

COLONIALISM AND/AS CATASTROPHE:
ANIMALS, ENVIRONMENT, AND ECOLOGICAL CATASTROPHE
IN THE CONTEMPORARY POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes literary representations of ecological catastrophe in contemporary postcolonial fiction to study the relationship between colonialism and catastrophe and to reveal the critical role animals and the environment play in literary renditions of catastrophe. Its primary site of investigation are six novels that I use as case studies to examine how postcolonial texts render experiences of catastrophe and connect contemporary ecological vulnerability to colonial legacies. I focus on fictional texts that engage with ecological catastrophe and climate change, environmental instability and exploitation, and human-nonhuman relations in an era that some scholars refer to as the Anthropocene – a time in which human activity has become a main driver of global environmental change. I limit my analysis to novels from South Asian and the South Pacific, because in addition to sharing a past as British colonies, these regions are consistently identified as at-risk for ecological catastrophes.

I show that the formal properties of novels (their commitment to representing mundane and repeated events and their focus on detailed psychological portraits) make them productive sites for thinking through the way ecological vulnerability is experienced unequally across the globe. Highlighting that factors such as race, class, and indigeneity affect how individuals living in ecologically vulnerable regions experience catastrophe, I emphasize the way intersecting positionalities shape the narrative representation of catastrophe. I demonstrate that relationships with local animal species and the land help environmentally vulnerable populations cope with catastrophe, and that postcolonial texts use the nonhuman to work through violent environmental events. In this way, I foreground the potential contributions of literary fiction to transnational efforts to better understand how postcolonial subjects experience ecological catastrophe and massive-scale environmental change, and how they imagine possible recovery.

Dedication

For my parents and grandparents.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	vi
Introduction.....	1
Positionality Statement	1
Section 1: A Crisis of the Imagination	1
Section 2: Climate Change, Catastrophe, and the Anthropocene	8
Section 3: Popular Perceptions of Climate Change	16
Section 4: Why Read Novels about Climate Change and Catastrophe	19
Section 5: Chapter Breakdown	33
Section 6: Conclusion	38
Chapter 1: Reading Catastrophe through Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism, and Animal Studies...	40
Section 1: Racism, (Neo)Colonialism, and Environmental Justice.....	40
Section 2: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Catastrophe	41
Section 3: Colonial Roots: Colonialism, Environment, Environmentalism	46
Section 4: Postcolonialism and Environmental Justice in the Anthropocene	53
Section 5: Defining Catastrophe (Catastrophe vs. Apocalypse vs. Disaster)	57
Section 6: The Nonhuman Turn	61
Section 7: Ecocriticism and Environmental Literature.....	63
Section 8: Animal Studies	66
Section 9: Problems and Scholarly Contributions	70
Chapter 2: Catastrophe, Vulnerability, and Human Relationships	74
Section 1: Colonialism, Catastrophe, and the Everyday	74
Section 2: Colonialism and its Aftermath in the Context of Climate Change: Race, Indigeneity, and Socio-Ecological Vulnerability	77
Part 1: Kiran Desai's <i>The Inheritance of Loss</i>	83
Section 1: Synopsis and Literature Review	83
Section 2: Socioeconomic Hierarchies and Power Dynamics: Caste, Class, Race, Ethnicity, and Indigeneity	88
Section 3: Racism and Colonialism.....	102

Section 4: Precarity, Vulnerability, and Catastrophe	108
Section 5: Reflection, Renegotiation, and Human-Animal Relationships	111
Section 6: Conclusion.....	114
Part 2: Kim Scott's <i>Benang: From the Heart</i>	115
Section 1: Synopsis and Literature Review	115
Section 2: Form, Perspective, and the De-sensationalization of Violence	119
Section 3: Colonial Law, Segregation, and Control	123
Section 4: Control, Violence, and the Body	133
Section 5: Control, Violence, and the Environment.....	138
Section 6: The Bushfire	141
Section 7: Conclusion.....	145
Chapter 3: Catastrophe and Human-Nonhuman Relationships in Degraded Environments	147
Section 1: Animals, Climate Change, and Ecological Catastrophe.....	147
Part 1: Uzma Aslam Khan's <i>Thinner than Skin</i>	150
Section 1: Synopsis and Literature Review	150
Section 2: Colonial Law and Human-Nonhuman Relationships.....	154
Section 3: Ecological Vulnerability and Earthquakes	169
Section 4: Disappearance of Local Species	177
Section 5: Animals and Catastrophe.....	183
Section 6: Conclusion.....	186
Part 2: Alexis Wright's <i>Carpentaria</i>	188
Section 1: Synopsis and Literature Review	188
Section 2: Racial/Racist Geographies and their Legacy.....	191
Section 3: Catastrophe in the Novel: The Cyclone and the Mine	195
Section 4: Narrative Form: Dreaming, Indigenous Cosmologies, and Indigenous Realism.....	203
Section 5: Animals in the Novel.....	211
Section 6: Animals and the Mine	215
Section 7: Animals and the Cyclone.....	218
Section 8: New Beginnings	226
Section 9: Conclusion.....	231
Chapter 4: Land Justice, Resistance, Recovery	233
Section 1: The Physical Environment	233

Part 1: Amitav Ghosh's <i>The Hungry Tide</i>	236
Section 1: Synopsis and Literature Review	236
Section 2: The Sundarbans	238
Section 3: Narrative Structure	241
Section 4: Space-Time Compression and Nonhuman Actants	243
Section 5: Project Tiger and the Morichjhāpi Massacre.....	250
Section 6: Indigenous Peoples and Conservation Priorities	256
Section 7: Catastrophe and Environmental Trauma	264
Section 8: Conclusion.....	269
Part 2: Patricia Grace's <i>Potiki</i>	272
Section 1: Synopsis and Literature Review	272
Section 2: The Colonization of New Zealand: Historical and Environmental Context	277
Section 3: Stories, Perspectives, and Now-Time.....	282
Section 4: Racism and Colonial Capital	286
Section 5: Land and Resistance	292
Section 6: Land, Community, Identity	295
Section 7: Ecological Degradation	300
Section 8: Floor, Fire, and Explosion.....	301
Section 9: Recovery, Cyclicity, and the Everyday	304
Section 10: Conclusion.....	309
Conclusion	312
Works Cited	319

Introduction

Positionality Statement

As a white settler scholar living and working on the Dish With One Spoon Territory and doing research funded by the Canadian government, I am implicated in the enduring networks of colonial power that I study in this dissertation. My research focuses on legacies of colonialism and their impacts on lands, cultures, and peoples with whom I have no relationship, and about whom I have no direct knowledge. Recognizing my position as an outsider, I have attempted to let the words and the work of Indigenous scholars belonging to the peoples and cultures and lands that I study guide my analysis. I endeavour to be a good listener and good reader, but I know that there is much I discuss here about which my knowledge and understanding fall short.

Section 1: A Crisis of the Imagination

We are “running out of time” to address climate change – scientists have been issuing such urgent warnings for decades (Yakupitiyage; see also Shabecoff; Tennberg). If global temperatures increase only 2 °C – a conservative estimate – sea levels will rise at least six meters, wiping out coastal cities and displacing millions of people worldwide (Fischer et al.). While such projections seem concrete on the surface, they are incredibly difficult to imagine and even harder to represent. Our inability to properly imagine climate change and the catastrophic events it presages makes responding to them a monumental challenge.

Many environmental humanists and climate change experts argue that the climate crisis is, at its core, a crisis of the imagination (see Hartman; Marshall; Skrimshire), and much of the contemporary imagination is shaped by fiction. In his 2016 polemic *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh takes on this relationship between imagination and environmental management,

arguing that we have failed to respond to climate change at least in part because fiction fails to believably represent it. Ghosh explains that climate change is largely absent from contemporary fiction because the cyclones, floods, and other cataclysmic events it evokes simply seem too “improbable” to belong in stories about everyday life (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 27). But climate change does not only manifest as a series of extraordinary events. In fact, as environmentalists and ecocritics from Rachel Carson to Rob Nixon point out, environmental change can be “imperceptible” (Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* 15); it proceeds gradually, only occasionally producing “explosive and spectacular” events (2). Most climate change impacts cannot be observed day to day, but they become visible when we are confronted with their accumulated impacts.

Climate change evades our imagination because it poses significant representational challenges – this is why documentary filmmakers who track climate change effects use representational techniques that show audiences “before and after” shots of the same environment, in order to draw out the changes that took place gradually over a period of time.¹ My dissertation employs a similar technique; it analyzes stories about daily life in postcolonial communities to pick out the before, during, and after shots that capture and render visible the impacts of environmental change. By tracing events over a period of time, stories that record daily routine make gradual changes stand out. At the same time, they reveal spectacular catastrophes to be routine events in environments marked by long-term ecological degradation.²

¹ This principle governs the structure of documentaries such as *Chasing Ice* and *Chasing Coral*. These works acknowledge that climate change cannot be seen in “human time.” *Chasing Coral* therefore presents viewers with “before and after” images of the same coral reef several months apart, to show audiences the drastic accumulated impacts of tropical storms, ocean warming, and acidification (see “Chasing Coral – About the Film.”).

² I recognize the problematic ethical and philosophical implications of calling catastrophe “routine.” Ecological catastrophes are occurring increasingly frequently in the Global South, yet dominant novel theory – which insists that the novel focuses on the everyday – fails to account for these realities that communities in the Global South experience regularly. Catastrophic events are grave threats to the lives and livelihoods of communities around the world. I believe it is necessary to recognize how frequent such events are becoming, but this does not mean that I

Entwined in the daily lives of characters, environmental changes and ecological catastrophes are integrated into the world of the story. Fiction takes climate change and ecological catastrophe out of the realm of the unimaginable and plants it squarely within the realm of the everyday, generating opportunities to begin reimagining unlikely environmental events as integral parts of daily life in the Anthropocene.

This dissertation engages with critical concerns surrounding climate change, catastrophe, and the Anthropocene more broadly by analyzing representations of ecological catastrophe and the devastating consequences of environmental degradation in postcolonial regions. Fiction provides opportunities to engage with environmental crisis through a structured storyline that renders it imaginable. It shrinks the climate crisis down by containing it within a story, offering useful counternarratives to popular discourses that frame climate change as unimaginably complex. Opening up a space for this imaginative shift is a necessary first step in the process of learning to live in increasingly challenging environments. My work thus demonstrates fiction's potential to help confront and thereby better cope with the particular conditions of life in the Anthropocene.

I argue that novels, in particular, play a vital role in shaping the contemporary climate change imagination, because their generic conventions (namely their focus on subjective experience and their commitment to representing normal daily life) lend themselves perfectly to the project of reframing catastrophe as a routine event. I use six novels from South Asia and the South Pacific as case studies for my analysis. I focus on the ways novels' formal qualities help to reimagine and therefore better handle contemporary environmental challenges. By analyzing

believe they should be viewed as "lesser" dangers, or should be accepted as inevitable and unpreventable events. My goal is rather to challenge dominant novel theory, and to push for an adjustment in how mainstream literary scholarship imagines the everyday.

narrative perspective, structure, movement, and pacing, I detect the specific moments in which catastrophe pushes up against the limits of the normal, and is ultimately subsumed into the everyday world the novel generates. These moments reveal the novel's unique ability to render gradual environmental changes visible, to make ecological catastrophe seem routine, and to assimilate both into the world they construct. I further track narrative moments in which the texts link catastrophe to colonial history, and I use these moments to study the relationship between colonialism and catastrophe in contemporary postcolonial novels. The novels I work with treat catastrophe as a form of colonial residue, framing it as a product of colonial environmental exploitation. As a result, I suggest that it might be beneficial to think of the study of catastrophe as an inherent part of the study of postcolonial literatures and environments.

The imaginative renditions of catastrophe presented in my case studies are productive sites for thinking through the way ecological vulnerability is experienced unequally across the globe. Factors such as race, class, and indigeneity (to name a few) affect how individuals living in ecologically vulnerable regions experience catastrophe, and my analysis emphasizes the ways these different positionalities and narrative perspectives affect representations of catastrophe in contemporary novels. I adopt an interdisciplinary approach that turns to, and draws from, postcolonial theory, literary criticism, disaster studies, animal studies, ecocriticism, and the environmental humanities more broadly. I examine representations of catastrophe, and I reveal the ways novels address climate change and environmental degradation by drawing connections to long-standing histories of environmental exploitation under colonialism. I pay close attention to experiences of traumatic environmental events, and to the ways postcolonial subjects negotiate their constantly shifting relationships with animals, environments, and forces they must contend

with on a daily basis.³ Finally, I show the central role nonhuman animals and the environment play in narratives about catastrophe. In my case studies, animals and the environment contribute importantly to the narrative handling of catastrophe and help the characters affected by catastrophe work through experiences of violent environmental events.

In focusing my analysis on narrative form and structure, in particular on perspective, movement, and pacing, I analyze how the novels depict the environments in which they are set, track the environmental changes that take place in these environments, and link catastrophe to colonial legacy. Colonialism's enduring impacts on postcolonial environments and on the lives of postcolonial and Indigenous subjects is perceptible in specific passages, and I study the way the novel makes these connections. Spectacular though they may be, the violent environmental events that the novels depict remain contained within the everyday world of the story, and contending with them becomes part of characters' daily routine. Through these novels, catastrophe is thus recast as a regular part of everyday life in contemporary postcolonial environments.

My primary site of investigation are six novels that I use as case studies to analyze how postcolonial subjects experience catastrophe, and how they understand their ecological vulnerability to be tied to colonial legacies. The two regions that form the core of my analysis are South Asia and the South Pacific. I have chosen three novels from each region as my case studies. From South Asia, I consider Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (set in India), Uzma

³ I use the terms "human" and "animal" as shorthand for "human animal" and "nonhuman animal" respectively. I also use the term "nonhuman" (as in "nonhuman environment") to designate nonhuman organisms, such as animals and plants, and abiotic (non-biological) objects, such as soil and water. I recognize that the terms "human" and "nonhuman" risk setting up a conceptual dichotomy that stems from, and that continues to sustain, colonial discourses that negotiate difference in terms of a simplistic "self-other" binary, but I use these terms because it is necessary to recognize the widespread historical tendency, at least in the European tradition, "to conceive of humanity by way of essential contrast to animality" (Anderson 302). Many of the texts I work with, however, do not espouse a "simple or strict classification of human versus nonhuman" (Anderson 302), challenging conventional (western, Enlightenment) modes of thinking about nonhuman life.

Aslam Khan's *Thinner Than Skin* (Pakistan), and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (India). From the South Pacific, I examine Kim Scott's *Benang* (Australia), Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (Australia), and Patricia Grace's *Potiki* (New Zealand). *The Inheritance of Loss* and *Thinner Than Skin* feature landslides and earthquakes, respectively, drawing attention to the impacts of vegetation loss and soil erosion in India and Pakistan. *Benang* performs similar work focusing on Australia: it highlights changes to vegetation and biodiversity, and it culminates in a bush fire that engulfs an island off the coast of Australia. *Thinner Than Skin* also tracks the gradual disappearance of native species in Pakistan, while *Potiki* draws attention to the shrinking ranges of various fish species due to water pollution. *Potiki* also features a number of catastrophes, including a flood and a fire. *The Hungry Tide* explores the impacts of poorly-conceived wildlife conservation efforts, and it ends with a violent cyclone. *Carpentaria* also ends with a cyclone, but it handles the environmental repercussions of mining. My case studies handle a wide range of ecological catastrophes and manifestations of environmental degradation, together forming a constellation of environmental challenges that are becoming increasingly common in present-day postcolonial environments. These works are highly attuned to the ways in which climate change affects the ecologies and communities of the regions they foreground. *Thinner than Skin* and *Carpentaria* make explicit references to climate change impacts in Pakistan and Australia; the other works engage with the impacts of anthropogenic climate change more obliquely. These six novels successfully entangle environmental change into the daily lives of their characters. They offer controlled, non-threatening ways of engaging with catastrophe and climate crisis, simultaneously empowering readers to rethink their perceptions of climate change, and forcing them to acknowledge that catastrophe is becoming a regular part of life for communities across the world.

My project responds to the critical need for research on the relationship between colonialism and catastrophe that both Anthony Carrigan and Rob Nixon point out, and lays the groundwork for new avenues of investigation in the environmental humanities. The goal of this project is to highlight the potential contributions of literary fiction to the growing field of the environmental humanities by offering up new ways of thinking about catastrophe narratives (commonly referred to as “disaster fiction”). The key questions that guide my work are organized around three central, organically connected nodes: climate change imagination, representations of ecological catastrophe, and the particular role novels play in both. I ask: What is the relationship between colonialism and catastrophe? How might fiction help shed light on this connection? and; How might novels help redefine the shifting borders of what constitutes “normal” ecological conditions in the Anthropocene? What does the novel form, in particular, have to offer to help us better respond to contemporary environmental challenges? How could reading postcolonial texts with attention to environmental crisis shift current critical conversations in the fields of disaster studies and postcolonial studies?

I work with postcolonial novels because they offer a two-part solution to the challenge of engaging with ecological change across different regions. The novel is today widely recognized as a global form (see the work of Debjani Ganguly; Adam Kirsch; Alexander Beecroft; see also Franco Moretti, *On the Novel*), and its formal characteristics facilitate my investigation.⁴ The unifying element of form gives my analysis structural coherence, providing a basis of comparison for works from different regions. I further limit my case studies by selecting texts produced in regions that share similar histories of colonial environmental exploitation and are therefore more vulnerable to future environmental degradation. I have singled out South Asia

⁴ I discuss the formal characteristics of the novel in Section 4.

and the South Pacific because they are already experiencing frequent and violent ecological catastrophes. In addition to sharing a past as British colonies, they are consistently identified as highly at-risk of experiencing climate-related catastrophes due to their ecological and geophysical characteristics (see Campbell and Barnett; Baer and Singer; Mirza). In making these choices, I create a framework for my analysis that facilitates controlled comparison of representations of catastrophic environmental events in ecologically sensitive regions in order to shine light on the relationship between colonialism and catastrophe.

Section 2: Climate Change, Catastrophe, and the Anthropocene

Anthropogenic climate change refers to a change in global climate patterns associated with increased levels of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the Earth's atmosphere. It is linked with sea level rise, increases in global temperatures, disruptions to normal seasonal cycles, changes in precipitation patterns, increased likelihood of droughts and temperature extremes (both extreme heat and extreme cold), and increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as hurricanes (NASA, "Effects"). Climate change is "happening faster than initially predicted" (Parenti 6), and it is already impacting communities around the world "in the form of more extreme weather events, desertification, ocean acidification, melting glaciers, and incrementally rising sea levels" (Parenti 6). 2005 saw the first wave of climate change refugees whose home island of Carteret (Papua New Guinea) in the South Pacific had to be evacuated due to rising ocean levels. That same year, half a million people became homeless when Bhola Island, Bangladesh, flooded. Ecological catastrophes are becoming increasingly frequent, and scientific data shows that "economically and politically battered postcolonial states" in the global south will be the hardest hit (Parenti 9). In fact, climate change is already compromising the ability of many communities to make ends meet; "[t]he United Nations has estimated that all but one of its

emergency appeals for humanitarian aid in 2007 were climate related” (6). Since 2001, we have experienced eighteen of the nineteen warmest years, with 2016 ranking as the warmest year on record (NASA, “Global Temperature”).

Sociologist Christian Parenti, whose book *Tropic of Chaos* maps out the regions that will be most devastatingly affect by climate change, paints a grim picture of the sociopolitical changes to come:

In Bangladesh 22 million people will be forced from their homes by 2050 because of climate change. India is already building a militarized border fence along its 2,500-mile frontier with Bangladesh, and the student activists of India’s Hindu Right are pushing vigorously for the mass deportation of (Muslim) Bangladeshi immigrants.

Meanwhile, twenty-two Pacific Island nations, home to 7 million people, are planning for relocation as rising seas threaten them with national annihilations. What will happen when China’s cities begin to flood? When the eastern seaboard of the United States starts to flood, how will people and institutions respond? (7)

Parenti calls this confluence of volatile ecological, economic, and political conditions a “catastrophic convergence”:

Climate change arrives in a world primed for crisis. The current and impending dislocations of climate change intersect with the already-existing crises of poverty and violence. [...] By catastrophic convergence, I do not merely mean that several disasters happen simultaneously, one problem atop another. Rather, I argue that problems compound and amplify each other, one expressing itself through another. (7)

This convergence of crises, each one adding layers of complexity to the others, aptly captures the conditions of a time that scholars have called the Anthropocene – an age in which humans are fundamentally altering Earth systems on an unprecedented scale.

The term “Anthropocene” responds to a growing awareness of the “quantitative shift in the relationship between humans and the global environment” (Steffen et al. 843) and acknowledges “the capability of contemporary human civilization to influence the environment at the scale of the Earth as a single, evolving planetary system” (842).⁵ In fact, today, “humankind has become a global geological force in its own right” (843). Although anthropogenic climate change is one of its defining features, the Anthropocene is not reducible to climate change. It encompasses a number of large-scale changes that have been taking place for centuries: climate change is “only the tip of the iceberg” (843). The Anthropocene also coincides with severe changes to the Earth’s biogeochemical cycles and physical landscape. Some of these physical changes include waste dumping, changes in land-cover (land clearing and clearcutting), the damming of rivers, the building of megacities, the removal of mountaintops for mining, and the drastic reduction in forests and other ecosystems supporting other-than-human life. These processes are “likely driving the sixth major extinction event in Earth history” (843), thus

⁵ “Anthropocene” is today a widely accepted term for the geological era we currently inhabit. The term began circulating in the 1980s, and its invention is commonly credited to the ecologist Eugene Stoermer (Revkin). It gained popularity through being reintroduced by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen (Revkin). In their paper, Steffen et al. argue that human impact on the environment is today so great that it constitutes sufficient scientific rationale for dividing the present from the previous geological era (the Holocene) (843). And on 21 May 2019, the Working Group on the ‘Anthropocene,’ formed as part of the Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy, agreed with their findings. They released a report stating that the Anthropocene began in the mid twentieth century, with the beginning of nuclear technology (Subramanian; see also “Working Group on the ‘Anthropocene.’”). Although the designation “Anthropocene” is “not currently a formally defined geological unit within the Geological Time Scale” (“Working Group on the ‘Anthropocene’”), the Working Group are currently putting together a proposal rationalizing their suggestion to make the term official. Many other scholars had previously dated the Anthropocene to the 18th century, to coincide with the rise of industrialization. Scholars Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, whose work and insights I discuss in greater detail in the following sections, provide one of the most convincing arguments for why the Anthropocene should be considered to have started much earlier than the 1950s. See Davis and Todd’s “On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene” for more on this.

fundamentally changing the species makeup of countless ecosystems and forcing communities around the world to adapt in order to survive. They affect ecological, social, political, and economic conditions alike, exacerbating the impacts of climate change, increasing the damage caused by catastrophic environmental events and, simultaneously, making it harder for humans and nonhumans to recover from them. In brief: human activity is causing environmental degradation which is accelerating climate change, and climate change is worsening the effects of anthropogenic environmental degradation. This is a cyclical process that triggers more frequent and more intense catastrophes in the form of floods and extreme weather events such as hurricanes/cyclones (NASA, “Effects”).⁶ A 2019 study published in *Nature* even suggests that while climate change causes more extreme weather events, extreme weather events also accelerate the progression of climate change (J. K. Green et al.).⁷ I use the term Anthropocene to signal my recognition of the cyclical relationship between human activity, climate change, catastrophe, and changing human-nonhuman relationships, as well as to capture the ways in which human lives are entangled with the nonhuman systems that sustain them.

The rapid progression of global climate change means that socially and economically vulnerable communities are facing unprecedented crises (see Beck; Parenti). The scientific consensus is that postcolonial nations “are the most vulnerable to climate change” (DeLoughrey and Handley 26; see also Parenti 9). “Virtually every model of global climate change” shows that nations in the global south are the most vulnerable to “predicted increases in weather extremes,

⁶ The terms hurricane, cyclone, and typhoon refer to the same weather phenomena (United States Department of Commerce, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration).

⁷ J. K. Green et al.’s study, “Large influence of soil moisture on long-term terrestrial carbon uptake,” shows that extreme weather events compromise the soil’s capacity to absorb carbon from the atmosphere (476). This reduced capacity to absorb carbon means that more carbon stays in the atmosphere, which leads to an increase in absorption of heat from the Sun. This process fuels global temperature increases and, in turn, triggers an increased likelihood in extreme weather events. See also Chelsea Harvey’s article on J. K. Green et al.’s study in the *Scientific American* magazine (Harvey).

such as more prolonged droughts, more intensified but less frequent rainfall and flooding, rising sea levels, shifting migrations of flora and fauna due to temperature increases, and even earthquakes” (DeLoughrey and Handley 26). Although most postcolonial nations are geographically situated in the global south, economic models usually position Australia and New Zealand alongside other developed nations in the global north. But like the nations of South Asia, Australia and New Zealand are highly ecologically vulnerable postcolonial nations whose Indigenous populations are disproportionately affected by climate change impacts. I therefore use these South Pacific nations in my analysis to highlight the way uneven impacts of climate change impacts among different social groups within a single geographical region.

South Asia and the South Pacific are highly vulnerable to climate change and are recurrently identified as regions that are already experiencing extreme weather events. Their ecosystems and landscapes have been degraded by colonial exploitation, making them more vulnerable to future environmental degradation. These biophysical similarities make the regions ideal case studies for my analysis of catastrophe.

South Asia is known as “the most disaster prone [sic] region in the world” (Sivakumar and Stefanski 13), and global warming is expected to increase extreme weather events there. Today, South Asia is experiencing “an array of climate change impacts, including glacial melt, forest fires, rising sea levels, mountain and coastal soil erosion, and saline water intrusion” onto agricultural land (*Climate Change in South Asia: Strong Responses for Building a Sustainable Future 2*). And many of these issues – as with the South Pacific – can be traced back to the ways the region’s landscape was modified to facilitate colonial resource extraction. More than half of the world’s poor (a total of 600 million people) live in this region, and depend on agriculture, forestry, as well as fishing for their daily subsistence – climate change has significant impacts on

all these sectors.⁸ With rising temperatures, extreme heat waves and intense precipitation events are becoming more common, and significant changes in monsoon patterns are expected in the near future (9, 2, 13). These changes will negatively impact both crop yields and water availability in the region (13-14).

Temperature variations in the South Pacific show trends of increasing temperatures as well (see Nicholls and Collins 3 for data on Australia; see Ministry for the Environment, “New Zealand’s Environmental Reporting Series” 7 for data on New Zealand; see also the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change). Climate change has already begun affecting precipitation patterns, with both increases and decreases in precipitation recorded across different regions (Nicholls and Collins 9). At the same time, Australia and New Zealand both show an increased risk of drought (Nicholls and Collins 6; Ministry for the Environment, “New Zealand’s Environmental Reporting Series” 8). Rising ocean levels are also becoming a greater threat; in parts of New Zealand, sea levels have risen 22 centimeters between 1909 and 2009 (Ministry for the Environment, “New Zealand’s Environmental Reporting Series” 7). In the future, storm surges will become more dangerous and will inflict greater coastal damage (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 9-10). Extreme weather events will increase in frequency, warmer temperatures will accelerate sea level rise which will increase “the risk of erosion, coastal flooding and saltwater intrusion, increasing the need for coastal protection” and “favour conditions for many exotic species” as well as for “the spread of disease and pests

⁸ The daily struggle that individuals living in rural areas affected by the early onset effects of climate change are made visible in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*. Set in the Sundarbans, a tidal forest on the border of India and Bangladesh, the novel introduces readers to a unique ecosystem that is highly sensitive to sea level rise and changes in weather patterns. The novel devotes a great deal of time to recording physical changes in the landscape over a period of time, as well as to the encounters with storms, cyclones, and tigers.

affecting both fauna and flora” (Ministry for the Environment, “Overview of Likely Climate Change Impacts in New Zealand.”).

Another severe consequence of climate change is its impact on South Pacific ecosystems, biodiversity, and native species range (National Biodiversity Strategy Review Task Group 5; Ministry for the Environment, “New Zealand’s Environmental Reporting Series” 7, 38-39; see also “Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change”). Climate change has already severely impacted marine ecosystems in the South Pacific, and ocean warming, sea level rise, and acidification will “continue for centuries,” threatening “marine life, commercial and recreational fishing, Māori customary practices, and other cultural and recreational practices” (Ministry for the Environment 7).

In both regions, climate change will exacerbate existing ecological instabilities, destabilize weather patterns, and intensify the strength and frequency of extreme weather events (NASA, “Effects”; see also Gillen D’arcy Wood; Harris; Harris and Vanderheiden; Baer and Singer; Dow, Kasperson, and Bohn). These regions are therefore valuable sites for studying literary responses to catastrophe and environmental change that are becoming visible throughout the world. In addition, they offer opportunities to draw attention to the uneven distribution of ecological vulnerability across and within geographic regions.

Socially and politically marginalized groups, such as racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities are most likely to face the greatest challenges in adapting to changing climate (Dow, Kasperson, and Bohn 86-89; see also Nixon 58-59). Indigenous peoples, for example, are among those groups who will be most affected (“Climate Change For Indigenous Peoples.”). Economic status is also “an important indicator of vulnerability” (Dow, Kasperson, and Bohn 86);

impoverished populations are more at risk than the upper and middle class. Jon Barnett explains that “[c]limate change creates insecurity through the ‘double vulnerability’ that arises when poverty is compounded by climate change” (Barnett 117). In addition to race, ethnicity, indigeneity, and economic status, factors such as age, sex, and gender are also indicators of a person’s likeliness to be more deeply affected by changing climate (Dow, Kasperson, and Bohn 89). It is clear that Indigenous, racialized, impoverished, and otherwise socially marginalized groups – groups that live “on the periphery of economic and political power” – are the most likely to experience the brunt of ongoing catastrophes and other climate change impacts (Barnett 117).

South Asia and the South Pacific are a useful pairing for my examination of climate change, catastrophe, and colonialism. These regions share many commonalities, but they also differ in significant ways. Australia and New Zealand are developed nations that have a greater economic capacity to adapt to climate change and to recover from violent environmental events. India and Pakistan, on the other hand, are developing nations that have a “socially, technologically and financially” limited capacity to adapt to changing environmental conditions (United Nations Framework Convention of Climate Change 5). Another major difference between these two regions is the type of colonialism that was practised there. The British Crown set up a dependent colony in South Asia, in which a limited amount of official personnel was sent to manage the administration of the colony. In the South Pacific, the British established a settlement colony: a large number of people were sent there to settle the land. These fundamental differences in colonial management types present interesting contrasts that are worth exploring through a parallel treatment of these two regions.⁹ South Asia and the South Pacific thus offer

⁹ I elaborate on the differences between settler colonialism and dependent colonialism in Chapter 1, Section 2.

two different but comparable contexts for the study of the relationship between colonialism and catastrophe.

