not collaborated with (or, as is the case with Sinha in *Animal's People*, co-opted from) disabled people to write his novel, he cannot know and so does not pretend to know how a child such as Pareekshit understands and experiences the world. He, does, however, know and understand how disability is harmfully constructed and constructed as harm in a toxified rural area in the Global South under late-stage capitalism.

³⁸ 'Even if they stop sprayin' it will be ther' contaminatin' the soil and other thin's for fifty years', *Swarga*, p. 192.

³⁹ Withers, p. 117.

Swarga adheres to the medical model of disability and an ideology of cure,⁴⁰ but it does to a degree, in the context of some of the most disenfranchised people in a country ransacked by colonialism and neo-colonialism and neoliberalism, show disability as societally constructed:

Disability resides in the set of social relationships and outcomes of social practices that tend to disadvantage and marginalize people with impairments, perceived impairments, and physical differences. These relationships are institutional, cultural, and interpersonal social structures. The environment is also socially constructed [, ...] defined through a web of socioeconomic relations that privileges commodities over relationships, where a tree is regarded far more as timber and paper pulp than as oxygen producer, shelter for beings, builder of soil or the many other roles it plays in a complex set of ecosystem relations.⁴¹

In the cashew plantations of Kerala, parents with children who have neurological impairments are forced into a choice, which is not a choice at all, between tying them up at home while they work in the plantations or leaving paid work to become full-time carers for their children, thus falling (further) into debt or starvation.⁴²

ESPAC, *Swarga*'s anti-pesticide activists, use the living bodies and the deaths of their disabled children as props in direct actions against political and corporate leaders.⁴³ ESPAC, like the novel itself, flirts with an eco-primitivism which strives to go backwards in time to a mythic utopia, unlike Gandhi's only in that it is not rooted in Hinduism, where disability seemingly did not exist (on a large scale). Disability justice critiques this vein of environmentalism: 'the goal isn't to recreate a static landscape somehow frozen in time, but rather to foster dynamic interdependencies rooted in the memory of ecosystems which had existed for thousands of years', with the knowledge that things will be present there that were not before, and things will be missing that were there before.⁴⁴ By failing to understand

⁴⁰ Kim, "People of the Apokalis", para. 8.

⁴¹ Robin M. Smith and Jack P. Manno, 'Critical Perspectives on Disability Studies and Social Constructions of Environments: Commoditization and Its Effect on Society and Nature', *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation*, ed. by Nocella II, Bentley and Duncan (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 59-75 (p. 61).

⁴² *Swarga*, p. 71.

⁴³ *Swarga*, pp. 156-9; pp. 165-7.

⁴⁴ Clare, 29.09.

restoration in this way, *Swarga* does not make adequate room for the possibility of an empowerment model of disability, which says that the material and immaterial infrastructure – things like roads, public transport, medical technology, health care and income welfare – and the cultural attitudes of a society are ‘much more a source of the problems than particular impairments.’⁴⁵ Harm here cannot be attributed solely to physical and neurological impairments, but rather is clearly co-constructed by immiserating socio-economic systems in which a large section of society is so disabled by lack of financial and political power, and so overburdened by the demands of a globalised world, that it cannot effectively enfold the range and abundance of deviation from corporeal and cognitive norms prevalent among its people.

To understand cure for Animal, we must first take a closer look at how Sinha figures disability as a fluid ‘oscillat[ion] between the binaries of human and non-human’;⁴⁶ between inclusion and exclusion, wanted and unwanted; between purity and danger. In doing so, we will see how *Animal’s People* muddies the criteria of dystopian fiction: it insists on and maintains the private world of its protagonist which *Swarga* does not, and it entangles the reader emotionally as well as cognitively in the dystopian state’s efforts to sacrifice its subjects, connecting us both with the protagonist (as victim/survivor) and with the dystopian state (as complicit in its existence and continuation).

‘Definitely you are [...] the right animal’⁴⁷

By taking as his name the slur which both disables and labels his disability, Animal ‘embraces [...] his alienation and abasement, scoffing at those, like Zafar [...] who suggest that he is not a beast just an "especially abled" human’.⁴⁸ It is understandable that Animal would reject humanity when what he knows of humans is their malice and greed – whether those humans are foreign and abstract (such as the Kampani bosses), local and cruel (such

⁴⁵ Smith and Manno, p. 60.

⁴⁶ Chattopadhyay and Nayak, p. 30.

⁴⁷ *AP*, p. 303.

⁴⁸ Nixon, pp. 450-1.

as the ‘sisterfuck’⁴⁹ fixer Chunaram or the Fatlu Inspector), or nomadic and exploitative (such as the tragedy-porn Journalis for whom he records the tapes/book). But he also, having been put in a do-or-die position, embraces such behaviours: he consistently assures and shows us that he is just as capable of lying, manipulating, scamming, stealing, and spying or ‘Jamisponding’ (James-Bond-ing), as he fittingly calls it. Farouq, Zafar’s right hand man, accuses Animal of claiming his non-humanness as a pre-emptive defence against moral criticism, as a way of saying ‘I don’t have to do like the rest of you, laws of society don’t apply to me because I’m such a fucking animal.’⁵⁰ While there is a point to be made here about the subversive power of the marginalised refusing a standard which is set by but not applied to the people who marginalise them, Animal dismisses Farouq’s critique for a different reason. His rejection of humanity hinges on his knowledge that:

if I agree to be a human being, I’ll also have to agree that I’m wrong-shaped and abnormal. But let me be a quatre pattes animal, four-footed and free, then I am whole, my own proper shape, just a different kind of animal from say Jara [the dog], or a cow.⁵¹

Rejecting humanity, he accepts and celebrates his difference, his unique abilities, as wholeness, as brilliant imperfection.⁵² He can reclaim worth by identifying as a disabled person, and through this aligning of himself with the broad human-animal collective.

Indeed, some scholars read *Animal’s People* as a text about a disabled community, arguing that Sinha posits the ‘collective sick’ as a more democratic version of democracy than any that a neoliberal order could establish while working hand in hand with global capital.⁵³

Jina Kim proposes that ‘Animal’s unique [...] imaginary’

engenders a local, collective, and embodied knowledge that resists the erasure of the local and the dissolution of survival networks under the disabling forces of neoliberal globalization. By making this knowledge contingent upon disabled experience, Sinha

⁴⁹ AP, p. 3.

⁵⁰ AP, p. 87.

⁵¹ AP, p. 208.

⁵² Clare, 44.09.

⁵³ Stephanie Yorke, Abstract for ‘Critical Healing: Queer and Disability Studies Interventions in Biomedicine and Public Health’ conference paper, 21 June 2011 <<http://criticalhealing.blogspot.com/>> [accessed 4 February 2021].

demonstrates that the legacy of the Bhopal disaster rests upon a stratum of disabled bodies[.]⁵⁴

To an extent, Animal does participate in various networks of locally situated mutual aid. He lives with Ma Franci, a French nun who helped raise him but whose exposure to MIC gas on the night of the disaster resulted in a neurosis (fuelled by the more apocalyptic teachings of Sanjo / the Saint John's Bible) and stripped her of her ability to speak English and Khaufpuri. Ma Franci and Animal are entangled in care for each other: they provide for each other's material needs and offer each other companionship. Animal is also entangled with care for Aliya, a young girl from the Nutcracker basti, and her grandparents; fetching water for them, being fed by them, caring about and caring for each other. But he brags about being one of 'the worst cases'⁵⁵ of the factory leak, elevating himself above his 'people', the other victims of the Kampani. Although the book is peopled with body-minds which have sustained the disabling effects of chemical toxicants and neoliberal economic policies, and who gather for peaceful demonstrations (turned violent riots), they are not figured as activists or organisers. Among the activists, the only disabled person other than Animal is Pandit Somraj. Somraj's wife died in the factory disaster, and Somraj himself contracted a respiratory illness from his exposure to the Kampani gases. Thus he, a world-renowned professional singer, lost his ability to sing – but, *crucially*, he did not lose his wealth, his property, his income (he turns to teaching singing) or his high social standing. In other words, he maintains power in spite of his physical impairment. Zafar, like Neelakantan, Dr Kumar, and Jayarajan in *Swarga*, is an elite, highly educated outsider who has renounced well paid and prestigious work to relocate to a site of injury and disaster, to work among the poor and disabled. In this way, both novels fulfil an ableist and classist (and indeed a casteist) stereotype that while the marginalised should be pitied and must be worked for, they are not equals, nor equal to the task of seeking justice for themselves.

⁵⁴ Kim, para. 4.

⁵⁵ AP, p. 4.

Animal's continual insistence on his animality is betrayed by his secret desire, stoked by Elli's insistence that it is both right and possible, to unbend his spine: to walk upright. This can be read as an expression of neo-colonialism – Animal's acceptance of his body changes when he sees himself through Elli's foreign eyes and comes to desire instead the normativity that she, which is to say the US, is selling.⁵⁶ But it is also stoked by his sexual desire, and his belief, despite sex being an essential/ly animal behaviour, that he cannot access sex unless he becomes human by 'curing' his disabled body. We learn through his frequent masturbation that he is physically and emotionally capable of sexual fantasy, arousal and ejaculation; socially, however, he cannot consensually sexually access the women he desires. It is important to note here that, despite the racial and colonial differences between Nisha and Elli, mirrored in his paternalistic veneration of the former and his misogynistic slutifying of the latter,⁵⁷ both women are wealthy and highly educated, both are gender-conforming and perform their femininity through caring/mothering roles, both are able-bodied and conventionally attractive. Spying through their windows while they are bathing and changing, Animal performs the same gratuitous voyeurism that we as readers perform on his disability, as well as making us complicit in his voyeurism through his erotic descriptions of the two women's bodies. Sinha here muddies the male gaze with the disability stare. Animal claims his manhood, his *normalcy*, through his objectification of women's bodies. He also claims his normalcy through his subversion of the stares (we) non-disabled people level at his disabled body: by highlighting our complicity, by staring back at us, he reclaims power, insists on equality, and rejects pity.⁵⁸

Corrupting Crip Theory

⁵⁶ Kim, para. 19.

⁵⁷ The juxtaposition of watching Elli and Nisha undress 'play[s] with notions of power and possession, and reflect the ways in which those notions are racialized.' Adele Holoch, 'Profanity and the Grotesque in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*', *Interventions* 18.1 (2016), 127-142 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.1001420>> [accessed 4 January 2021], p. 135.

⁵⁸ Chattopadhyay, and Nayak, pp. 33-9.

*Thing you want takes two. What girl'll do it with you?*⁵⁹

With his sexuality thus harnessed to toxic heterosexual masculinity, Animal speaks to a colonial stereotype in which the European imagination 'libidinally eroticized' people from the 'unknown continents – Africa, the Americas and Asia', figuring them as just a 'bundle of drives and desires'.⁶⁰ He also speaks to an ableist stereotype about the dangers of disabled men's sexuality: the popular figuration of them as perpetrators of harm, as predators with urges that they cannot control and may act on.⁶¹ Sinha does, however, balance the lewdness of Animal with an emphasis on his loneliness. He highlights the dehumanising assumptions, rooted in eugenicist notions that we should not breed 'defective' genes, that non-disabled people make about sex and disability: we deny that people with impairments, whether those are corporeal or neurological, can desire sex and deny that they should have sex. Anjali, a sex worker whom Farouq has paid on Animal's behalf, offers Animal the opportunity to participate in reciprocal sex. Whether we can say Anjali is consenting is blurred by questions over what consent means in circumstances when teenage girls have been trapped into sex work, but Sinha gives her agency, drawing her as streetwise and skilfully coquettish. She leads Animal by his tie to her room 'like a dog' on a lead, praises the size of his 'lund', and teases him about his bravado and his inexperience.⁶² But she also offers him what sex workers have long offered disabled people: mutual erotic touch, dignity in exploring their sexuality.⁶³

Sidestepping issues of class and beauty privilege, Chattopadhyay and Nayak argue that 'Animal's desire to be normal [sic] is inspired by his desire for Nisha but it is also the emasculation of his disability that gives him a unique perspective of Anjali the whore [sic]'.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ AP, p. 45. Italics in original.