Focusing my analysis on South Asia and the South Pacific allows me to foreground the relationship between colonialism and catastrophe in postcolonial environments, and to shed light on the uneven distribution of ecological vulnerability. These two regions are already experiencing the early signs of the dramatic environmental changes still to come. But despite the overwhelming scientific consensus surrounding climate change and the recurrent warnings that climate change will increase both the frequency and intensity of ecological catastrophes, a majority of the global population does not view climate change as a legitimate threat.

Section 3: Popular Perceptions of Climate Change

At least 97% of “actively publishing climate scientists agree” that climate change is happening, and the human activity is its primary driving force (NASA, “Scientific Consensus: Earth’s Climate Is Warming”). Many of the world’s national governments, as well as major national and international scientific organizations, the UN, and many other NGOs have made climate change a priority in the agendas over the past several decades. This ostensible scientific and political international consensus, however, does not mean that everyone believes climate change poses a legitimate risk. On the contrary, among the general public, awareness and perception of climate change and its associated risks vary greatly: they differ from nation to nation, and even within nations, vastly different perceptions coexist.

In North America, in Europe, and in Japan, over 90% of the population is aware that climate change is occurring (Lee et al. 1015). These three regions represent the highest levels of climate change awareness globally. In developing nations in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, however, climate change awareness is the lowest in the world (1015). A 2015 survey – the

largest ever conducted on climate change, representing 119 countries or “over 90% of the world's population” – shows that over a third of the world’s adult population has never heard of climate change (Lee et al. 1015; see also the “Global Survey”). In nations like India, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Nigeria, that number increases to over 65% of the population (Lee et al. 1015; see also “Global Survey”). Education is the most important predictor of climate change awareness (Lee et al. 1015), so nations where access to education is limited have the highest number of people who have never heard of climate change. The people of developing nations are therefore less likely to view climate change as a threat to their lives, livelihoods, and communities.

Lee et al.’s survey hypothesizes that “as more people begin to experience more pronounced and atypical changes in local weather patterns, awareness of climate change and perceptions of climate change as a serious threat are likely to increase worldwide” (1017). The data that climate change communications expert George Marshall provides in *Don’t Even Think About It*, however, suggests that Lee et al.’s hypothesis may be incorrect. Marshall explains that even when people realize climate change is happening, they often put a lot of work into actively denying its impacts or pretending that it is not already manifesting itself in their communities. This commitment to a willful ignorance holds true even in places where climate change is already resulting in major ecological catastrophes. In Bastrop County, Texas, which in 2011 experienced the most destructive wildfire the state had ever seen, Marshall observes that people tend to “actively suppress the divisive and partisan issue of climate change” and focus instead on “common ground” (Marshall 8). Marshall conducts the majority of his research in North America – one of the regions Lee et al. identify as having some of the highest rates of climate change awareness globally.¹⁰ Marshall’s findings, then, show that even places where climate

¹⁰ Yet even as the “consensus over the reality and significance of anthropogenic climate change” grows stronger in the scientific community, it is “increasingly contested in the political arena and wider society” (Dunlap and

change is widely acknowledged are characterized by a high level of denial that climate change poses legitimate risks. In fact, recent psychological research shows that “people who survive climate disasters [...] are prone to have a false sense of their own future invulnerability”

(Marshall 9):

A large field study in an Iowa town that had been hit by a Force 2 tornado found that most people have become convinced that they were less likely to be affected by a future tornado than people in other towns. The people in areas who had suffered the most damage were often the most optimistic. [...]

At a community level they collectively choose to tell the positive stories of shared purpose and reconstruction and to suppress the divisive issue of climate change which would require them to question their values and way of life. (9-10)

Marshall’s research, combined with the psychological study and the massive cross-sectional study conducted by Lee et al., lead to the following conclusions: a large percentage of the global population is not aware that climate change is happening, and therefore does not recognize it as a threat. Among those who are aware of climate change or who have experienced climate-related catastrophes, there is a high degree of denial and wilful ignorance surrounding its risks. And even in parts of the world where climate change is a widely accepted fact, denial continues to be a significant impediment to social change. This widespread lack of awareness, combined with a

McCright 144). Dunlap and McCright address this issue through their discussion of the political climate “denial machine”:

Contrarian scientists, fossil fuels corporations, conservative think tanks, and various front groups have assaulted mainstream climate science and scientists for over two decades. Their recently intensified denial campaign building on the manufactured ‘Climategate’ scandal [...] and revelations of various relatively minor errors in the 2007 IPCC Fourth Assessment Report appear to have seriously damaged the credibility of climate science [...]. (Dunlap and McCright 144)

The players in this denial machine are “coordinated” and “well-funded,” and their assault on climate science and on scientific practices has played a major role in sabotaging accurate societal perceptions of climate change, and, by extensions, adequate responses to it (144).

high degree of committed unknowing, means that climate change is not perceived as a serious threat by a majority of the global population. This misguided popular perception is having devastating material impacts. To begin properly addressing the challenges climate change poses, it is necessary to first confront it through fictional narratives.

Section 4: Why Read Novels about Climate Change and Catastrophe

Climate change is often framed as a “crisis of culture” (Hartman 73; see also Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 8-9). George Marshall argues that climate change poses a fundamental “challenge to our ability to make sense of the world around us” (Marshall 2). Novelist and anthropologist Amitav Ghosh writes that the climate crisis is at its core a crisis of the imagination (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 9). He sees our collective failure to address human impacts on the environment as rooted in our inability to properly imagine the sheer scale and urgent nature of the threat. Environmental humanist Kate Rigby agrees. She explains that people’s limited capacity to “imagine the (actual or potential) future impacts of runaway global warming” is in fact “[o]ne of the widely recognized impediments to acting on climate change” (Rigby 9). Ghosh suggests that this imaginative failure is in part caused by fiction authors’ failure to effectively represent the effects of climate change in their work. There are, however, many postcolonial novelists who handle climate change and ecological catastrophe in productive ways.¹¹ Their works handle the unimaginably vast and vague concept of climate change by filtering it through a story in which the characters experience and reflect on catastrophic events and environmental changes. I examine a selection of such novels here.

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh echoes contemporary scholars’ argument that fiction has a crucial role to play in the climate crisis. Rigby explains that “the kinds of stories that we

¹¹ In Chapter 4, I argue that Ghosh is one of them.

tell” about our relationships with the nonhuman environment “shape how we prepare for, respond to, and recover from increasingly frequent and [...] unfamiliar forms of eco-catastrophe” (Rigby 2). I agree; fiction is an excellent medium for bringing attention to issues that we would prefer to ignore, or for tackling issues that seem so abstract or complex that they evade our imaginative capacities. If climate change is to be dealt with effectively, its popular perception must be addressed at the level of imagination. I therefore examine it through the lens of contemporary fiction: literature provides insights into the imaginative struggles involved in capturing and representing the catastrophic events, and might help to better understand the challenges affected populations are facing. Narrative fiction is an effective way of shifting people’s perceptions of environment and environmental change. Literary scholar and environmental humanist Karen Thornber emphasizes that fiction plays an integral role in shaping people’s perceptions of the world: “[t]he power of story is particularly significant. Our sense of reality, our understandings of who we are and of our relationships with our surroundings, generally are constructed around stories, not around quantitative data” (Thornber 5).

Fiction generates opportunities to see anew and therefore creates possibilities to rethink relationships with the nonhuman environment, which are crucial first steps in the process of changing the way communities think about their environmental vulnerability. American ecocritic Lawrence Buell writes that:

For technological breakthroughs, legislative reforms, and paper covenants about environmental welfare to take effect, or even to be generated in the first place, requires a climate of transformed environmental values, perception, and will. To that end, the power of story, image, and artistic performance and the resources of aesthetics, ethics, and cultural theory are crucial. (Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* vi)

Buell believes that fiction can do what articles and scientific reports on climate change cannot: it can shape the way people think about climate and catastrophe and, by extension, prime people to better respond to environmental crisis. Ecocritic Richard Kerridge takes it one step further. He argues that it is the task of ecocriticism to identify how literature “[d]ramatize[s] the occurrence of large events in individual lives” (6) and to “evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis” (5). This is a useful way of thinking about the type of analysis I am performing.

I ground my approach to ecological catastrophe in postcolonialism because postcolonial scholarship is invested in studying the exploitative and often violent histories that have led to present socio-political inequalities.¹² Vulnerability to climate change and catastrophe are contributing factors in this inequality. Studying representations of catastrophe through the lens of postcolonialism exposes the historical roots of present-day ecological crises, connects colonialism to its contemporary ecological consequences, and allows me to place works dealing with different ecological catastrophes in relation to one another, since the six novels I have selected are, in different ways, working through the legacies of their respective region’s colonial past.

My methodology is grounded in a focused close reading of select passages from novels, paired with an analysis of how the issues these novels raise reflect larger structural problems and social justice issues outlined in secondary literatures, such as scientific articles, statistical reports, legislation, and UN reports.¹³ I also apply this close reading methodology to these secondary

¹² For an in-depth discussion of why postcolonial scholarship provides a useful lens for studying catastrophe, see Chapter 1, Sections 4 and 5.

¹³ Brummett defines close reading as the “mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings” (Brummett 3). Similarly, Boyles describes the act of “reading to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension” (Boyles). In an article that outlines the benefits of close reading for developing critical thinking abilities, Elder and Paul explain that close reading “requires active engagement in reading” and allows readers to “connect[...] important ideas with other important ideas” in the text (Elder and Paul

literatures, in order to expose patterns and similarities between the novels and the secondary literatures. I opt for close reading because of novels' ability to make processes that operate on massive spatial and temporal scales – like climate change and colonialism – “legible” in specific textual moments. They focus incredibly destructive environmental events and incremental environmental changes through stories and characters that render them both noticeable and conceptually manageable. The non-fiction works I draw on, my secondary literatures, provide important context about the material living conditions of the communities on which my cases studies focus. They help me connect the larger issues that my case studies engage with colonialism and its aftermath.

In Chapter 3, for example, I reference legislative statutes to illustrate how British colonial law, and subsequently postcolonial Pakistani law, marginalizes and disadvantages Indigenous populations living semi-nomadic lifestyles by making it illegal for them to continue practices consistent with their traditional lifeways. These non-fiction documents provide useful historical

290). Brummett adds that a close reading allows readers to “understand the socially shared meanings that are supported by words, images, objects, actions, and messages” (Brummett 25). He emphasizes proof: “readings are done in such a way as to be *defensible* after the fact”: in order for a close reading to be convincing, evidence must be produced to support it (Brummett 7, original emphasis; see also Bass and Linkon 247). The more times a reader reads a text, and the more closely she pays attention to the “words, images, actions, objects, and other components” of the text, the more likely the reader is to pick up on additional meanings they may have missed the first time around (Brummett 9). Close reading then, is a disciplined and methodical process that involves the use of critical thinking, pattern detection, as well as aesthetic and linguistic analysis as it is applied to the study of a certain texts – in my case, postcolonial novels.

Close reading has been theorized in many different ways over the past century. At times, it is talked about in contra-distinction to theory (philosophy), and at other times is seen as operating together with theory to generate a holistic understanding of a literary text (Selden; see also Bass and Linkon). Its relationship to historical study has also evolved over time: some close readings emphasize the cultural and historical context surrounding a text's production while others insist on reading the text “in a vacuum,” paying attention only to the words and aesthetics of the text itself (Selden) My approach to close reading does not separate it from theory or from historical context, and does not insist on the primacy of form over all other textual elements. I adopt a comprehensive close reading method which takes into consideration the contexts in which texts were produced and draws on the text's formal, linguistic, and aesthetic qualities to show how that context is always-already embedded in the text itself. I also see theory/philosophy and close reading as co-constitutive. Bass and Linkon explain that theory can be used to shed light on specific readings of a certain text the same way specific readings of a certain text can “offer new insights on a more broadly defined subject” (247). This is precisely what this dissertation strives to do. I use novels that are generally read under the rubric of postcolonialism, diaspora, identity studies, or critical race studies, and read them with attention to catastrophe and climate change in the contemporary era.

and social context for my close reading of the novel *Thinner than Skin*, but they fail to make palpable the far-reaching and sometimes unpredictable consequences of colonialism, including the slow violence affecting individuals in contemporary postcolonial contexts. These secondary literatures support my close readings by providing evidence that aligns with the environmental changes, events, and experiences that my case studies highlight.¹⁴ Non-fiction provides empirical evidence that helps me connect colonialism to catastrophe at the material level, but it is incapable of representing individual experiences of catastrophe, and of simulating the affective experiences of subjects whose lives and livelihoods are, in a multitude of ways, shaped by a region's colonial past. The novel, through its use of limited perspective and its emphasis on subjective experience, provides the type of insight that non-fiction material cannot. In this context, a novel's limited scope and perspective reveals itself to be its strength: novels present incomplete but poignant glimpses into what it is like for subjects to experience multi-layered vulnerability and to cope with the daily consequences of historical phenomena that are so diluted across time and space as to seem imperceptible. I use close reading as a tool to analyze imagined renderings of subjective experiences of catastrophe, colonialism, and its aftermath, and to make visible the way the specific, situated perspectives of these novels' characters connect colonialism to catastrophe.

Close reading offers a valuable counterpoint to the impersonal empirical data detailed in legal documents, UN reports, and scientific articles; it offers a glimpse into how global historical phenomena impact individuals in a direct, tangible way and thereby reveals exactly where and how larger historical threads become entangled with individual lives. It also makes visible the

¹⁴ Slow violence is a term coined by Rob Nixon (2011) to designate violence that has been enacted on the environment over the course of decades or centuries, and that is usually invisible until it manifests itself in the form of violent environmental events (Nixon 2). I engage with slow violence in greater detail in Chapter 2, Part 2, Section 2.

ways colonial histories shape specific moments wherein subjects imbricated in these histories play out their relationships in ways that replicate, reinforce, or undermine them. Through paying attention to the form and structure of the text, I can see how these histories impact the connections characters' minds make, and how they reverberate throughout human-human and human-nonhuman relationships in the text. In harnessing close reading's ability to reveal connections that may not even be obvious to the characters making them or to the authors writing the stories, I show how the threads of colonialism and catastrophe are woven together throughout the six texts I have chosen. The novels I analyze integrate climate change and ecological catastrophe into the everyday in both believable and unremarkable ways, but simultaneously in ways that reflect the trauma such violent events produce. These works were selected not only because of the way they engage with the concomitant processes of catastrophe and colonialism, but also because of the way they make use of the novel form's generic conventions.

According to Rigby, stories are the most effective means for influencing thinking about climate change and catastrophe: “[t]he story is the most powerful educational tool we possess; it is learning distilled in common language” (qtd. in Rigby 2). For her, a story functions as a ““privileged carrier of truth, a way of allowing for multiplicity and complexity at the same time as guaranteeing memorability”” (qtd. in Rigby). I propose that novels are particularly well-suited to this task precisely because the world of the contemporary novel is so at odds with the effect of climate change.

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh reflects at length on the climate crisis and asks how it is possible for such an obvious and urgent global problem to figure so seldom in literary fiction (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 7). Climate change is rarely mentioned in “serious” fiction, and “fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the

kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals” (7). In fact, Ghosh writes, “the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction,” as though “climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel” (7). Attributing the conspicuous absence of climate change in contemporary fiction to a broad “imaginative and cultural failure” (8), Ghosh suggests that there is something about climate change that makes it resist assimilation into the novel form:

[...] the challenges that climate change poses for the contemporary writer [...] derive ultimately from the grid of literary forms and conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was writing the destiny of the earth. (7)

Ghosh refers here to the Industrial Revolution which occurred in Europe in the eighteenth century. It marked an explosive period in human innovation, industry, and, correspondingly, pollution. Ian Watt, in the *Rise of the Novel*, dates the novel form back to this same era.

Conversely, literary scholars such as Margaret Anne Doody and Franco Moretti argue that the novel appeared much earlier – around two thousand years ago (Doody 1; Moretti, *The Novel*, vol. 1, ix-x).¹⁵ With its several-centuries-long history, the novel has circulated across the world; Moretti describes it as “the first truly planetary form” (Moretti, *The Novel*, vol. 1, ix). In *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, Timothy Spurgin explains that despite the multiplicity of varied definitions of the novel, most contemporary scholars agree that “the novel is to be distinguished from other kinds of prose fiction by its commitment to psychological realism” (Spurgin). But the most important element that sets the novel apart from other contemporary literary forms is its status as a “commercial literary product – perhaps the first – to

¹⁵ Despite misgivings about citing Moretti, his work remains useful to my project because my argument relies, in part, on countering his views of the novel and its relationship to and representation of the everyday.

be marketed to a mass audience” (Spurgin). These characteristics make novels valuable sites of thinking through representations of global environmental crisis.

By limiting my analysis to a single literary form, I can draw connections between works handling completely different ecologies and histories. Novels, as Spurgin explains, stress the psychological dimensions of characterization and narrative. Many (conventional) novels aim to present realistic psychological portraits of their characters (Spurgin).¹⁶ This focus on psychological realism makes novels ideal case studies: it focalizes human experiences of traumatic environmental events, facilitating an examination of individual experiences of environmental degradation, and spotlighting the psychological impacts of catastrophe.

Spurgin also suggests that novel studies and cultural studies share many thematic and methodological similarities:

Like the novel, cultural studies has been characterized by a deep suspicion of universals and a passionate interest in the local and the particular. Moreover, cultural studies shares with the novel an interest in the formation of identities and subjectivities, not to mention a concern with the relationship between individuals and larger historical or political forces. (Spurgin)

This privileging of the “local” and the “particular” over the universal facilitates my investigation into the ways catastrophe in specific regions of the world affects human-nonhuman relationships. It also allows me to highlight the ways texts reflect inequalities in socio-ecological vulnerability to climate change across those regions. In addition, the novel’s emphasis on psychological realism and its limited scope give me insight into the ways individuals and communities

¹⁶ Many contemporary novels opt for different approaches to representing characters’ psyches, but realism remains an important characteristic of the conventional novel form (Spurgin) – of novels that are not characterized as “genre fiction.”

experience and negotiate environmental trauma and gradual environmental degradation. Novels are therefore ideally suited for studying the environmental imagination and the ways stories about everyday life negotiate unlikely ecological changes and events.

Yet Ghosh insists that contemporary fiction writers fail to engage with climate change in their works, and he blames the novel form for its part in this failure. He argues that there are “peculiar forms of resistance that climate change presents to what is now regarded as serious fiction” (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 9). Climate change often manifests in ways that seem far too unbelievable to fit neatly into the world of the contemporary novel. Its effects – floods, cyclones, landslides – are so violent and destructive that they seem implausible in a work of fiction, especially one married to the tropes of realism. Ghosh himself struggles with this paradox. In his youth, he survived a tornado, but he writes that if he encountered one in fiction, he would think it “a contrivance of the last resort”: “Surely only a writer whose imaginative resources were utterly depleted would fall back on a situation of such extreme improbability?” (16).

This question of probability lies at the core of the predicament Ghosh explores in *The Great Derangement*. Climate change is today a “widely acknowledged” truth in the scientific community (8), but it is one the world of most conventional novels cannot seem to accommodate. “We have entered a time,” Ghosh writes, “when the wild has become the norm” (8), yet this new norm is at odds with the world that novels have historically represented. The novel is characterized by a preference for the regular over the unpredictable (Moretti, *The Way of the World* vi). Novels are meant to paint for us a picture of the routine of daily life, even when that daily routine is turned on its head by historical or ecological circumstances: “[e]ven in decades when public life has become explosive and passionate, [...] novels opt resolutely for the

private sphere” with their “stubborn, ‘realistic’ capacity to survive the tempests of social conflict” (vii, original emphasis).

Ghosh concludes that for these reasons, the novel struggles to accommodate the improbable:

Probability and the modern novel are in fact twins, born at about the same time, among the same people, under a shared star that destined them to work as vessels for the containment of the same kind of experience. Before the birth of the modern novel, wherever stories were told, fiction delighted in the unheard-of and the unlikely. Narratives like those of *The Arabian Nights*, *The Journey to the West*, and *The Decameron* proceed by leaping blithely from one exceptional event to another. This, after all, is how storytelling must necessarily proceed, inasmuch as it is a recounting of ‘what happened’—for such an inquiry can arise only in relation to something out of the ordinary, which is but another way of saying ‘exceptional’ or ‘unlikely.’ In essence, narrative proceeds by linking together moments and scenes that are in some way distinctive or different: these are, of course, nothing more than instances of exception.

(Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 16-17)

The novel works by concealing extraordinary moments that function as the “motor of narrative” (17). It relegates the exceptional to the background while foregrounding the everyday. Through the use of what Moretti calls “fillers,” the narrative of the contemporary novel comes together. Fillers are “mechanisms designed to keep the ‘narrativity’ of life under control—to give a regularity, a ‘style’ to existence” (qtd. in Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 17).¹⁷ Ghosh explains

¹⁷ Franco Moretti divides episodes in a narrative into either “turning points” or “fillers” (Moretti, *The Bourgeois* 70). He describes filler as “what happens *between* one turning point and the next” (71). He writes that fillers “don’t really do much; they enrich and give nuance to the progress of the story, but without modifying what the turning points have established. [...] Narration: but of the everyday. This is the secret of fillers” (71).

that worlds are “conjured up” through fillers (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 17), through these unremarkable details of everyday life which function ““as *the opposite of narrative*”” (qtd. in Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 17, original emphasis). These fillers allow for us to rationalize the “‘novelistic universe’,” to transform it into “‘a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all’” (qtd. in Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 19). The world described here is completely at odds with the one many postcolonial populations dealing with the effects of climate change inhabit. It is patently not the world of the six novels I have chosen as case studies.

These novels were selected for three reasons. First, they cast catastrophe as a condition of daily life in postcolonial environments, and they represent it as an occurrence that can be both traumatic and routine. They thus present opportunities to better engage with events that are becoming increasingly frequent in much of the world. Ecocritic and animal studies scholar Greg Garrard argues that stories make valuable sites of reflection for considering how people experience and negotiate climate change. He explains that when he teaches climate change novels in his own classes, he treats them as “dramatizations of the cultural processes by which climate change becomes cognitively and emotionally legible” (Garrard, “In-flight behaviour” 122). I treat the novels in a similar manner; I analyze how they represent characters’ experiences of ecological catastrophe.

The second reason behind my selection of novels has to do with their adherence to the formal conventions outlined by Spurgin, Moretti, and Ghosh. These texts offer a narrative about daily life and in-depth psychological portraits of their central characters. This focused attention to the inner workings of postcolonial subjects’ minds allows me to track the impacts of catastrophe on these characters’ thoughts and experiences. In one text, a character’s thoughts

take a backseat during a catastrophe, as the narrator tries to accurately depict the violence and power of the storm. In another, it is made abundantly clear that the character's mind has temporarily shut down, overwhelmed by what they are witnessing. In yet another text, the trauma a character experiences is so great that catastrophic events are rendered without any emotion whatsoever. In this case, the trauma associated with the experience is made manifest through the absence of insight into the character's mind – through the detached, impartial language the narrator uses to depict these events. I pay particular attention to these moments in which characters experience catastrophe or reflect on the ways it shapes their life and their relationship with the environment in which they live. That they all depict the daily lives of their characters is also significant; I use these works to study how a literary form that, conventionally, leaves no room for extraordinary events manages to absorb catastrophe into the world it creates by undercutting its narrative representation. Some texts, such as *Thinner than Skin*, achieve this by avoiding visual cues of the earthquake's aftermath. Other texts, such as *Benang*, manage this by refusing to sensationalize any of the violence in the story. I pay close attention to the way these narrative techniques help the form accommodate catastrophe.

The third reason behind my choice of case studies is their engagement with colonialism and its aftermath. All six novels are set in the postcolonial era and contain regular reminders of the region's colonial history. Physical reminders often appear in the form of environmental degradation (slow violence). Ideological residue from the colonial era is made apparent in human-human and human-nonhuman relationships, through the ways characters treat one another and the nonhuman beings they encounter throughout the narrative. These texts link colonialism to catastrophe at multiple levels. The form of the narrative (its perspective and movement) connects colonial legacies to present-day ecological catastrophes. At the same time,

specific narrative moments explicitly tie images and ideas associated with colonialism to catastrophe. My analysis highlights these formal and stylistic connections, and draws attention to the way the text foregrounds the uneven distribution of ecological vulnerability. These six texts offer a nuanced vision of catastrophe that is anchored in the colonial history of the region, and that emphasize the disproportionate environmental burden that socially and economically marginalized postcolonial and Indigenous subjects experience. They thus show postcolonial environments to be important sites of reflection for discussions about catastrophe and environmental degradation.

The connection between colonialism and catastrophe provides the rationale for my inclusion of non-fiction works such as British colonial legislation, UN climate reports, articles from scientific journals, governmental statistics, as well as books outlining the environmental and political histories of my chosen regions. Colonialism is a broad designation for a plethora of large-scale processes whose aim is profit through exploitation and subjugation. It has so many and varied consequences that it is impossible for a handful of fictional works to fully represent their scope and impact. Such massive historical processes and their aftermath cannot be rendered from a limited, subjective experience. In fiction, one can only catch glimpses of colonialism's manifestations, in different contexts, from different angles. But one can never capture the whole. This is where statistical data and scientific reports become useful. These types of documents are capable of providing a broad overview of the consequences of colonial environmental intervention or of the legal structures that supported it. Scientific articles quantify environmental damage in different regions and track ecological changes across large expanses of time and space. British colonial legislation, on the other hand, show the links between colonialism and the disproportionate vulnerability of subaltern subjects. Legal and scientific documents in particular

are incredibly useful for this project. Combined, these two types of data provide details about the structure of colonialism and, correspondingly, the structures of environmental vulnerability in the postcolonial environments I study. Therein lies the value of non-fiction in this project – non-fiction provides the map; fiction offers the tour.

In studying fiction, I study the way climate change and catastrophe are perceived and imagined. Non-fiction works generate the background against which that perception can be analyzed. These texts ground my analysis, offering a historical and political context to works that engage with the aftermath of colonialism. Books and articles that outline South Asia's environmental history, for example, give me greater insight into histories that Ghosh's novel engages with, such as the national political conflicts and international pressures that fueled the dispossession of Indigenous people in the Bay of Bengal – a crucial plot point that drives *The Hungry Tide* towards its conclusion. All the novels I work with engage with historical events that took place in their respective regions. Some of them represent a specific historical catastrophic event, while others feature catastrophes that occur regularly in the regions in which the text is set. Data about the region is therefore very helpful in studying representations of catastrophe. The non-fiction works I include support the critiques the novels make, showing that catastrophe is linked with colonial history. In the case of *Thinner than Skin*, for example, colonial legislation and scientific studies about forest-cover in Gilgit-Baltistan show that colonialism sped up environmental degradation, making the region particularly vulnerable to the effects of anthropogenic climate change. In this way, the non-fiction works I use help me make connections between colonial history, environmental conditions, and catastrophe in the novels.

I use theoretical texts to help me situate my research within current scholarly discussions about disaster studies, environment, postcolonial theory, the nonhuman turn, and the

Anthropocene. I use the works of Graham Harman, Jedediah Purdy, Kate Rigby, and Anthony Carrigan as a springboard for my analysis. Their work also deals, to varying degrees, with the connection between colonial legacy and contemporary ecological conditions. Taken together, they provide me with a model for how literature contributes to the study of relationships between environmental thinking (philosophy), environmental management (law and history), and ecological vulnerability (contemporary material conditions). By foregrounding catastrophe in my analysis, I provide a different take on theorizations of the connection between history and culture, environment and environmental philosophy, as well as literature and imagination. The theoretical framework I construct borrows from disaster studies a sustained focus on catastrophe and ecological vulnerability, and from ecocriticism and animal studies an interest in, and a commitment to, paying close attention to the nonhuman in the literary text. These fields of inquiry are invaluable components of my interdisciplinary approach because their thematic concerns decentre anthropocentrism and turn instead to the relationship between the human and other-than-human worlds.

Section 5: Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1: Reading Catastrophe Through Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism, and Animal Studies

Building on the Introduction, which reveals the value of literary study for thinking through climate change and argues that the novel form is particularly useful for analyzing narratives about catastrophic events, Chapter 1 provides the theoretical framework for my analysis. It links colonialism with environmental exploitation and present-day ecological vulnerability under climate change and stresses that factors like race, poverty, and indigeneity affect the ways catastrophe is experienced by individuals living in ecologically vulnerable

regions. It shows that postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and animal studies offer valuable contributions to the study of catastrophe in the contemporary world.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 aim to answer the question of what precisely it is about the way these novels represent catastrophe that makes them productive sites of reflection for thinking through climate change and differentiated forms of ecological vulnerability. These chapters focus on the six novels that form the core of my analysis. They include close readings of select passages that feature catastrophe and traumatic experiences of violent environmental events. I have chosen three novels from South Asia (Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner than Skin*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*) and three from the South Pacific (Kim Scott's *Benang*, Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, and Patricia Grace's *Potiki*). Each novel is treated as a case study of a particular kind of ecological catastrophe that is becoming increasingly frequent in the Anthropocene. These chapters are organized thematically, according to the ways the narratives work through their characters' experiences of catastrophe and ecological instability.

Chapter 2: Catastrophe, Vulnerability, and Human Relationships

This chapter focuses on how different types of inequality between human actors play into the production of vulnerability to climate change and catastrophe. The novels I have selected for this chapter focalize settler/Indigenous and white/BIPOC relations in the context of postcolonial catastrophe. It close reads Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (South Asia) and Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* (South Pacific), analyzing human-human relationships with specific attention to race, class, caste, and indigeneity. The Introduction sets up a theoretical frame for why postcolonialism as well as critical race studies and Indigenous studies are necessary components for theorizing catastrophe in postcolonial environments; Chapter 2 extends that argument by close reading novels whose narrative trajectories hinge on the differing

positionalities of its socioeconomically and ecologically vulnerable characters. It foregrounds the way different Othering mechanisms work in the production of ecological vulnerability and analyzes the ways colonial legacies imbue person-to-person encounters with a historical weight that precludes such encounters from ever being simply about those two individuals' relationship. It foregrounds the way colonial histories and the power imbalances they upheld imprint on the psyches of postcolonial subjects, and studies how those histories play out in individual human-human relationships. It also draws attention to how these texts use nonhuman imagery to reflect the pain, frustration, and vulnerability of their BIPOC and Indigenous protagonists. This chapter therefore establishes the way race and indigeneity connect with catastrophe in postcolonial environments. It also lays the foundation for my later analysis (in Chapters 3 and 4) of the way nonhuman animals and the nonhuman environment work in the other novels I analyze by gesturing toward the way human-nonhuman relationships function as sites of reflection for renegotiating increasingly unstable and unpredictable environments.