⁶⁰ Holoch, p. 135.

⁶¹ Michelle Jarman, 'Dismembering the Lynch Mob: Intersecting Narratives of Disability, Race, and Sexual Menace', *Sex and Disability*, ed. by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham: Duke UP, 2012) <<http://www.uwyo.edu/wind/files/docs/jarman/dismembering.pdf>> [accessed 8 January 2021].

⁶² AP, pp. 239-42.

⁶³ For more, see Andrew Gurza's podcast series 'Disability after Dark' <<http://www.andrewgurza.com/podcast>> [accessed 29 January 2021].

⁶⁴ Chattopadhyay and Nayak, p. 37.

In this reading, Anjali is 'socially disabled' by her work as a prostitute, and Animal's embodied eyeline, which is on a level with the crotches of people who walk upright, is read metaphorically as a kind of feminist social equaliser. This is what enables him to gaze in wonder at and wax lyrical about Anjali's genitals, naming the vagina the 'grace' of women, rather than treating her with the contempt that Brahminical patriarchy usually reserves for female sex workers.⁶⁵ When the typical treatment sex workers can expect is to be abducted, gang-raped, tortured and left for dead by their clients, as Mangad exemplifies in Devayani's history, we are expected to read Animal's treatment of Anjali as proof of his humanity. Animal in the brothel is eloquent, tender, even reverential, compared with the animalistic behaviour behind the 'mask of civility' of the wealthy, young, able-bodied, privileged-caste Hindu men who attack Devayani.⁶⁶

Like Sinha, Mangad presents a sex worker who has been coerced into prostitution, but, like Sinha, he also allows her to salvage (a limited) power from this: 'I decided to take up with pride the work my husband had introduced me to.'⁶⁷ Any empowerment that these male authors are trying to bestow on their female sex workers, however, is undermined by the sense that these women exist in debasement entirely in order to show the goodness, the humaneness, the remediation of the male protagonists. Neelakantan takes Devayani as his lover and life-partner, where other men apparently would not, and only refuses to marry her on the grounds that he would not marry anyone, seeing marriage as 'a prison in which Man limits and tames Woman'.⁶⁸ Neelakantan claims that he does not wish to exert control over her, although he does set a pre-requisite that, if they are to live together – which, having been nursed back to life by him after a brutal attack, and having nowhere else to go, she has expressed a desire for – she must have a hysterectomy.⁶⁹ Animal, too, and just as knottily, 'rescues' a prostitute: taking the money Elli had raised for his surgery, he rejects 'cure' and

⁶⁵ Chattopadhyay and Nayak pp. 39-40.

⁶⁶ *Swarga*, p. 29.

⁶⁷ *Swarga*, p. 28.

⁶⁸ *Swarga*, p. 46.

⁶⁹ *Swarga*, pp. 46-7.

instead uses it to secure Anjali's freedom. But it is a questionable freedom when, from the outset of this freeing, he stakes a claim to her (for her own good): 'I will go buy Anjali free and she will come to live with me.'⁷⁰ Animal may be emasculated by his impairment, and may reclaim his masculinity by turning the male gaze on women with more power than him, but when he finally and fully exerts the power of this masculinity it is not over women like Nisha and Elli. Rather, it is over the life of a woman disenfranchised by her poverty and precarity.

Abnormal Normality

'In such dreams was my back straight? Did I stand upright? No and no. I was exactly as I am now and it did not matter. Such dreams!'⁷¹

It is important to note here that Animal does not reject the corrective surgery in order to buy Anjali's freedom, but rather thinks of using the money in this way only after coming independently to an acceptance of his bent body. Let us return, then, to our conversation on the rejection of cure as a conversation about the complex ways in which the dystopian state enacts a miscarriage of justice, wastes its subjects and its dream of utopia. Reading Animal's body metonymically as the body of Khaufpur, his rejection of cure, of the 'paradigm of recovery, which organizes the anarchic material of crisis into a linear narrative of healing,'⁷² is also a rejection of *conclusion*: we cannot 'contain his story within the narrative arc of recovery', just as we cannot contain Khaufpur (or Bhopal) to that narrative arc when the Kampani (or Union Carbide) have neither accepted accountability nor cleaned the toxic mess they left behind, when the only compensation available is an inadequate, individual, one-off cash settlement 'affixed to a sliding scale of disability', which itself acts as a smoke-screen cure for larger systemic issues.⁷³

⁷⁰ AP, p. 366.

⁷¹ AP, p. 78.

⁷² Kim, para. 25.

⁷³ Kim, para. 26.

In this context, disability and cure are co-constitutive with the city space.⁷⁴ Emphasising the role colonialism (and neo-colonialism) play/ed in damaging urban spaces and populations, Clare Baker emphasises that because the ‘history of colonialism (and its post/neo-colonial aftermath) is [...] a history of mass disablement’,⁷⁵ ‘postcolonial fictions are replete with the trope of disabled children as characters [where] they are shown to embody “both the postcolonial nation-state’s potential for radical difference and it’s supposed fragility”’.⁷⁶ Indeed, we saw this in the previous chapter with Wright’s treatment of Oblivia’s muteness. Furthering this, Stephanie Yorke proposes that postcolonial fictions which offer ‘a sustainable disabled presence suggest the potential for the community or nation to emerge from oppressive social structures unscathed.’⁷⁷ Stacey Balkan adds a reading of ‘cure’ as ‘a metaphor for [neoliberal] economic uplift’, positing that Sinha rejects both.⁷⁸ While scholarship which connects disability with postcolonialism metaphorically is interesting and illuminating, ‘the figurative representation of disability’ runs the risk of overtaking ‘its material ontology’.⁷⁹ In other words: disability must always be understood as material first, metaphor second.⁸⁰

Ultimately, Animal declines Elli’s offer (but not her US dollars) because the impairments of his body, adapted from the toxified Khaufpur, have adapted him to live an *enabled* life in Khaufpur. Were he to become a wheelchair user, as he might after a spinal operation, he would not be able to navigate the basti streets; were he to walk upright he might need a cane and so could not carry children on his back, or climb trees, or roam in jungles.⁸¹

⁷⁴ Kim, para. 12.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Kim, para. 5.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Chattopadhyay and Nayak, p. 31.

⁷⁷ Stephanie Yorke, ‘Disability, Normalcy, and the Failures of the Nation: a Reading of Selected Fiction by Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Indra Sinha, and Firdaus Kanga’, PhD Thesis, *University of Oxford*, 2015. <<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:50a3e631-419f-490a-9995-f0fa511e5688>> [accessed 12 January 2021], p. 1.

⁷⁸ ‘A Memento Mori Tale: Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* and the Politics of Global Toxicity,’ *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 25.1 (Winter 2018), 115–133 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isy006>> [accessed 2 January 2021], p. 122.

⁷⁹ Chattopadhyay, and Nayak, p. 31.

⁸⁰ There is much criticism within Disability Justice about the ableism inherent in a multitude of our idioms and analogies.

⁸¹ AP, p. 366.

In the context of Khaufpur, Animal is not disabled, but especially abled. Ability emerges as a socio-spatial experience, and because he can easily access and navigate Khaufpur's terrain, his body is no longer legible as disabled.⁸²

Thus does Animal's embracing of his disability, in a disabled/ing environment, shift our definitions of disability so much that we end up in a kind of denial of disability. It is a view which says he does not need to be cured because in his context there is nothing wrong with him; or, in Khaufpur everything is wrong, and so as a product, inhabitant, and metonym of Khaufpur, any wrongness (physical, neurological, moral) is right. Beyond the binary of right and wrong, of health and illness, of healing and suffering, Eli Clare advocates for 'a politics of cure that bears witness to the pain, brokenness and limitation contained within human body-minds and at the same time fundamentally grasps the harm done by ableism.'⁸³ A politic which is as messy, mutating, diverse and paradoxical as are our body-minds.

Putting the author in authenticity

'Why are you so upset? You did not suffer those things.'⁸⁴

All dystopia contains within it the seed of utopia, and vice versa.⁸⁵ As Mangad says, 'Thi' abundance of water whic' made this place heaven is wha's makin' it hell now'.⁸⁶ A key feature of the dystopian novel is to show how and why the dream of utopia is corrupted, trashed, wasted. Therefore, to read dystopia, there are key questions we must ask: who is doing this dreaming, what value systems are they working on or towards, how do they understand and depict corruption, trash, waste. Indian dystopia, literary and real, is as complex, specialised, multifaceted, and contradictory as any other. *The Mahabharata* and *the Ramayana* outline one form of slave society and a feudal system, albeit fluctuating and mutating, that was in existence in India, centuries before the nation-state of India was formed.

⁸² Kim, para. 25.

⁸³ Clare, 'Bodies as Home', 41. 13.

⁸⁴ Animal, quoted in Sinha, 'blah blah blah', *Indra Sinha* <<http://www.indrasinha.com/books-2/animals-people/blah-blah-blah/>> [accessed 5 February 2021].

⁸⁵ See for example Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History: A Study of Modern Despotism, Its Antecedents, and Its literary Diffractions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 5.

⁸⁶ *Swarga*, p. 127.

Shashi Tharoor has outlined the myriad ways in which British imperialism, when it came, devastated Indian economies and Indian people,⁸⁷ just as Arundhati Roy has outlined the ways in which Gandhi's vision of independence from the British enshrined the caste system, and how Ambedkar's oppositional striving towards western modernity set an anti-Adivasi stance which criminalised their traditional ways of life and made them trespassers on their own land.⁸⁸ Ian Buruma has outlined what successive national governments since Swaraj (Independence) have done with democracy, focusing, as power has been, on the Indian National Congress (INC) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).⁸⁹ Pankaj Mishra has contributed to visions, articulations and understandings of the role neoliberalism has played in shaping modern India.

Swarga and *Animal's People* come from and contribute to this complicated tangle of utopia/dystopia. It is a slippery business trying to pinpoint what utopia, *whose* utopia is being dreamt – that of the fictional characters, or of the real-world characters on whom they are based (and if so, which ones among fractured groups), or that of the author, or the intended reader? Where exactly did the wasting start, who started it and why – was it the Jains who entered Dravidian lands, or the Brahmins who colonised them, or the British who colonised them, or the neo-colonising Americans, or the pollution and corruption which flourishes under free market economies, or the policies of monocropping high yield crop varieties pursued since Indira Gandhi's Green Revolution? *Swarga* puts us in Adivasi territory, celebrating the richness and range of the social, mythic, physical, and linguistic landscapes of Kasaragod. But it

⁸⁷ See also Anita Desai's conversation on the place of women in Indian history in "Women Well Set Free", *India: A Mosaic*, ed. by Robert B. Silvers and Barbara Epstein (New York: NYREV, 2000), pp. 107-130.

⁸⁸ See Roy, 'The Doctor and the Saint', *My Seditious Heart: Collected Non Fiction*, read by Tania Rodrigues, (Penguin Book Audio Book, 2019) [Audible]. Note that some Dalit scholars have criticised Roy's reading of Ambedkar's comments on Adivasis: see Dalit Camera: Through Un-Touchable Eyes, 'An Open Letter to Ms. Arundhati Roy', *Round Table India*, 15 March 2014

<https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7283:an-open-letter-to-ms-arundhati-roy&catid=119&Itemid=132> [accessed 5 February 2021]. See also her response: Arundhati Roy, 'Arundhati Roy replies to Dalit Camera', *Round Table India*, 15 March 2014
<https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7284:arundhati-roy-replies-to-dalit-camera&catid=119&Itemid=132> [accessed 5 February 2021].

⁸⁹ Ian Buruma, 'India: The Perils of Democracy', *India: A Mosaic*, ed. by Robert B. Silvers and Barbara Epstein (New York: NYREV, 2000), pp. 3-32.

centres as its protagonist a non-local Brahmin who the local tribal elder, after recognising his moral purity and superiority, assigns as their saviour. It celebrates biodiversity and cultural diversity, while denying that it is possible for diverse and non-conforming body-minds to have agency, equal worth and dignity. It figures the Malayalam of Adivasi Tulu-speakers as a stilted vernacular, a non-systematised, bastardisation of Malayalam, thus implying that the foreigner, the coloniser, is eloquent and intelligent and the local Indigenous is incapable and coarse.⁹⁰

For its part, *Animal's People* romanticises and homogenises the poor, claiming that because they have all suffered together at the hands of elites, they are united by class in spite of religious and caste differences.⁹¹ What's more, the novel claims to present an authentic subaltern voice, is indeed celebrated for this, and yet was written by an author who was educated at prestigious schools, who has spent most of his life working profitable jobs in affluent parts of affluent countries in western Europe. Animal asks of his audience:

What can I say that they will understand? Have [they] slept even one night in a place like this? Do [they] shit on railway tracks? When was the last time [they] had nothing to eat? [...] what do they know of our lives?⁹²

Animal makes a powerful point here and is right to ask this, but whether Sinha has a right to ask this is another matter – and whether we can separate the two is another matter still. What are Sinha's answers to these questions? It is true that he presents the warfare of pesticide manufacturing which has been waged against the urban poor of the Global South in a sympathetic and evocative manner. It is true that he has been involved in the real-world work based in Bhopal, in dystopian conditions, which tries to address the harm done to bodies and societies. At the same time, he blurs the boundary between the real and the imagined beyond a conversation and into co-option. The paratextual website he has created for *Animal's People*

⁹⁰ I am assuming that the use of bastardised/standardised language in Devika's English translation of the text is a true reflection of how Mangad chose to differentiate Tulu speakers' Malayalam from standard Malayalam. I note here that I would not have to make this assumption if I were myself a Malayalam speaker, and that there is an uncomfortable tension in using English, a language with a long legacy of colonising and condescending to other languages, to critique a non-English text for a tendency towards colonial sentiment.

⁹¹ *AP*, p. 302.

⁹² *AP*, pp. 7-8.

brings readers not to more information or organisations supporting Bhopal, but rather to more information about his fictional Khaufpur.⁹³ Likewise the voice and agency of Animal is constructed and foregrounded at the expense of the voice and agency of Sunil Kumar, the living (now deceased) Union Carbide victim and campaigner upon whose experiences Sinha based his titular character. Outside the text, Animal is giving interviews; in Bhopal, Kumar has died by hanging himself. As Brigitte Rath points out, Sinha does not do for Kumar what the Jarnalis in the text does for Animal, which is to publish his story verbatim, to make space for the subjugated, subaltern voice without editing, embellishing, contorting or otherwise altering it.⁹⁴ Instead, Sinha uses his personal relationship with Kumar to legitimise his fiction, while simultaneously distancing Kumar from the work and claiming for himself creative credit, royalties and international accolades.⁹⁵

These tensions raise further questions: do we have a responsibility, if we have privilege and platform, to tell the stories of those who have had their voices systemically silenced? Can we imagine ourselves into subaltern body-minds when there is such an immense power imbalance between us; can we do so ethically? Where does representation become appropriation? Fiction does to reality what plastic does to 'natural' materials – it mimics the appearance while adding new, desired characteristics and properties.⁹⁶ The purpose of (speculative) fiction is to shift us cognitively, emotionally – to imagine what it is to be another person in another world, to learn from this about our own world/s. Both *Animal's People* and *Swarga* ask hard questions about authenticity, about the ethics of fictionalising

⁹³ See Sinha, 'Khaufpur' <<http://www.khaufpur.com/>> [accessed 4 January 2020].

⁹⁴ Rath, Brigitte, "'His words only?'" Indra Sinha's Pseudotranslation: *Animal's People* as Hallucinations of a Subaltern Voice', *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 38.2 (2013), 161-183 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43025856>> [accessed 4 January 2020] p. 165.

⁹⁵ 'The BBC reported, wrongly, that Sunil was the inspiration for Animal in my novel *Animal's People*, but Animal certainly benefited from Sunil's courage, sense of humour and ability to live on 4 rupees', Indra Sinha, 'Why I'm going on hunger strike for Bhopal', *The Guardian*, 12 June 2008 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/jun/12/india>> [accessed 5 February 2021].

⁹⁶ See Bernadette Bensaude Vincent 'Plastics, materials and dreams of dematerialization', *Accumulation: The material politics of plastic*, ed. by Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins and Mike Michael (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 17 – 29.

and speaking on behalf of others, particularly of those from the most marginalised and disenfranchised communities. They ask whether the gap between rich and poor can be bridged by empathy – whether those of us who are and have been removed from dystopia geographically, socio-economically, material-culturally can imagine being in it, whether we can ask those who *are* in it to tell us about it and to do so in ways which appeal to us, in ways we can understand.

As well as drawing attention to the vertical power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South maintained by economic hegemony, they also draw attention to the cultural hegemony of Euro-American literature over Indian literature, in addition to the social, cultural and economic divides within India itself. Shortlisted for the Man Booker prize in 2007 and winner of the 2008 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book in the Eurasia category, *Animal's People* has received much mainstream, literary and academic attention. Mangad is also an award winning writer, but as a Malayalam writer this has been limited to the regional level. Of course, awards are not necessarily a signifier of merit, but they *do* signify recognition, they spotlight certain works and the issues addressed in them. *Animal's People* in particular is lauded for its genre-blurring, its foregrounding of a powerful, idiosyncratic subaltern voice, its strong, sharp politics. This is a novel published by Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, a subsidiary of the American owned, multinational mass media conglomerate ViacomCBS. It is written in English but presented as if it has been translated from Hindi. Compare with this *Swarga*, which has genuinely been translated from Malayalam to English, and which was published by Juggernaut, an Indian publishing house based in New Delhi. The appeal, the clout and the prestige of *Animal's People* in the Global North make as much sense as *Swarga's* obscurity and inaccessibility. It also prompts the question: how many novels written by Adivasis and by Dalits do not make it from the southern regions of India to the north, from the plantations to the publishing houses, and from there into English translations, into world-wide circulation? From whom can we hear an authentic subaltern voice?

With that said, let us look at the dystopias that these two men present, the utopias they dream, and the lived experience of the communities from which they draw.

Corporations and the corruption of chemicals

'toxins moulding neurons and muscles as you floated in utero' ⁹⁷

Union Carbide arrived in India with the promise of accelerating the country's drive toward attaining self-sufficiency in the production of food grains and the eradication of poverty and hunger. It routinely claimed that fertilizers and insecticides manufactured in its factories would double or quadruple the grain yields across the country.⁹⁸

The Indian state and Indian industrialists also capitalised on and compounded this insistence on the necessity and efficacy of agrichemicals. In India, endosulfan manufacturing companies, both privately owned (Excel Crop Care Ltd. and Coromandel International Ltd.) and public sector (Hindustan Insecticides Ltd.), controlled between them '\$ 40 million in the world Endosulfan market',⁹⁹ making India 'the largest producer, consumer and exporter of Endosulfan' in the world.¹⁰⁰ If we look to India's agricultural lands to check these claims of self-sufficiency (read: exponential growth), we can see that the joint policies of mono-cropping non-Indigenous crops and the widespread spraying of pesticides – more frequently than the scientific and legal guidelines allow for – worked in tandem to indebt and exploit farmers, and actually reduce crop yields:

The yield is going down, but not because of pests [...] It's climate change. And PCK's unforgivable mismanagement, wrong farming practices. Look, right here, the dried-up trees are nearly one-fourth. How come the company says nothing about the fall in numbers of trees? And won't the poison that has decimated all the living things here affect the trees also? [...] What an absurd idea that [pests] alone will thrive in a place where roaches and worms can't survive!¹⁰¹

The tea mosquito is just a myth. It's just an excuse to spray poison and swallow commissions and bribes. What is pesticide for? Every pest in Nature has other pests which

⁹⁷ Clare, 46.02.

⁹⁸ Mukherjee, p. 219.

⁹⁹ Aparna K. U., 'Understanding Endosulfan Tragedy in India: Analysis of Activism for Rehabilitation', MA thesis, Pondicherry Central University, 2017-2019
<https://www.academia.edu/40678249/Understanding_Endosulfan_Tragedy_in_India_Analysis_of_Activism_for_Rehabilitation> [accessed 30 September 2020], p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ Priti Thakkar, 'Environmental Responsibility and Damages: Role of Multinationals in Indian Economy', *Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies*, 3.21 (November – December 2015), p. 1127.

¹⁰¹ Swarga, p. 153.

eat it. If they need pesticides, those can be made from our neechikad and aryaveppu [trees] too.¹⁰²

The chemicals are not used to control a pest, rather the pest is used to produce the chemical. What is pesticide for, asks Mangad. The answer he finds: to line the pockets of industrialists and politicians. It is a criticism of pesticides which has been made emphatically, repeatedly, at least since *Silent Spring*'s popularising of it in the early 1960's: the officially given, ostensible use of pesticides – to allow the flourishing of essential food produce – is utterly contradicted by the lived reality of the ecologies it is used on – the devastation of human and animal bodies, on the bodies of land and bodies of water, and on the bodies of plants, crop producing or otherwise. In Kasaragod, the PCK call it 'medicine', the people call it 'poison'.¹⁰³

As mentioned above, there are two main chemical culprits figured in these novels: endosulfan in *Swarga* and methyl isocyanate (MIC) in *Animal's People*, although the latter is complicated by the unknown quantities of other, undisclosed toxicants which may have mixed into the MIC gas leaking out of the Union Carbide factory:

MIC is the smallest and the most toxic of all isocyanates; it affected all life forms, killed nearly 8,000 people [in Bhopal] within 48 hours [of the leak] by producing pulmonary edema, and produced lasting effects on more than 200,000 residents. [...] Nearly 40% of women pregnant at the time of the disaster lost their fetuses. Chronic effects include pulmonary, gynecological, ocular, neurological and other complications. MIC metabolites are also toxic and some like trimethylamine exert selective toxicity on male progeny.¹⁰⁴

Endosulfan is a pesticide belonging to the organochlorine group of pesticides [which include DDT], under the Cyclodiene subgroup. [...] Endosulfan blocks the inhibitory receptors of the Central Nervous System, disrupts the ionic channels and destroys the integrity of the nerve cells¹⁰⁵

This resulted in

peculiar and complex health implications noted among the community in Kasaragod, such as congenital anomalies, physical deformities, neurological disorders, impaired mental

¹⁰² *Swarga*, p. 190.

¹⁰³ This is repeated continually by PCK employees and management, and local politicians throughout the text. *Swarga*, p. 156 & 171.

¹⁰⁴ Daya R. Varma and Shree Mulay, 'Methyl Isocyanate: The Bhopal Gas', *Handbook of Toxicology of Chemical Warfare Agents*, ed. by Ramesh C. Gupta (London: Academic Press, 2015), 287-299 (p. 287).

¹⁰⁵ Thakkar, p. 1126 & 1128.

health, disorders related to hormonal irregularities, defective reproductive health, developmental health disorders, different types of cancers and respiratory and immune systems disorders.¹⁰⁶

The scientific and medical language used here to describe these chemicals and their effects on humans works to neutralise the lived reality of the Bhopalis and Keralites. Both Sinha and Mangad use fiction to rewrite this, to manifest the effects in ways which provoke horror and anger at the injustice. Nisha M. offers a different inventory of the bodies described in *Swarga*:

children with tongues jutting out of the mouth well below the chin (69), children with enormous heads (71), mentally ill children (71), children covered with sores (74), children with fingers like octopus arms (74), children with eyes that have no pupils (74), children who look and act like monkeys (83) and children in whom menstrual cycle begins as early as seven.¹⁰⁷

It is a list which mirrors the visceral descriptions of disabled body-minds given in both novels, shocking and harrowing readers, working as cautionary tales. I recognise that dystopian fiction's reliance on the reader being invested means setting up horror in this way,¹⁰⁸ and that in rural Kerala and urban Bhopal there is little infrastructure to alleviate hardships on disabled body-minds. But I am also conscious of A.J. Withers' assertion that we can talk about harm without devaluing the people on whose behalf we claim to be outraged and of whom we claim to be speaking in defence.