Through attention to perspective, imagery, and detailed psychological portraits, I show that these texts depict catastrophe as routine, as part of the “filler” (Moretti, *The Bourgeois* 70) that makes up the vast majority of the conventional novel. These novels succeed in depicting the unlikely environmental events associated with climate change and ecological destruction in convincing and believable ways. They thus present an everyday that stands out from the one Spurgin, Moretti, and Ghosh assume the novel is constricted to representing.

Chapter 3: Catastrophe and Human-Nonhuman Relationships in Degraded Environments

Chapter 3 close reads selected passages from novels that feature human encounters with individual nonhuman animals, arguing that these moments play a crucial role in the narrative negotiation of human relationships with increasingly unstable and unpredictable environments

under climate change. It then analyzes these passages alongside colonial laws to illustrate that the environmental vulnerability of marginalized Indigenous communities is strategically produced through legal and administrative colonial mechanisms.

Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner Than Skin* (South Asia) and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (South Pacific) bring out the influence of the nonhuman in shaping human thinking about the environment and ecological instability. Close readings of specific human encounters with nonhuman animals reveal them to be crystallizing moments in the narrative negotiation of human-nonhuman relationships. These texts disrupt outmoded ways of thinking about human relationships with the nonhuman rooted in Enlightenment thinking and draw attention to human-nonhuman entanglements. In this way, the texts explore the way animals figure in colonial schemes of control. The texts use animality to work through ecological catastrophe, and reveal that animals can help marginalized communities work through traumatic environmental experiences or contribute to their marginalization by serving as vehicles for the enactment of post/colonial violence. In *Thinner than Skin*, animals figure as both sources of calm and strength and as tools of colonial oppression extending into the present. In *Carpentaria*, on the other hand, animals help characters prepare for, cope with, and recover from catastrophe.

My analysis of the primary texts in this chapter focuses on narrative perspective, movement, and pacing. I draw attention to the way perspective affects the narrative representation of catastrophe, and I draw a link between characters' traumatic experiences and the language the text uses to render catastrophe. I show that by manipulating these formal elements, Khan and Wright are able to make catastrophe more conceptually manageable. These novels harness narrative perspective to filter catastrophe through animality, allowing the affected characters to better cope with it. The texts thus enable readers to engage with catastrophe in new

ways, generating opportunities to more productively think through how climate change affects human relationships with the nonhuman beings with whom we share our environment. The formal and stylistic elements of these texts therefore create a framework that primes readers to reimagine catastrophe.

Chapter 4: Land Justice, Resistance, and Post-Catastrophe Recovery

This chapter also performs close readings of human-nonhuman relationships, but it turns instead to human relationships with the environment more broadly. It highlights narrative moments that deal with recurring struggles with changing ecological conditions in postcolonial environments. It close reads Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (South Asia) and Patricia Grace's *Potiki* (South Pacific) alongside histories of struggles for land justice in each of these two regions. These two novels deal with conservation, land ownership, and land use – I group them together under the theme of land justice. The focus on land justice also allows me to draw attention to the way postcolonial novels negotiate the catastrophes that the region is experiencing under climate change. Rather than looking at individual human-nonhuman encounters, this chapter examines human relationships with local environments and recurring struggles with changing ecological conditions. In this way, it provides a wider scope than the previous chapter, and allows me to look at the way narrative structure influences the way catastrophe is dealt with in the text.

The texts themselves connect colonial histories and postcolonial ecological vulnerability, highlighting the fact that environmental concerns in postcolonial environments are always-already embedded in political and economic histories of environmental exploitation. They draw attention to setting as a critical literary device for renegotiating human-animal relationships, and exemplify the way narrative form affects the narrative treatment of catastrophe. They present

nonhuman actants operating alongside human actants, and make land central to how their characters imagine, experience, and cope with catastrophe. They reveal the role land and environment play in articulating anti-colonial resistance and in envisioning post-catastrophe recovery, and they situate the experiences of ecological catastrophe their characters experience in long-standing histories of colonial exploitations of both people and landscape.

Section 6: Conclusion

Taken together, Chapters 2, 3, and 4 offer a three-pronged approach to the way the novel engages with catastrophe in the aftermath of colonial environmental exploitation. They show a combination of stylistic elements and narrative structure creates moments in which ecological instability can be reimagined in a more productive manner. In this way, these three chapters demonstrate that the novel form is well-equipped for imaginative engagements with catastrophe and the effects of present-day climate change.

The texts I focus on in this dissertation exemplify the novel form's strengths in dealing with the "unbelievable" challenge of global climate change. These novels depict catastrophe in uniquely productive ways, showing it to be both traumatic and part of daily routine. The material realities of present ecological conditions in many postcolonial regions call for a re-evaluation of what constitutes the "everyday" in the contemporary novel. This is precisely what these six novels achieve. *Inheritance of Loss*, *Hungry Tide*, and *Benang: From the Heart* handle catastrophes that occur regularly in their respective regions (recurrent catastrophes). *Thinner than Skin*, *Potiki*, and *Carpentaria*, on the other hand, deal with specific historical events (specific catastrophes). Combined, these six postcolonial texts depict a world in which the unlikely and increasingly violent environmental events we are experiencing constitute the status quo. Once we readjust what we think of as routine events and begin to take notice of the

pervasive impact of climate change on communities across the world, we may begin to recognize how, in so many contemporary postcolonial novels, the seemingly extraordinary has already begun to creep into the world of the everyday.

Chapter 1:

Reading Catastrophe through Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism, and Animal Studies

Section 1: Racism, (Neo)Colonialism, and Environmental Justice

In the opening paragraphs of *Traffic Stops, Stopping Traffic: Race and Climate Change in the Age of Automobility*, Kara Thompson describes a scene which gained significant news media and social media attention in September 2016. A small group of protestors with large banners saying “Black Lives Matter” and “Climate Crisis Is a Racist Crisis” chained themselves together on a London City Airport runway, effectively disrupting air traffic for several hours (Thompson 92-93; see also T. Hume; Grierson). The protestors were soon removed by police and received conditional discharges from the court, but not before the judge commented that she found it “rather hard” to make the leap between climate change and the politics of the Black Lives Matter movement. Yet this is the very connection that the activists were attempting to highlight by staging their protest on an airport runway. Thompson explains:

Scholars and activists who take up the racialized contours of climate change offer widespread evidence that effects of global warming disproportionately affect people of color and others in structurally oppressed positions because of class, geographic location, and citizenship status. Climate refugees or environmental migrants must leave their homes because gradual or sudden changes to the environment—sea-level rise, drought, and water scarcity—have made life at home unlivable. The actions on the tarmac at London City Airport attempted to draw out these connections by disrupting the flow of air traffic, by targeting a form of global transportation. (Thompson 93)

Thompson's analysis also teases out the inherent contradictions between the protest's message and its messengers: eight of the nine protestors were white, they were all middle-class, and many of them had pursued university educations at prestigious universities such as Oxford. While their goal was to decry the racism of climate change, "their identities and actions are historically bound to white paternalism and patronage: the sense that 'nature' belongs to, and thus needs to be protected by, the white middle-class" (Thompson 93).

This event speaks to the interrelated issues that this dissertation addresses, namely the connection between race, racism, and vulnerability to environmental disruption and the patronizing (neo)colonial attitudes of those in positions of wealth, power, and privilege both towards the nonhuman world itself and towards those they perceive as degrading it. I regularly draw on insights from postcolonial studies, Indigenous studies, and critical theory in my analysis because critical conversations about climate change and environmental degradation in the Anthropocene are fundamentally about race, class, and indigeneity.¹⁸

Section 2: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Catastrophe

Colonialism is a "form of domination in which at least one society seeks to exploit some set of benefits believed to be found in the territory of one or more other societies, from farm land to precious minerals to labor" (Whyte 154). Colonial expansion in South Asia and the South Pacific was fueled by the desire to mine these regions for the economic benefit of the colonial metropolis. The primary goal of a colonial project shapes the way in which it is enacted, and one important difference between these two regions is the motivation behind British presence there. Colonial India (today's India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) was a dependent colony

¹⁸ Certainly, factors such as sex, gender, age, disability, and so forth, also contribute significantly to the degree of vulnerability a person or a community faces in the Anthropocene, but studying the impacts of these factors is beyond the scope of my current investigation.

(also known as franchise colony), which means that the main purpose behind British colonization of India was trade:

European colonizers exploited societies like India, China, Java and Japan for labour and material goods, and used them as a market for surplus European goods. In such dependent colonies the primary aim was thus not to settle European populations, though this was usually an outcome. (Moran 1016)

The British went to India to buy from and sell to the Indigenous population, and to use its natural resources to benefit the Crown. This motivation sets the type of colonialism practised in India apart from the type of colonialism practised in Australia and New Zealand. The latter are settler colonies – colonies established with the primary purpose of bypassing the Indigenous population altogether “in an attempt to directly connect with the land” (Moran 1016; see also P. Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* and *Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native*). Trade was not on the agenda there; the goal was to take control of the land in order to take possession of its resources and facilitate British settlement of the region. Settler colonies, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States, were administered differently than dependent colonies because they served different purposes for the British Crown. Patrick Wolfe argues that while dependent colonialism is about the exploitation of the local population, settler colonialism is about its “replacement” (P. Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* 163). Dependent colonialism takes advantage of existing societal structures and harnesses them to benefit the colonial power; settler colonialism, on the other hand, “strives for the dissolution of native societies” (P. Wolfe, “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native” 388).

Linking remote colonies with European metropolises through a “global chain of command,” settler colonialism was “foundational to modernity” (P. Wolfe, “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native” 394). It played an integral role in the Industrial Revolution and thus played no small part in giving the world its current shape:

The Industrial Revolution, misleadingly figuring in popular consciousness as an autochthonous metropolitan phenomenon, required colonial land and labour to produce its raw materials just as centrally as it required metropolitan factories and an industrial proletariat to process them, whereupon the colonies were again required as a market.

(394)

Colonialism is fundamentally about expansion – a process which is not only political, cultural, and economic, but also ecological. As settlers settle Indigenous land in the South Pacific, “agriculture (including [...] commercial pastoralism) progressively eats into Indigenous territory,” turning “native flora and fauna into a dwindling resource and curtail[ing] the reproduction of Indigenous modes of production” (395). In this way, colonial expansion and settlement practices compromise Indigenous populations’ ability to sustain themselves as they traditionally have, making them “dependent on the introduced economy” (395). Indigenous populations are thus themselves absorbed into colonial practices that fuel their cultural, economic, and ecological disenfranchisement.

Following postcolonial scholars Rob Nixon and Anthony Carrigan, I frame my approach to catastrophe around histories of colonial exploitation because it helps me account for how catastrophe is linked to the colonial transformation of material and cultural landscapes in formerly colonized nations. Postcolonial studies have long focused on the impacts of colonialism on people and culture; I am interested in how legacies of colonialism have impacted physical

landscapes, ecologies, and present-day ecological vulnerabilities. I draw connections between colonialism and catastrophe, and demonstrate that catastrophe is linked to a long history of exploitation of the land that accelerated under British colonialism. As Graham Huggan notes, current ecological crises cannot be separated from historical legacies of imperialistic exploitation and authoritarian abuse” (Huggan 702). There have already been many in-depth investigations of the relationship between colonialism and the environment (see Swami; Rigby; J. Murphy; Carrigan) but, to date, none has provided a “sustained analysis of the relationships between colonialism and catastrophe” (Carrigan, “Towards a Postcolonial Disaster Studies” 122). My goal is to produce that sustained analysis, and to illustrate the value of a historically inflected way of reading catastrophe in literary fiction for contemporary investigations of the relationship between colonialism and environment.

Carrigan’s *Postcolonial Tourism* focuses on the way tourism practices in contemporary postcolonial contexts perpetuate colonial economic power relations. He argues that legacies of colonialism must be studied alongside present-day environmental degradation for current ecological conditions to be understood in the historical contexts that produced them. He points out how, even today, neocolonial economic pressures on postcolonial nations continue to fuel the “long-term dispossession and even annihilation of coastal communities,” along with the destruction of local ecosystems (Carrigan, “Out of this Great Tragedy” 274). Grounded in literature but drawing on historical and economic sources as well, Carrigan’s analysis points to a connection between tourism, colonialism, and environmental destruction. In “Towards a Postcolonial Disaster Studies,” Carrigan turns his attention specifically to environmental disaster, and argues for the need for what he calls a postcolonial disaster studies. His works are perhaps the only contemporary analyses of the relationship between contemporary catastrophe and

British colonialism. I draw on Carrigan's work because his historically specific and environmentally conscious approach to reading literature from postcolonial environments lends itself perfectly to the type of analysis I conduct here. The way Carrigan's employs the term "postcolonial" is particularly useful to me. Borrowing the definition from Albert Wendt, a postcolonial novelist from the South Pacific, Carrigan takes "postcolonial" to mean "not just [...] 'after' colonialism but also 'around, through, out of, alongside, and against'" it (Wendt 3). My analysis of postcolonial catastrophe is primarily concerned with environmental events that occur in the wake of colonialism, but this broader definition of "postcolonial" helps to frame catastrophe in a way that is not temporal but rather contextual.¹⁹

Anthony Carrigan's research also helps me intervene at the intersection of disaster studies and postcolonial studies. He notes that dominant approaches in risk-based analysis focus primarily on "*future* apocalyptic scenarios" and recommends looking instead at how postcolonial texts "depict *past and present* experiences of real-world catastrophes along with their deep-lying causes" (Carrigan, "Towards a Postcolonial Disaster Studies" 131, original emphasis). Even within literary and cultural studies, such a shift in approach has not yet occurred. To date, those interested in catastrophe and climate change have been "much more willing" to study its representation in Western texts and Hollywood films, "like Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006) or Roland Emmerich's films *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004)" instead of studying representations of "lived disasters" in the global south (131). He suggests that postcolonial studies might "humaniz[e]" disaster studies by bringing to it an understanding of "identity

¹⁹ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin perform a similar move in *The Empire Writes Back*. They take "post-colonial" to "cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day," as opposed to using it to designate the period after independence (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2). They argue that this understanding of the term is more useful because it highlights the "continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression" (2). They suggest that it is more appropriate to use it this way because it enables one to study "the world as it exists during and after the period of European imperial domination and the effects of this on contemporary literatures" (2).

politics and social stories at the core of understanding disaster—and in seeing vulnerability reduction as predicated on culturally and historically nuanced understandings of human-environment relations” (131). Creative texts can be helpful here:

[...] [they] offer epistemological alternatives to the dominant rhetorics through which disasters are framed, providing new vocabularies for talking about the relationships between catastrophic events, histories, and—perhaps most significantly—processes of recovery and reconstruction. (133)

Carrigan’s text carves out a space at the intersection of postcolonial studies and disaster studies which makes room for the type of analysis I conduct here. He delineates the sites of productive exchange between disaster studies and postcolonialism, and offers suggestions for how humanistic approaches – and literary study more specifically – can contribute to opening up new areas of inquiry in each of these fields. He points out many gaps in current scholarship that my research aims to address.

Section 3: Colonial Roots: Colonialism, Environment, Environmentalism

Since I seek to draw connections between colonial land management practices, human-nonhuman relationships, and contemporary ecological instabilities in former British colonies, I begin by calling attention to the historical connections between environment, environmentalism, and British colonialism. I highlight two things: firstly, the specific historical factors that are often overlooked in studies of early British colonialism, and, secondly, the way that the management of the physical environment is intrinsic to the operation of colonial power. From the very beginning, British imperialism has been rooted in control over the physical landscape.

As Joseph Murphy points out in his 2009 study of environmentalism in postcolonial nations, dominant approaches to studying British colonialism share a significant limitation: they

begin their analysis in the East Indies, in South Asia, in Southern Africa, or in the South Pacific. They overlook the fact that structures of British colonial administration that manifested themselves in those parts of the world stem from those practised during the conquest of Gaelic Scotland and Ireland. Studying the way British colonialism unfolded there is historically useful: it shows how the “policies which came to define colonialism” first emerged there and reveals the connection between colonialism and environment (J. Murphy 6). The following brief overview of early British colonialism shows its investment in the control of land and resources. It illustrates that British dependent colonialism and settler colonialism have as both their goal and as their vehicle the domination of the physical environment.

Colonialism is structured on the systematic subjugation of “Other” peoples, cultures, practices, and beliefs. The Anglo-Norman conquest of Gaelic Scotland and Ireland worked in just this way. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Gaelic Scottish and Irish people were characterized by the invading Anglo-Normans the same way racialized and Indigenous peoples were in the later British colonies: “The highlanders and people of the islands... are a savage and untamed nation, rude and independent” (qtd. in J. Murphy 7).²⁰ McInnes observes that this description “is one of the earliest stereotypes of an ‘Aboriginal people’” (qtd. in J. Murphy 7). This characterization also maligned traditional Gaelic dress, music, and language, associating these cultural markers with “anything and everything unacceptable” (J. Murphy 7). Murphy

²⁰ Chandra explains that “[e]very imperial project articulates abstract principles to justify its rule over subjects who are deemed to be culturally different and morally inferior” (Chandra 137). Combined, these principles make up an “imperial ideology of rule” and work in “two complementary ways: first, as a justificatory argument for a particular legal-administrative system in a colonized territory, and second, as a social theory that describes the inner structure of a colonized society and supports the aforementioned argument in the realm of law and governance” (137). A belief that the Other is “primitive” therefore becomes a “legitimate basis for colonizing a certain territory and its population” (137). This imperial ideology depicts colonized subjects as needing, paradoxically, both “improvement and protection” (138). “Much like children need to be nurtured and protected yet improved and guided toward adult capacities of reason and self governance,” Chandra writes, “primitive peoples, too, were deemed to be exceptional in their need for both improvement and protection via a regime direct colonial rule” (138).

argues that in studying early history of British colonialism, we can observe the emergence of “ethnocidal policies” which later came to define it (7). Concepts synonymous with later stages of British colonialism were first enacted here. The term ‘plantation’, for example, originated from practise of planting settlers on lands belonging to Indigenous peoples (7). These plantations were model farms, set up by the British in the hope that Indigenous peoples would replicate their farming and land management practises. The British would also confiscate large pieces of land and re-appropriate them, dispossessing large portions of the Indigenous population (8). These mechanisms of control over the land and how it is used show evidence of early British colonialism’s close ties to environmental management (8).²¹

By controlling human access to land and resources, the British could maintain their grasp on colonized populations. They alienated people from their land, from their traditional relationships with their local ecosystem, and oftentimes uprooted them and moved them to distant places; Murphy argues that these are all “signature activit[ies]” of colonialism that highlight its reliance on forms of environmental control (8). “Botanical Decolonization,” by Mastnak et al., also frames colonialism as about control of the environment. They define colonialism as “the literal planting and displanting of peoples, animals, and plants—as inscribing a domination into blood and soil” (367). Likewise, environmental historian and geographer Alfred Crosby speaks of European imperialism as “ecological imperialism,” explaining that it

²¹ Other environmental processes also played a significant role in the British colonization of foreign lands. Disease, for example, contributed greatly to the colonization of Australia. Murphy explains:

[...] the problems began in April 1789 when English settlers began finding bodies near Sydney harbour. The cause was smallpox or something like it. From here the disease spread throughout most of Australia, often spread by indigenous people who were trying to escape infected areas. One estimate from the 19th century suggests that smallpox might have killed one-third of the native population. In this case conquest and dispossession were assisted by processes which were unplanned and unforeseen and the environment played a central role. (J. Murphy 8)

The role of plants, animals, as well as microbes and viruses in colonization is also discussed at length in Neel Ahuja’s *Bioinsecurities: Disease Interventions, Empire, and the Government of Species*.

“has a biological, an ecological, component” (Crosby 7). Ben Holgate elaborates on this point in his 2019 *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse*: he writes that ecological imperialism is the “process by which European colonists conquered the Americas, Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand and other territories by imposing not only foreign people and philosophies but also animals, plants and ideas in order for exploiting the natural environment for commercial profit” (Holgate, *Climate and Crises*). The massive scale of the consequences of British ecological imperialism is still visible in former colonies today. At the height of British colonialism, one out of every four people in the entire world were subjects to the British Crown (approximately 458 million people). During this time, Britain controlled one quarter of the world’s landmass.

The scale of environmental exploitation in South Asia under the British Raj cannot be understated. At the time, the British occupied the territories of what are today India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. A nineteenth-century forest conservator writing about the region noted that Britain is unique among European nations in its complete disregard for “the value of the forests” (qtd. in Gadgil and Guha 119). Indeed, by 1860, the Britain had become “the world leader in deforestation [...] to draw timber for shipbuilding, iron-smelting and farming” (Gadgil and Guha 118). Britain was during this time in a rivalry against France, and needed timber for to build up the British Navy. Railway construction was another major driver of the timber trade. Growing demand for timber resulted in massive-scale deforestation across South Asia, and the British administration’s desire to maintain control over timber drove them to take possession of large tracts of land, dispossessing many Indigenous peoples and making it illegal for them to use natural resource as they traditionally had.²² Forests were also destroyed in sign of political

²² See Chapters 3 and 4 for an in-depth discussion of how the colonial administration severed Indigenous populations’ relationships with the land.

victory, as was done in Ratnagiri in the early 1800s, after the East India Company defeated the Marathas (118). In 1902, Webber wrote that Britain’s systematic conversion of “forests into deserts” (119) is evidence of the “destructive energy of the British race” (qtd. in Gadgil and Guha 119).

The impacts of colonial environmental intervention were no less dramatic in the South Pacific. In Australia, the colonial livestock industry caused a great deal of environmental damage. It fueled competition for land between settlers and Indigenous peoples, often culminating in violence and killings (“Colonial Period, 1788–1901.”). The Australian landscape was modified significantly by European settlement. Forests and bush were cleared “for the purposes of agriculture or urban development,” leading to compromised “soil health and landscape functionality” as well as dramatic changes biodiversity (“Landscape.”). In New Zealand, changes to land cover and landscape due to farming and agriculture accelerated dramatically after contact with Europeans (Haggerty and Campbell, “Farming and the environment - Early changes”). It was at first slowed by Māori resistance, but after British military intervention in 1870, it grew steadily; today, farming is the greatest source of anthropogenic environmental change (Haggerty and Campbell, “Farming and the environment - A modified landscape”). European settlers cleared forests and burned grasslands *en masse* to accommodate the growing number of pastures and grazing animals, which exhausting “limited soil fertility” (Haggerty and Campbell, “Farming and the environment - Early changes”).²³ These changes have resulted in a dramatic decrease in forest cover in New Zealand: “[i]n 1840 rainforests covered about half of New Zealand’s land area [...]. By 1930 about half of the forest

²³ Soil loss in New Zealand is well above the global average: “[b]etween 200 and 300 million tonnes of soil are carried out to sea every year” (Haggerty and Campbell, “Farming and the environment - Effects on soil and water”). Farming fuels this loss of soil, and continues to fuel erosion today (Haggerty and Campbell, “Farming and the environment - Effects on soil and water”).

area, and a large part of the tussocklands – totalling 39% of New Zealand’s land area – had been transformed into pastures” (Haggerty and Campbell, “Farming and the environment - Early changes”).

Colonizers’ relationships with the land in South Asia and the South Pacific produced massive-scale changes in these regions’ landscapes – changes that even the colonial administrators themselves quickly noticed (Grove and Damodaran 4345-46). Contemporary concerns for environmental stability and sustainability stem from the aftermath of these colonial interventions in the region’s landscape. In fact, the field of environmental history came into being as a result of a widespread “fear of extreme natural events” (Grove and Damodaran 4345). It can be traced back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Western Europeans began encountering unfamiliar and inhospitable tropical environments and extracting resources from them. The damage caused by this extraction soon became visible, and anxieties started building regarding the natural world’s ability to regenerate. Some of the first people to put concerns about rapid environmental change in the context of empire into writing were British colonial officers “who were themselves often actors in the process of colonially stimulated environmental change” (4346). They had both the scientific and historical knowledge necessary to spot these changes, and access to the regions where it was becoming observable. Grove and Damodaran elaborate on their discoveries:

As early as the mid-17th century we find that intellectuals and natural philosophers such as Richard Norwood and William Sayle in Bermuda, Thomas Tryon in Barbados and Edmond Halley and Isaac Pyke on St Helena were all already well aware of characteristically high rates of soil erosion and deforestation in the colonial tropics, and of the urgent need for conservationist intervention especially to protect forests and

threatened species. [...] In India William Roxburgh, Edward Balfour, Alexander Gibson and Hugh Cleghorn (all Scottish medical scientists) wrote alarmist narratives relating deforestation to the danger of climate change.” (4346)

Such accounts reveal growing concerns about changing environmental conditions among scientists long before the present era. They also show an understanding of the relationship between environmental conditions and human actions. One specific concern these accounts share is deforestation. It was observed that deforestation tended to lead to drought – the fear was that it might eventually lead to “global desiccation” (4347). Grove and Damodaran write that, “in the wake of colonial expansion,” this fear grew and “fed into post-colonial fears about desertification articulated by international bodies and global NGOs” (4347).

Climate change has therefore been a concern in environments marked by colonial resource extraction since long before colonialism ended. And throughout the twentieth century, environmental crises in postcolonial nations have escalated in both severity and frequency. This era also coincides with the beginning of decolonization in the developing world, as well as with a period of renewed concern for environmental catastrophe:

writings about the possibility of global nuclear catastrophe and pesticide pollution (particularly by Rachel Carson in the US and Kenneth Mellanby in the UK) both helped to stimulate the early green shoots of a worldwide and populist environmental movement which finally came to full bloom in the early 1970s.” (Grove and Damodaran 4346)

Thus, although the recent explosion in popularity of the environmental humanities and of environmentally inflected modes of investigating history has a several-centuries’-long history, it is also fueled by climatic changes which are becoming more evident in the twenty-first century.

Section 4: Postcolonialism and Environmental Justice in the Anthropocene

Postcolonialism has valuable contributions to make to the study of contemporary environmental crises. The discipline is invested in shedding light on the historical roots of such crises, and in situating them within a continuum of capitalistic exploitations of distant, foreign lands for the benefit of centres of power. As postcolonial studies scholar Robert Young explains,

‘Postcolonialism’ is not just a disciplinary field, nor is it a theory which has or has not come to an end. Rather, its objectives have always involved a wide-ranging political project—to reconstruct Western knowledge formations, reorient ethical norms, turn the power structures of the world upside down, refashion the world from below. The postcolonial has always been concerned with interrogating the interrelated histories of violence, domination, inequality, and injustice, with addressing the fact that, and the reasons why, millions of people in this world still live without things that most of those in the West take for granted. Clean water, for example. This is not to say that “the West” is an undifferentiated economic and social space, and nor, of course, are those countries outside the West, as economic booms transform nations such as Brazil, China, and India into new dynamics that contribute to a shifting of paradigms of economic and political power that have certainly modified the sensibility of colonial dependency. (20)

Postcolonial studies offer a grounding mechanism for talking about disparate ecological issues across vast temporal and spatial scales, and allow scholars identifying the causes of contemporary environmental vulnerability to draw connections between vastly different ecosystems, cultures, places, and histories. I frame my approach to catastrophe in contemporary literature using postcolonialism because it provides a way of placing the six novels I analyze in conversation with one another. It also forces me to contend with the systemic social, political,

and economic inequalities that postcolonial and Indigenous populations experience daily – all of which are key contributing factors to ecological vulnerability.

In his “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that climate change, and its corresponding theoretical paradigm “the Anthropocene,” functions as a global leveling mechanism: “[u]nlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged (witness the drought in Australia or recent fires in the wealthy neighborhoods of California)” (Chakrabarty 221). But as Malm and Hornberg point out, this is an extremely short-sighted view:

It blatantly overlooks the realities of differentiated vulnerability on all scales of human society: witness Katrina in black and white neighborhoods of New Orleans, or Sandy in Haiti and Manhattan, or sea level rise in Bangladesh and the Netherlands, or practically any other impact, direct or indirect, of climate change. For the foreseeable future – indeed, as long as there are human societies on Earth – there *will* be lifeboats for the rich and privileged. ... [The Anthropocene] cannot serve as a basis for challenging the vested interests of business-as-usual.²⁴ (66-67)

Without a doubt, the Anthropocene will not flatten out inequalities between humans. On the contrary, climate change will continue to manifest its effects unevenly across the globe, hitting marginalized and impoverished communities in the postcolonial south the hardest. As Dow, Kasperson, and Bohn argue, the uneven distribution of climate change impacts and the unequal conditions of life in the Anthropocene are inherently social justice issues. Negotiating

²⁴ Rosi Braidotti makes a similar critique in her 2017 Tanner Lectures address (Braidotti 17-21). She asks: “supposing ‘we’ are in this together, who are ‘we’? Whose crisis is this?” (21). Instead of “we-are-in-*this*-together” (17), Braidotti proposes to think of the present moment as one in which “‘we-are-in-*this* together-but-we-are-*not*-one-and-the-same” (23).

environmental impacts means taking into consideration “other broad inequalities in wealth and well being,” such as:

dislocations between those who will benefit from and those who will bear the burdens and damage associated with climate change, procedural justice issues as to how decisions have been made in structuring international approaches to assess scientific issues and creating the institutions of the global climate change regime to address the problems, and how equity issues and adaptation strategies may interact. (Dow, Kasperson, and Bohn 79)

Like Malm and Hornberg, Dow, Kasperson, and Bohn draw attention to the fact climate change will exacerbate current societal inequalities. The combined history of environmental exploitation and the postcolonial economic explosion in growth and development in formerly colonized nations means that postcolonial and Indigenous communities are disposed to being the most vulnerable to further changes in climate and environment, and will therefore experience the worst of what the Anthropocene has to offer.