Miscarriage of justice

'the odour in our nostrils is justice rotting'¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Ambalathinkal D. Dileep Kumar and Chelaton Jayakumar, 'From Precautionary Principle to Nationwide Ban on Endosulfan in India', *Business and Human Rights Journal*, Cambridge University Press, 4.2 (2019), 343–349 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/bhj.2019.9>> [accessed 30 September 2020], p. 344.

¹⁰⁷ The numbers here are referencing the page numbers on which these disorders can be found in *Swarga*. "The Undeclared Chemical Disaster in God's Own Country: *Swarga – A Posthuman Tale*," *New Academia*, VIII.III (July 2019) <https://www.academia.edu/39983782/THE_UNDECLARED_CHEMICAL_DISASTER_IN_GODS_OWN_COUNTRY_SWARGA_A_POST_HUMAN_TALE> [accessed 30 September 2020], p. 24.

¹⁰⁸ Erika Gottlieb notes that for dystopian cautionary tales to work the reader must be cognitively engaged but emotionally distant. *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2001), pp. 15–16.

¹⁰⁹ *AP*, p. 261.

Another integral element of dystopian fiction is that the state commits crimes against its own people, particularly through the corruption of the legal system. Under a regime of neoliberalism, however, contemporary postcolonial dystopia sees a key difference magnify and compound this trope: not only is the nation-state conspiring against its subjects, other nation-states, usually more powerful, are also involved in the form of large, privately owned – but publicly guaranteed – corporations: it is also about ‘corporate crime, multinational skullduggery, injustice, dirty deals, medical malpractice, corruption, callousness and contempt.’¹¹⁰ Such abuses are exemplified in both texts over and again.

A great deal of scholarship already exists which outlines the many myriad ways in which Union Carbide coerced the Indian government, both before and after the Bhopal factory leak. Promises that their pesticides and fertilisers would multiply the country’s crop yields were ‘bathed in the aura of so-called first world technical and commercial efficiency and wrapped in financial sweeteners,’ which secured Union Carbide an exemption from the regulation that ‘limited foreign capital to no more than 40 percent ownership of Indian subsidiaries’ and so ensured ‘the company [could] retain full control of its operations in India’.¹¹¹ Under US administration, Union Carbide further manipulated regulations by manufacturing more potent agrichemicals than their original agreement allowed for;¹¹² by over-burdening their waste storage systems and slashing both their supervisory staff and maintenance budgets for their safety systems in an effort to cut costs;¹¹³ by not informing residents in the surrounding slums what the emergency procedures were;¹¹⁴ by not informing their workers of the correct safety equipment and protocols, leading to the death of a man employed as a cleaner.¹¹⁵ The company then targeted Union workers who put up posters warning Bhopalis of the dangers

¹¹⁰ Anthony Carrigan, ‘“Justice is on our side”? Animal’s People, generic hybridity, and eco-crime’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47.2 (2012), 159–174 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989412447488>> [accessed 4 January 2021] p. 159.

¹¹¹ Mukherjee, ‘Tomorrow there will be more of us’, p. 219.

¹¹² Kim, para. 6.

¹¹³ Mukherjee, p. 218.

¹¹⁴ Nixon, p. 446 & 455.

¹¹⁵ Mukherjee, p. 220.

following his death.¹¹⁶ Contrary to all evidence attesting to this, the company shifted blame for the disaster onto the Indian government for disallowing them 'the appropriate level of American control';¹¹⁷ onto the incompetence of its Indian managers (despite similar, smaller leaks also occurring regularly in their US based factory),¹¹⁸ and by claiming that the leak was an act of sabotage.¹¹⁹ Following the leak, Union Carbide obfuscated details about other chemicals that were being manufactured at the factory which could have combined with the escaping MIC gas, thus preventing adequate, apposite medical treatment in the immediate, the short and the long term. A company spokesperson also lied about how long the leak had taken to get under control, stating it was minutes when it was 'at least an hour' – an important omission when the level of exposure, determined by duration as well as proximity, greatly increases the effects of the toxicants.¹²⁰

After the massacre in Bhopal, Union Carbide argued 'that the case could not be tried in India, due to the corporation's status as an 'American' company; at the same time, they also claimed that 'American courts and juries could not try it because they would not be able to comprehend the reality of daily life in India', including 'the poverty of Bhopal's citizens and the different living standards accompanying that poverty'.¹²¹ The legal proceedings, when they were finally underway, were marred by the 'flooding' of American lawyers into Bhopal to take on individual cases against Union Carbide, leading to a 'presidential ordinance, and later a statute,' known as 'The Bhopal Gas Leak Disaster Act', in which 'the Indian government [became] the exclusive representative of all Bhopal victims'.¹²² It was an act which undermined any hope of justice fitting the scale of harm in Bhopal by eliminating the possibility of using non-traditional avenues to pursue justice. Furthermore, the complexity of determining who was

¹¹⁶ Mukherjee, p. 220.

¹¹⁷ Mukherjee, p. 219.

¹¹⁸ Varma and Mulay, 'Methyl Isocyanate: The Bhopal Gas', p. 287.

¹¹⁹ Carrigan, p. 160.

¹²⁰ Mukherjee, p. 218.

¹²¹ Holoch, 'Profanity and the Grotesque in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*', p. 129.

¹²² Jamie Cassels, 'The Uncertain Promise of Law: Lessons from Bhopal', *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*, 29.1 (Spring 1991), 1-50 <<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/232617653.pdf>> [accessed 25 February 2021], p. 12.

accountable, given the various layers of management and chains of command, and to whom, given the vast numbers of people affected, the dislocated timescales of the affects, the numerous standard symptoms and outlying symptoms, and the complications of poverty-induced poor health, made it easy for Union Carbide to manoeuvre the justice system. The Bhopal Act also set a precedent for future disaster litigation in India, so that this model of compensation was also used in the case against endosulfan in Kerala.¹²³ In this way, the state, despite holding twenty-two percent ownership of Union Carbide's Indian division, and despite the competent grassroots organisation of survivor groups, (exploiting a loophole in the law which was designed to protect vulnerable children from their abusive legal guardians) acted as *parens patriae* on behalf of the victims.¹²⁴ As a result, the state did not, and did not have to, consult survivors before it agreed upon a settlement in 1989 of 'Rs 1 lakh (100,000 rupees or \$1000) for every death', and 'Rs 25,000 (about \$500) for people who suffered lifelong injuries' to be paid to the Indian government, rather than directly to the survivors.¹²⁵ In exchange, 'Union Carbide was to be absolved of all civil liabilities, [c]riminal cases against the company and its officials were to be extinguished, [t]he Indian government was to defend the corporation in the event of any future lawsuits.'¹²⁶

Bhopal, however, is not Khaufpur. Within the text of *Animal's People*, corporate and state violations are not so explicitly outlined, although Sinha does expose one particularly callous corporate response: in the aftermath of the leak, the Kampani 'had rung up their best friend the Chief Minister and told him to stop the thighs-of-fate', a drug 'which was helping people who didn't immediately die after the tragedy'. Doctors who refused and instead relocated their clinics in order to continue administering sodium thiosulphate were beaten by the police: 'Zafar says that by giving relief this thighs-of-fate somehow proved that the illnesses

¹²³ Kumar, and Jayakumar, 'From Precautionary Principle to Nationwide Ban on Endosulfan in India', p. 347

¹²⁴ Carrigan, p. 160.

¹²⁵ The International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal, 'Compensation & the Injustice of the 1989 Settlement', 2019 <<https://www.bhopal.net/what-happened/the-immediate-aftermath-1984-1989/compensation-injustice-1989-settlement/>> [accessed 25 February 2021].

¹²⁶ The International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal.

could pass to future generations. The Kampani was afraid of this knowledge getting out because it might cost them in a court case'.¹²⁷ In the paratextual interview, 'Blah blah blah', between Animal and an Indian jarnalis indignant at the 'two rupees [per person] forever, finish, khattam, end of story' compensation that was offered to Bhopali survivors, Sinha references the miscarriage of justice embodied in the 1989 Union Carbide settlement. Within the text itself the reference is more subtle: when the Kampani lawyers finally appear at the courthouse, an elderly woman's protest that 'if the Kampani has any honour it must stand trial, and it should pay just and proper compensation for all the wrongs it has done' is translated into: 'she is asking for money.' The Kampani lawyer reaches into his pocket and gives her 500 rupees.¹²⁸ It is the closest the resistance movement in *Animal's People* comes to legal or financial 'justice': the novel begins and ends without the Kampani ever standing trial. It is significant that Sinha chooses not to give Khaufpur a similar settlement to Bhopal. It allows him to make the point that we are naïve to believe any real justice is available within such unjust systems, such corrupting companies and unjust, corrupted worlds – what did you expect, Animal asks the journalist, and where have you been during the relentless, impossible, losing fight for Bhopal's settlement. It also allows Sinha to leave justice open to possibility outside the traditional framework, open to transformation, reinterpretation, repurpose. Justice becomes the anger of a violent mob, the burning of the ruined factory; it becomes Somraj hearing music in frog-song, Nisha planting stink bombs, Animal refusing cure. Justice becomes survivance – the salvaging of mutated, vibrant life out of toxified dystopia.

Although *Swarga* is infused with magical realism – or what might better be called an Adivasi ontology – *Swarga's* fictionalisation of the miscarriages of justice in Kerala are clear, realistic depictions of the lived experience. Mangad lucidly depicts how, '[d]espite relevant laws in place, the government systems for implementing and monitoring the necessary restrictions on the pesticide's use to prevent environmental contamination and, in turn,

¹²⁷ AP, p. 112.

¹²⁸ AP, pp. 306-7.

safeguard public health, did not function properly'.¹²⁹ It shows the opposition presented by endosulfan manufacturers: how industrialists banded together into a powerful lobby group, dressed up as the Indian national delegation at the international summit (the fifth meeting of the Conference of the Parties, or COP5) to block 'a worldwide ban of Endosulfan and its associated isomers' both 'in India and across the world based on the argument that it couldn't be proved that endosulfan spraying was the reason behind the health issues of the people of Kerala.'¹³⁰ *Swarga* shows how 'the PCK [had] been actively aiding the endosulfan industry rather than the pesticide aiding cashew production'¹³¹ by putting the lie to the claims that there is no alternative to the pesticide for productive yields: 'other farming techniques like organic farming in Sikkim, Zero-budget farming in Maharashtra and Non-pesticide management of Andhra Pradesh [have proven to be] great successes.'¹³² Further, it exposes the duplicity of these claims – the native aryaveppu tree is a natural pest-deterrent:

Many global corporates have their eagle eye on it. They've secured patents for some seventy-five products that use its elements. Something that's been used since two thousand years ago in India was thus looted! It is those who brought chemical pesticides like endosulfan here who are after our biopesticide now! Two ways to destroy us!¹³³

The Indian government has not only allowed its farmers to be colonised by indebtedness to corporations, but it has also simultaneously allowed its Indigenous natural resources to be exploited and commoditised. In this way, the 'novel highlights how the state machinery fails in

¹²⁹ Kumar and Jayakumar, p. 345. For corresponding material in *Swarga* see pp. 145-7.

¹³⁰ Aparna K U, 'Understanding Endosulfan Tragedy in India: Analysis of Activism for Rehabilitation', MA thesis, Pondicherry Central University, 2017-2019
<https://www.academia.edu/40678249/Understanding_Endosulfan_Tragedy_in_India_Analysis_of_Activism_for_Rehabilitation> [accessed 30 September 2020] pp. 7-8. In *Swarga* we see the continual insistence by PCK workers and politicians such as the agricultural minister and 'the leader' that the health problems are not connected to the pesticide.

¹³¹ Irshad and Joseph quoted in Nisha M., 'The Undeclared Chemical Disaster in God's Own Country: *Swarga* – A Posthuman Tale', *New Academia*, VIII.III (July 2019)
<https://www.academia.edu/39983782/THE_UNDECLARED_CHEMICAL_DISASTER_IN_GODS_OWN_COUNTRY_SWARGA_A_POST_HUMAN_TALE> [accessed 30 September 2020], p. 28.