Considering the relationship between colonialism and the Anthropocene through the lens of Indigenous studies adds a great deal to my approach. Many Indigenous and Métis scholars have argued that “the Anthropocene is rooted in colonization” (Whyte 159).²⁵ Whyte explains:

The colonial invasion that began centuries ago caused anthropogenic environmental changes that rapidly disrupted many Indigenous peoples, including deforestation, pollution, modification of hydrological cycles, and the amplification of soil-use and terraforming for particular types of farming, grazing, transportation, and residential, commercial and government infrastructure.

²⁵ See also Heather Davis’ and Zoe Todd’s “On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene,” which I return to in my discussion of post-catastrophe recovery in Chapter 4, Part 2.

Colonially-induced environmental changes altered the ecological conditions that supported Indigenous peoples' cultures, health, economies, and political self-determination. While Indigenous peoples, as any society, have long histories of adapting to change, colonialism caused changes at such a rapid pace that many Indigenous peoples became vulnerable to harms, from health problems related to new diets to erosion of their cultures to the destruction of Indigenous diplomacy, to which they were not as susceptible prior to colonization. (154)

For this reason, Indigenous studies often frame “climate vulnerability as an intensification or intensified episode of colonialism” (Whyte 155). Indeed, as both independent analyses and UN climate reports show, “anthropogenic climate change affects Indigenous peoples earlier and more severely than other populations” (154).²⁶ Indigenous people are, after all, the first climate refugees who have had to evacuate their homes in South Asia, the South Pacific, and the Arctic.

Postcolonial and Indigenous studies are necessary in discussions of climate change and the Anthropocene – because they provide a historical grounding that forbids us from forgetting the historical and economic processes that continue to fuel contemporary inequalities and vulnerabilities. These lenses provide a context to catastrophic processes which are often viewed – erroneously – not as processes but as singular events. As Carrigan points out, postcolonial studies help to understand the ways climate change compounds the effects of growing economic disparities and social crises in postcolonial communities. An Indigenous studies approach to the Anthropocene, on the other hand, can help reframe the climate crisis as a “*déjà vu* experience” for Indigenous peoples (Whyte 156), situating it among a long list of other ways Indigenous communities have been disenfranchised and disempowered by colonialism in the past; “[t]he

²⁶ I provide a great deal more data on Indigenous peoples' vulnerability to climate change in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

same colonial practices and policies that opened up Indigenous territories for deforestation and extractive industries are the ones that make adaptation difficult for Indigenous peoples today” (156-157). Combined, postcolonial and Indigenous studies form necessary components of my analysis, as they historicize current socioeconomic and ecological inequalities, and tie them to present-day processes that continue to replicate them.

Robert Young argues that the impulse to “pronounce postcolonial theory dead” shows that it in fact “continues to disturb and provoke anxiety: the real problem lies in the fact that the postcolonial remains” (Young 19). He writes that “postcolonial theory” cannot and has not come to an end, because imperialism and colonialism continue to exist in the world, in the form of “economic and resource exploitation enforced by military power, or a refusal to acknowledge the sovereignty of non-Western countries” (20). Peoples and cultures “still suffer from the long-lingering aftereffects of imperial, colonial, and neocolonial rule, albeit in contemporary forms such as economic globalization” (20). Young’s concept of “postcolonial remains” draws on the work of Derrida, who argues “that there will always be something ‘left over’” (21). For Young, this means that “the postcolonial will always be left over” – “[s]omething remains, and the postcolonial is in many ways about such unfinished business, the continuing projection of past conflicts into the experience of the present, the insistent persistence of the afterimages of historical memory that drive the desire to transform the present” (21). I borrow Young’s formulation of postcolonial “remains,” or residue, and I return to it periodically throughout this dissertation.

Section 5: Defining Catastrophe (Catastrophe vs. Apocalypse vs. Disaster)

My analysis of catastrophe centres on environmental events and does not exclude types of catastrophe triggered by human activity. Catastrophic events caused by drilling, building, and

other activities related to economic development are often not treated as ecological catastrophes (see Rigby, Morton, and Nixon). In disaster studies, catastrophes caused directly by human industry (like Exxon-Valdez, Bhopal, Chernobyl, etc.) are recurrently separated from those that seem “natural,” such as cyclones and floods. My approach does not make such a distinction, because in our current ecological climate, it is neither possible nor useful to divide the two.²⁷ The Anthropocene marks a moment in which humans have become *geological* forces in the environment. Catastrophes caused by human activity cannot be separated from those caused by regular climactic patterns, because there is nothing about our current ecological and climactic patterns that humans have not already altered, as Jedediah Purdy explains (Purdy 2-3). My definition of catastrophe is inclusive and flexible because it helps to see catastrophic events, regardless of their root causes, in relationship with one another, and as sharing in the history of colonial exploitation of the environment.

The six novels I analyze could all be classified as disaster fiction – fiction concerned with violent environmental events – and some even as climate fiction (“cli-fi”). I argue, however, that they do not qualify as apocalyptic fiction. I insist on a distinction between catastrophe and apocalypse. Although there is an area of overlap between disaster fiction and apocalyptic fiction, it is important to acknowledge the different ways disaster and apocalypse have been used in literature and characterized by scholars in the environmental humanities.²⁸ Apocalypse has long been used as a rhetorical trope in the green movement (Garrard, “Ecocriticism” 101-102). Lawrence Buell has even argued that it is “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (Buell, *The Environmental*

²⁷ Although he focuses on “human disasters” rather than “natural ones,” Rob Nixon too interrogates the conventional division of the two (58). He calls this division “unsustainable” (58).

²⁸ Rigby also insists on a difference between “disaster” and “catastrophe.” For her, a catastrophe is “a calamity with an ‘apocalyptic’ dimension” (18). I do not necessarily agree with such a distinction.

Imagination 285). Apocalypse is typically associated with narratives in which “violent and grotesque images are juxtaposed with glimpses of a world transformed,” and its “underlying theme is usually a titanic struggle between good and evil” (Thomson 14). Indeed, as Ritzenhoff and Krewani argue, apocalypse originally emerged as a religious concept (xii); in this way, it separates itself from disaster, which does not have these religious or moral connotations.

Furthermore, apocalypse is often thought of as a “strong allegory, a rhetorical figure that enables us to speak of the present” (xii). I do not treat catastrophic events as symbols or allegories in the narrative. I analyze dramatizations of real historical events or of events that occur regularly in a given region. The fictional renderings of catastrophe I work with reveal the material, life-altering consequences it has on the people who experience it. To read catastrophe in postcolonial literature as a symbol is to ignore the reality that such events are occurring regularly around the world. I suggest that much could be gained by refusing to treat catastrophe as an allegory for something else, and by recognizing it as a fixture of daily life in postcolonial environments.

Ritzenhoff and Krewani explain that apocalypse “provides a structure to express our fear of an ending and to give expression to politically threatening situations that we could not understand otherwise” (xii). I recognize the value in using catastrophic events as symbols for talking about contemporary political fears and anxieties, but such an approach is not productive to my analysis. To treat the catastrophes my case studies handle as if they were allegories would be to take away from the material realities of poverty, vulnerability, systemic oppression, and environmental destruction that communities in these regions face regularly. I therefore draw a clear distinction between my approach to catastrophe and dominant approaches to apocalypse.

Although disaster fiction shares many characteristics of apocalyptic fiction, and is often treated as its subgenre, disaster functions differently from apocalypse in narrative fiction.

Disaster fiction does not generally feature such a radical break between the world before the traumatic environmental event and the world after it. Disaster does however have a powerful revelatory function in these novels: “historians of disaster have argued that such events at once can trigger and reveal social change” (Riede et al.) Another feature that sets disaster fiction apart from apocalyptic fiction is the fact that it typically does not present the narrative struggle in terms of such “extreme moral dualism” (Garrard, “Ecocriticism” 94). In addition, apocalypse discourse deals with “the fate of the world as a whole” (Heise, *Sense of Place* 141), whereas catastrophe does not manifest in such a uniform manner across the globe (Dürbeck 2). Catastrophe often occurs in ways that are dramatic and explosive – localized in space and immediate in time (Nixon 2). In these important ways, fiction dealing with catastrophe separates itself from apocalyptic fiction.

Although the fictional texts I analyze fall under the category of disaster fiction, I intentionally veer from the language of “natural disaster” and use the term “catastrophe” instead. There are two reasons behind this rhetorical choice. First, violent environmental events are recurrently couched in discourses of fate and misfortune, both in media reports and in survivors’ accounts of these events. The word “disaster” comes from the Italian “ill-starred” (“disaster, n.”); its etymology casts it as a product of destiny – a divinely ordained event. I use the term ecological catastrophe because “natural disaster” obscures the reality of human accountability in current ecological conditions.

Second, this dissertation seeks to recuperate catastrophe's transformative potential. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, *katastrophē* is a reversal, a turning point that leads to the "dénouement" – the resolution of the plot (Rigby 17). Rigby explains that it denotes "a sudden turn or overturning" (17).²⁹ *Katastrophē* is also connected to *anagnorisis*, "the moment of realization" wherein the protagonist "is faced with the collapse of their underlying assumptions about themselves and/or others and is brought, painfully and sometimes fatally, to the recognition of the damage that has been wrought by their ignorance" (18). Catastrophe in postcolonial texts helps uncover the slow violence that shapes the regions' material and discursive landscapes. I treat it as a narrative event that creates opportunities to subvert conventional (western, Enlightenment) views of the nonhuman and to reimagine contemporary relationships with nonhuman others.

Section 6: The Nonhuman Turn

In working through the ways my case studies engage with catastrophe and its impacts on both the human and nonhuman worlds, I pay close attention to the way the texts treat nonhuman animals and the environment, and I therefore draw on scholarship belonging to the intellectual movement known as the nonhuman turn. The nonhuman turn refers to a contemporary shift in philosophical thought wherein the human is decentred in favor of a turn towards, or a concern for, the nonhuman (see Richard Grusin's *The Nonhuman Turn*). It rejects the notion of human exceptionalism embraced in Enlightenment philosophy and insists instead that humans have never been "human" because they coevolved alongside and collaborated with nonhumans. Human-animal studies, posthumanism, object-oriented ontology/new materialism/immaterialism, as well as ecocriticism and the environmental humanities more broadly all constitute part of the nonhuman turn. Grusin argues that the paradigm of the Anthropocene, since it makes humans

²⁹ For more on this, see Nancy 16 and Gonçalves 51-54.

into geophysical forces and situates them alongside many other nonhuman factors that contribute to changing climate, also belongs under the umbrella of the nonhuman turn.

Jedediah Purdy notes that in the Anthropocene “the divide between people and the natural world is no longer useful or accurate” (2); it is this same division that many of the novels I work with undermine. Bruno Latour has long argued for the need to dissolve the boundaries between culture and nature, and he sees the Anthropocene as a moment that enables just such a shift in our thinking. He argues for us to leave behind Enlightenment narratives of progress that cast the human subject as exceptional, and as gaining mastery over a passive environment:

The first advantage of living in the time of the Anthropocene is that it directs our attention toward much more than a ‘reconciliation’ of nature and society as one larger system that would be unified in terms of either one or the other. To operate such a dialectical reconciliation you would have to accept the Great Divide of the social and of the natural. [...] But the Anthropocene does not overcome this Divide: it bypasses it entirely. (Latour 78)

In the Anthropocene, Latour argues, we are faced with conditions that force us to recognize that human subjects are not and have never been separate from the nonhuman world they inhabit.³⁰ The Anthropocene therefore presents us with possibilities to rethink the relationship between human and nonhuman animals.

In recent years, ecocritical, posthuman, new materialist, and animal studies scholarship have been pushing for an increased recognition of the fact that animals, plants, and other biotic and abiotic (biological and non-biological) objects too are active players in shaping the material

³⁰ This argument has also been made by scholars such as Anna Tsing, in her study of the entangled lives of matsutake mushrooms and mushroom gatherers, as well as by Donna Haraway, who reflects on the cells and bacteria she shares with her dog, thus drawing attention to the very literal and material entanglement of their bodies.

world.³¹ Anna Tsing, in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, writes that human entanglements with other species, which “once seemed the stuff of fables,” are today taken seriously “among biologists and ecologists, who show how life requires the interplay of many kinds of beings” (Tsing vii). Turning towards ecocritical and animal studies scholarship, and towards fields of scholarship such as vital materialism and new materialism which take seriously the complicated material entanglements between human and nonhuman, undercuts the traditional Enlightenment view of the “moral intentionality of Man’s Christian masculinity, which separated Man from Nature,” and highlights alternative ways of conceiving of human relationships with the nonhuman world (vii). Ecocritical and animal studies scholarship, in particular, are particularly valuable here, as the texts I work with repeatedly demonstrate sustained attention to nonhuman animals and environments, and usefully deploy representations of the nonhuman in their narrative handling of ecological catastrophe.

Section 7: Ecocriticism and Environmental Literature

Broadly speaking, ecocriticism is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”: it takes an “earth-centered approach” to literary study (Glotfelty xviii). With “one foot in literature and the other on land,” ecocriticism takes as its premise the fact that humans and human culture are “connected to the physical world” and are therefore “affecting it and affected by it” (xix). Human culture shapes the environment, and the environment, in turn shapes human culture. A central concern of early ecocriticism was drawing attention to the fact

³¹ I use the term “object” following Graham Harman’s definition, laid out in *Object-Oriented Ontology*. He describes objects not only as “solid inanimate objects as opposed to human, animal, concepts or events” (401), but also as “[a]nything that cannot be fully reduced either downward to its components (‘undermining’) or upward to its effects (‘overmining’)” (401-402). Objects, for Harman, include “human beings as well as dragons, stones and the Dutch East India Company” (401).

that “current environmental problems are largely of our own making” – they are “a by-product of culture” (xxi). In 1996, Cheryll Glotfelty, a pioneer of the ecocritical movement, wrote:

Regardless of what name it goes by, most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe [...].
(Glotfelty xx)

Over two decades later, ecocritics and environmental humanists continue to echo these concerns.

Susie O’Brien, a scholar working in the fields of ecocriticism and postcolonialism, argues that the fact that ecocriticism’s founding text, William Rueckert’s “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” was published the same year as postcolonialism’s founding text, Edward Said’s *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, is no coincidence (177). She explains that the two movements emerged from the same historical conditions and political concerns, and that ecocriticism is another one of the “intellectual fruits of the long and violent engagement of colonialism with the physical environment” (178). In order to be politically productive, in order to incite the types of changes needed to avert the catastrophes that Glotfelty and others warn readers about, O’Brien suggests that ecocriticism must refuse to be “abstract[ed] from its embeddedness in a largely non-human material environment” (181). For this reason, O’Brien writes, “[e]cocriticism is committed to an interdisciplinary perspective which enhances the focus of literary criticism by recalibrating it with the insights of science, in particular the science of ecology” (181). Much of what I do here follows this trajectory; I combine analyses of representations of the natural world in literary texts with knowledge gathered from

environmental science, ecology, and environmental health, while at the same time picking out the interchanges between the porous and co-constitutive categories “human” and “nonhuman.”

As ecocriticism grew and developed from the 1980s onwards, different offshoots of the field have taken on a life of their own and gone in different directions. The field of postcolonial ecocriticism, for example, is one such offshoot. O’Brien argues that ecocriticism and postcolonialism can learn from one another: “[o]ne of the crucial insights of postcolonial theory has been to recognize the extent to which the process of colonialism was fuelled by a desire for an unmediated possession of the world – with devastating cultural and environmental consequences” (194). Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley elaborate. They explain that postcolonial and ecocritical methodologies complement one another (4). Whereas the work of ecocritics shows how colonialism proceeds through a domination of the physical environment, postcolonialism draws attention to the histories of specific environments. This attention to history is necessary in the study of the environment because “the decoupling of nature and history has helped to mystify colonialism’s histories of forced migration, suffering, and human violence” (4). To draw attention to the historical dimensions of environment and landscape, then, is to shed light on how colonialism shapes peoples’ experiences of and relationships with the nonhuman world. My reading of my case studies relies heavily on the elements and approaches that DeLoughrey and Handley outline, and I return to their work periodically throughout this dissertation.

Another offshoot of conventional ecocriticism is the substantial body of recent work on the connection between literary imagination and human material relationships with the nonhuman environment. In *Ecology Without Nature*, for example, Timothy Morton goes to great lengths to show the relationship between Romantic literary imaginations and the way the natural

environment was conceived of in that era. Jedediah Purdy performs a similar analysis in post-settler America in *After Nature*. Kate Rigby, whose book *Dancing with Disaster* is concerned primarily with ecological catastrophe, also argues for a connection between imagination and action, but her analysis focuses on earlier historical eras. Literature about catastrophe and environmental imagination is therefore largely limited to the study of earlier historical contexts and events – to a time before the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere began to have a drastic impact on life on earth. Morton’s, Purdy’s, and Rigby’s works are useful because of the way they theorize human-nonhuman relationships and resist conventional Enlightenment views of “Nature” and the physical environment more broadly. I use these historical examinations of the relationship between literature and the environment as a starting point; my approach turns to contemporary representations of catastrophe in the context of ongoing anthropogenic climate change.

Section 8: Animal Studies

In the Western intellectual tradition, animals have traditionally been conceived in contrast to humans and culture in opposition to nature (DeMello 37-38; see also Ghosh, “Wild Fictions”; Berland; Latour; Wiseman et al.; Tsing; Ingold, *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*; Armstrong; C. Wolfe; Morton).³² This dichotomous view of humans and nonhumans, of culture and nature, played a significant role in organizing the epistemological frames which governed the worldview of European colonizers and which ultimately led to the dehumanization and subjugation of racialized and Indigenous peoples around the world. As Jody Berland explains in *Virtual Menageries*, analyzing representations of animals “helps to illuminate essential links

³² For an extended discussion on how humans have historically understood their relationship with animals, see *What is an Animal?* by Tim Ingold, *Virtual Menageries* by Jody Berland, *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period* edited by Susan Wiseman et al., and *Becoming Human: Evolution and Human Uniqueness* by Ian Tattersall.

between our colonial past and our Anthropocenic present,” and “confirms how often the exploitation of animals involves the exploitation of other humans, and how often the exploitation of other humans involves the exploitation of animals” (3). Berland’s book illustrates the role animals played in colonial administrative systems and power dynamics, and the role they continue to play in structuring inequitable relationships between different human groups in the present.³³ European colonizers viewed the peoples they encountered in the colonies as existing in a state that was dangerously close to animality and nature. This proximity to the nonhuman was incredibly threatening to the European worldview, and it marked racialized and Indigenous peoples as indelibly ‘Other’ in the colonizers’ rigidly structured worldview (72, 89). In fact, as Ben Holgate points out, differences between Indigenous peoples’ and colonizers’ conceptions of the nonhuman significantly contributed to the oppression of Indigenous people: “[t]he ‘triumph’ of European colonists in these territories over their indigenous populations [...] was effected through environmental, and hence cultural, derangement premised on both ontological and epistemological differences about what it is to be human and animal” (Holgate, *Climate and Crises*; see also Huggan and Tiffin 11).³⁴

In the cosmologies of many Indigenous nations and cultures, this binary conception of humans and animals does not exist (DeMello 33-34; see also the work of Ambelin and Blaze Kwaymullina; Lynne Hume; Davi Kopenawa; and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro). The human-animal divide is “neither universally found nor universally agreed upon”; it is largely “culturally

³³ Berland calls these relations in which animals play a pivotal role “animal-mediated encounters” (Berland 1). She explains that “[a]nimals have served as mediators for human interaction as far back as records exist” (8). Both animals themselves and their human-crafted representations (in art, literature, film, and contemporary digital media) “have been put to work in changing social configurations and have helped to alter them” (2). I deploy some of these insights in my discussion of *Thinner than Skin* in Chapter 3, Part 1.

³⁴ The “ultimate irony of this hegemonic triumph,” Huggan and Tiffin write, is that today, “the West is increasingly attempting to re-think and re-capture practices generated through the very respect for animals and nature that the early settlers so righteously scorned” (Huggan and Tiffin 11).

and historically contingent; that is, depending on time and place this border not only moves but the reasons for assigning animals and humans to each side of the border change as well”

(DeMello 33).

In many non-Western societies, nature and animals are not necessarily categories that are easily to the opposite of culture or humans. In fact, many cultures see (or saw) animals as potential clan members, ancestors, separate nations, or intermediaries between the sacred and profane worlds. Many of those cultures share a belief in animism, a worldview that finds that humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects all may be endowed with spirit.³⁵ (34)

Theorizations of animals are “inextricably bound up with the formation of other notions fundamental to the work of colonialism” such as the categories of human, nature, and culture (Armstrong 414; see also Ingold, *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*). The role animals play “in the biological and social development of *Homo sapiens*” cannot be overstated; analyzing representations of nonhuman animals in literature therefore sheds light on the way animals reflect, inform, and comment on human perceptions of themselves and the world (Best 14). Thinking about animals in relation to human beings is a constitutive part of articulating human experience and subjectivity. Studying the way contemporary works stage human-nonhuman interactions can therefore provide important insight into the human dilemmas with which these works are concerned.

Human-animal studies (or simply animal studies) is invested in interrogating the relationship between humans and animals in different societies, and in studying the ways animals figure in human systems of thought and signification. This field “examines how our lives,

³⁵ I elaborate on the way different Indigenous cultures conceive of human-animal relationships in Chapters 3 and 4.

identities, and histories are inseparably tied to other sentient, intelligent, communicative, and cultured beings in ways that human animals (in Western cultures above all) have systematically denied” (Best 14). Turning to animals can be particularly illuminating in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism, as animals have “tended to disrupt the smooth unfolding of Enlightenment ideology” which has shaped so much of colonial discourse (Armstrong 415). The animal “resists the imperial desire to represent the natural [...] as a passive object or a blank slate ready for mapping by Western experts” (415). At the same time, as Berland points out, “a country built by settler colonialism is built on the bodies of animals” (69). Analyzing the role animals play in intrahuman relationships in postcolonial environments is therefore necessary for properly accounting for the way power and powerlessness, resilience and vulnerability, survivance and recovery are imagined and articulated in contemporary postcolonial literary production.

The human-nonhuman conceptual divide that animal studies investigates is “not just any difference among others; it is, we might say, the most different difference, and therefore the most instructive” (C. Wolfe 23). Kari Weil, who writes extensively on the ethical and political implications of the perceived human-nonhuman difference, picks up on Gayatri Spivak’s well-known commentary on the subaltern voice and extends it to nonhuman subjects.³⁶ Weil explains that, in a modern context, the nonhuman being functions as the quintessential other: it becomes a “limit case for theories of difference, otherness, and power” (5), since, contrarily to the objects of “women’s studies or ethnic studies” (4), animals literally cannot speak, or at least “cannot speak any of the languages that the academy recognizes as necessary for such self-representation” (4).

³⁶ Philip Armstrong picks up on this connection as well. Gayatri Spivak argues that the subaltern, the figure existing outside of the sociopolitical and geographical centres of hegemonic colonial power, can never really ‘speak’ – “that is, cannot express its own relation to history on its own terms or cannot be heard to do so within the dominant modes of historiography” (Armstrong 415-16).

Animals in fiction thus raise important questions about the limitations of language, and about the way in which the narrative configuration of human characters is affected by interactions with those beings whose subjectivities are fundamentally different and unknowable.

My case studies demonstrate recurrent aesthetic and thematic interest in nonhuman animals and the environment; they are therefore particularly useful for investigating the role animals play in the narrative representation of human experiences of catastrophe. Animal studies makes valuable contributions to the type of study I undertake here, because it offers a critical lens that works well in conjunction with postcolonial studies. Armstrong argues that animal studies and postcolonial studies examine parallel questions, share a distrust of “theories and values that claim absolute authority,” and “attack” representations of the other as powerless and voiceless (Armstrong 416). Turning to representations of animals in postcolonial literature therefore sheds light on the way postcolonial subjects conceive of themselves, their culture and history, as well as their relationship with the nonhuman environment. I draw on animal studies scholarship to highlight the way postcolonial novels use animals as friends and kin, as narrative sites of reflection and renegotiation, and as sources of strength when characters experience difficult times. I also draw attention to the way colonial schemes of control deploy animals as vehicles of enduring colonial violence.

Section 9: Problems and Scholarly Contributions

Studies of climate change in the humanities are often characterized by epistemological gaps at two different levels. The gap between people-centred and environment-centred approaches to ecological vulnerability and climate change is the first challenge. The gap between research and practical application (between theory and practice) is the second.

The first epistemological gap my project must contend with is the significant disconnection between scholars investigating the cultural and social legacies of colonialism and those studying ecological catastrophe and its material impacts on human groups.³⁷ As a result of this disconnection, eco-social crises such as famine go unexamined in the context of the historical and political forces that produced them. It is crucial to my approach to reframe such crises as catastrophes to better situate them in a network of forces at work in shaping both historical legacies and present ecological realities. By adopting a broader definition of catastrophe, I can draw attention to the slow violence that the novels highlight. It also enables me to reveal the long-term impacts of colonialism on both human and nonhuman worlds.

The second epistemological gap that marks contemporary approaches to the study of climate change in the humanities is the “disconnect between rhetoric and ground-level reality” (Mukherjee et al. 62). Nicholas Lawrence argues that this gap is rooted in philosophical legacies of the Cartesian dualism which frame nature and culture as fundamentally separate entities, and which cast nature as a background upon which culture acts (62). Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Jedediah Purdy, Christine Murrin, and many other scholars interested in posthumanism, OOO, and new materialisms critique this disconnection. The narratives I have selected work to undermine this false dichotomy; they present rigid views that conceptually and materially separate the human from the nonhuman as unsustainable. People often lack a “non-Cartesian vocabulary for considering climate change” (63) – this is a central issue in dealing with climate change in the humanities. I suggest that by turning to the ways fiction authors imagine and

³⁷ Jonathan Skinner believes this disconnection between different disciplinary approaches to climate change is at least in part caused by the fact that “contact zones” between disciplines remain “underfunded” in the humanities; he qualifies this as a form of “benign neglect” (Mukherjee et al. 64).

engage with climate change in postcolonial environments, we can arrive at better ways of thinking through and articulating these issues.

Carrigan suggests that one of the ways disaster studies might benefit postcolonial studies is by lending it some of its methodologies, and by allowing postcolonialism to integrate “conceptual insights derived from cultural and historical analyses into broader, collaborative research projects that are oriented towards achieving change in real-world practices” (Carrigan, “Towards a Postcolonial Disaster Studies” 123). He is here gesturing to the fact that interdisciplinary approaches that combine postcolonial frameworks with disaster studies ones might help to marry research and theory to practice.

My approach seeks to address the theoretical and historical blind spots in contemporary approaches to studying and imagining ecological vulnerability. I take vulnerability to the effects of climate change and relationships with the other-than-human world to be central concerns in postcolonial studies. I analyze the sociocultural and the ecological side by side, revealing how catastrophe impacts the types of narratives that are produced and how, in turn, these narratives have the potential to prompt us to rethink our responses to environmental instability. The material realities of the Anthropocene demand a renegotiation of conventional anthropocentric ways of seeing the world. I argue that fictional representations of catastrophe are particularly effective at generating opportunities to reimagine human relationships with the nonhuman in unstable ecological conditions.

Chapter 2:

Catastrophe, Vulnerability, and Human Relationships

Section 1: Colonialism, Catastrophe, and the Everyday

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (South Asia) and Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* (South Pacific) explicitly link catastrophe to colonialism and highlight the connection between racial, ethnic, Indigenous, and caste identities and differential vulnerability to catastrophe and environmental degradation. I spend a lot of time unpacking the social hierarchies in these novels and laying out the historical and political contexts in which they operate, because doing so highlights the ways the novels themselves align social and political marginalization under and after colonialism with environmental vulnerability. Character analysis drives my analysis of these novels because it foregrounds the way characters experience catastrophe, process post/colonial power dynamics, and conceptualize the relationship between these two things. Focusing in on characters' psyches, traumatic experiences, and thought processes reveals links between characters' identities as BIPOC subjects and their lived experiences of catastrophe and environmental degradation.³⁸ This approach spotlights individual experiences and intra-human relationships, revealing the ways characters negotiate complex power dynamics and understand their lives to be affected by the diffuse historic forces of colonialism and environmental degradation. In short, I use character analysis as a method to unearth connections between colonialism and catastrophe.

Drawing attention to the ways human beings are codified through blood, caste, and class, and human bodies are categorized and controlled by colonial legal and administrative systems,

³⁸ I use the acronym BIPOC to stand for "Black, Indigenous, and people of colour."

Inheritance and *Benang* illustrate how human hierarchies fundamentally shape different subjects' experiences of and relationships with the natural world. They both feature Indigenous/settler, colonizer/colonized, hegemonic/marginalized, white/BIPOC relations in the context of degraded landscapes of the Indian Himalayas and ancestral Nyoongar territories in Australia, respectively. Relationships and conflicts between characters occupying different ethnic, socioeconomic, class and caste positionalities and, therefore, different degrees of vulnerability and exposure to ecological catastrophe and to risks related to climate change and environmental degradation propel the plots of these novels forward.

The narratives reveal the way encounters between individual characters carry the baggage of historic inequalities. Such interchanges are never about one person's relationship with another person – they are always-already shaped and defined by colonial legacy, which permeates every aspect of how individuals in postcolonial contexts perceive and interact with one another. Desai's novel provides multiple one-on-one interactions that exemplify this narrative strategy. For example, in one scene set in England, an Englishman yells at South Asian immigrant, "go back to where you came from," to which the latter responds: "your father came to *my* country and took *my* bread and now I have come to *your* country to get *my* bread back" (Desai 135; original emphasis). Scenes like this one exemplify how the texts treat individual interactions between people as synecdoches for the way power dynamics are played out across generations in the wake of British colonialism.

Inheritance and *Benang* also foreground the impacts of colonial violence on both the landscape and the marginalized characters whose daily lives the stories tell. They foreground the colonial residue that imprints itself not only on the minds and bodies of postcolonial subjects, but also on the physical environment. They draw attention to the parallel exploitation of postcolonial

landscapes and peoples, and they engage with catastrophe in unexpected ways. Violent and dangerous environmental events are depicted as a routine part of daily life for the characters who experience them. By treating catastrophe as “filler” rather than as a “turning point” in the plot (Moretti, *The Bourgeois* 70), these novels generate a different kind of “everyday;” they render unusual and credible the violent environmental events that Ghosh would designate as “improbable” (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 27).

The novels achieve this unlikely representation of catastrophe through their focus on characters’ psyches and their use of narrative style and perspective. Their suggestion that catastrophe can be experienced as a mundane event sheds light on the need for a critical re-examination of contemporary ideas of the “everyday” that the novel spotlights – especially if this everyday is experienced by characters who are disproportionately affected by the impacts of environmental degradation and anthropogenic climate change. Many of the central characters in Desai’s and Scott’s texts represent social groups whose background and place of dwelling make them particularly vulnerable to both these phenomena. By showing that their characters’ everyday differs from the one imagined by many novel theory scholars, these texts exemplify contemporary postcolonial novels’ ability to recalibrate our assumptions about “normal” environmental conditions and to help reimagine contemporary environmental challenges.

I begin by outlining the socioecological context in which each novel operates. I show that environmental vulnerability is distributed unevenly in postcolonial environments, and that socially and economically marginalized communities (such as the Gorkha and Lepcha people in *Inheritance* and the Nyoongar people in *Benang*) experience the brunt of environmental degradation in their respective region. Next, I move into my analysis of the novels themselves. Part 1 (*Inheritance*) and Part 2 (*Benang*) each begin with a short synopsis and a review of critical

responses to each novel. Each Part then proceeds to establish a connection between colonialism, ecological catastrophe, and environmental vulnerability. Part 1 does this by showing how the text uses catastrophe to negotiate social marginalization. Part 2 relies on excerpts from post/colonial legislation to illustrate how social marginalization and environmental vulnerability are strategically produced. I close Parts 1 and 2 by highlighting the way that postcolonial authors use encounters with nonhuman animals (in the case of *Inheritance*) and nonhuman environments (in the case of *Benang*) to reflect the psychological experiences of postcolonial characters. The nonhuman world does not serve merely as foil in these novels. As I argue in Chapters 3 and 4, encounters with the nonhuman function as crystallizing moments in the narrative during which characters work through and learn to cope with catastrophe.

Section 2: Colonialism and its Aftermath in the Context of Climate Change: Race, Indigeneity, and Socio-Ecological Vulnerability

Marginalized racialized and Indigenous groups are disproportionately affected by ecological catastrophe in the wake of colonialism. Especially insofar as these factors often coincide with poverty, race and indigeneity (among others) play a significant role in determining the degree of climate-related risks that different populations face (see *Climate Change For Indigenous Peoples*” and Cutter et al. 20-22).³⁹ Paul Harris’ work emphasizes the direct link between poverty and the way people experience the effects of climate change. In *World Ethics and Climate Change*, he argues that, because climate change threatens human rights – such as, for instance, access to drinking water – it is inherently a social justice issue.

³⁹ For more on this connection, see Jon Barnett and Neil Adger’s *Climate Change, Human Security, and Violent Conflict*; Kristen Dow, Roger Kasperson, and Maria Bohn’s “Exploring the Social Justice Implications of Adaptation and Vulnerability” in *Fairness in Adaptation to Climate Change*; as well as Paul Harris’s *World Ethics and Climate Change* and *Ethics and Global Environmental Policy: Cosmopolitan Conceptions of Climate Change*.

Poverty-stricken groups often live in geographical regions that make them experience the brunt of ecological catastrophes (Gentle and Maraseni 30). At the same time, they have the lowest capacities to adapt to changing ecological conditions due to limited access to funds and resources (see Dow, Kaspersen, and Bohn). In a report funded by the Hazards and Vulnerability Research Institute, Cutter et al. emphasize the way race plays into the unequal production of ecological vulnerability. Using Hurricane Katrina (2005) as a case study, they demonstrate that racial and ethnic minorities in the United States are more likely to be poor and therefore more likely to be highly vulnerable to environmental hazards. Cutter et al. also show that women, especially single mothers, as well as children, elderly people, and disabled people are also disproportionately affected by catastrophes, as they often face significant challenges in responding without external help (Cutter et al. 21-22). Cutter et al. conclude that “[i]t is often the intersection of gender, race, class, and family circumstances that most influence the social burdens from natural hazards” (22). Although their research focuses on the USA, similar patterns can be identified in literature focusing on a multitude of different regions.

A 2007 Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation report links social deprivation to “age, gender, caste, race, ethnic group, class, social group and occupation” (Eriksen, Siri E. H., et al. 19). It goes on to explain that “[p]owerlessness, difficulty to organise and bargain, lack of influence and lack of independence form important aspects of poverty,” and that “Indigenous people may have less access to water and other necessities than the population at large,” since socially “weak” groups are often “neglected by both national and local governments” (19). Similar patterns are “evident among poor in large and/or rapidly growing cities, such as the megacities of Bangkok, Jakarta and Manila” (19). Focusing specifically on rural communities in Nepal, Gentle and Maraseni’s 2012 article arrives at the same conclusions about the connection

between poverty, marginalized social status, and vulnerability. They argue that climate change is “an additional burden to the poor people in the mountains who are already living in poverty,” who are already vulnerable and therefore prone to “further inequity in the future” (Gentle and Maraseni 24).

Gentle and Maraseni’s research surveys three communities in rural Nepal and studies the way changing climate affects their daily life in regards to food and water availability, soil quality (as these communities rely on agriculture for their subsistence), and frequency of catastrophes. They report decreased rainfall and erratic monsoon patterns, which has led to “a massive reduction in food production” (29). Well drinking water is becoming scarcer, and “drought, followed by limited winter rain/snowfall,” affects both the grazing of their livestock and their collection of forest resources (29). Their study gathered data on poor, medium-income, and wealthy households; in distinguishing between poorer households and wealthier ones, their findings demonstrate that poverty makes people more vulnerable and reduces their ability to adapt to changing climate (29-31). It highlights the link between poverty and increased exposure to catastrophe: “[t]he hazard map showed that the poor households were residing in the areas close to landslide [sic] and water scarcity”: it concludes that “the distribution and quality of land [i]s related to the wellbeing status of households” (30). Crop failure is also linked to household wealth, as poorer households have decreased access to irrigation systems for their crops (30). The data gathered supports the link between poverty and increased vulnerability to climate change-related hazards.⁴⁰

A 2014 study conducted by Gentle et al., which analyses differential vulnerability to climate change in Himalayan communities, foregrounds the ways climate change makes poorer

⁴⁰ Importantly, Gentle and Maraseni also found that poor households are “concerned about day to day problems and lack[...] a longer term vision” (31).

households disproportionately vulnerable to climate change. Interviewees identified “nine hazards they considered to be directly impacting their livelihoods” (Gentle et al. 822). The identified hazards – “changing weather patterns,” “unusual or unseasonal frost,” and the “increasing incidence of landslides” – are all linked to climate change (822). The hazards specifically related to agricultural activities also show that climate change hinders the regional population’s ability to make a living off the land. Interviewees describe experiencing “increasing coverage of invasive weeds, increasing incidence of crop damage from insects and crop diseases and increasing incidence of livestock diseases” (822). Gentle et al. demonstrate that the interviewees’ statements are consistent with meteorological data gathered in the region between 1971 and 2010: “analysis shows that both mean annual maximum and minimum temperature were constantly increasing with high variations” (823). This study highlights the way poverty and social status connect with vulnerability to climate-related catastrophes such as landslides.

Similar patterns of ecological vulnerability and similar temperature trends appear in the South Pacific. In “The Australian Climate Movement,” Hans Baer writes that “Australia experienced its hottest month on record with a nation-wide heat wave in January 2013” (148). These unusually high temperatures align with global temperature trends (148). These extreme heat waves come hand in hand with an increase in erratic weather patterns and increasingly unpredictable weather events: in the last decade, “much of Australia shifted from a land of drought and heat waves to one of cyclones, heavy rains, and floods. [...] While parts of interior Australia were experiencing ravaging bushfires, coastal Queensland and New South Wales experienced heavy rainfall and flooding” (148). Baer’s findings about climate change impacts in Australia are consistent with Gentle and Maraseni’s as well as Gentle et al.’s findings in South Asia. The *Medical Journal of Australia* reports that these environmental changes

disproportionately impact Australia’s Indigenous populations, most dramatically affecting Indigenous groups living in remote regions. In “Disproportionate Burdens,” D. Green et al. write that Indigenous groups’ “vulnerability to climate change is intensified by the social and economic disadvantage they already experience” (4). These findings contextualize the struggles that Gyan’s family and the Lepcha family face in Desai’s novel as well as the struggles that Harley and his family experience in Scott’s novel.

Developed countries such as Australia are generally understood to be in a better position than developing countries (such as India) to face the challenges climate change poses.⁴¹ But there are regions of the world that do not fit neatly into this scheme – regions inhabited predominantly by Indigenous people that constitute pockets of poverty nested in wealthy developed nations. The Indigenous inhabitants of these regions do not experience climate change and environmental degradation in the same way the rest of the nation does. There, as well, research shows that Indigenous populations are significantly more vulnerable to climate change than non-Indigenous populations (Ford 1260-61).

Although “risk profiles” vary significantly “among and between Indigenous groups” (Ford 1260), Indigenous populations “have been identified as a highly vulnerable group within global discourse on climate change because of habitation in regions undergoing rapid change, and the disproportionate burden of morbidity and mortality faced by many groups” (1260). In “Indigenous Health and Climate Change,” which focuses specifically on the ways climate change affects the wellbeing of Indigenous communities in Australia and in the Arctic, James D. Ford explains that the regions inhabited by Indigenous people undergo climatic changes more

⁴¹ See Introduction, Section 2.

rapidly (1262).⁴² Furthermore, Indigenous people’s lifeways are more strongly affected by changes in climate than the lifeways of non-Indigenous people, because of Indigenous peoples’ “close relationships with and dependence on land, sea, and natural resources” (1260). Ford adds that “social and economic disadvantage” also contribute to Indigenous populations’ disproportionate vulnerability to climate change (Ford 1262; see also Poirier and Schmartmueller 317).

The “continuing and persistent high rates of poverty,” the “burden of ill health for many indigenous populations,” as well as the fact that “access to education, housing, and employment are typically well below that of non-indigenous populations” re-entrench Indigenous populations’ vulnerability to climate change impacts (Ford 1262; see also Maru et al. 339, and D. Green et al. 4). Many Indigenous populations in Australia face “unique exposures and sensitivities to climate change” that are different from the challenges faced by the nation’s non-Indigenous population (Ford 1260). Scott’s novel, in focusing on an Indigenous family living in Western Australia, spotlights one of these pockets of disproportionate socio-ecological vulnerability in the context of a developed nation. The novel also connects this vulnerability to colonial legacy.

Veland et al., whose research focuses on rural Australia, begin their article by acknowledging that Australia’s colonial history is at least in part responsible for the unequal socioeconomic conditions Indigenous people experience. They treat colonization as an “ongoing disaster in Indigenous Nations” and they critique research that fails to recognize the link between colonial histories and present-day social inequalities (Veland et al. 314). Scholars who do not recognize this connection, Veland et al. argue, frame “poverty, ill health and welfare

⁴² Maru et al. also arrive at the conclusion that even within developed countries, there are regions that will experience climate change in ways that are disproportionate to the national average (Maru et al. 338).

dependence” as “primary contributors to high climate change vulnerability” instead of recognizing that these factors are, in fact, “secondary disasters” produced by the aftermath of colonization (314).⁴³ Dirk A. Moses demonstrates that a common problem in widespread perceptions of Indigenous peoples lies in public discourse’s refusal to acknowledge the links between colonial history, its material aftermath, and present-day socioeconomic inequalities. He explains that the media all too often insists on a narrative of “Aboriginal dysfunction” which “pathologize[s] Aboriginal culture and normalize[s] its own” (Moses 9), thus dismissing colonialism’s enduring impacts on Indigenous peoples. Using Canada and Australia as case studies, Wayne Warry’s *Ending Denial: Understanding Aboriginal Issues* expands upon the way colonial histories and their material aftermaths are “often contested and whitewashed,” resulting in the widespread denial that contemporary Indigenous poverty and ill health are in effect “the product of hundreds of years of colonialism” (Warry 53). The contemporary manifestations of this history entrench Indigenous peoples’ socioeconomic marginalization, increasing their vulnerability to environmental changes.

Part 1: Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*

Section 1: Synopsis and Literature Review

Set in Kalimpong, on the border of India and Nepal, *The Inheritance of Loss* takes place in a time of political conflict between Indians and Nepalis, during which the ethno-political Gorkha National Liberation Front movement was gaining popular support. The novel is split into two narrative threads. One takes place in Kalimpong, where the retired Indian judge Jemubhai lives with his servant and cook Panna Lal, his dog Mutt, and his granddaughter Sai. Much of the book traces Sai’s psychological growth and the development of her romantic

⁴³ I address this error in thinking in Chapter 1, Section 5.

relationship with her Nepali mathematics tutor, Gyan, who gets mixed up in the GNLFF movement and the violence that comes with it. The other narrative thread is set in New York City, where Biju, Panna Lal's son, is an undocumented immigrant working low-paying jobs and barely making ends meet with the hopes of someday returning home with his savings to allow his father to retire. My primary concern in this analysis is the relationship between colonialism, catastrophe, and socioeconomic marginalization. I therefore focus on the sections of the novel that take place in Kalimpong, as that is where the landslides occur.

Inheritance is a text about risk, instability, and catastrophe. The novel reveals the precarious foundations – both social and material – upon which Kalimpong is built. The majority of the plot takes place in a hill station, high in the Himalayas. Everything in *Inheritance* – from physical structures to social relationships – is perpetually on the verge of collapse. Risk and danger are omnipresent here, be it in the form of crumbling buildings, frequent landslides, attacks by guerrilla bandits, or encounters with venomous snakes. *The Inheritance of Loss* is punctuated by tragedies and violent conflicts, both in the physical environment and in the inner lives of its characters, and it is saturated with a sense of instability and constant anxiety.

The novel recurrently describes its characters as feeling “restless” (Desai 68, 81, 92, 162). Biju, in particular, feels “so restless sometimes, he could barely stand to stay in his skin” (81). An undocumented immigrant in America, he is constantly worried about being deported. His anxiety is made evident via the recurrent refrain of “the green card, the green card, the—” (81). The green card dominates Biju's thoughts, and the narrative, filtered through his perspective, repeats these words like a mantra: “[t]he green card, green card, the *machoot sala oloo ka patha char sau bees* green card that was not even green. It roosted heavily, clumsily,

pinkishly on his brain day and night; he could think of nothing else” (190).⁴⁴ Biju also worries that his aging father will fall ill and die in his absence (80); this anxiety mirrors his father’s, who worries about his son: “[c]lawing at his heart as if it were a door was his panic—a scabbling rodent creature” (277). When he is not worrying about his son, Panna Lal “[w]orrie[s] about growing problems in the market and the disruption of supplies due to strikes” (178). The judge, too, is consumed by anxiety: he is worried about being revealed as a sad old man, and he makes up for it with cruelty (320-321). Anxiety saturates the novel.

In addition to these human-centric anxieties, the novel deals with grave ecological anxieties. It takes place in a region where deforestation and rapid development have drastically increased the frequency of landslides. Guri et al.’s 2014 study emphasizes that northern India, where Desai’s novel is set, “has emerged as one of the most prominent hot spots of landslide occurrences” in the world (1).⁴⁵ Petley et al.’s study shows an undeniable “upward” trend both in the frequency of landslides and in the number of fatalities they cause (23). They conclude that this probably results from human activity and “its attendant changes to physical and natural systems,” including urbanization and development, deforestation, and anthropogenic climate change (23). Sarkar and Kanungo’s study focuses on the Darjeeling area in particular, and it confirms that the region is today at high risk of experiencing frequent landslides. It estimates landslide occurrence at “0.39 [landslides] per km²” (622). Landslides are an everyday reality for the characters of Desai’s novel; they know that they must be cautious whenever they travel along mountain roads: “[i]n places, the entire mountain had simply fallen out of itself, spread like a

⁴⁴ The words “green card” appear four times on page 81, four times on page 99, once on page 297, and three times on page 190.

⁴⁵ In their analysis of “the spatial distribution of landslide events globally” in 2003, 2007, and 2008, Kirschbaum et al. show that “Asia, particularly India, Nepal, China, and Japan” make up the “largest proportion of landslide reports and fatalities for all years considered” (570).

glacier with boulders, uprooted trees. Across the destruction, the precarious ant trail of the road was washed away” (Desai 315). The words “landslide” or “landslides” appear ten times throughout the novel (95, 197, 244, 263, 281, 311, 316). And within the last few pages, Biju has to circumnavigate ten of them on his journey home to be reunited with his father (316).

Inheritance explicitly links colonialism to catastrophe in specific narrative moments. Imagery used to depict the Himalayan landscape as well as material possessions associated with colonial histories and environmental degradation underline this connection. In fact, ecological catastrophes like landslides are so commonplace that they are often mentioned only in passing by the omniscient narrator: “They went through seven landslides. At the eighth they kept getting mired in the mud, the jeep rolling back down. [...] Again and again the engine stalled and shut off and they rolled back down. [...] Hours passed. . . . The ninth landslide and the tenth” (316). Landslides are so routine that they often do not even register as “events” in the narrative – instead, they function as the fillers that constitute the majority of a conventional novel’s content (Moretti, *The Bourgeois* 70-71; see also Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 17), as the background against which normal life unfolds. The novel’s representation of landslides disrupts commonly held notions about what is “normal” in the context of large-scale environmental degradation.⁴⁶

I read *Inheritance* as a novel about ecological catastrophe, but it is also a novel about the ways differential degrees of social marginalization, particularly as related to race, ethnicity, caste and class, as well as indigeneity, intersect and influence the way individuals experience the impacts of environmental degradation. Much of the conflict in the narrative revolves around these markers of social difference and how they shape the way characters inhabit their socio-ecological reality. Desai’s use of the omniscient narrator is therefore crucial to understanding

⁴⁶ Kim Scott’s *Benang* performs a similar move. See Chapter 2, Part 2, Section 2.

how past experiences of shame, trauma, and feelings of alienation in colonial and postcolonial contexts manifest themselves in Jemubhai's cruelty, self-hatred, and refusal or inability to empathize with others.

Kiran Desai is an Indian author, born in Delhi and raised in Pune and Mumbai. Her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, foregrounds the ways colonialism and catastrophe intersect in South Asian fiction. The novel goes to great lengths to shed light on the complicated colonial history of the region and to expose the systemic inequalities imbricated in producing contemporary conditions of ecological vulnerability. *Inheritance* won the 2006 Man Booker Prize and Vodafone Crossword Book Award, as well as the 2007 National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award. The novel was very successful, drawing attention from a large number of literary critics and postcolonial and globalization studies scholars alike. The vast majority of critical responses to the text, however, analyze it under the rubric of identity studies, globalization and cosmopolitanism, as well diaspora and postcolonialism.⁴⁷ Articles examining the novel's treatment of the interrelated themes of subjectivity, space, and displacement are also common.⁴⁸

Most relevant to my analysis is Jill Didur's ecocritical reading of *Inheritance* in *Postcolonial Ecologies*. Didur argues that the novel takes a "countercolonial approach to representing the Himalayan landscape" (43). It "displaces normalized notions of the land,

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Jackson's article studies the way the novel negotiates cosmopolitanism in relation to postcolonialism, arguing that the text functions more clearly as a cosmopolitan one than a culturally-grounded postcolonial one. John Masterson's reading focuses on the novel's treatment of diaspora and immigrant experience. He argues that the novel makes obvious that globalization proceeds unevenly. Oana Sabo takes a similar approach: she foregrounds diaspora and emphasizes the text's treatment of "power asymmetries inherent in global capitalism" (388). Uma Jayaraman also relies on diaspora theory in her analysis. She takes a close look at the characterization of the judge and argues that his experiences as a colonial subject have made India "unheimlich" (unhomely) to him.

⁴⁸ David Wallace Spielman's and Reena Sanasam's articles, for example, foreground the text's construction of postcolonial subjectivity, and Jesse Patrick Ferguson focalizes the way subjectivity is shaped by space and attachment to place. Adriana Elena Stoican shifts the focus away from space and place in relation to characterization; she focuses instead on migration patterns and the way they reveal competing western hegemonies (American versus British).

gardens, and nature” by depicting the Himalayan landscape as resisting colonial schemes of control (43). I return to Didur’s analysis in Section 3 of Part 1, in my analysis of the hill station Cho Oyu, one of the novel’s primary settings, in order to show how Cho Oyu contributes to Jemubhai’s characterization and projected social status. Lucienne Loh’s article also comes close to the type of analysis I undertake here. Centrally concerned with the consequences of colonial legacies on the region, Loh’s article surveys the text’s treatment of “damage caused by a class structure forged from India’s colonial inheritance and a persistent privileging of English culture and heritage” (302). These insights are particularly useful for my discussion of Mon Ami, Lola and Noni’s cottage, as well as their stores of expensive goods imported from England. Although she foregrounds the social and psychological impacts of “damage” caused by inherited colonial class structures (302), Loh’s article makes no mention of the ecological damage and environmental vulnerability that these same structures produce.

Section 2: Socioeconomic Hierarchies and Power Dynamics: Caste, Class, Race, Ethnicity, and Indigeneity

The two narrative threads woven together in the novel engage with race, ethnicity, caste, and indigeneity in nuanced ways. They juxtapose different forms of inter-ethnic and inter-racial discrimination in the USA, UK, and India. During his time studying in the UK, Jemubhai remembers how people “moved over when he sat next to them in the bus” (39), and how they would comment audibly to each other that he “stinks” (39). In the USA, Biju has similar experiences at the hands of his employers. “‘He smells,’ said the owner’s wife. [...] She had hoped for men from the poorer parts of Europe—Bulgarians perhaps, or Czechoslovakians. At least they might have something in common with them like religion or skin color” (48). Biju and

Jemubhai both experience racism at the hands of white people, but they also engage in discriminatory behaviors and make racist comments against other people of colour.

Biju, for example, discriminates against his co-worker. When a Pakistani man is hired to work in the same kitchen as Biju, Panna Lal becomes “alarmed” – “[w]hat kind of place was he working in?” (22) – and Biju makes his father “proud” by rejecting the Pakistani man: “he could not talk straight to the man; every molecule of him felt fake, every hair on him went on alert” (22). Biju also utters racist slurs against Dominican women in an effort to bond with his fellow immigrants of colour: “fucking cheap women you’ll get some disease . . . smell bad . . . *hubshi* . . . all black and ugly . . . they make me sick” (16). In Kalimpong, relations between characters of different races, ethnic groups, and castes follow a similar pattern of discrimination.⁴⁹ Almost all of the characters in Kalimpong are people of colour living in a town inhabited primarily by people of colour, yet there, too, bigotry abounds, determined by caste, class, ethnicity, and indigeneity.

The novel’s two narrative threads – the one unfolding in Kalimpong and the one unfolding abroad – echo one another, paralleling different forms of discrimination. They show these two vastly different settings – Western and Eastern; urban and rural – to be as mirror images of one another, at least as far as the bigotry, the hardships, and the austerity experienced daily by socially marginalized and racialized Others are concerned. Time and again, the novel shows Indian characters having grandiose (inaccurate) ideas of life in western countries, and having these illusions shattered by the stark realities of the poverty and adversity they experience there. Before arriving in the UK, Jemubhai “hadn’t realized that here, too, people could be poor and live unaesthetic lives” (38). These two narrative threads work in analogous ways throughout

⁴⁹ I elaborate on these experiences in the following sections.

the novel, and they come together at the very end, when Biju, on his journey through the mountain roads to return to Kalimpong, is robbed and stripped down to his underpants by a group of guerilla bandits. After several years abroad, living meagrely and saving all the money he can, he returns home “with far less than he’d ever had” (317). The novel thus shows him coming full circle, having spent years being miserable and poor and alone in America for absolutely nothing, when he could have spent them being miserable and poor and with his father in India.

Inheritance handles discrimination against local Indians and Nepalis by white tourists, and against immigrants of colour by white Europeans. But it foregrounds the racism and discrimination against Indian and Nepali ethnic Others and Indigenous groups by hegemonic groups of Indians and Nepalis. The novel also deals with racism via internalized hatred for Indian culture by Indians who suffered traumatic experiences under the British colonial administration. Caste also looms in the background of the narrative, although it is rarely referenced directly in the text.⁵⁰ The story takes place at a moment in Indian/Nepali history when Gorkha nationalism was on the rise – a moment when wealthy and/or high-caste Bengali Indians saw their positions of power in the region challenged by the military insurrections of the Gorkha majority. The novel features poor Indians belonging to low castes (Panna Lal and Biju), wealthy Indians who aligned themselves with British colonial authority and benefitted from colonial rule (the judge Jemubhai, the unnamed Bengali princesses, as well as Lola and Noni), Indigenous Nepalis identified as Lepcha people (the unnamed family who steal the judge’s dog), non-

⁵⁰ One such direct reference comes in the form of a document containing the emergency contact information of Sai Patel. It lists her grandfather’s full name, occupation, and “Caste: Patidar” (28). Biju also comments on the widely different experiences of Indian immigrants belonging to different castes. He one day delivers Chinese food to an Indian home, and the customer speaks to him in Hindi. He reflects on “this meeting between Indians abroad of different classes and languages, rich and poor, north and south, top caste bottom caste” (50).

Indigenous Nepalis identifying as Gorkhas (Gyan and the other guerillas fighting for an independent Gorkha state), as well as a white European immigrant living in the Himalayan hillside who has totally integrated himself into the local culture (Father Booty). I focus on three of these socio-economic and ethnic groups here.

Desai's novel engages with complex webs of power dynamics and socio-economic hierarchies in ways that make it impossible to neatly align racial, ethnic, or Indigenous identity with power or lack thereof. In order to properly read how caste, race, ethnicity, indigeneity, and environmental vulnerability connect in the text, it is necessary to first understand how caste works, how indigenous identity is claimed and ascribed, and how the region's colonial history impacts the power dynamics at play in the narrative. I therefore begin my analysis of *Inheritance* with a brief discussion of caste and indigeneity in India, a survey of the social and ethnic groups living in the Darjeeling and Sikkim region, and a short history of both Bengali and Gorkha people in the area.

The Indian caste system has existed since at least the medieval period (Gupta, "Caste, Race, Politics"). In *Interrogating Caste*, Gupta explains that caste status is derived from the Vedas (Hindu scripture) (2),⁵¹ dividing people along hereditary lines into different social strata which are seen as distinct from one another and are, today, organized hierarchically.⁵² Caste

⁵¹ It should be noted that Gupta's argument that the Vedas are the basis of the caste system is not uniformly accepted.

⁵² Gupta explains that caste hierarchy is complicated: "there are probably as many hierarchies as there are castes in India. To believe that there is a single caste order to which every caste, from Brahman to untouchable, acquiesce ideologically, is a gross misreading of facts on the ground" (Gupta, *Interrogating Caste*, 1). Castes were not always understood to be organized in a hierarchical fashion (see Reddy), and the particular ordering of this hierarchy has also been the subject of heated debate. Specific castes have not always occupied the same place in the hierarchy throughout history, and people belonging to these castes do not uniformly accept their caste's position within the hierarchy. On the contrary, "there is ample evidence to the effect that people do not take their low-caste status lying down" (3), as there have been many caste revolts throughout Indian history (3). See Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development* and *The Annihilation of Caste* for more detail on the intricacies of the caste system.

status is ascribed at birth based on parentage and ancestral occupation (Pinto 2817-2818; see also Sadangi 55).⁵³ There are four main caste groups (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Shudra) which are part of the caste system proper, but there are also people who exist outside of the caste system (Sadangi 22; see also 55-57). This last group of people occupy the very lowest ranks in the system; they are known as Dalits or “untouchables” (Sadangi 22). The central characters in Desai’s novel belong to different castes and therefore occupy different positions of caste-privilege. It is made clear that Gorkha and Lepcha characters occupy a lower position in this social hierarchy than characters such as Jemubhai, Sai, Lola and Noni, and the Bengali princesses.

Deepa S. Reddy and Nicholas B. Dirks argue that although caste was not invented by the British colonial administration, it was profoundly affected by it (Reddy 549-550; Dirks 5). Caste, as it exists today, is “the product of a historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule” (Dirks 5). Dirks argues that “it was under the British that ‘caste’ became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all ‘systematizing’ India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization” (5). Drawing on the work of anthropologist Louis Dumont, Reddy writes that before the nineteenth century, the caste system could be understood as a ““a fluid, structural universe in which the emphasis is on interdependence”” (qtd. in Reddy 549). The British Raj, however, sought to codify these castes in an effort to impose ‘order’ on Indian society (see Reddy 549-550 and Dirks 5, 8-9).

⁵³ Gupta argues that “[i]t is very rarely that one can correlate caste and occupation in contemporary India” (Gupta, “Caste, Race, Politics”). Ashwini Deshpande makes a similar argument in *The Grammar of Caste*. She writes that, in recent years, there has been a breakdown in the traditional connection between caste and occupation, but that the connection between caste and class remains strong in many places (Deshpande). As the 2007 documentary film *India Untouched* illustrates, belonging to lower castes, particularly to “untouchable” castes, continues to be in rural areas a significant indicator of holding a low-paying job that is considered polluting, or that is unsanitary or dangerous (Kurup, *India Untouched*). Historically, caste and occupation were intimately linked, and the pattern endures today (Pinto 2817-18).

Caste became included in colonial census data, turning this fluid societal system into ““a universe of impenetrable blocks, self-sufficient, essentially identical and in competition with one-another”” (qtd. in Reddy 549). New nomenclature was added to label castes, and they were organized into an orderly hierarchy (Reddy 550). The colonial census, Reddy explains, thus “reinscribed a Brahmanic ideal of caste,” triggering the emergence of an inter-caste competitive politics in the twentieth century (549). This codification of caste was inscribed in the Indian Constitution, under *Part XVI.—Special Provisions relating to certain Classes*. It divides society into several groups: the Backward Classes (BCs), so-called because they are “socially and educationally backward” (Government of India. Constituent Assembly. Constitution. Part XVI, Article 340), the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs) (see Articles 341 and 342), and the Forward Castes, negatively defined in contradistinction to BCs, SCs, and STs. Reddy explains that Forward Castes are “usually Brahmins and other propertied communities” (550). The Lepcha characters in *Inheritance* belong to a Scheduled Tribe; they occupy the very bottom of the social hierarchy in the text and they routinely experience discrimination from characters belonging other ethnic groups and occupying a higher caste position.^{54, 55}

Countless academics compare casteism to racism, using race and racism to illuminate the ways caste and casteism play out in Indian society (see for example the works of Sarich Vincent and Frank Miele, of Louis Dumont, of Dipankar Gupta, of Deepa S Reddy, and of Ambrose Pinto). Caste, race, and ethnicity are not interchangeable. While some scholars such as Sarich

⁵⁴ The Namashudra characters in *The Hungry Tide* belong to a Scheduled Caste (SC). They, too, occupy the lowest position in the social hierarchy that governs that novel.