¹³² Aparna K U, 'Understanding Endosulfan Tragedy', p. 8.

¹³³ *Swarga*, p. 141.

carrying out its obligations' to protect its subjects 'and maintains a dangerous complacency', indeed, a dangerous *complicity*, 'thus exposing the dysfunction of the State.'¹³⁴

Where Sinha strategically chose to omit from his fiction the real world trial and its settlement, Mangad was writing before the 2011 Supreme Court ruling which placed 'an interim order banning the manufacture, use and sale of endosulfan in India', following a review of 'the petition filed by Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI)'.¹³⁵ He was writing before the 2013 court proceedings in which 'the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) ordered that a tribunal be held to identify those responsible and those qualifying for compensation', and before 'the 2017 Supreme Court order on compensation [which] mentions the issue of liability by directing the state-level government to recover the amount of the compensation either from the concerned industry or from the Government of India'.¹³⁶ There were, of course, serious issues, failings, obstacles and corruptions, both during and following these rulings: compensation has not been distributed in a 'time-bound manner' (read: compensation has still not been paid), and 'community members disagree on the list of victims prepared by the government. They claim that the list is not comprehensive enough to include all the people who have been suffering for many years', and all those who will suffer in the future.¹³⁷ While the anti-pesticide organisations in Kasaragod were successful in securing a ban on endosulfan, indeed this was a clear objective of Mangad's novel, they have been less successful at ensuring the government keep their promises of 'compensation and other rehabilitation measures like medical facilities and Daycare centres',¹³⁸ or to hold the pesticide industry accountable. Here we see again one miscarriage of justice set the precedent for more injustice: when the state does not hold polluting corporations accountable, they 'are less likely

¹³⁴ Nisha M., 'The Undeclared Chemical Disaster in God's Own Country: *Swarga – A Posthuman Tale*', p. 28. Note that while the novel was published in English translation in 2017, it was first published in its original Malayalam in 2009.

¹³⁵ Aparna K U, p. 9.

¹³⁶ Kumar and Jayakumar, p. 348.

¹³⁷ Kumar and Jayakumar, pp. 348-9.

¹³⁸ Aparna K U, p. 9.

to include the human health and environmental costs of their pesticide products on their corporate balance sheets, and are less likely to respect national and international laws controlling dangerous pesticide use.’¹³⁹

What-graha

‘I will only be happy to become a martyr to this cause!’¹⁴⁰

We turn our attention now to the resistance movements featured in the novels, a theme as pertinent to dystopian fiction as it is to dystopian reality. Indeed, the movements they depict are representative of real-world resistance and are situated within a historical context of fierce opposition to oppression and injustice.

Initially, I had intended to focus on ecological destruction in this chapter. Before reading the novels, when I had only read *about* them, I had thought that these texts would be excellent tour guides to polluted jungles of plants and of concrete and corrugated metal, environments toxified by industrial chemicals. Indeed, they are this. But what quickly becomes apparent when reading is that Nature and Human are so entangled that we cannot talk about harm to one without talking about harm to the other: we cannot separate social issues from environmental ones. ‘I never paid any attention to environmental issues before’ Neelakantan says, on learning that the chemicals which have caused so much chronic pain and disability were still being sprayed, excessively, after the time period in which the pesticide was rendered ineffective through resistance development, ‘Even when I was a journalist, all my attention was on human suffering, physical suffering. I never cared about Nature.’¹⁴¹ Neelakantan has not stopped focusing on human suffering when he started working with ESPAC, he has merely understood that our well-being and ill-being, on both individual and societal scales, is locked into a feedback loop with the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the houses we live in – all of which are stratified on class lines – all of which come from and form the

¹³⁹ Kumar and Jayakumar, p. 348.

¹⁴⁰ *Swarga*, p. 177.

¹⁴¹ *Swarga*, p. 154.

natural world. Nature is not greenery, it is not wilderness, but rather it is the relationship between all things, human and non-human, sentient and non-sentient, living and dead: the environmental activists we see in Khaufpur and Enmakaje are just as much activists for social justice as they are for clean air and water.

I have called this chapter 'Post-Satyagraha' to foreground the philosophy and practice of a non-violent peoples' movement which mobilised hundreds of thousands of people and led to Swaraj. It is this tradition of activism from which *Animal's People* and *Swarga* speak. They are both, however, written decades after the original movement, decades after Indian freedom from British rule and decades into self-rule (a self-rule which is embroiled with and undermined by global capital), and so they are speaking about resistance in an entirely different context: in the corruption of the dream of Swaraj. They explore the power of a Satyagraha-based resistance, and they ask pertinent questions about why we should be committed to this and whether there is much comfort or any efficacy in moral superiority. Arundhati Roy points out that Gandhi's Satyagraha was not without violence, but rather that because he thought with a colonised mind, a position so entrenched in English bootlicking, he would rather do this violence to himself than to the coloniser.¹⁴² Roy also outlines the distinction Gandhi made between the holy undertaking of Satyagraha, which he defined as the political use of 'soul force', and Duragraha or 'devilish force', which he saw as a corrupt form of this, urging 'Untouchables to fight for their rights by "sweet persuasion and not by Satyagraha which becomes Duragraha when it is intended to give rude shock to the deep-rooted prejudices of the people".'¹⁴³ Gatekeeping Satyagraha in this way, caste is for Gandhi the deciding factor in who is allowed to call themselves a Satyagrahi.

Neither *Swarga* nor *Animal's People* make explicit mention of which castes are involved in the struggle, and I have already highlighted how both texts follow the precept that peoples' movements are to be led by elite, male, Mahatma figures. However, as poverty and

¹⁴² For more on the complex positioning of Gandhi and Ambedkar see Arundhati Roy, 'The Doctor and The Saint', in *My Seditious Heart*.

¹⁴³ Gandhi, quoted by Roy, 'The Doctor and the Saint'.

caste are intertwined, we can infer (although not say for certain) from the abject poverty of the 'People of the Apokalis', that those who populate Sinha's Khaufpuri justice movement are not of the privileged castes. Likewise, the campaign groups in *Swarga* include a significant Adivasi presence – peoples who are outside the caste system yet afforded as little recognition and as much abuse of their rights by the state as the 'depressed' castes can expect. Whether these movements can be considered Satyagraha is therefore complicated not only by the tactics used, but also by the people using them. If the Satyagrahis of *Animal's People* and *Swarga* belong to subaltern groups historically forbidden from practising this resistance because of their subaltern status, their use of it is a radical act of reclamation, of repurposing, of committing utopia, irrespective of its ultimate in/efficacy.

Violent non-violence

'shut up or I'll be forced to do you no harm'¹⁴⁴

In both novels we see resistance movements which face the insidious, many-headed monster of state and corporate violence with a commitment to non-violence. Outlining his reasons for rooting the movement in a philosophy of peace, Zafar asserts, 'We must be impeccable, or else we make it easy for them to say, "these people are extremists," from there it's a short step to "these Khaufpuris are terrorists"...'.¹⁴⁵ In *Swarga*, despite their 'impeccable' behaviour, anti-endosulfan campaigners are still denounced and criminalised as terrorists.¹⁴⁶ But regardless of whether non-violence could effectively ensure self-protection, Zafar would still insist on it. He believes that they must retain the moral high ground, remain the perfect victim:

'If we allow anger to rule us, if we break the law, we place ourselves in the same situation as the Kampani. [...] No violence,' says Zafar. 'Not now, not ever. Listen, it might be that

¹⁴⁴ *AP*, p. 337.

¹⁴⁵ *AP*, p. 282.

¹⁴⁶ *Swarga*, p. 156.

we never win against the Kampani. Maybe we won't ever get justice. But even if those evil ones escape punishment, they will still be just as blood-stained, just as wicked'.¹⁴⁷

Similarly, we see morality in *Swarga* drawing on the more compassionate teachings of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, where violence against any living thing cannot be condoned, where activists can only try to avoid it:

The ancient Jaina of Enmakaje did not light a lamp at night [...] to prevent insects rushing into the flames, blinded by the flame's attraction. Now, on the Jadadhari Hill, Neelakantan and Devayani did not light a lamp. Not because they feared that insects may give up their souls. They had perished long ago in the poisoned showers that human beings had sent there. They stayed in the dark so that violent men would not snatch away their own lives.¹⁴⁸

With their philosophy thus reasoned, rooted and cemented in non-violence, the activist collectives in both texts, mirroring the real events in both Bhopal and Kasaragod, adopt common tactics of Satyagraha: mass demonstration, non-cooperation, civil disobedience, and hunger strike.

In *Swarga* Neelakantan joins the Beekeepers and Adivasi honey collectors in their direct action to prevent PCK workers accessing the endosulfan-spraying helicopters;¹⁴⁹ Jayarajan travels between villages agitating locals into action;¹⁵⁰ ESPAC disrupt the opening of a jewellery store which is being inaugurated by the minister for agriculture by displaying their disabled children as 'the morning's first auspicious sight – the kani – [customarily] made of Enmakaje's flowers';¹⁵¹ the people of *Swarga* walk in a funeral procession with Pareekshit's corpse to the PCK offices and bury a symbolic coffin;¹⁵² Leela Kumari Amma, a government worker, brings a court case against endosulfan manufacturers.¹⁵³ In *Animal's People* Zafar

¹⁴⁷ *AP*, pp. 282-3.

¹⁴⁸ *Swarga*, p. 234.

¹⁴⁹ *Swarga*, p. 104.

¹⁵⁰ *Swarga*, p. 151.

¹⁵¹ *Swarga*, p. 156.

¹⁵² *Swarga*, p. 167.

¹⁵³ *Swarga*, p. 186.

also continues to seek justice through the courts despite the Kampani stalling proceedings for nearly two decades;¹⁵⁴ he insists on a boycott of an American-owned clinic; his organisation arranges to pay off the medical debts of victims of the factory and initiates low interest loans so others are not forced into borrowing from loan sharks;¹⁵⁵ he organises thousands of people in a peaceful protest outside the Chief Minister's house;¹⁵⁶ they graffiti anti-Kampani slogans on walls around the city;¹⁵⁷ Zafar, Farouq, and two women from the bastis go on hunger strike, nearly to death;¹⁵⁸ Nisha, dressed as a cleaning lady, plants a stink bomb in the air conditioning vents at the Kampani lawyers' meeting, mimicking the poisoning gases which leaked from the factory.¹⁵⁹ Throughout the novel, Zafar remains optimistic, not only that they will eventually win in court, but that legal justice will be an adequate justice.¹⁶⁰ He also remains deeply suspicious of Elli's free clinic, sustaining a boycott of it despite internal opposition from Somraj and the desperate need of the Kaufpuris for medical assistance. In this way, he understands the importance both of using and of not cooperating with official institutions, but he remains alert to the many ways in which these are corrupt and corrupting, cynical, insufficient.

Similarly, in *Swarga*, ESPAC pursue justice through official channels despite their fraught experiences with these, despite the consistent miscarriages of justice they endure. They are aware that the same investigators who write scientific reports which exonerate endosulfan either pretend or blatantly refuse to drink the water in Kasaragod, yet they must continue to rely on scientific reports as technical evidence for their cause.¹⁶¹ They are aware of the corruption in the courts, as well as the extrajudicial intimidation of plaintiffs: Leela Kumari Amma was subjected to an array of intimidation tactics during her court case and was

¹⁵⁴ *AP*, p. 33.

¹⁵⁵ *AP*, p. 86.

¹⁵⁶ *AP*, p. 268.

¹⁵⁷ *AP*, p. 177.

¹⁵⁸ *AP*, p. 288.

¹⁵⁹ *AP*, p. 361.

¹⁶⁰ *AP*, p. 50.