⁵⁵ Vibha Arora argues that “tribal identity,” such as the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status granted to the Gorkha people, “does not necessarily signify marginality, subalternity and oppression” (196). In fact, tribal identity also reflects “political empowerment” (196). Indeed, many communities have sought identification as a BC, ST, or SC precisely because this legal status grants them certain benefits under positive discrimination laws. In *Inheritance*, the Gorkha characters certainly mobilize and organize into a powerful political movement, but the material conditions of their lives, as shown in the novel, certainly align them with social and economic marginalization.

and Miele suggest that there may have been an ethnic/racial component to the conceptualization of caste and that caste may have emerged as a result of perceived ethnic/racial differences, others such as Gupta explain that race and caste are fundamentally different and function in fundamentally different ways. Gupta insists, for example, that caste is “not as immutable a category as race is” (Gupta, “Caste, Race, Politics”). Caste is not based on skin colour. The official position of the Indian government “is that caste is not race” (Pinto 2817), but Dalit activists insist that it is useful to discuss casteism in the context of racism. They have raised the issue of caste-based discrimination in the context of the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR).⁵⁶ Despite differences between race and caste, it is undeniable that their social construction buttresses “comparable systems of *oppression*” (Reddy 545, original emphasis). Reddy explains that even though Indians may deny the racial basis for caste, “many would not reject the [...] claim that Dalits, Blacks, and people of the ‘South’ in general are similarly disenfranchised, despite their vast cultural differences” (545).⁵⁷

At the same time as it has served as “the necessary vehicle of social and political mobilization” throughout Indian history, caste has carried with it “as many traces of the modern as the institutions it is said to inhibit or oppose” (Dirks 8). Caste-based discrimination endures today, despite laws that illegalize it (namely Section 15 of Part III of the Constitution of India) and despite Reservations (positive discrimination laws) put in place to counteract it.⁵⁸ Pinto

⁵⁶ Dalit activists also reject the idea that caste only exists in India, arguing that “[c]aste is prevalent all over south Asia especially in India, Nepal and Bangladesh,” and that it also exists in the discrimination against the “Burakumin in Japan and Korea,” against the “Osu of Nigeria,” as well as against “similar ‘untouchable’ communities” in other parts of western Africa (Pinto 2817). Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar likewise draws attention to similarities between how caste and other systems of social stratification work, pointing in particular to the fact that the idea that certain people’s touch is “polluting” is not unique to the Indian caste system (Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste*).

⁵⁷ I provide information on Dalit people in Chapter 4, Part 1, Section 5.

⁵⁸ See Sukhadeo Thorat’s and Katherine S. Neuman’s book *Blocked by Caste* and Ashwini Deshpande’s *The Grammar of Caste* for more on information on caste-based discrimination.

argues that caste-based discrimination can even be observed in the ways governments respond to catastrophe in the contemporary era: “[e]ven in the midst of the recent worst human tragedy that hit the country in the form of an earthquake in Gujarat, the whole institutional mechanism of the state did not move into the dalit areas and belts while the benefits of relief went into the upper castes as fast as possible” (qtd. in Pinto 2818). Caste is therefore directly relevant to the way in which marginalized populations in India experience violent environmental events and the accumulated impacts of long-term environmental degradation. *Inheritance* sheds light on the connection between occupying lower caste status and being disproportionately affected by environmental catastrophe through its representation of the living and working conditions of Gorkha and Lepcha people.

Lepcha characters

The novel is set in the mountainside town of Kalimpong, a hill station in the province of West Bengal, Northern India, close to the border with Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. Kalimpong borders on the state of Sikkim, the “origin and home” of the Lepcha people who make up the first ethnic group to have settled on the “southern and eastern slopes of Mount Kachenjunga” (Subba 249).⁵⁹ The Lepcha are a Scheduled Tribe (ST) under the Indian Constitution, and they are considered an Indigenous group in India.⁶⁰ Lepcha characters make up

⁵⁹ According to Subba’s analysis of early twentieth century documents, there are thirty-six different Lepcha clans (251), though Desai does not identify her Lepcha characters by clan. The region is also home to many other Indigenous groups such as the Bhutia and the Sherpa people, also recognized as Scheduled Tribes, but there are no characters identified as Bhutia or Sherpa in Desai’s novel.

⁶⁰ There is considerable scholarly debate about the relationship between tribal status and indigeneity in the Indian context. C. R. Bijoy argues that peoples belonging to Scheduled Tribes are “generally considered” to be Indigenous peoples (55). The UN and many other multilateral agencies share this view (55). Virginius Xaxa, however, nuances the relationship between tribal and Indigenous status. He argues that despite sharing certain features in common with tribal and semi-tribal populations, Indigenous peoples differ from them in that they are “invariably marked out as a distinct international entity” (Xaxa 3590). In India, Indigenous peoples are usually considered to be those peoples who lived in India before the arrival of the Aryans – although this temporal demarcation, as any other, is “arbitrary” (3591). Unlike many other former British colonies such as Australia and Canada, in which population groups who lived in the region before the arrival of Europeans are considered Indigenous, “in India identification of indigenous people is not easy” (3591). This is in part because the Indian

the most vulnerable social group in Desai's novel. Although they used to represent a significant percentage of the area's population, their numbers have been declining steadily over the past century.⁶¹ Their historically marginalized status is exemplified by the fact that the word "Lepcha" comes from a Nepali word meaning "vile speakers" (Subba 249). Undeniably derogatory in its origins, the term no longer carries a pejorative meaning today, and, in Desai's novel, it is used by people belonging to this group to self-identify.

There are three characters explicitly identified as Lepcha in Desai's text: the unnamed man who is falsely accused of the robbery at Jemubhai's house and is subsequently arrested and beaten by the police, his wife, and his father. These characters' marginalization due to their Indigenous status and ethnic background is evidenced when the wife pleads with Jemubhai, asking him to use his clout with the local authorities to get her husband released: "[w]hat will we do?" she begged. 'We are not even Nepalis, we are Lepchas.' [...] her father-in-law was too scared. He said nothing at all" (Desai 263). Desai recurrently demonstrates that Lepcha people make up the very poorest people of the region; "They were hungriest" (282). They bear the brunt of the region's ecological damage, and their lives continue to be affected by the ecological and

subcontinent has seen so much migration from a wide variety of different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups long before European colonization, and because "the history of internal movements of peoples is not known," Indian sociologist Govind Sadashiv Ghurye explains (qtd. in Xaxa 3590). In addition, "even if the tribes are not aborigines of the exact area they now occupy, they are the autochthonous of India and to that extent they may be called the aborigines" (qtd. in Xaxa 3590). Xaxa argues that, for these and other reasons, "the use of the term indigenous to describe tribal people in India is fraught with difficulties" (Xaxa 3593). In his view, the term "Indigenous" as it applies to groups in India today "is more of a political construction" (3593). Xaxa does, however, acknowledge the significant marginalization that the peoples in question face, and concludes that regardless of the official label claimed by them or imposed on them by the state, "the least the dominant regional communities could do is to recognise the priorities of rights and privileges of these people in the territories and regions they inhabit" (3594). Whereas the rights of dominant communities are respected, "the same is denied to the tribal communities. [...] they are progressively getting dispossessed of their control over land, forest, water, minerals and other resources in their own territory and are increasingly subjected to inhuman misery, injustice and exploitation" (3594).

⁶¹ In the 1891 Indian census, Lepcha people represented 18.92% of the region's total population (Subba 249). In 1931, that number dropped to 11.89%, and in 2004, Lepcha people represented only 8.46% of the population (252).

economic legacies of colonial and post/neocolonial exploitation of the Darjeeling region and its people:

The woman looked raped and beaten already. Her clothes were very soiled and her teeth resembled a row of rotten corn kernels, some of them missing, some blackened, and she was quite bent from carrying stone—common sight, this sort of woman in the hills. Some foreigners had actually photographed her as proof of horror . . .

“George! . . . ! George!” said a shocked wife to her husband with a camera.

And he had leaned out of the car: Click! “Got it, babe . . . !” (263-264)

Wealthy/powerful Indian characters

The second group of people the novel paints a portrait of are Indians born into high castes or holding high social status, such as Lola and Noni, the Bengali princesses, and Jemubhai. These characters were either born into wealth or became wealthy and powerful during their lifetime.⁶² Jemubhai, Lola, and Noni are repeatedly associated with Britain and empire in the novel. They own and buy foreign goods, which they believe to be inherently superior to (largely equivalent) local goods, and they insist on separating themselves from local Nepalis, Gorkhas, Lepchas, and Indians of lower caste – in brief, from poverty and perceived racial, cultural, and ethnic inferiority. Their sense of superiority is recurrently made manifest via their racist and casteist remarks and their projection of prejudicial colonial worldviews onto those they view as Others (“Lola had always professed that servants didn’t experience love in the same manner as people like themselves”) (Desai 68). They also refuse to learn broadly-spoken local languages such as Nepali despite having lived in the region for decades.

⁶² Jemubhai was “born to a family of the peasant caste, in a tentative structure under a palm roof scuffling with rats, at the outskirts of Piphit” (Desai 54-57). But throughout his life, he “rose to the very top” (307) and became a judge in the Indian Civil Service (ICS). As his social power increased, his ego swelled, and he came to think of himself as superior to everyone else – more highly educated, more cultured, and with more refined taste.

Desai uses this group of characters to work through post/neocolonial social relations in *Inheritance*. Jemubhai was a colonized subject under the British Raj in India and he experienced racism and bigotry in England when he went abroad to study law. He is a deeply conflicted and broken man. He has internalized a learned hatred for all things Indian: “He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both” (Desai 119). Jemubhai thinks along lines that uphold structures of white supremacy; for example, he designates his mother’s love for him as “[u]ndignified love, Indian love, stinking, unaesthetic love” (38), and he believes that “[a]n Indian girl could never be as beautiful as an English one” (168).

Rajat Ganguly, in his analysis of political unrest in the Darjeeling district in the 1980s, identifies the “colonial attitude of the Bengali dominated West Bengal government towards the Gorkhas” as one of the main drivers of the conflict (497). This is precisely the attitude characters such as Jemubhai, Lola, and Noni exhibit. Caste and wealth place these characters in positions of privilege over Gorkha characters of lower caste, such as Sai’s mathematics tutor Gyan. Jemubhai’s condescension and mockery of Gyan functions as a microcosm for this larger socio-political conflict that unfolds in the background of the novel: “[y]ou might be adept at mathematics, but common sense appears to have eluded you.’ [...] The judge began to laugh in a cheerless and horrible manner” (Desai 109). Desai uses Jemubhai, Lola, and Noni to exemplify the prevailing prejudices towards Gorkha and Lepcha people by those in positions of social, economic, and caste privilege. In aligning themselves with European culture and capital and in making concerted efforts to separate themselves from those they see as inferior, these characters act as stand-ins for (legacies of) colonial power in the novel.

Gorkha characters

Gorkhas constitute the third group that appears prevalently in the novel. They are often depicted participating in the GNLFF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) activities which shook the Darjeeling region in the second half of the twentieth century.⁶³ This movement sought the creation of an independent Gorkha state – “Gorkhaland for Gorkhas” (Desai 7) –, driven forward by the Gorkha people’s long history of feeling alienated from other Bengali Indians and neglected by the Indian state. Tony Gould, who has written an extensive history of the region, states that “[t]he void at the centre of all histories of the Gurkhas is the voice of the Gurkhas themselves. [...] Gurkha sources are so rare as to be almost non-existent” (4).⁶⁴ I therefore rely heavily on work by Tony Gould, Bidhan Golay, Rajat Ganguly, and Barun Roy in this section; these scholars trace “the emergence of Gorkha identity in nineteenth century colonial India” (Golay 74). One of the difficulties in studying this history lies in understanding the complicated identity category that people refer to when they use the term Gorkha. Barun Roy explains:

‘Gorkha’ [...] no longer refers to a nation, caste or a race. It is also not an ethno-linguistic classification [...]. ‘Gorkha’, as a term can best be described today as a ‘broad base ethnic classification’ – one that encompasses elements of Caucasoid and Tibeto-Burman cultures resident in and around Himalayan, Sub Himalayan and Indo Gangetic Regions. In other words, the ‘Gorkha people’ would mean an amalgamation of the Caucasoid Khās and the Tibeto-Burman Kirātas who are either aboriginal to or part of an ancient

⁶³ In his well-researched book on the history of the Gorkha people and the Gorkhaland movement, Roy briefly references Desai’s *Inheritance* and then dismisses her portrayal of Gorkha people and her treatment of the region’s political issues as “inadequate and even misrepresentative” (19).

⁶⁴ Gurkha was originally spelled Gorkha, so many scholars use these two terms interchangeably. I use Desai’s spelling for consistency.

community of people living in the Himalayan, Sub-Himalayan and Indo Gangetic Regions of the Indian Subcontinent (37).

There are Gorkhas who are citizens of Nepal, and Gorkhas who are citizens of India. By and large, Gorkha people in India and Nepalis in Nepal “share the same lingua franca – Nepāli” (38). Roy adds that the term Gorkha has also become popularly seen as a political identity, associated with a movement for self-determination and self-governance in the Darjeeling area in the 1980s (246).

The British colonial administration cast the Gorkhas as a martial race. Famed for their prowess and tenacity in battle, “the Gurkha Brigade was a *crops d’élite* within the Indian Army, with a fighting record second to none” (Gould 285). Throughout the nineteenth century, the British pushed for permission to recruit Gorkha men into their army – and for years, Nepali authorities resisted (2). Rights to recruitment were conceded in the 1880s “in return for riches and a guarantee, if circumscribed, independence” (3). Nepal was never colonized in the way India was, but the history of Gorkha people is linked to Britain’s colonization of South Asia and its push for control over trade and tourism in the region throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. This trope of Gorkha men being linked with military force – a British colonial trope – is taken up by youth participating in the GNLF movement in Desai’s novel – they ride around in jeeps with weapons, threaten and humiliate locals – “Say, “*Jai Gorkha*, [...] Say, “I am a fool.” [...] Say it louder” (Desai 7) – and wear “leather jackets [...], khaki pants, bandanas—universal guerilla fashion” (4). The novel therefore deals with British colonialism in South Asia in rather oblique ways. References to colonial pasts resurface in specific moments of the narrative, when interactions between characters start to take on historical significance and echo power dynamics between colonizer and colonized.

Darjeeling's population exploded in the late 1800s when the region became known for its tea gardens – largely a product of colonial and postcolonial tourism (Roy 240). In one particular scene, the novel introduces the reader to the “three *Ts* of the Darjeeling district”: “‘*Tea! Timber! Tourism!*’” (Desai 225). These three *Ts* represent the region's greatest sources of income in the twentieth century, and its claims to western capital. They recur throughout the novel in connection with colonialism and environmental catastrophe.

Inheritance takes place in an era when various groups in Darjeeling felt disenfranchised by the Bengali-dominated government of the Indian state and rallied around the Gorkha identity as poverty took on “ethnic overtones and [...] exploded in violence” (qtd. in Ganguly 473). Among the grievances of the Gorkha people were Darjeeling's “massive infrastructural problems,” such as regular drinking water shortages that plagued the region every summer (Ganguly 472). Gorkha people represented 85% of the population then (Roy 240), and the water shortages always struck when they most needed the water: at the height of tourist season (Ganguly 472). Power shortages were also frequent, “which had an adverse effect on the tourism industry apart from creating tremendous difficulties for the local people” (473). Both these factors made it nearly impossible for the locals to capitalize on the region's growing tourist industry, which had been fueled by British colonialism.⁶⁵ These daily struggles heightened feelings of alienation and dejection in the region.

The “appalling” condition of roads also made it unsafe to travel, as landslides were a regular occurrence (Ganguly 472). Ecological problems which accumulated over the years also constituted an important grievance. “Besides destroying the region's aesthetic beauty,” massive-scale deforestation increased the instability of the mountainside, contributed to decreased

⁶⁵ The narrator's portrait of Gyan's home, stuck in a perpetual state of being both unfinished and in a state of disrepair, embodies this reality perfectly.

rainfall, and precipitated soil erosion and drinking water scarcity (474). Ganguly concludes that “a rapidly growing population” combined with commercial deforestation, “high unemployment and deep rooted [sic] poverty among the local people” (474) increased political tensions in the region (472). At the same time as it makes the impacts of gradual environmental destruction abundantly clear, *Inheritance* explores these tensions at length:

It was February of 1986. [...] there was a report of new dissatisfaction in the hills, gathering insurgency, men and guns. It was the Indian-Nepalese this time, fed up of being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority. They wanted their own country, or at least their own state, in which to manage their own affairs. (Desai 8-9)

Section 3: Racism and Colonialism

The novel opens at the hill station Cho Oyu, built long ago by “a Scotsman, passionate reader of the accounts of that period: *The Indian Alps and How We Crossed Them*, by A Lady Pioneer. *Land of the Llama*. *The Phantom Rickshaw*. *My Mercara Home*. *Black Panther of Singrauli*” (12). This catalogue of British travel writing in South Asia functions to situate Cho Oyu and the Scotsman’s fantasy within the picturesque aesthetic and literary tradition of the era.⁶⁶ Jill Didur explains that “[t]he Indian ‘hill station’ is a British creation partially fueled by fantasies of virgin landscapes and the possible recovery of or retreat to the Garden of Eden. Nowhere is this association with the landscape more prominent than in the Darjeeling region of

⁶⁶ In *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization*, Jill Casid explains that “[t]ravel narratives such as these depended on the picturesque as a discourse of aesthetic and political control for the translation and forcible reshaping of the foreign and the exotic into the familiar and the tamed” (Casid 47). Jill Didur adds that the Himalayan landscape was so popular as a tourist destination for colonial officers because it could so easily be “assimilated to British notions of the picturesque, a trope that pervades travel writing of the nineteenth century when these areas were first settled by Europeans” (Didur 44). When it was used to describe paintings, picturesque “often meant that the scene or the handling of it was somehow faithful to nature” (Casid 45). On the other hand, when it was applied to “‘nature’ or to physical terrain, *picturesque* primarily signified that a select ‘view’ was ‘like a picture’” (45).

West Bengal” (43). Desai’s descriptions of Cho Oyu’s construction show that this commitment to romantic colonial fantasies has lasting and damaging impacts on the local population:

As always, the price for such romance had been high and paid for by others. Porters had carried boulders from the riverbed—legs growing bandy, ribs curving into caves, backs into U’s, face being bent slowly to look always at the ground—up to this site chosen for a view that could raise the human heart to spiritual heights. (12)

Jemubhai bought the house when he retired from being a judge with the ICS, and he filled it with objects he believed signalled his authority, status, and connection to British culture: *National Geographic* magazines (1), a certificate from Cambridge University (7), a purebred red setter named Mutt (289), a second-hand gravy boat with the monogram J.P.P. (which “happily” matched his own initials) (170), Pond’s Cold Cream (7), a “BSA five-shot barrel pump gun, a .30 Springfield rifle, and a double-barreled rifle, Holland & Holland” (5), as well as bottles of “Grand Mariner, amontillado sherry, and Talisker” (7). These items reveal Jemubhai’s desire to present himself as a person with learning, power, and wealth.

Cho Oyu is, however, severely dilapidated and uncared-for, reflecting the judge’s retreat from the world and refusal to engage in any act of care or nurture, be it towards his home or his grandchild.⁶⁷ Jemubhai himself seems to recognize the way Cho Oyu and the Himalayan environment rebel against his desired self-portrait:

How he hated this dingy season [...]; it made a mockery of him, his ideals. When he looked about he saw he was not in charge: mold in his toothbrush, snakes slithering unafraid right over the patio, furniture gaining weight, and Cho Oyu also soaking up

⁶⁷ In fact, the only thing in the world Jemubhai seems to genuinely care about is his dog Mutt – and it is Panna Lal’s job to care for her.

water, crumbling like a mealy loaf. With each storm's bashing, less of it was habitable.
(Desai 109-10)

The home resists Jemubhai's civilizing efforts.⁶⁸ A "gamy mouse stench" pervaded the place (6), and entire rooms of the house could not be used because the "floor had caved in" (7). The condition of the house signals the "downfall of wealth" (12). Yet Cho Oyu remains a hill station, a space aligned with colonial power and prestige, and its resident is a former judge – a role that still allows Jemubhai to occupy a privileged position in Kalimpong. Local authorities all address the judge with monikers of respect ("sir sahib *huzoor*"), but the judge knows "what they really thought of him" (292).

When Jemubhai sends Panna Lal to the police station to report that GNLFF men had robbed him, the police cannot ignore this complaint the way they ignore almost everyone else's: "[a]s a servant, he [Panna Lal] was far beneath them, but the robbery of guns from a retired member of the judiciary could not be ignored" (Desai 11). Likewise, when the police unfairly arrest the Lepcha man for the robbery, his wife knows that Jemubhai is her only hope for getting him released – he is the only one whose social capital could sway the police. But Jemubhai refuses to intervene for her husband, partially because getting involved would stir up feelings of shame and powerlessness for allowing himself to be robbed (264), and partially because of his own racism:

He had done his duty as far as it was any citizen's duty to report problems to the police, and it was no longer his responsibility. Give these people a bit and one could find oneself supporting the whole family forever after, a constantly multiplying family, no doubt, because they might have no food, the husband might be blind and with broken legs, and

⁶⁸ In "Cultivating Community: Counterlandscaping in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*," Jill Didur likewise argues that Kiran Desai represents the landscape in ways that resist colonial schemes of order and control.

the woman might be anemic and bent, but they'd still pop out an infant every nine months. If you let such people get an inch, they'd take everything you had [...]. (264)

Lola and Noni share these racist beliefs. In several distinct narrative moments, one of the sisters is shown making disparaging generalizations about Nepali people or Gorkha people and expressing condescending views of the non-Bengali local population (239). Like Jemubhai, the sisters refuse to have any sympathy for the poor whose lives they know are much harder than their own. When GNLFF boys come by their home, Mon Ami, selling calendars to raise money for their movement, the two women assume they cannot speak English: “[d]on't give them anything,” hissed Lola in English, feeling faint, thinking they wouldn't understand. ‘Once you start, they'll keep coming back.’ But they did understand. They understood her English and she didn't understand their Nepali” (238). Their condescending views of the GNLFF boys ends up costing them dearly: the boys take the sisters' money, eat all of their food, take over their home, and leave with their preserves. Shortly afterward, Lola and Noni's large property starts turning into a refugee camp for poor Gorkha families who chop down their bamboo, plant their own crops, and start building huts to house their families where the sisters' vegetable garden (grown from imported seeds) had once been.

Desai's descriptions of Gorkha homes make their impoverished status abundantly clear. When Sai, Jemubhai's granddaughter, goes to find Gyan's house after a lovers' quarrel, she passes through parts of mountainside she had never visited before. Illuminated by sunlight and surrounded by flowers, the houses, at first, look “pretty” (Desai 254), but “Sai knew that once the day failed, [...] you wouldn't be able to ignore the poverty” (255):

[...] it would become obvious that in these homes it was cramped and wet, the smoke thick enough to choke you, the inhabitants eating meagrely in the candlelight too dim to

see by, rats and snakes in the rafters fighting over insects and birds' eggs. You knew the rain collected down below and made the earth muddy, that all the men drank too much, reality skidding into nightmares, brawls, and beating [sic]. (255)

This depressing projection of what life is like in these Gorkha homes is placed in stark contrast to the portrait of Mon Ami. When Sai finally locates Gyan's house, she "felt a moment of shock" (255). The house was "a small, slime-slicked cube; the walls must have been made with cement corrupted by sand, because it came spilling forth from pock-marks as if from a punctured bag" (255).

Descriptions of Lola and Noni's home and their possessions set them apart from the local poor; they are aligned with wealth and privilege.⁶⁹ Their trunks are filled with, among other things, "a telescope made in Germany; [...] silver marrow spoons (they had always been a great family for eating their marrow); damask napkins with a pocket sewn in to enfold triangles of cucumber sandwich" (Desai 238). The narrator describes this collection of items as "[m]agpie things gleaned from a romantic version of the West and a fanciful version of the East" (238). Much of Lola's characterization is achieved through lists of things she buys in Europe and brings back to India: "Marmite, Oxo bouillon cubes, Knorr soup packets, After Eights, [...] Marks and Spencer underwear—the essence, quintessence, of Englishness as she understood it. Surely the queen donned this superior hosiery" (46-47). Lola and Noni's wealth, their abundance of food, their land – all of these things make them stand out from the locals. These possessions make them a target when tensions start building and Gorkha people start reclaiming portions of the mountainside for their own use. And in these circumstances, Lola and Noni find themselves, for

⁶⁹ Lucienne Loh also points this out. She explains that "[t]he degree to which socially privileged characters in Cho Oyu adopt forms of English heritage and identity signify their relative wealth and social status within the village's social hierarchy" (310). This assessment is accurate. Loh, too, focuses on the way material objects are used in Lola and Noni's characterization: "the sisters shape their identities around their affinity with England" (310).

the first time in their lives, at a disadvantage: “These people could name them, recognize them—the few rich—but Lola and Noni could barely distinguish between the individuals making up the crowd of poor” (241). They never paid attention to the names or identities of their poor Gorkha neighbours “for the simple reasons that they didn’t have to” (241):

It was natural that they would incite envy, they supposed, and the laws of probability favored their slipping through life without anything more than muttered comments, but every now and then, somebody suffered the rotten luck of being in the exact wrong place at the exact wrong time when it all caught up—and generations worth of trouble settled on them. (241)

Inheritance explores the repercussions of this exact scenario. Generations of living in “extreme poverty” (242) have left the Gorkha people feeling “fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority” (9). Lola and Noni are “forced to confront the implications of their privileged landholding status” (Didur 58). Suddenly, their insistence on maintaining a separation between themselves and the locals mattered – their wealth mattered, their caste and class mattered, and their air of superiority mattered. The narrator explains:

It *did* matter, buying tinned ham roll in a rice and dal country; it *did* matter to live in a big house and sit beside a heater in the evening, even one that sparked and shocked; it *did* matter to fly to London and return with chocolates filled with kirsch; it did matter that others could not. They had pretended it didn’t, or had nothing to do with them, and suddenly it had everything to do with them. The wealth that protected them like a blanket was the very thing that left them exposed. [...] [I]t turned out that they, *they*, Lola and Noni, were the unlucky ones who wouldn’t slip through, who would pay the debt that should be shared with others over many generations. (Desai 242)

The narrator makes it clear that these interactions between Lola and Noni and the locals are not singular person-to-person interactions – these interactions work as microcosms for Bengali-Gorkha relations across generations. They carry the weight of colonial histories and shed light on the long-term consequences and the built-up resentment that systemic inequality produces. They also crystallize the ways race and class intersect with ecological vulnerability.

Section 4: Precarity, Vulnerability, and Catastrophe

Lola refuses to accept this reclamation of her land by the Gorkha families. She seeks an audience with Pradham, the “head of the Kalimpong wing of the GNLF” (Desai 242). Her request to make the squatters leave is unsuccessful, but the rhetoric she employs is worth examining more closely. Pretending to speak broken English in an attempt to mask her privileged status, Lola tells Pradham that the squatters “cut into the hill, land weak, landslide may occur, [...] [v]ery dangerous for your men” (244). But Pradham is not buying it: “[l]andslide? They aren’t building big houses like yours, Aunty, just little huts of bamboo. In fact, it’s your house that might cause a landslide. Too heavy, no? Walls many feet wide? Stone, concrete? You are a rich woman? House-garden-servants!” (244). In this exchange, catastrophe works as a way of negotiating class and ethnic differences. Lola relies on the danger landslides pose to the poor Gorkha squatters to plead with Pradham. But Pradham shifts the focus of the discussion to her wealth. Landslides go from being linked with the lives of the poor who most often experience them to being connected with the structures built by the wealthy who most often cause them. Pradham here takes control of the rhetoric Lola offers and turns it against her, moving the discussion from one about vulnerability to catastrophe to one about accountability for long-term environmental degradation. This dialogue about landslides reveals the connections between generational wealth gaps, racial, ethnic, and class differences, and differential exposure

to environmental harms. Through the catalogue of goods in *Mon Ami* and the discussion between Lola and Pradham, the narrative explicitly links privileged positions of racial, ethnic, and class status to the accumulation of wealth in the form of western goods and capital. These goods play a dual role in the novel. They function as cultural capital and set Lola and Noni apart from their neighbors, but they also signal imminent catastrophe, as Pradham's rhetoric makes clear. Pradham directly links these possessions which signal wealth and Englishness, as well as the house in which they accumulate, to landslides.

The narrative goes even further in linking landslides and environmental degradation more broadly to pursuits of wealth and westernization. Mountainsides that used to be abloom with flowers are now bare and covered in buildings and signs that advertise the sale of, ironically, "FLOWERS" (Desai 195). This replacement of local vegetation with infrastructure catering to tourists and the privileged few works to highlight the connection between ecological damage and the legacy of colonialism in the Darjeeling district. The concern with landslides in the region becomes most obvious in the descriptions of the town's buildings and infrastructure. The narrator describes how, "[i]n order to accommodate the population boom" that accompanied economic growth fueled by colonial and postcolonial tourism, the government passed a "legislation that allowed an extra story to be built on each home in Darjeeling" (196). At first glance, this influx of capital may seem positive, but the narrator immediately undercuts this misconception. Despite the use of "landslide reinforcements" (126), "the weight of more concrete pressing downward had spurred the town's lopsided descent and caused more landslides than ever" (196-197). Kalimpong now looked "like a garbage heap rearing above and sliding below, so it seemed caught in a photostill, a frozen moment of its tumble" (197).

This image of an entire town that seems to be spilling out over the mountainside echoes descriptions of Gyan's house: "spilling forth [...] as if from a punctured bag" (Desai 255). Recall Lola's exchange with Pradham: while Mon Ami stands strong, "heavy" (244), triggering landslides due to its weight, the homes of the poor are precariously perched on the edge of these unstable mountainsides, crumbling, "fall[ing] into disrepair" (255). For families like Gyan's, there is no economic advantage to the influx of tourism in Kalimpong. While the town grows heavier, buildings taller, and shops more abundant, his family still lacks the means to improve their living conditions. The family began construction on a second floor of their home, but it remains perpetually unfinished: "presumably abandoned for lack of funds, and, while waiting to stockpile enough to resume building, it had fallen into disrepair; no walls and no roof, just a few posts with iron rods sprouting from the top" (255). The Gorkha home stuck in a state of incompleteness, so dilapidated that it is clear construction will never resume, captures the reality that the poor of Kalimpong do not benefit from the influx of capital that postcolonial tourism brings to the region. On the contrary, they end up paying the highest price, as they are the ones whose precarious homes will crumble first, and who risk their lives doing the work of digging out the rubble after a landslide:

The work of recarving a path through this ruin was, of course, usually contracted to teams of hunchbacked midget men and women, rebuilding things stone by stone, putting it all together again each time their work was rent apart, carrying rocks and mud in wicker baskets attached to bands around their foreheads, staggering loony with the weight, pounding on hulking river boulders over and over for hours with hammers and chisels until a bit chipped off, then another bit. (315)

The narrator's language highlights the precarity of life for the poor Gorkha and Lepcha people of Kalimpong. It links their poverty to landslides on multiple levels.

In describing Gyan's house, the narrator insists that houses like these are "common to those who had struggled to the far edge of the middle class—just to the edge, only just, holding on desperately—but were at every moment being undone, the house slipping back" (Desai 255-56). The figurative language here – "on the edge," "holding on desperately," "slipping back" (255-56) – also evokes landslides. The novel uses catastrophe to characterize life for its poor marginalized characters, to establish that risk and precarity constitute their status quo. The narrator emphasizes the cyclical nature of these events:

All night it would rain. It would continue, off and on, on and off, with a savagery matched only by the ferocity with which the earth responded to the onslaught.

Uncivilized voluptuous green would be unleashed; the town would slide down the hill.

Slowly, painstakingly, like ants, men would make their paths and civilization and their wars once again, only to have it wash away again. . . . (323).

The narrator goes on to tie the image of the Gorkha home in the midst of falling apart to postcolonial tourism. Gyan's home did not embody the type of "picturesque poverty that tourists liked to photograph" (256); instead, it signaled "something truly dismal—modernity proffered in its meanest form" (256). This is the modernity of uneven flows of global capital in the postcolonial era, which reach even remote regions like Kalimpong, but from which only a privileged few profit.

Section 5: Reflection, Renegotiation, and Human-Animal Relationships

The Lepcha family that appears several times throughout the novel experiences the worst of the systemic inequality in the region. They return to Cho Oyu many times to ask the judge for

help dealing with the police, but their requests are repeatedly denied. Jemubhai is committed to this cruel, impassive persona he perfected while working for the ICS: “[t]he judge seemed suddenly to remember his personality, stiffened, and said nothing, set his mouth in a mask, [...] went back to his game of chess” (Desai 264). They return once more to beg for food, because the police blinded the husband and broke both of his legs, leaving him unable to work: “[p]lease sahib,’ they begged with hands folded, heads bent. ‘Who comes to our help? Can we live on no food at all? We will be your servants forever . . .’” (282). Jemubhai ignores them and orders Panna Lal not to give them anything. They retreat, but not before the Lepcha woman sets eyes on Mutt, the judge’s purebred red setter.

Mutt was “expensive” (289). Jemubhai “never thought of her that way” (289), but the Lepcha family did: “[s]ell that kind of dog and you can get a lot of money. . . .” (283). They returned a few days later and kidnapped Mutt, “bound her with rope, [...] put her in a sack” and carried her “to a small hamlet that was far from any paved road” (283). They sell her to “a family that couldn’t love her [...], an ordinary family, paying hard for modernity” (321). Mutt’s life would never be the same: “[t]hey wouldn’t care for Mutt. She was just a concept. They were striving toward an idea of something, toward what it meant to have a fancy dog. She disappointed them just as modern life did, and they tied her to a tree, kicked her . . .” (321). The dog thus ends up paying the price for the judge’s cruelty. In a town where rabies is rampant, where “stray dogs were rounded up and slaughtered by the truckful” and “whole families too penniless to pay for the three-thousand rupee vaccine died” (290), Mutt had been privileged. She was vaccinated. She was fed. She slept indoors. Her life was more comfortable than most people’s. Realization dawns on Jemubhai. His callousness towards the Lepcha family came down on her: “[t]he price of such arrogance had been great” (291).

Jemubhai's indoctrination into a system of white supremacy during his colonial education isolated him and made it impossible for him to empathize with others: "[n]ever again would he know love for a human being that wasn't adulterated by another, contradictory emotion" (Desai 37). Mutt is the only thing in the world that he genuinely loves. When she goes missing, he searches for her for days, and he falls apart when he realizes he will never find her. His pain and grief drive him to lose himself temporarily, weep, beat his servant, and re-examine the "sins he had committed that no court in the world could take on" (301). For the first time in the novel, the judge feels truly weak and powerless. He recognizes that "by having forsaken this world, for having held himself apart, Muff would suffer" (292) – this realization represents the greatest insight this character demonstrates in the entire narrative. It is his most humble moment, his first time taking responsibility for his actions, and one of the rare moments in the novel in which he is neither hiding behind his "mask" (264) of learned callousness nor beating a subservient figure in a blind rage. Importantly, the narrator states that, in his desperation, Jemubhai is "undoing his education" (301). Years of practice in unfeeling, acquired during his time abroad when he felt shame and alienation, are being undone in this moment of profound grief.

The loss of Mutt triggers a flow of memories that Jemubhai worked hard to repress: he recognizes his accountability in his wife's death and acknowledges how poorly he has treated his family. He even thinks back on his youth – a time when he was still capable of experiencing unadulterated love (308). The disappearance of the dog forces Jemubhai's façade to crack, and it gives the reader the first real glimpse of who he used to be before years of trauma changed him. Mutt's kidnapping is a plot device: it humanizes the judge and drives him to rethink his treatment of others. It pushes him to try to feel his way into the suffering of another being, to truthfully re-evaluate his relationships with others. Jemubhai's moment of clarity, however, does not last

long. As days go by, his grief turns to rage, and he beats Panna Lal. The dog's disappearance does not elicit a permanent change in the judge's behavior, but it does open up a space which allows Jemubhai to reflect on his behavior.

Section 6: Conclusion

Inheritance uses Mutt to explore human subjectivity and to generate potential opportunities to renegotiate one's way of being in the world. The image of Mutt, abused and tied to a tree, exemplifies the way the novel uses animals to provoke change in characters and work through human trauma and inner conflicts. These brief glimpses into human-animal relationships that the novel offers serve as crystallizing moments in the texts, capturing the ways generational trauma plays out in the aftermath of colonialism.

The novel also links environmental degradation and catastrophe to colonial capital and the systemic exploitation of the Kalimpong landscape and its people. It is significant that Jemubhai, Lola, and Noni are consistently aligned with privilege and power while Gorkha and Lepcha characters are repeatedly shown to be poor and vulnerable. The novel shows that poverty, indigeneity, race, and class intersect and create greater degrees of vulnerability to ecological catastrophe. In a particularly important scene featuring a dialogue between a privileged Bengali and the political leader of the marginalized Gorkha nationalist movement, the novel even uses catastrophe as a device for talking about racial and class differences. This same scene also works as a microcosm to illustrate the ways colonial pasts continue to shape human interactions in the present.

Inheritance does a great deal of work to show that catastrophe and environmental vulnerability constitute the status quo for the Gorkha and Lepcha characters in the novel. At least ten landslides occur throughout the narrative, but these violent and destructive environmental

events are mere blips in the narrative. These landslides do not register as events in the plot, because they are a regular occurrence in the lives of deeply poor characters living in deforested and severely degraded environments. Landslides thus become part of the “filler” (Moretti, *The Bourgeois* 70) that enriches the story and provides additional context to the major turning points in the plot, such as Biju’s return home. Through its attention to characters’ psyches and to the consequences of racism, poverty, and precarity that marginalized characters experience regularly, the novel recasts catastrophe as an everyday phenomenon. It thus presents an “everyday” that is markedly different from the one so many novel theory scholars describe, and it offers one possible solution to Ghosh’s predicament in *The Great Derangement*. Through its narrative treatment of catastrophe, the novel draws attention to environmental degradation and depicts it as a believable, unremarkable phenomenon.

Part 2: Kim Scott’s *Benang: From the Heart*

Section 1: Synopsis and Literature Review

Benang foregrounds intergenerational trauma in colonial and postcolonial Australia. Set in early-twentieth-century Australia, it takes place in a time when Indigenous communities were subject to racist (anti-Black and anti-Indigenous) laws, and Indigenous children were often forcibly removed from their families to be raised as “white.” Centring on the memories and experiences of Harley, a man with both Indigenous (Nyoongar) and settler ancestry, the novel works through his past trauma from being abused by his white supremacist grandfather and depicts his at-times violent rebellion against him.⁷⁰ It explores the consequences of forced

⁷⁰ A large percentage of scholarly sources that discuss colonialism in the context of Australia use the word “Aboriginal” rather than “Indigenous.” I use “Indigenous” because it highlights parallels between the Australian context and many other regions whose native occupants were decimated and displaced because of colonialism.

assimilation and traces Harley's journey to towards reconnecting with his Indigenous family and heritage. In the process, it also draws attention to the legal and administrative mechanisms which limit Indigenous Australians' freedom of movement and make them disproportionately vulnerable to catastrophe and environmental degradation.

Benang highlights the ways Indigenous peoples are made to experience the brunt of ecological degradation in Western Australia. It draws attention to the structural violence, upheld by racist and colonialist ideologies, that characterizes the colonial and postcolonial eras. Scott exposes the laws and practices that effectively stripped Indigenous peoples of their status as human beings, based on a racial calculus that privileges the rights of European settlers and their descendants and that simultaneously disenfranchises and marginalizes those people who are deemed non-white and non-European. These laws control everything from who counts as Black/Indigenous to how Black/Indigenous people can use uncultivated land and natural resources. These two sites of colonial control – body and land – are interlinked; the colonial impetus to regulate the Black Indigenous body works in tandem with the control of the physical environment.⁷¹ The violence enacted against Indigenous bodies in the novel is often reflected in the violence enacted against the Australian landscape.

The novel is centrally concerned with environmental racism: it highlights the way racist structures create different degrees of risk and vulnerability for Black Indigenous characters, specifically in relation to ecological degradation. The colonial laws that Scott's text deals with produce a system wherein white people and Black people living in the same region of Australia, and therefore dealing with similar ecological hardships (water scarcity, for example) experience these hardships completely differently. Water scarcity is a grave problem in much of Australia,

⁷¹ This pattern reappears in many of the texts I study here.

and one which will only be exacerbated by climate change. Scott wrote *Benang* in 1999 and the text deals with water shortages at length. Since then, the situation has gotten worse. In 2008, southern Australia had the “worst drought in 1000 years” (Pearson and Gorman 712), and in 2013 the country experienced a record-breaking heat wave (Baer, “The Australian Climate Movement” 148). Scott’s novel engages at length with these ecological issues that climate change aggravates, and that disproportionately disadvantage Australia’s Indigenous population.

Kim Scott, who has both Black Nyoongar and white European ancestry, became the first Indigenous author to win the Miles Franklin Literary Award with his publication of *Benang*.⁷² Because of how clearly the novel brings environmental racism to the forefront of the narrative, it works as a useful site of investigation for analyzing ecological catastrophe in the context of race, indigeneity, and colonialism. Yet the ecological aspect of Kim Scott’s novel has gone under-theorized in critical responses to his work. The majority of scholars writing on *Benang* read it through the lens of race and identity studies.⁷³ Anthony Uhlmann’s article is much more concerned with the way the novel uses archival documents in its construction of the novelistic universe (42-43).⁷⁴ John Fielder focuses instead on the practice of writing itself. In his overview of Scott’s writing, Fielder explores the risks Scott took: “there will be those who will criticise Scott for being too easy on the colonisers, and others who will criticise it for being too soft on

⁷² There are many different English spellings of the name of this people, including Noongar, Nyungar, Nyungah, Nunga, etc. I use Kim Scott’s spelling for consistency.

⁷³ Patrick Brantlinger engages with the novel through the lens of race and authenticity. Pablo Armellino studies how the novel “manages to successfully re-map Australian history and geography,” thus displacing white Australian discourse and “creat[ing] the basis for the emergence of a new Aboriginal one” (16). In “Interrogating Whiteness,” Graham Huggan examines the way *Benang* sets itself “aggressively against the white man’s history” and works to reverse “the processes of genealogical barbarism” that were enacted in colonial Australia (99). Paul Newman studies the novel alongside J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* – another work that deals with “reconciliation” after racial segregation (83). He pays particular attention to white men who stand in for patriarchy and control in *Benang*, and he analyzes the way the Indigenous and mixed-race characters work to rediscover their identities and their relationship to Nyoongar culture.

⁷⁴ I elaborate on the novel’s use of documentation later in this section.

the colonised” (5). He pays close attention to Scott’s narrative techniques, and studies how they are deployed to explore and flesh out Nyoongar identity. Fielder nevertheless maintains that, in the way it deals with the aftermath of colonialism, the novel “risks over-simplifying what is a complex narrative” (6).⁷⁵

Lisa Slater’s writing is most useful to my analysis. Like Fielder, Slater is invested in studying the practice of writing in the novel. In “Kim Scott’s *Benang*: An Ethics of Uncertainty,” Slater analyzes the difficulties Harley faces in writing his family history in conversation with Kim Scott’s own writing practice: “[t]he questions that Harley raises regarding what it is he is writing parallel Scott’s concerns with problems of style, genre and frame” (147). She pays close attention to the narrative style of the novel, asking: “[g]iven that writing has been a crucial weapon deployed in the interests of colonial violence, in what style should Harley write? And how can he write of worlds which he has been estranged from, and *educated* to disavow?” (147, original emphasis). Slater argues that Scott finds his way out of this “to write or not to write” ethical impasse, and that he disavows colonial logic and exposes the violence it produces (148). In another one of her pieces on *Benang*, Slater discusses monstrous bodies, analyzing how they defy colonial eugenicist schemes of control. Here, she argues that these monstrous bodies enable Scott to undercut “the fantasy of a uniform civic body” and allow a multiplicity of stories and subjectivities to exist simultaneously (Slater, “Monstrous (Textual) Bodies” 63).⁷⁶ Importantly, Slater argues that “Scott graphically depicts how discourse shapes bodies and creates specific

⁷⁵ I do not think this statement is entirely accurate. Scott handles colonialism and its aftermath in a nuanced manner. Scott’s Indigenous characters do at various points throughout the story reflect on Indigenous people’s complicity in the colonial project and on the part Indigenous people played in the subjugation of other Indigenous people. The novel certainly does spotlight the hardships and adversity that Indigenous people faced under and after colonialism, but it does not present Indigenous people as hapless victims who have no agency in their own lives or actions.

⁷⁶ The simultaneous co-existence of multiple stories, worlds, and truths can also be seen in Patricia Grace’s *Potiki* and in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*. See Chapter 3, Part 2, as well as Chapter 4, Part 2, for an in-depth discussion of how Grace’s and Wright’s narratives allow multiple, at times seemingly incompatible, stories to unfold simultaneously.

conditions in which people live and recreate themselves” (67). The way colonial laws contribute to the creation of different types of bodies parallels the way these same laws shape the Australian landscape.

Section 2: Form, Perspective, and the De-sensationalization of Violence

Like *The Inheritance of Loss*, and like the vast majority of conventional novels, *Benang*'s plot revolves around human interactions. It is deeply invested in exploring bonds of kinship and family relationships, so environmental issues and encounters with nonhuman life seem at times to take a backseat to character development and to glimpses into characters' psyches and inner conflicts. But the nonhuman environment never disappears from the narrative entirely. The narrator regularly reminds the reader of the extent to which colonial expansion and resource extraction have changed the landscape of Western Australia throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the last few pages of the novel, this ecological destruction is compounded by a bushfire that envelops an island off the coast of Australia. This event, combined with several other key moments in the novel, make *Benang* a text about colonialism and ecological catastrophe.

The novel's use of perspective is one of its strengths. Its protagonist Harley is also its semi-omniscient narrator. Harley exhibits shaman-like powers that give him the ability to “see” the memories of other people, to watch events other people experienced unfold as if they were happening before his eyes.⁷⁷ Other characters recognize his ability: Harley's uncles, for example, are dumbstruck when he recounts events that happened before he was born: “[t]hat is not quite how I told it, then. But my two uncles were staring at me, open-mouthed. [...] ‘How did you do that? How do you know that?’” (Scott 189). The text moves back and forth from first-person to

⁷⁷ A similar kind of “special knowing” is evidenced by Toko in Patricia Grace's *Potiki*. See Chapter 4, Part 2.

third-person narration as the protagonist either reflects on his own experiences or relates the experiences of his relatives and ancestors. Rendering the entire plot through a semi-omniscient narrator that is also a participant in the action is an effective technique for generating narrative immediacy – the novel does, after all, explore the trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians during and after colonialism. Filtering the story through the eyes of a witness and survivor of post/neocolonial violence and using a style that moves in and out of stream-of-consciousness narration therefore makes sense.

The novel's combination of perspective and narrative style foregrounds Harley's trauma. The narrator/protagonist never dwells on traumatic experiences for long, even when these experiences are often deeply disturbing and clearly have lasting impacts on people. In fact, much of the violence and abuse in the text are relayed without any emotion whatsoever. The calm and detached tone is jarring – it clashes with the violent and explosive action, producing the effect of dulling the violence depicted in the narrative while at the same time refusing to turn away from it. As the reader learns more about Harley's upbringing, and about the lives of his ancestors, it becomes clear why neither physical abuse nor child rape shock him – he and his family have seen it all before. Scott's decision to make Harley, a deeply traumatized man, the narrator of the novel puts the objectively traumatic events relayed in the story into perspective; it situates them within a continuum – a legacy – of violence against Indigenous people in postcolonial environments. This intra-human violence works in parallel with violence committed against the Australian landscape. But rather than presenting the reader with one type of violence that is “explosive and spectacular” (Nixon 2) and one type of violence that is unremarkable, “incremental and accretive” (2), Scott refuses to sensationalize violence altogether.

Building on work done by scholars such as Rachel Carson, Rob Nixon uses the term “slow violence” to “respond both to recent, radical changes in our geological perception and our changing technological experiences of time” (12). In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon defines slow violence as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). He lists a few examples to clarify: “[c]limate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes” (2). Nixon distinguishes slow violence from immediately obvious and instantly recognizable violence: “[v]iolence is customarily conceived as an event of action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility” (2). He argues that, in our present spectacle-obsessed era, we need to “engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive” (2). And we need to figure out how to render that violence visible:

[...] how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time?

(3)

But perhaps making violence “dramatic enough” is not the solution (3). Kim Scott de-sensationalizes typically sensational violence through his use of narrative perspective. In so

doing, he makes the slow violence his novel engages more visible. Scott's strategy may be one way of beginning the imaginative process for which Nixon calls.

Scott's use of narrative perspective filters all the violence in the text through the point of view of a person who is so deeply traumatized that violence no longer shocks him. The novel thus resists the sensationalization of violence that Nixon critiques, and presents its readers with a narrative in which vastly different types of violence (violence against humans, animals, and the environment more broadly) are equally weighted. Violence against human bodies (namely child rape and physical and sexual abuse) is not presented as any more disturbing than violence against the Australian landscape – in fact, in many instances, images of scarred human bodies in the text evoke images of “the earth cut,” and vice versa (Scott 481).⁷⁸ Environmental violence in the novel does not work as foil for racial violence. Neither do these two types of violence compete with one another for the reader's attention – they are presented side by side, as mutually constitutive of one another.

Benang is punctuated with scenes that highlight the fact that Nyoongar characters' daily lives are governed by the consequences of environmental racism and post/colonial environmental exploitation. Indigenous reserves are consistently located outside of cities and are always in close proximity to garbage dumps – and often downwind from them.⁷⁹ And only Indigenous characters, Fanny Benang Mason,⁸⁰ a Nyoongar woman, and her husband Sandy One Mason, whom the narrator/protagonist assures us is “no white man,” experience the bushfire first-hand

⁷⁸ A similar parallel appears in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*.

⁷⁹ *Carpentaria* also emphasizes the proximity between towns' garbage dumps and Indigenous encampments.

⁸⁰ Fanny is not her birth name – it is a name her husband gives her, and that she accepts. She is referred to throughout the novel as Fanny, as Benang or Pinyan (two possible spellings of her suspected birth name), and as Winnery or Wonyin (two possible spellings of her father's suspected name) (Scott 495).

(Scott 496). The text makes it clear that the island was set on fire intentionally, in order to destroy the place that Indigenous people were sent to live on in the text's previous scene:

A gavel striking our wood; rap rap rap. [...] There was enjoyment, certainly; but it was malicious, and angry, and the laughter was cruel, even its restraint.

'Send them to the islands.'

[...]

Fanny was with him, and the wind lifted the boat, as they skimmed by the islands they saw the station boat rowing away from the island, and that a fire had been lit on the island the boat has so recently left. (469)

Race, indigeneity, and their treatment and categorization under post/colonial laws are central concerns in *Benang*. These factors dictate how different characters navigate a world of segregation and institutionalized racism.

Section 3: Colonial Law, Segregation, and Control

Scattered throughout the novel are archival documents, such as legal documents, excerpts from Acts of Parliament, and letters to and from Australia's second Chief Protector of Aborigines A. O. Neville. Some of these letters are unedited excerpts from Neville's books and speeches, while others are paraphrased from his correspondences and speeches (Scott 499).⁸¹ Neither Scott nor his narrator comment upon these letters and documents. Interspersed in between scenes from Harley's life and experiences, they ground the narrative in the history of colonial Australia. Passages such as "[a]s I see it, what we have to do is uplift and elevate these people to our own plane ..." (13) and "[...] some of them are so fair that, after a good wash, they

⁸¹ The novel's Acknowledgements specify which book or speech Neville's quotes come from (499). They also outline which quotes attributed to Neville are truly his, and which are adapted from a series of similar sources.

would probably pass unnoticed in any band of whites ..." (367) serve as constant reminders of the status of Indigenous people in colonial Australia.

Many important historical events are dealt with obliquely in the novel. These events are never mentioned by name, and the disorientating narrative style adds to the difficulty of understanding what exactly took place. To further complicate things, Scott changes the names of towns in which these historical events took place: he stages real historical events in made-up places. A handful of scholars responding to Scott's work have matched scenes from the novel to specific historical events. For example, in *A Companion to the Works of Kim Scott*, Wheeler links fragmented descriptions of "[f]lame and explosions," "gunshots," and "bodies hitting the ground" (Scott 188) to the 1880 Ravensthorpe massacre (Wheeler 39), during which over thirty Indigenous men, women, and children were killed by settlers in retaliation for the killing of a settler who had raped a child. This event is also referred to as the Cocanarup or Kukenarup Massacre. Wheeler explains that the real number of victims of the massacre is unknown due to a lack of sources.

‘They got a permit,’ I said. ‘From the police. To kill.’ I had seen a reference to police permission for a revenge killing among my grandfather’s papers. ‘Eighteen. They were allowed to kill eighteen.’

Uncle Jack snorted. ‘More than that, they killed just about everyone here. Most Nyoongars still won’t come here, just wind up the windows and drive right through Gebalup.’

[...]

The bodies were dragged away from the creek to prevent contamination and damage to stock. A fire. Maybe heap the bones together. (Scott 177-78)

Benang’s epigraph supports the connection between the massacre in the fictional town of Gebalup and the historical massacre at Ravensthorpe. It explains that Nyoongar people “roll up their car windows while passing through Ravensthorpe,” and avoid stopping there: “[t]he whole region has bad associations and an unwelcoming aura for them. It is a place for ghosts, not for living people” (7).

The novel begins in the early twentieth century, and explores the consequences of the 1905 Act to make provision for the better protection and care of the Aboriginal inhabitants of Western Australia (commonly referred to as the Aborigines Act). The Act outlines the legal definition of the terms “Aboriginal” and “half-caste” (Government of Western Australia, Parliament, Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council. An Act to Make Provision for the Better Protection and Care of the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Western Australia, Section 3), laying out a system of strict racial segregation coded in the language of blood quantum and focalizing the physical body,⁸² and severely limiting Indigenous peoples’ freedom of movement

⁸² According to legal scholar John McCorquodale, the designation of “Aboriginal” was long used and applied to people without a specific or official definition (McCorquodale). He argues “Commonwealth legislation quite

throughout their land.⁸³ Combined with the “existing attitudes based on race,” this Act “established an apartheid regime where Aboriginal people in Western Australia were discriminated against in all sorts of ways. Civil rights were denied by the Act” (“Impacts of Law Post 1905”). In these pieces of legislation, control is focused in two loci: the Indigenous body (control over who is deemed Black/Indigenous and who is not) and the environment (control over how different people are allowed to occupy and move through the physical environment). *Benang* deals at length with characters who have Nyoongar or mixed Nyoongar and European heritage navigating the legalese surrounding who and “what” they are and, therefore, what their rights are.

deliberately refrained from providing an unambiguous, and consistent meaning to the expression” (McCorquodale). McCorquodale goes on to explain that the first mention of “blood” in the legal framing of the term “Aboriginal” stems from the 1905 Sugar Bounty Act (McCorquodale). This Act distinguishes between sugar produced by “coloured labour” – “whether half-caste or of full blood” – and “white labour” (Government of Australia, Parliament, Senate and House of Representatives. An Act to provide for a Bounty to Growers of Sugar-cane and Beet, Section 2), establishing a “bounty on white-grown cane or beet” (Section 3) which is “not [...] claimable or payable” if “coloured labour” is involved in its production (Section 5). The Sugar Bounty Act thus establishes the legal basis for the codification of indigeneity through markers of blood and the body in the Australian colonial legal system.

⁸³ Sections 14 and 15 of the 1905 Aborigines Act make it illegal for white settlers to enter “reserves” or to cohabit with Indigenous Australians (Government of Western Australia, Parliament, Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council. An Act to Make Provision for the Better Protection and Care of the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Western Australia, Sections 14 and 15). These sections in effect illegalize relationships between white settlers and Indigenous Australians, enforcing racial segregation by keeping white settlers out of reserves and Indigenous Australians inside reserves. Section 9 of the 1905 Aborigines Act also “restricted” freedom of movement:

Any person who, without the authority, in writing, of a protector, removes or causes to be removed any aboriginal, or a male half-caste under the age of sixteen years, or a female half-caste from one district to another, or to any place beyond the State, shall be guilty of an offence against this Act. (Section 9)

The statutes show that Australian colonial law is designed to maintain control over the Indigenous body and over the physical space that the Indigenous body is allowed to occupy. It reinforces segregation and implements complete control over multiple aspects of Indigenous people’s lives.

The Aborigines Act also creates the Aborigines Department – “to be charged with the duty of promoting the welfare of the aborigines, providing them with food, clothing, medicine and medical attendance, when they would otherwise be destitute” (Section 4) – and outlines the massive powers of the Chief Protector of the Aborigines appointed by this Department (Section 6). The legal guardianship of Indigenous children is taken away from parents (Section 6, Subsection 3) and handed over to the Department and the Chief Protector (Section 8). Parents of Indigenous children cannot travel freely with their children (Section 9). Indigenous people are also not able to represent their own legal interests, as this becomes the prerogative of the Chief Protector, who could now “manage the property of Aboriginal people without their consent” (“Impacts of Law Post 1905”; see also Government of Western Australia, Parliament, Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council. An Act to Make Provision for the Better Protection and Care of the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Western Australia, Section 6, Subsection 6). As these many excerpts show, the aim and purpose of these laws was to allow colonial officials to exercise complete control over the Indigenous Australian population.

The novel is set in an era when the colonial administration was working hard to “keep Australia white” (McGregor 286). Segregation was, paradoxically, implemented alongside the promotion of the cultural and biological “absorption” of Indigenous Australians into settler society through systemic efforts to “breed out the colour” (286). The 1937 *Aboriginal Welfare Conference* prescribes the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples into settler society: “[t]his Conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end” (Government of Australia, Department of Aboriginal Affairs. *Aboriginal welfare: initial conference of Commonwealth and state Aboriginal authorities held at Canberra, 21st to 23rd April 3*, “Destiny of the Race”).⁸⁴ The objective is to create a uniform white Australia (14, “Conditions in New South Wales”).

Unions between European settlers and Indigenous Australians are therefore legalized but are monitored by the state, and mixed-race children are routinely removed from their families in order to be raised as “white” (McGregor 287),⁸⁵ since their parents do not have legal guardianship of them as per the 1905 *Aborigines Act*.⁸⁶ *Benang* depicts many such children forcibly removed from their families. In his article “Sorry and Not Sorry in Australia,” which outlines the history of the genocide committed against Indigenous peoples in Australia, Tony Barta elaborates on the attitudes of colonial administrators in relation to the removal of mixed-race children from their families:

⁸⁴ The policy “is to do everything possible to convert the half-caste into a white citizen” (Government of Australia, Department of Aboriginal Affairs. *Aboriginal welfare: initial conference of Commonwealth and state Aboriginal authorities held at Canberra, 21st to 23rd April 14*, “Conditions in the Northern Territory”). The Conference determines that Indigenous people of mixed heritage are to be absorbed into settler society, while so-called “full-blood natives” are to be dealt with in a variety of different ways based on their perceived level of “civilization” (3, “Supervision of Full-Blood Natives”)

⁸⁵ “Mixed-race” is the term I see used most often in scholarly discussions about race and indigeneity in the context of Australian history. I use “mixed-race” for consistency.

⁸⁶ These people who were removed from their families are known today as the Stolen Generations.

James Isdell, a West Australian pastoralist and parliamentarian appointed as “Travelling Protector” in 1907, told his superior, “I consider it a great scandal to allow any of these half-caste girls to remain with the natives.” He saw himself as serving both morality and the larger cause of civilisation. “I would not hesitate to separate any half-caste from its Aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic momentary grief might be at the time. They soon forget their offspring.” (202)

I include this excerpt because it speaks volumes about the way colonial officials in Australia conceived of the Indigenous population and of children of mixed parentage. It illustrates the deeply racist and dehumanizing thinking patterns deployed against Indigenous Australians, and it also reveals the degree to which Australian settlers believed in their “white man’s burden.”⁸⁷ It also speaks to the colonial mindset which was incapable of envisioning Indigenous people as human beings. This dehumanization of the Nyoongar people becomes particularly salient upon examination of Scott’s use of nonhuman imagery in the text.