¹⁶¹ *Swarga*, p. 179.

eventually disabled after a lorry drove directly into her.¹⁶² Anti-endosulfan campaigners are also aware that ‘the leader’, the unnamed politician who is behind many of the government’s endosulfan deals, owns most of the media: ‘there is no reason to think that the news will appear even if we hold a press conference’.¹⁶³ This is not to say that state violence in *Swarga* is confined to the control of narratives – the activists in Kasaragod are threatened, beaten, conspired against, exiled, turned against each other, disappeared. Neelakantan and Devayani’s home is burned down by the leader’s goons, counterfeit notes are planted on Jayarajan, charges of prostitution, murder and counterfeiting money are fabricated and levelled to arrest all three, Jayarajan is abducted and murdered and Devayani and Neelakantan only narrowly escape murder. While *Animal’s People* does not show the state tactic of disappearing people, it does depict the corruption of political leaders, the sadism of police officers (embodied in the Fatlu Inspector), and the environment of thuggery which supports this. Thus, both texts attest ‘to the tricky politics of resistance in which, as [...] Zafar recurrently notes, residents must find strength in having nothing’.¹⁶⁴ These texts ask difficult questions about how people who endure violence on systemic, economic, bureaucratic, psychological, corporeal, genetic levels can effectively fight all this armed only with civil disobedience. How can starving people go on hunger strike? What does mass demonstration achieve if those demonstrating are structurally, globally, unseen and overlooked? What does it mean when sick people boycott health? How can an unjust legal system deliver justice? The Satyagrahis in these texts represent an ‘increasingly tangled mosaic of resistance and revolution that has been deployed over time against [polluting corporations and corrupt politicians], and whose tactics repeatedly come into question as each ultimately fails.’¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² *Swarga*, p. 186 & 191. Like Dr Kumar, the character of Leela Kumari Amma is a depiction of a real person. See Aparna K U, p. 4.

¹⁶³ *Swarga*, p. 215.

¹⁶⁴ Balkan, Stacey, ‘A Memento Mori Tale: Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* and the Politics of Global Toxicity,’ *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 25.1 (Winter 2018), 115–133
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isy006>> [accessed 2 January 2021], p. 127.

¹⁶⁵ Balkan, ‘A Memento Mori Tale’, p. 128.

These texts grapple with the place and necessity of violence in resistance movements, with the idea that Satyagraha can and should externalise violence onto the police, the state, the corporations, rather than internalise violence by increasing and exulting their own suffering and wasting. Mocking Zafar's dictate that they must act within the law, Animal highlights the harm caused by adhering to a regime of Gandhi style Satyagraha and working within the established system of power: 'Hail, Saint Zafar. What a fucking hero. Champion of the good and true, he'd even spare our enemy.'¹⁶⁶ Nisha adds to this critique, voicing the frustration of an entire generation which has grown up while the Kampani has continued to evade the courts, claiming that 'If we want justice, we'll have to fight for it in the streets.'¹⁶⁷ It is a tactic not available to Saint Zafar, but one which Animal can claim, embrace, and ultimately legitimise by his (albeit limited) success with it. When the peaceful protest turns to violent riot, Animal is able to stop Fatlu Inspector from committing more 'torture' by tackling, felling and incapacitating him.¹⁶⁸ It is his animality which ensures his attack is successful, not only because his four-footedness, his proximity to the ground, puts him out of the inspector's eyeline, but also because 'An animal isn't subject to the laws of men.'¹⁶⁹ Animal feels liberated from the imperative to behave 'humanely' – he is free to pounce on Fatlu Inspector, to bite at his flesh, to tear his ear off, to go for the kill and stop only because other police officers pull him away.

This type of animal justice also appears in *Swarga*, with the serpent of Jadadhari Hill intervening to save Neelakantan and Devayani from the leader's attempt to bury them alive. Panji had previously proposed that the best course of action was to stop 'troublin' so muc'' with legalistic and political avenues, and instead to act like the snake and simply *puncture* the leader: 'I hav' a shar' knife, Jus' brin' the dog to me. I'll tak' hi' life in one thrust!'¹⁷⁰ The leaders

¹⁶⁶ *AP*, p. 283.

¹⁶⁷ *AP*, p. 34.

¹⁶⁸ *AP*, p. 313.

¹⁶⁹ *AP*, p. 284.

¹⁷⁰ *Swarga*, p. 216.

of ESPAC disregard his advice since, like Zafar, they can only allow violence in animals. They use the term ‘animal’ as a slur to describe the criminality of corporate elites,¹⁷¹ while relying on non-human violence to aid their struggle. Consequently, their non-violence is used to claim and define their humanity. Free from human ethics, although awkwardly bound up in our comprehension of it, the non-human world is also resisting, and it is to this that we now turn our attention. These texts make an important contribution to the study of dystopia, which is not made by dystopian fiction within the canon.

More than Human

“‘I’ve not yet begun,” says the datura.’¹⁷²

The nature of global capital, much like miasma, is ‘multidirectional, variegated and indiscriminating, and [works] in concert with other mechanisms of disease’ and harm.¹⁷³ Understanding this, these texts say that the struggle against a many-headed monster cannot rely entirely on any one tactic, leader, group, *philosophy*, but rather necessitates many different weapons, many types of resistance, many varied fighters – including non-humans, or more-than-humans. Indeed, they acknowledge that animals, plants, weather systems, stones, and chemicals have an agency which, outside of our understanding, is nevertheless co-constitutive with our own. To use Jane Bennett’s phrase, these things are ‘actants’.¹⁷⁴ As we saw with the monster of ‘Socio’ in Anna Starobinets’ future Russia, the personification of ‘Father Earth’ in N.K. Jemisin’s ‘Broken Earth’ trilogy, and in *The Swan Book*’s dreamtime ontology, the non-human world in these Indian dystopias is figured as having its own logic, sentience, power. Here, non-humans are also involved in the pursuit of justice and acts of resistance, in some instances fighting back against and in others enfolding and mutating with the oppression, manipulation, and exploitation enacted by certain groups of humans (specifically, the economically and politically powerful).

¹⁷¹ AP, p. 332.

¹⁷² AP, p. 343.

¹⁷³ Max Liboiron ‘Plasticizers: A twenty-first century miasma’, *Accumulation*, p. 136.

¹⁷⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*, p. viii.

As discussed above, disability in these texts is used to foreground questions about humanity, exploring the difference between human and animal by way of corporeal, psychological and social difference. Sometimes animal connections are used to denigrate a person's value, to show the wasting of human into a lesser being. The children who bully Animal are simply violently enacting the psychology behind Neelakantan's rejection of Pareekshit, the worldview which says that there is one standard corporeal norm, and any deviation from this is a deviation from personhood and the right to dignified life. Sometimes the figuration of animals as superior to humans is used to show the trashiness, the shittiness, of humanity: Neelakantan, like Animal, rejects his human status out of disgust for the atrocities and cruelties he has seen humans commit.¹⁷⁵

Sometimes the figuration of animals and animality goes past any binary of good-bad, with *Animal's People* in particular using animal metaphors to colour its descriptions of humans, human body parts, human thoughts, behaviours and emotions, while *Swarga* reverses this, using human metaphors to elevate and enliven animals.¹⁷⁶ Anthropomorphising in this way may be critiqued for its speciesism, but Bennett proposes that by adopting

an anthropomorphic element in perception [we] can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances — sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchical structure. We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of 'talented' and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self).¹⁷⁷

This is particularly pertinent when the 'size, shape, and meaning of material violence is [...] circumscribed by a "world" system that prescribes what is "meant to be seen" as human, and what is meant to be ignored as nonhuman'.¹⁷⁸ Drawing on the practice of Adivasi serpent worship in Enmakaje, *Swarga* shows the complex belief that snakes are deities, neither good nor bad, who will act upon their own agendas and logics both interwoven with and separate

¹⁷⁵ *Swarga*, p. 9, 25 & 52.

¹⁷⁶ *AP*, p. 72, 73, 77, 77-8, 82, 83, 97, 104, 125, 133, 133, 191, 217, 256, 264, 266, 289 & 342-5. *Swarga*, p. 121.

¹⁷⁷ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 99.

¹⁷⁸ Johnson, Justin Omar, "'A Nother World" in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 62.2 (June 2016), 119-144 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/0041462X-3616552>> [accessed 4 January 2021], pp. 121-2.

from ours, which may work to our benefit or detriment. *Swarga* also draws on a human-animal hybridity present in Hinduism by foregrounding the deity Mahabali in his donkey avatar. He is not the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent god of monotheistic religions, but rather he is a composite of divinity (the 'guardian of truth and duty'), human ('the righteous Asura king') and animal ('the humble donkey'), he is mighty in his lowliness, and his ethic is one both ancient and modern, pure and mutated, fitting the time and place.¹⁷⁹ By viewing the non-human animal in this way, these texts move us away from the centrality of human, Kantian ideas which exult use-putting and exploitation. They muddy the binary between human and animal, offering instead a humanimal approach, a flattening of hierarchy, suggesting the possibility of collaboration rather than colonisation.

Likewise, *Swarga* shows how plants, or *crops*, can be seen to exert this actant power. Following Michael Pollan, we can consider that domesticated plants have in fact domesticated us:¹⁸⁰ Mangad highlights how the practice of plantation farming has given large areas of India over to non-native trees, fibre crops and food grain, showing how these plant actants have evolved in ways which appeal to, or perhaps yoke, humans so that we transplant them and eliminate their competition, creating for them new habitats. Where Pollan locates this agency in plant biochemistry, Bennett extends her concept of actant power, or 'vitality' to 'mean the capacity of *things* – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede and block the will and designs of humans but also to act as [...] forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own'.¹⁸¹ Approached in this way, we can see the agency of different types of rock in both novels. *Swarga*'s Truth Steps historically acted as a force to compel humans into honesty and integrity, and the destruction of them heralds the destruction of the memory of this past, utopian era. The sacred, talking Cave provides a protective and liminal space where human and non-human can hide, worship, hunt, live, and discover together the mysteries of the universe, but it maintains control over who or what is allowed inside it. The

¹⁷⁹ *Swarga*, pp. 56-8.

¹⁸⁰ Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-eye View of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

¹⁸¹ Bennett, p. viii. Emphasis mine.

ancient grinding stone of the Jain Ballalas acts as both rubbish and treasure, determined to lie buried, to remain wanted but unused and unusable; when removed it is so uncooperative that the treasure-hunter promptly returns it. In *Animal's People* we see rock-actants in the form of the poison-leaching bricks which make up the remnants of the Kampani's factory, a wasteland which houses the ghosts of capitalism's human victims, living scorpions, the reclaiming jungle, wild dogs, and the family of Animal, Jara and Ma Franci. We also see these bricks transplanted: they have been repossessed by basti dwellers, walked off from the site of ruination to be reimagined into houses. In these ways, non-human actants can show us the flows of capitalism's money and power, but they can also offer us glimpses into how this can be resisted, refused and repurposed.

Latency

'here too they dropped a big bomb. Not at one go, slowly, gradually'¹⁸²

Perhaps the most compelling example of more-than-human actants offered in these novels are the chemicals themselves. We have seen in Khaufpur how international politics and neoliberal economics locate and relocate the spatialities of harm, displacing risk onto the global poor through shady deals and selective plant placement while hoarding reward for the global rich. The danger of agrichemical production is made acceptable to those of us in the Global North by its far-away-ness – both in the geographical space between the US/EU and India, and the psychological and emotional space created by our processes of othering slum dwellers, fuelled and legitimised by western lawyers and a national media embroiled in corporate interests.¹⁸³ In Kerala we see on a regional level how the gap in distance between urban and rural aids this cognitive dissonance. 'Health conscious' city dwellers in Kottayam are hesitant about eating pesticide-contaminated produce from the countryside plantations lest their own bodies should accumulate toxins in the same way as farmers' bodies: we permit

¹⁸² Swarga, p. 176.

¹⁸³ See Nixon for more details about the difference between US and Indian media coverage of the massacre at Bhopal, p. 446 & 455.

harm to others that we ourselves are unwilling to endure.¹⁸⁴ We also see in Khaufpur and Kasaragod how the chemicals themselves relocate spatially, exploding out of their confines in factory tanks, entering surnagams (the naturally occurring waterways which cover Kerala) and flowing with them beyond their human-intended destinations.

We also see the magnification of actant power when these chemicals interact with living weather systems: they are incorporated into bodies of dust and of water, forming assemblages of clouds and currents which, through their movements, cause toxic drift away from the initial sites of contamination. In Khaufpur we experience this in the Nautapa, the nine days of extreme heat which precede the monsoon;¹⁸⁵ in Swarga we experience the vitality of a tropical storm.¹⁸⁶ Both these events, exacerbated by climate change, spread the chemicals and compound the health issues that both extreme weather and pesticide poisoning can cause.

These toxicants are also displaced '*temporally*, such that accountabilities exceed the scope of individual lives, bioaccumulating or persisting over time, beyond regulatory regimes, into the long future.'¹⁸⁷ Indeed, Union Carbide disappeared when it was bought by Dow Chemical, just as the endosulfan manufacturer Hurst disappeared in a merger with AgrEvo, exemplifying the way in which corporations can shape-shift out of responsibility: as 'extinct' corporations they have 'effectively circumvented or offloaded historical culpability for the continued slow violence of delayed effects.'¹⁸⁸ But let us return to the chemicals. As endocrine disruptors, MIC and endosulfan do not 'act like poisons and foreign trespassers', rather they mimic hormones, participating 'in the body's normal systems in abnormal ways' by triggering

¹⁸⁴ Nisha M., p. 29.

¹⁸⁵ *AP*, pp. 278-9.

¹⁸⁶ *Swarga*, p. 183.

¹⁸⁷ Michelle Murphy, 'Distributed Reproduction, Chemical Violence, and Latency', *Life (Un)Ltd: Feminism, Bioscience, Race, The Scholar and Feminist Online*, 11.3 (2013) <<https://sfonline.barnard.edu/life-un-ltd-feminism-bioscience-race/distributed-reproduction-chemical-violence-and-latency/>> [accessed 28 July 2020], p.

1.

¹⁸⁸ Nixon, p. 459.

DNA work earlier or later than usual, or forcing unusual gene expressions.¹⁸⁹ This, for example, is why puberty becomes dislocated from adolescence to childhood – in *Swarga* menstruation starts at age seven or eight.¹⁹⁰ Michelle Murphy gives the word ‘latency’ to this lag between ‘stimulus and response’, ‘between chemical exposure and symptom’:

In temporal terms, latency names the wait for the effects of the past to arrive in the present. As such, latency is a movement from past to present or even future. It is the inverse temporal orientation of anticipation—in which the not-yet-future reorients the present. In comparison, latency in ecological time names how the submerged chemicals of the past finally arrive in the present to disrupt the reproduction of the same. Latency names how the past becomes reactivated. Through latency, the future is already altered.¹⁹¹

Although exposed on the night of the leak, it is years before Animal’s spine bends, just as Neelakantan’s body-mind, although non-disabled in the action of the novel, may or may not distort outside the textual time as a result of his exposure to pesticides. We as readers are left to conjecture, as Neelakantan himself conjectures while swimming in the river or eating endosulfan-laced jackfruit, when these chemicals will reanimate in his body, and in what ways they will manifest.

Endosulfan and MIC cause deviation from the norm in the bodies with which they have had direct contact: as they linger in inhabited places, and as new generations are born into these places, they will continue toxifying human (and) animal bodies for decades to come. Yet even if the Kampani paid for a clean-up mission, or if endosulfan could somehow be removed from the vegetation and waterways of Kasaragod, these chemicals are also latent in human animal bodies and will affect DNA work in the children or grandchildren born to those bodies. Furthermore, a common correlation between bodies housing endocrine disruptors and effects on fetuses – or the eggs of those fetuses – is the feminisation of male embryos: ‘not only has life been altered in intergenerational time, but the material ability to continue life in time,

¹⁸⁹ Max Liboiron, ‘Redefining Pollution: Plastics in the Wild’, PhD Thesis, *New York University*, 2012 <<https://discardstudies.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/liboiron-redefining-pollution-defended-sm.pdf>> [accessed 13 February 2021], pp. 86-8.

¹⁹⁰ *Swarga*, p. 110 & 146.

¹⁹¹ Murphy, ‘Distributed Reproduction, Chemical Violence, and Latency’, p. 1.

to reproduce, has also been rearranged'.¹⁹² We come here to the conceptualisation of the wasting of life as wasted *potential* life, most notably embodied in the character of Khã-in-a-Jar in *Animal's People*. Khã-in-a-Jar is one of many fetuses miscarried as a result of the escaping MIC gas, preserved in a jar for medical enquiry. In him Sinha gives us a spokesperson for harm kept latent, for potential not manifested:

Everyone on this earth has in their body a share of the Kampani's poisons. But of all the Kampani's victims, we are the youngest. We unborn paid the highest price. Never mind dying, we never even got a fucking shot at life.¹⁹³

Instead of living humans (read: humans living with the potential to manifest deviation from the norm), the 'unborn' are figured as embodied ghosts, another example of non-human actant. Like the chemicals that have aborted them and the chemicals that preserve them, they collapse the past, present and future into each other.

Bennett emphasises that the power of actants rests in inter-actions – in the ability of things to act upon and be acted upon. These chemicals may in themselves be potent, but this becomes all the more apparent, complex and profound when we see them within their wider assemblages of materialities and policies, systems of agriculture, human and animal agendas and reactions, weather systems, anthropogenic climate change; within 'long-term strings of events',¹⁹⁴ stretching across geographies and 'timelines of mutation – international, intranational, intergenerational, bureaucratic, and somatic – [which] are dizzying even to attempt to map'.¹⁹⁵

Closing words, open wounds

'Life, please listen. I have some very important things to say.'¹⁹⁶

The environmental movement here in the UK has been successful in tying veganism to eco-warriorhood in much the same way as it has vilified single-use plastic: it follows the

¹⁹² Murphy, p. 2.

¹⁹³ *AP*, p. 236-7.

¹⁹⁴ Bennett, p. 37.

¹⁹⁵ Nixon, p. 447.

¹⁹⁶ *Swarga*, p. 247.

greenwashed capitalist belief that it is possible to consume our way to the ethical self, offering us a quick-fix, individualised solution to complex planetary problems. Rather than asking us to question the tricky web of our food industries, agricultural policies and deep global inequality, rather than asking us to make any significant changes to the ways we think about our globalised world and the ways we operate in it, this philosophy assures us that if we simply *substitute*, we will save the earth, and save ourselves. Just swap your meat for soya, it says, swap your cheese for cashews.

During Veganuary this year (2021), while I was working on this chapter, my social media accounts and the free recipe magazines handed out at Tesco and Sainsbury's were full of creamy pasta recipes, cheesecake recipes, mozzarella stick recipes, chocolate fudge recipes, all made with cashews instead of dairy. They all looked delicious. I even tried a few. They all also looked like two-headed still-born calves and agonised children, like the suicides of Keralite farmers and Bhopali workers, like two rupee per person compensation – if any compensation at all. I do not mean to draw a hard, clear line of causation here, to say that the pesticide factories in Khaufpur, in Bhopal, existed because they were needed for the pesticide spraying in Kerala and Karnataka, which was needed to feed the burgeoning cashew appetite in Northern Ireland. It is not a consecutive, linear path: after all, which comes first – desire or demand? I have tried to show throughout this chapter that countering the insidious, immiserating power of the neoliberal global economy (and our complicity in it) is like unravelling a tangled ball of yarn – wherever we pull, somewhere else will snag, some other knots will tighten. There may be environmental benefits in moving towards a more plant-based diet, but equally, there are devastating impacts of this. I cannot eat my vegan alfredo linguine without wondering how many parts per million of endosulfan my dinner has in it. I cannot swallow, unquestioningly, the veracity of veganism's claims that no animals have suffered in the production of these meals. I cannot put aside the knowledge that there are still farmers

outside Delhi trying to enact democracy, protesting the introduction of free-market laws, still being faced with the full physical and bureaucratic force of Modi's BJP government.¹⁹⁷

The texts explored in this chapter traverse the bounds of time and place, intra-textually in their depiction of the slow chemical and structural violence of pesticide warfare, in the ways they muddy the binaries of human/animal, normal/abnormal, disabled/abled, waste/nature; and extra-textually in their ability to reach into the heart-minds of readers in far off countries, and make visible to us the ways in which we are all embroiled (and yet, unequally) in this natural, man-made world together. Sinha and Mangad appeal directly to us, the reader, the public, rather than resting justice in court houses alone, or at the door of unresponsive or limited governments and corporations, shifting 'the burden of response' from survivors to all of us.¹⁹⁸

Both novels end ambiguously, refusing conclusion. What conclusion could they offer while blame is shifted and accountability dodged, while toxicants are abandoned to continue their toxification and mutation of living things in the present and the future, while multinational corporations still drive cycles of farmer debt, overurbanisation, block unionisation, and set up their dirty dumping shop among the bastis this creates, while neoliberal policies continue to dictate who must live and die in waste. In Khaufpur, at the close of *Animal's People*, the Kampani have postponed the trial again; in Kasaragod, at the close of *Swarga*, prominent campaigners are dead or in exile. Both novels also end ominously: *Animal* promises that 'Tomorrow there will be more of us', while in *Swarga* the truth steps are broken beyond repair. Being so closely interwoven with real world experience, these stories cannot be contained in their novels. They leach out as toxicants do, reaching forwards and backwards in time, beyond the moment of writing, the moment of reading, beyond the text itself. Instead of concluding, they remind us that our planet is a closed loop, that what we do *here* affects what happens

¹⁹⁷ Mujib Mashal and Sameer Yasir, 'Modi's Response to Farmer Protests in India Stirs Fears of a Pattern', *New York Times*, 8 February 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/world/asia/india-modi-farmer-protest-censorship.html> [accessed 10 February 2021].

¹⁹⁸ Carrigan, p. 168.

there, and vice versa, that today is just as full of yesterday as it is of tomorrow, that 'away' is closer than we think.

Trash Can

Where there are accumulations of plasticisers, there are increased rates of cancer, obesity, schizophrenia, feminisation of male embryos, homosexuality: this raises difficult questions about the nature of harm – what value systems are we working on if we say being fat, neuro-atypical, a woman, or gay is bad and should be avoided, and what policies of erasure would such beliefs lead us to?

In *Animal's People*, politicians sought to divide the Nutcracker community, by attempting 'to stir trouble between the [religious] communities in Khaufpur', but without success '*Always the Khaufpuris say, we have suffered together, we will not be divided.*' P302

how the PCK, like Union Carbide, was overstepping the bounds of its original agreement to use the land for cashew cropping by beginning to plant the more resource demanding and depleting crop of rubber;¹⁹⁹ Fundamentally, though, both texts are dealing with the concept of normal or natural bodies. When we create exclusionary systems of stratified categories, and then align those categories with moral uprightness, with economic constraints,

These real-world people and their stories are enfolded into *Swarga* without much (apparent) fictionalisation, and through this we see the terrible price both people/characters have paid for their involvement in resisting endosulfan: Dr Kumar is dying because of his excessive exposure to the pesticide; Leela Kumari Amma now needs assistance walking.

'Under this regime, disabled subjects are regarded as objects deserving at best pity and charity, and at worst, contempt, disgust, and even death.'²⁰⁰

This chapter has been researched and written during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has given it a pertinence that I, able-bodied and able-minded, would likely have otherwise missed. The disease has been so slippery and has shown that there is no norm when it comes to bodies, and that we cannot predict exactly how any/every body will react to nascent diseases / inputs. The effects of Covid are debilitating, highlighting how we are all only one accident or event away from being disabled, ALSO highlighting how disability is not the impairment but rather the lack of accessibility and inclusion in society

¹⁹⁹ *Swarga*, p. 155.

²⁰⁰ Kim, para. 8.

Conclusions:

Learning and unlearning through encounters with waste

Moth-eaten morality

At an online conference in the spring of 2021, I had the opportunity to discuss conceptualisations of waste, in the manifestation of pests and animal rights, with a group of utopian scholars.¹ The conversation revolved around a question which the primary texts studied here have engaged with over and over again: what is the place of the things we do not want in the place we want? In other words: how does waste figure in utopia, and how is dystopia figured as waste?

During the previous year I had been co-habiting with a large and persistent family of moths who, over their generations, had destroyed many of my clothes, bags, blankets and rugs. They had expensive tastes, preferring the wool and silk garments – those of ‘natural’ fibres – which had been made by the women in my family or handed down as heirlooms. During this time, I was living in my family’s multi-generational household, and although our attitudes to pests were different, our approach was united; I toed the line of extermination. We would stalk adult moths, smashing them against walls. We hunted out and squashed their larva babies. We vacuumed up their eggs. We sprayed lethal chemicals on everything that we were not able to wash at their death point of 60°C: which is worse, to burn or to boil? I was ashamed to confess this to the utopian scholars, cognizant of my entitlement, my wonky anthropocentric ideas about property rights – ownership and protection – my compliance with practices to which I felt ethically opposed.

One conference participant replied with admonishment, saying that only humans are arrogant enough to put themselves above killing, above necessary acts of violence. Other

¹ I am indebted here to the question-and-answer session following Manuela Palacios’ paper ‘Anomalous Encounters: “Humanimal” Spaces in Contemporary Ecopoetry by Irish Women Writers’, at the Speculative Art and Spatial Justice Conference, NUI Galway and The Moore Institute, 16-17 April 2021.

animals do not hesitate to defend their territory: to refuse to do so on moral grounds is to believe ourselves superior to other animals. In proposing that we co-habit peacefully, I would be allowing destruction: the creation of wasted goods, of things that would be beyond repairing back to their original (or any) intended use, and so destined for the dump. But in exterminating the moths – or, at least, attempting to – I was denying the right to life that I fundamentally believe all living things have. I have too often heard the metaphor of pest infestations applied to people seeking relief from persecution, from horrific, dystopic worlds which I, a middle-class citizen of the Global North, am complicit in making. What ensued was an illuminating discussion on how domination and control have been an inherent part of utopia since it was first figured as a land of Cockaigne, a New World onto which ideals could be projected, or *settled*; and how conversations about whether we have a right to protect ourselves become conversations on harm and gradients of threat. There is no one answer to the place of waste in utopia, they said, because there is no singular waste, and no singular utopia. If the moths had been rats, the conversation would be different;² if the clothes had been unwanted, it would be different again. Are moths threatening and harmful if they only eat rubbish?

Throughout this thesis I have shown how defining and determining harm is central to the creation and destruction of utopia and dystopia. In chapter one, for example, I looked at the terror and redemption available in mutation, and I asked questions about the relationship between abstraction and the degradation of human life, human society and the material world. In chapter two I studied whether/how/what enslaved peoples can salvage from the dystopias they have been forced to build (and destroy). In chapter three I explored the consequences of Aboriginal people reclaiming the kin, Country and culture from which they have been forcibly dislocated after these things have been polluted and toxified. In chapter four I sought to balance the imperative to uphold the right to life and dignity of disabled people with holding accountable the transnational corporations which have caused huge suffering and deviation

² See, for example, Jared Diamond's explanation of the destruction of Easter Island in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (London: Penguin, 2005).

from the corporeal standard in the name of profit. Further, I have shown how dystopia is signified through unjust processes of wasting: through the corruption of a utopian ideal, the state's miscarriage/s of justice, the creation of scapegoats and sacrificing of these people in the name of the dystopian ideology. The texts I have looked at have upheld these criteria of dystopian fiction. They have, however, challenged other criteria of the literary dystopia, as we shall see below.

Mutating dystopia

Thinking about moths points us not only to ideas about harm but also to ideas about hysteria, which speak in important ways to waste and dystopia. In her conference paper on (Irish) ecofeminist poetry, Manuela Palacios looked at the work of poets who typically revere and rejoice in 'nature' which confesses to their violent reactions to 'pests' in their domestic spheres. She highlights the gendering of spatial segregation: while we/they are disempowered outside the home, women are placed in and given dominion over domestic spaces. Once we/they have control over the home, we/they re-enact hierarchies of value and spatial segregation, imposing order in the name of protecting against danger: nature is glorified and protected so long as it is outside the home. But the home must remain a space free from moths – or ants or cockroaches or rats.

Paradoxically, the feminisation of nature runs alongside this; the patronising or exploiting of both women and nonhumans is made possible by the alignment of one with the other.³ Hysteria is also feminised, in part because of its association with nature. In the poetry she studies, Palacios sees 'the primacy of hysteria [speaking] to the need to acknowledge that masculinised rationality is not the default superior method of making sense of experiences and information'.⁴ Classically, dystopian fiction is considered important for its ability to

³ For more on this matter see Jason Moore, 'Capitalocene & Planetary Justice', *Maize* 6 (Summer 2019) <<https://jasonwmoore.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Moore-The-Capitalocene-and-Planetary-Justice-2019-Maize.pdf>> [accessed 10 March 2021].

⁴ Palacios, 'Anomalous Encounters'.

cognitively dislocate and estrange us. Non-canonical contemporary dystopian fiction goes beyond this: it allows emotion to play a part in ‘the strategy of warning’ function of the genre. In discussing hysteria around pests, the scholars at this utopian conference were highlighting the gendered valuation of emotion in processes of waste-making. Just so, the dystopian texts by female authors (Tolstaya, Starobinets, Jemisin and Wright) which I have studied here highlight the importance of emotional involvement in dystopian fiction. Whether it is the use of second person in ‘The Broken Earth’ trilogy, or the intrusive online-epistollic format of *The Living*, or the mutated poetics of *The Slynx* and *The Swan Book*, these authors use narrative styles which challenge boundaries between reader and protagonist, so that we feel wholly, holistically entangled with them and their world. The dystopian texts by male authors (Mangad and Sinha) allow more room for movement here: *Animal’s People* is written as an address to the reader, positioning us as ourselves, outside of the protagonist, as culprits, as complicit in the dystopia wrought on the protagonist. Meanwhile, *Swarga’s* position within a real-world struggle against the continuation of harmful pesticide use means it falls back on a paternalistic and ableist rhetoric which can trouble our closeness with the protagonist.

This is, perhaps the greatest challenge and contribution to the genre that I have found: modern dystopian fiction from those with lived experience of dystopia does not insist on a sympathy yet distance from the protagonist or the protagonist’s world, since they are not so much imagining a possible future dystopia as they are re-framing their experiences of the past and present in literary form. It is less a strategy of warning about the nightmare that *could* come, and more a strategy of creating solidarity (or exposing our entanglement) in the here and now. Indeed, these texts make clear how tricky it is to say where dystopia begins and ends – in time, in place. It is a literature which emmeshes past and present and future, here and there, you and me.

We have also seen throughout the chapters how the dystopian criterion of destruction of the private world is challenged through interconnections between human and nonhuman life. Where a ‘virus’ in Oblivia’s mind, in chapter three, is responsible for taking away her sovereignty, it is through ghosts and spirits, swans and stories, a hollowed-out tree stump and

a toxified swamp that Oblivia is able to reclaim dignified life, even in the midst of dystopia. Where Essun and Nassun are enslaved people, in chapter two, it is through their connection with and to obelisks, the radically powerful junk of collapsed civilizations responsible for their position in society, that they can know themselves outside of disempowerment and enslavement. And we have seen how the proprietary approach of the dystopian state to the memory of the past has been challenged by the presence of waste, such as the obelisks and the polluted swamp mentioned, or the ruined, corrupted 'Truth steps' in *Swarga*, the left-behind chemicals in the bodies and body of Khaufpur in *Animal's People*, the radiated 'Oldener' books in *The Slynx* and the derelict, looted shopping mall in *The Living*. Dystopian states try to control, bury, corrupt memory of the past; waste refuses to co-operate. In lingering, in insisting that there is no away place, these lively waste objects and wastescapes show the disruption of waste in a dystopia – as well as the disruption of waste to the dystopian genre.

Beyond the borders (further directions)

In my introduction I discussed the imperative I felt at the beginning of this project to decentralise dystopia, to move scholarship away from dominant, western ideas of it. I started my PhD with the belief that by using waste studies as a methodological framework to investigate how authors coming from diverse dystopian realities envisioned dystopia in fiction I could learn from them how to survive, resist and revolutionise dystopias. I still feel that this is important, perhaps more so now than ever, but I have also realised that the number of peoples who have experienced dystopia is expansive and expanding – indeed, it seems quite wrong to assume that there are any societies which have not experienced some form of dystopia. With the group of primary texts from which to choose thus unendingly extensive, it is worth noting that the distinct dystopian (con)texts that I have chosen here are merely a sample of contemporary dystopian fiction deserving of study. I see this work as a contribution to a broader project rather than a project complete in itself. Dystopian fiction is alive and thriving: this thesis is just a small part of a discussion which is by no means exhaustive or limited or static.

Further study is needed which could continue in the same vein of decentralising the conversation around wasted worlds by conducting close reading of novels from authors who have experienced wasting, whatever their relationship with the western canon. Additionally, if the selection of primary texts for analysis was expanded, further study could be quantitative too, picking out patterns and disruptions across cultural groupings, much like the research into pan-European dystopian fiction of the 20th century conducted by Erika Gottlieb. Alternatively – or *additionally* – further study could take a different route, incorporating collaborative and/or creative and/or activist work. It need not be academic; it need not be written; it need not satisfy genre conventions.

There are already examples of work like this. The Discard Studies website, for example, gathers work from diverse fields of study and research which focus on waste materials and processes of wasting. Moving away from online resources, the creative writing workshops run by the Octavia's Brood project take a collectivised and multiversal approach to envisioning (more just and equitable and abundant) futures: participants spend the majority of time in these workshops agreeing on and building the world into which they then write their own stories. It is an approach to creativity which acknowledges our inter-relatedness, the fact that our pasts, presents and futures are shared. I have seen this focus on communal building made tangible in an interactive art piece by performance artist Eleni Kolliopoulou which asked participants to work together and in silence to abstract clothes from a mound of dirt, to hang these clothes from suspended wires. In many ways, I think, urban community gardens offer a similar experience: both comment on how dirt is handled, literally, collectively. The art piece, however, consciously asked participants to consider how reviled materials such as half-decomposed clothes can offer generative experiences if we are willing to handle them. It was a reminder for me that waste is always material first, metaphoric second. Perhaps the most powerful exploration of waste and dystopia, which centres the people most impacted by both,

is in the documentary film *Waste Land*.⁵ The film looks at what happens when an artist takes a collaborative approach to making portraits of his subjects, people who work in Jardim Gramacho, a giant rubbish dump outside Rio de Janeiro. The film explores the tricky ethical questions about power and representation, about who can speak for whom, and how those of us on the outside of dystopia can be, actively, in solidarity with those living it – even while we are complicit in it.

W/hole

I would like to close by returning to moths. When we talk about moths, about co-habiting with them, about us all sharing a home together, we are talking about the ethics of waste and the utopian-dystopian spectrum. We are talking about constructing and destroying our material world, our ideas about what/who belongs in our ideal worlds, and our behaviour towards those objects/subjects we feel do not belong. The winter following the arrival of moths into my life was a cold, wet, dark and lockdown winter. I had time to fill, and clothes to salvage. I set about learning different techniques to darn holes, to sew patches, to upcycle out of garments which had felted after being washed at too-high temperatures. I was slow to learn how to repair, and repair is itself slow work: the time scales of production and destruction and restoration are often uneven. Any odd bit of plastic can attest to that.⁶

Still, many of my things were irredeemable, either through the extent of the damage or by being too large to be treated. What to do with these things? What to do with moths in your mattress? I learnt the lesson that these wasted things teach: that impermanence is a constant. I learnt that in all life there is death, in all use there is misuse and disuse, in all having there is losing, in all want there is waste, in all utopia there is dystopia. And vice versa.

⁵ *Waste Land*, dir. by Lucy Walker (O2 Filmes, 2010) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jD5CDRgS_w> [accessed 24 June 2021].

⁶ For more contemplation on the pre-life, short-lived life and post-life of plastics see James Marriot and Mika Minio-Paleullo, 'Where does this stuff come from? Oil, plastic and the distribution of violence' *Accumulation: The material politics of plastic* ed. by Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins and Mike Michael, (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 171-183. Also see David Farrier, *Footprints: In Search of Future Fossils* (London: 4th Estate, 2020).

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