Australia officially became an independent nation in 1901, but the ideologies that prevailed under colonialism remained ingrained in the way the state managed and controlled the Indigenous population. These “absorptionist practices” soon exposed a flaw in their design: the strong impetus to “absorb” Indigenous identity into white settler culture was being undermined by segregation, resulting in the isolation of mixed-race people (“half-castes”) from white settlers:

Segregation fostered the entrenchment of more or less enclosed mixed-descent communities, which in the inter-war years were observed to be reproducing much faster than White Australia. From this arose fears of an escalating ‘half-caste problem’,

⁸⁷ The term “white man’s burden” comes from the Rudyard Kipling poem by the same name. The poem lays out the idea that it is white men’s burden to go forth throughout the world in order to “better” and to “civilize” the masses of non-European peoples (described in the poem as “[h]alf devil and half child”) they encounter (Kipling, line 8). The term has today become associated with imperialism and with the misguided mindset that it proliferates.

compounded of both the rapid growth rate of the mixed-descent population and the fact that ‘mixed-bloods’ were demonstrably not mixing with White Australians but forming their own distinct enclaves—‘dark ethnic pockets’ in the words of one observer. As fears flamed, absorption was pursued more zealously. (McGregor 287)

The result was that, in the following decades, the state redoubled its efforts to wipe out all trace of Indigenous ancestry: “The reproductive futures of ‘mixed-bloods’ would be regulated, each successive generation becoming progressively more European in ancestry, until ultimately all outward signs of Aboriginal descent were ‘bred out’” (287-88).⁸⁸ Given this historical context, and the perspective from which it is written, *Benang* relies heavily on historical documents and historical events to situate itself in a conversation about the long-term impacts of colonialism on both Western Australia’s landscape and its people.

In addition to its use of archival documents, the novel also includes elements of the epistolary tradition – some chapters are made up exclusively of letters exchanged between colonial officials and Indigenous characters. These letters serve to reinforce the connection between control over the Black Indigenous body and control over the physical environment. One such letter is written by Harley’s Uncle Jack, a mixed-race man who writes to Chief Protector A. O. Neville to request an exemption from the 1905 Aborigines Act (to be made exempt from his status as an Indigenous person) on the basis that, since he does not associate with other Indigenous people, he should be allowed to enter the town’s establishments, from which Indigenous people are usually barred:

Dear Sir,

⁸⁸ Countless articles have been written on this history. See, for example, Chesterman and Douglas’ “Their Ultimate Absorption,” Francis’ “Social Darwinism and the Construction of Institutionalised Racism in Australia,” Zogbaum’s “Herbert Basedow and the Removal of Aboriginal Children of Mixed Descent from their Families,” and Ellinghaus’ “Absorbing the ‘Aboriginal problem’.”

In regards of the Aborigines Act has it I am a half-caste and I Don't mix up with the Blacks and I work Hard and Earn a living the same as a white man would my mother was a black woman and my father was a white man and I can Read and write But I have now Been barred from going Into a Pub and having a drink because I have got no permit so Could you do any thing in the way of granting me a certificate of exemption.

Yours faithfully,

Jack Chatalong (Scott 64)

Both sites of colonial control come together here. Jack's letter is constructed around an understanding of the legal premise that white Europeans are allowed to navigate space freely while Nyoongars are only allowed to exist in certain spaces. And, tellingly, A. O. Neville's response follows the same pattern. It first inquires about Jack's name and parentage, and it then goes on to question whether he "*in any way consort[s] with other natives or half-castes*" (66). In asking these questions, Neville seeks to determine "what" Jack is. Jack's request is ultimately denied: "*the reason you have been refused a Certificate of Exemption under the Aborigines Act is that insufficient evidence has been submitted to show why the privilege should be granted to you. Being a half-caste you come within the provisions of the Aborigines Act [...]*" (68-69). The language of Neville's letter is very clear: being allowed to move through and occupy certain spaces is a privilege – one that Jack's racial heritage bars him from enjoying.

Other letters exchanged in the text also deal with the relationship between race and the right to occupy space. Many of these include, for example, the guardianship of mixed-race children, who are then removed their family and sent half-way around the country to live in an institution (Scott 106-8). Such letters lend the text historical weight and make tangible the

colonial systems of control which seek to dominate the physical environment and dictate Indigenous peoples' rights to occupy space.

Benang works as a family history, tracing the lives of several members of the Mason/Coolman/Scat family across several generations, starting with Harley's great-great-grandparents, Fanny Benang Mason and Sandy One Mason. The story begins with Sandy One, who has both Nyoongar and European ancestry. His mother was "conceived in rape, born on an island and – snatched from her mother – was little more than a child when she was thrown from a boat and into the arms of the convict shepherd who walked her to Frederickstown" (Scott 486). That shepherd is Sandy One's father. Racial and sexual violence against Nyoongar people pervades the narrative, and roots Harley's family history in deeply traumatic experiences. Within its first few pages, the novel introduces ecological degradation as an element that powerfully shapes how Indigenous people live in Western Australia. This degradation is another manifestation of the colonial impetus to control the physical landscape. The way that degradation impacts the material lives of Indigenous Australians links control over the environment to control over the Black Indigenous body.

Sandy One's story opens with "a bad smell" emanating from an area near the "government water tank" (Scott 10). Such bad smells recur throughout the novel, punctuating moments when the setting moves from the town, where European settlers live, to "the holding pens, the settlements, the refugee camps" where Nyoongar people live (405). These camps are always associated with bad smells, degraded land, and unsanitary conditions:

There was the camp, the reserve, between the tip and the shit pit and hardly any water for the people who were pushed all together like that. Yeah, they were huddled under thin,

scraggly trees in tents and humpies, which was okay, but it was such an awful place to camp. He hadn't wanted to go there but had been told that was his place. (71)

Segregation forced Indigenous people to live in camps located outside of nearby towns.⁸⁹ As a rule, the camps are located near rubbish dumps. Scott constantly reminds readers of this proximity. He recurrently uses the rubbish dump as a landmark, situating the camps in relation to it: "Mt Dempster's reserve was between the rubbish dump and the sanitation depot. Whatever time of day you breathed the town's shit" (319), and: "[t]o the east was the rubbish tip, beyond that the Natives Reserve" (428), and again: "people were kept in reserves, usually close to the rubbish tip. They were breathing it in, deep, all that shit from the town, and you could hardly move, not once you got there like that" (303). The lack of water, and the difficulties the camps' inhabitants face in acquiring water, are also emphasized:

There was no water on the reserve, and so they braved the dogs and pilfered from the rainwater tanks of the houses closest to the reserve. There were horse troughs in town, but it was a long walk back with an improvised bucket banging your leg, or carrying a sloshing pair on a pole across your shoulder. (320)

The risks Nyoongar people face in these unsanitary conditions are compounded by the fact that their shacks are sometimes made of "asbestos" and other unsafe materials (397). The novel insists that the environments in which Indigenous people live are characterized by three things: "broken ground," "different kinds of shit," and "never enough water" (181). Descriptions that

⁸⁹ In the novel, Traveling Inspector of Aborigines James Segal explains:

'The Settlements,' he said, 'give the *natives* a chance. They're a Child Race. It's our duty to train them for Useful Work, and keep them from harm, from causing harm. They can be an Embarrassment.' He hesitated, as if considering the varied causes of such embarrassment.

'An ideal camp,' he continued, 'is near enough to town to allows the *natives* to call for rations when they are indigent, to come under surveillance by police and other local protectors, and to provide a ready labour force when necessary. However, it must always be far enough from white habitations to avoid complaints and to discourage unwelcome visits by white men.' (Scott 47; original emphasis)

drive home the compromised ecological conditions in and around the camps abound. The landscape is organized in ways that favor white settlers living in the towns and that directly disadvantage Nyoongar people living in the camps. Control over the Indigenous body and control over the environment come together in the form of environmental racism. The ecological violence Nyoongar characters experience in *Benang* coheres with the physical, sexual, and psychological abuse to which they are subjected.

Section 4: Control, Violence, and the Body

In *Trauma Trails*, Judy Atkinson traces transgenerational trauma and its impacts on Indigenous communities in Australia. Her research targets trauma related to violence, and the way in which she situates her case studies makes it abundantly clear that violence is a routine phenomenon in the lives of Indigenous Australians: “The coastal area where the study took place is located at the periphery of a semi-circle, the centre of which is the site of a series of massacres that occurred from the mid-nineteenth century into the beginning of the twentieth century” (J. Atkinson 9). Such massacres were widespread throughout the period of colonial expansion, and *Benang* provides glimpses into this violent history. Wayne Warry writes that there are countless historical records of “frontier violence” in Australia, but that “more conservative historians” avoid discussing them (Warry 56). He draws on research by Evans and Thorpe, who describe “how the actions of Queensland Native Mounted Police (circa 1860-1910), resulted in an ‘estimated, conservative count of 10,000 violent Aboriginal deaths’” (qtd. in Warry 56). These “highly trained officers,” under the guise of “dispersal,” “used hit-and-run tactics to track down and murder hundreds of individuals and to destroy Aboriginal camps and settlements” (Warry 56). Judy Atkinson likewise refers to “large-scale dislocations” (10) as part of the legacy of violence with which Indigenous Australians contend today.

Atkinson's research on violence and trauma grew out of her work for the Australian government. She describes at length the various issues of violence and abuse in the community that Elder men and women raised with her and that were being consistently ignored and dismissed by government agencies.⁹⁰ Atkinson's findings resonate with those of Moses and Veland et al.: like them, she points out that governmental agencies and police dismiss the connections between contemporary transgenerational trauma and legacies of violence. Instead, they treat Indigenous Australians' behaviors as if they occur in a vacuum, ignoring the larger issues fueling violence and mental illness in their communities: "[p]olice were making regular charges for drunk-and-disorderly, while ignoring the more serious interpersonal violence that appeared to be escalating" (J. Atkinson 7-8). She writes about a meeting which was meant to determine the future of Indigenous children admitted to the hospital: "[t]he doctor felt they should not be returned to their homes and communities, but that they should be placed in foster care. In the emotion of the meeting the senior bureaucrat told us, 'A lot more of your people are going to die until you people become responsible'" (7). Atkinson also records an exchange she had with a senior Aboriginal Affairs official in 1988. She was working on "a review of policing functions" and he told her that she was "wasting [her] time" – "'the solution is clear ... just stop them from breeding'," he said (8). These attitudes echo the colonial eugenicist mentality that *Benang* brings to the forefront through its reliance on historical documents.

⁹⁰ Atkinson's book provides a detailed catalogue of these issues:

They named issues I never heard discussed as items of importance to government meetings where allocations of grant monies were decided. I heard of rape of small children; of women laughed at when seeking help at the police station after having been assaulted by their partner. I heard of abuse in police watch houses by law enforcement officers; evidence of escalating suicides and multiple suicide attempts; an increase in offending behaviors in young people, of homicides, of one young man after another being taken away from his community to serve a prison sentence after beating his girlfriend or wife to death [...]. (J. Atkinson 5-6)

Many of the symptoms of transgenerational trauma that Atkinson identifies in the Indigenous communities she studies, such as violence, substance abuse, mental illness, high rates of suicide and incarceration, and family and community conflict (J. Atkinson 10-11, 146-47) also feature in Scott's and Wright's novels. In the beginning of *Benang*, Harley tells the reader that he grew up "[s]carred, fragile and empty" (Scott 25). As a child, he "just wanted someone to be proud of [him]. Anyone" (25). He felt "defeated" (25) and "guilty" (25). There is a striking resemblance between Harley's own feelings and the feelings Judy Atkinson's interviewees report: "[t]houghts and feelings include: [...] not being part of anything; numb; never feeling happy, contented, loved or love; feeling depressed, [...] shame, [...] useless, worthless, of no value; totally isolated" (J. Atkinson 147). Judy Atkinson argues that "contemporary community circumstances" and social and psychological manifestations of transgenerational trauma, such as escalating violence, are linked to colonialism (8). *Benang* also insists on this connection.

Harley's grandfather Ern raised him from the age of seven onward. Ern, a Scottish man, is a white supremacist obsessed with race and committed to turning his mixed-race grandson into "[t]he first white man" in the family (Scott 12). As Lisa Slater comments, Ern "desires to be read as a scientist in the service of the nation" (Slater, "Monstrous (Textual) Bodies" 64). Ern is emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive towards his grandson. Harley recounts how mixed-race children like himself "grew in a climate of denial and shame" (Scott 99), "[r]aised to carry on one heritage, and ignore another" (21). Throughout his life, Harley strives to "reverse that upbringing" (21), and to reveal himself to be Ern's "failure" (31).

Harley's Uncle Jack blames the law for the systematic racism he experienced all his life: "[i]t's another sort of murdering. What the law was doing. And helping people do. Killing Nyoongars really, making 'em white, making 'em hate 'emselves and pretend they're something

else, keeping ‘em apart” (Scott 339-40). But Harley knows that “we [Nyoongars] have conspired in our own eradication” (100). His father Tommy, he feels, contributed to that eradication by giving him up to be raised by Ern, who did everything he could to beat whiteness into him. When Harley finally confronts his father about it, Tommy “did the fractions talk; *half-caste, quadroon* ... that sort of stuff. He talked racism, oppression, genocide. He talked defeat, isolation, loneliness” (444). The way Harley glosses over these words, these histories of oppression, speaks to the degree to which these traumas make up the status quo for Indigenous and mixed-race Australians in the text.

Just like his son Harley, Tommy was abused as a child. Given up to an orphanage where white men would come pick out Black and mixed-race children to spend the weekend with – “[c]all me uncle” (Scott 388) – Tommy endured years of sexual abuse:

‘It’s a game. You close your eyes and we’ll put a lolly in your mouth. Don’t bite it but.’

And one time it was not chocolate.

And it was a different voice.

‘Suck on it.’

Suck on it.

Well of course Tommy didn’t want to open his eyes. They were pulling his pants down and that. Afterwards he got some white chocolate. [...]

Next time they said suck it suck it, Tommy bit. And how the uncle howled. (388-89)

The novel goes to great lengths to expose what Indigenous and mixed-race children’s bodies endured. Since they are routinely given up for adoption when their (usually white) fathers refuse to claim them, they become vulnerable targets for other (usually white) people to abuse. They are beaten (86), tied to desks by their teachers (94), humiliated, and forced to take “baths of bleach”

to make their skin lighter (389). These events are relayed in an unemotional manner that only serves to highlight the trauma they impart. In the midst of all the abuse he was undergoing for being Nyoongar, Tommy “used to wish that he was darker” (396). His body becomes the site of his rebellion.

Like his descendent Tommy, Sandy One’s body also bears evidence of the racism he endured throughout his life. Sandy One, in an effort to protect his family from constant government intervention, distanced himself from his Nyoongar relatives and did his best to perform whiteness. Lisa Slater argues that the pressure to escape the laws imposed on Indigenous people effectively caused him to “participate inadvertently in assimilation practices” (Slater, “Monstrous (Textual) Bodies” 67). Sandy One’s silence – his unwillingness to speak out against the racism he witnesses and experiences – results in him losing the ability to speak: “passion aplenty, but not the words for it. Now his words left him faster than he had ever acquired them. There was the trouble with his tongue, at the tip. It was wooden and dead, the skin turning black and flaking all the time” (Scott 251). Metaphorical ills become literal in the novel; Sandy One’s deadened tongue is a sign that he has failed to assert himself against the structures of control that the state authorities impose on Indigenous and mixed-race people. Unused for too long, his tongue becomes “useless as a weapon to defend his family” (Slater, “Monstrous (Textual) Bodies” 67).⁹¹

Much of the abuse in the novel occurs “off-stage” and is rendered through descriptions of Nyoongar bodies who bear the marks of past beatings. Jack remembers seeing Nyoongar men covered in scars: “the backs of his legs covered with weals as if from an old or inherited

⁹¹ Slater also ties the damage done to Sandy One’s body to the damage done to the Australian landscape: “[h]is body, like the body of the land, is a damaged body, its withering and deterioration a document of the effect of assimilation practices” (Slater, *Monstrous (Textual) Bodies* 67).

whipping” (Scott 86) or “with a skin evidencing a startling range of colours; black, brown, tan, red and white and even blue swirling together in scars formed from burnt flesh” (86). Fanny

Benang also sees histories of violence imprinted on the bodies of her people:

Fanny Benang Mason saw her people fall; saw them trembling, nervous, darting glances all about them. Some became swollen, felt themselves burning up. Their skin – too hot to touch – erupted in various forms of sores. People itched, and scratched the skin away, and writhed on the ground with their arses raw from so much shitting, until eventually even that ceased and there was only an ooze of mucus and blood. (495-96)

The traumatic and systemic racial violence Indigenous people experienced for generations under and after colonialism is made manifest in the novel through descriptions of Nyoongar bodies.

But the trauma of Nyoongar characters in the novel is linked not only to bodies and to the mechanisms of control that white settler ideology exercises over Black bodies.⁹² This same violence, these same mechanisms of control, are also exercised upon the Australian environment.

Section 5: Control, Violence, and the Environment

The narrator often uses the nonhuman environment to comment on racism, segregation, and colonial violence. The tree in front of Ern’s house works as one such metaphor:

It towers over the house, and Grandad believed its roots threatened the foundations. He was right in that, they have cracked one wall.

⁹² The novel emphasizes colonial control over Black Indigenous bodies through its repetition of images and descriptions of wounded and scarred Indigenous people. This power that white settlers have over Indigenous bodies is however reversed when Harley’s grandfather Ern falls ill and becomes incapable of speaking or moving on his own. Harley takes care of him. He feeds him and bathes him, but his built-up hatred for the man resurfaces. Harley takes vengeance on Ern by cutting him, inking the wounds, tending to them, and watching them heal – he tattoos his grandfather so that his body too bears the marks of what he has done to his children and grandchildren, and to the plethora of Indigenous women he abused (physically, sexually, and psychologically) throughout the novel (Scott 447).

Granddad wrote: *Cut down the tree. Burn it, dig out its roots.* He might also have written: *Displace, disperse, dismiss ... My friends, you recognise the language*" (109-10). Here, the narrator speaks directly to his readers, directing them to read the house as the colonial project and the tree as Indigenous resistance to it. This insistence on a parallel between how settlers treated the Australian environment and how they treated its people reappears throughout the text.

Deborah Bird Rose's *Dingo Makes Us Human* lays out the ways in which settler colonial economic ventures in the early stages of colonization fueled environmental degradation and violence against Indigenous Australians: "[t]he business of establishing a cattle empire depended upon killing" (qtd. in Rose 10). She provides gruesome anecdotes about how settlers treated Indigenous workers, and links violence done to the Indigenous peoples to violence enacted against the nonhuman environment. "Since the arrival of Europeans," she explains, animal and plant species in Australia have been going extinct "at a vastly increasing pace" (Rose 101).⁹³ In addition to species extinctions, "there is also drastic loss in life-support systems" (101). Rose lists the signs of environmental degradation in the region she surveys:

The topsoil is being eroded, river banks are badly degraded, the rivers are silting up. Many springs and small billabongs have dried out; the plants that once grew there are gone, and the animals that depended on them have had to seek water elsewhere, putting more pressure on surviving systems. Changes in plant communities suggest early signs of

⁹³ Rose draws on other sources that have documented these extinctions:

As the rate of extinction is faster than the rate of European documentation, many species will almost certainly die even before they have become known to Europeans. All up, over two thousand species of plants are known to be extinct or on the verge of extinction. Dozens of species of animals are thought to be extinct, and close to two hundred are endangered or vulnerable. It is not possible to make any statement about insects for there is simply not enough information (Rose 101).

desertification, and a number of plant and animal species are locally either extinct or in severe decline. (102)

Rose's catalogue of the manifestations of environmental destruction resonate with the descriptions Scott provides in *Benang*.

The landscape in the novel is barren, "riddled with [...] death" (Scott 55), "the earth cut" (481): "There was so little life, there was no food, no water. Murder everywhere" (484). Scott's word choice once again reaffirms the connection between the systematic violence done to Indigenous bodies and the slow violence enacted on the landscape. Settlers cleared the land "on a massive scale" (412), and even the land far from railroads "would be cleared soon enough" (302): "*Our goal is to clear a million acres a year*" (302). Fanny Benang cannot help but notice how sparse the vegetation has become: "there were no more pink flowering gums, no trees of any kind" (481). There used to be plenty of animals there, but now there are "no roos, no emus; even a knowing eye could find very few signs of the little animals that should be there" (481). Instead, "[t]here were men with rifles" (481).

Fanny Benang recalls once being so hungry that she ate a cat, "a descendent of a crate of animals dumped inland and expected to feed on its pioneering rabbits. There were plenty of rabbits now. Cats, too" (Scott 480). This scene in which she reflects on the changes that the landscape has undergone throughout her life reveals the ways in which the Australian environment has been shaped and molded by European colonization and the invasive species it brought to the South Pacific. These changes are then immediately connected to how they impact Nyoongar people: "[h]er people huddled in groups, dressed in the rags of white people. They held out their hands to strangers, and were herded like sheep and cattle, though less well fed" (481). The comparison Scott makes here between the living conditions of Nyoongar people and

cattle connects human and nonhuman suffering under colonial systems of control and exploitation.

Some of the effects of colonial slow violence are not visible on the surface. In addition to the land clearing and the mines which scar the landscape, there are also poisoned waterholes (185) and poisoned rivers. In a place where a powerful river used to flow, watering acres of vegetation, the long-term impacts of colonial environment control become manifest: “[t]he river still flows, although it now floods the shallow harbour with pesticides” (24). The toxicity of the land, of the water, reflects the toxic psychological environments in which Nyoongar people live.

Section 6: The Bushfire

The novel foregrounds the various markers of colonial environmental exploitation and expansion recorded in the Australian landscape. And this violence against the environment and the Nyoongar people finally culminates in the bushfire that Fanny Benang and Sandy One narrowly miss being caught in – a fire on an island they had been sent to after settlers took possession of the land they lived on and expelled them from it so they could start developing it. In this way, the novel frames the catastrophe Sandy One and Fanny Benang experience as a direct result of colonial environmental exploitation.

Harley’s Uncle Jack explains that there is a long history of settlers exiling Indigenous people to the islands off the coast of Australia: “[t]hey used to take our people out there. [...] They took people out to the islands and left them. They were places of the dead. Some of our spirit is out there now” (Scott 263).⁹⁴ Sandy One and Fanny Benang are sent to one such island.

⁹⁴ It is impossible to pinpoint which specific island Kim Scott has in mind here. There is, however, a long history of Indigenous Australians being sent to live on a reserve on Palm Island off the coast of Queensland. The 1897 Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act allowed the government to forcibly remove Indigenous Australians from their place of dwelling and to send them to live on such a reserve: “it shall be lawful for the Minister to cause every aboriginal within any District, not being an aboriginal excepted from the provisions of this section, to be removed to, and kept within the limits of, any reserve situated within such District, in such

As their sailboat draws nearer, they see flames and a station boat leaving the island. They put two and two together: workers of the colonial station set the island ablaze. But one man is left behind:

Jogging down the south-west slope of the island, Wonyin, sees the ship's sail, itself like a cloud, drift in between him and the headland. [...] He feels the fire racing at his back, feels its heat...

And is wrapped within the smoke, and amongst a flurry, a stampede, of soft footed animals rushing and scampering; tamar, wallaby, goanna ... Scorching heat, and a great wind at his feet. (470-71)

In the chaos, it is unclear whether Sandy One and Fanny Benang see him.⁹⁵ But they see “[s]mall channels of grey ashy froth run down the rock, and the heads of small animals bob about in the sea” (470-471). The blaze prevents them from getting any closer to the island, and they return to mainland. Fanny Benang thinks their return is “[p]ayback” for the settlers having exiled them to the island in the first place, but her relief is short-lived (472). The text immediately throws another traumatic event their way: “then was the further killing at Gebalup and they had to journey even further” (472).

The fire which takes place within the final pages of the novel fits somewhere near the very beginning of its timeline. The fire immediately precedes the massacre at Gebalup (which

manner, and subject to such conditions, as may be prescribed” (Government of Queensland, Parliament, Legislative Assembly. A Bill to make Provision for the better Protection and Care of the Aboriginal And Half-caste Inhabitants of the Colony, and to make more effectual Provision for Restricting the Sale and Distribution of Opium, Section 9).⁹⁵ The bushfire scene is a particularly challenging one. The stream-of-consciousness narration used here makes it difficult to decode exactly what is happening. It is unclear who the man left on the island is, and how he fits into Fanny Benang and Sandy One’s story. The abrupt way in which the sentence is interrupted when he finds himself trapped (“[h]e feels the fire racing at his back, feels its heat... And is wrapped within the smoke” (470)), however, implies that he died in the fire. It is mentioned that Wonyin (one of the possible spellings of Fanny Benang’s father’s name) was exiled to an island years ago (475), but it is unclear if the man in the bushfire scene is indeed him. Who the man is and whether he died in the fire is never clarified in the text.

probably refers to the Ravenstrophe massacre),⁹⁶ which happened when Fanny Benang and Sandy One were quite young. This catastrophe therefore marks the beginning of the family history Harley sets out to write in the opening pages of the novel. It is the precipitating factor that shaped the rest of Sandy One and Fanny Benang's life, and that set out the direction for the future of the Mason/Coolman/Scat family – for the constant displacements the family is subject to throughout the narrative, the moving from town to town, the efforts to escape the scrutiny and control of A. O. Neville and the Aborigines Department. Temporally, the fire sets the narrative on its course, but thematically, it introduces the status quo – the trauma and vulnerability this family experiences as a result of systemic racism.

The pages following the fire outline the ordeals Sandy One and Fanny Benang face on their journey to return home to Kylie Bay. Their journey quickly teaches them to “stay away from the goldfields” (Scott 474), from other people, from “the noise and stench and stirred-up earth” (474). Despite their caution, their child Harriette is kidnapped by a group of men. The text implies that she is raped and becomes pregnant (474), and that her parents never see her again. Sandy One and Fanny Benang next discover that their child Dinah is being held prisoner in the home of a white family: “[s]he had been kept there, working. There were rope marks on her wrists” (475). Like the fire, these events are recounted in a flat tone, without any sign that they register on an emotional or psychological level for Harley.

Fanny Benang and Sandy One Mason eventually manage to get some room on a wagon headed to Kylie Bay (Scott 475), but a traumatic accident interrupts their journey. They witness the wagon owner get killed as he falls from the wagon: they see him “go up up up, and then return with the curve of the sky. His downfall culminated in a sickening sound. He landed like a

⁹⁶ See Chapter 2, Part 2, Section 3.

spear; head first, body straight and quivering. Then, slowly, he tipped and slammed onto his back” (476-77). The next town they pass through after the accident is hostile to them: “the new manager wanted nothing to do with them, and chased them off” (480). So is the next one, and the next one: “[a]ll in all Sandy felt like giving in. He’d just about had enough” (481). Finally, the Mason family arrives at Kylie Bay, where Fanny Benang sees “our own people, begging” (483). At this point in the text, we once again encounter “that very bad smell” (483) – the same bad smell that opened the novel. The text comes full circle, having pieced together the lives and journeys of several members of the Mason/Coolman/Scat family across several generations. The narrative has by now made it abundantly clear, through its recounting of everything this family has endured, why none of the traumatic events relayed faze its narrator.

Filtering the novel through Harley’s point of view is essential for generating the effect of dulling the systemic violence experienced by this family over generations and thereby, in contrast, underscoring the violent impacts of colonial environmental exploitation on the Australian landscape. The bushfire scene, although it constitutes the most focused description of a singular ecological catastrophe in the narrative, resists simplistic interpretation and closure. It is unclear what its lasting effects are, whether one or many people died in it, or whether it really impacted anyone except the handful of people present there at the time. And after it happens, it is never mentioned again. In a way, the fire is downplayed. It does not become the single most traumatic event the Mason/Coolman/Scat family has ever experienced. In fact, when read alongside other instances of ecological destruction in the narrative, the fire seems uneventful in comparison. It is only one among many catastrophic ecological events that Fanny Benang and her descendants experience. The narrative resists making the “black smoke,” the “leap[ing]” flames, and the “hissing” waves drenching the “steaming” vegetation spectacular (470-71). And

the narrator's refusal to spectacularize this catastrophe generates a shift away from explosive violence and toward sustained attention to other forms of violence that are "typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). The novel thus performs the imaginative work Rob Nixon argues is necessary in the contemporary moment.

Section 7: Conclusion

Benang refuses to sensationalize violence, and in so doing, it draws attention to parallels between systemic violence against human beings and systemic environmental violence. The connection between control over the Indigenous body and control over the environment is apparent in the legislation I reference above; the linguistic and aesthetic patterns in *Benang* also link the two. Taken together, the novel and the secondary literatures show that these two forms of violence are co-constitutive in postcolonial environments, revealing connections between broken ground, scarred bodies, transgenerational trauma, and colonial schemes of domination and control.

Through its use of perspective and narrative style, *Benang* makes catastrophe routine. In this respect, it performs the same rhetorical work as *Inheritance*: it takes ecological catastrophe out of the realm of the improbable or the unbelievable and places it squarely within the realm of the everyday. The ecological catastrophes experienced by the Nyoongar characters in *Benang* are not unthinkable. In fact, they are largely historically accurate. Such traumatic environmental events constitute part of daily life for both Kiran Desai's and Kim Scott's characters. In this way, both novels shift perceptions of what the everyday looks like for postcolonial and Indigenous subjects. They shed light on the ways race, class, and indigeneity – as well as caste, in the context of *Inheritance* – play into ecological vulnerability and experiences of catastrophe. Both

texts also gesture toward the way human-nonhuman relationships function as sites of reflection for renegotiating increasingly unstable and unpredictable environments.

Chapter 3:

Catastrophe and Human-Nonhuman Relationships in Degraded Environments

Section 1: Animals, Climate Change, and Ecological Catastrophe

Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner than Skin* and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* exemplify how the residue of colonial laws and power dynamics in formerly colonized nations continue to affect human-nonhuman relationships in the present. They link colonial histories with contemporary conditions of ecological vulnerability by emphasizing how that vulnerability has been produced by long-standing colonial efforts to control and dominate human relationships with land, animals, and natural resources. *Thinner than Skin* connects colonialism with ecological catastrophe through its handling of the disappearance of local species, which has devastating impacts for the semi-nomadic populations of northern Pakistan. *Carpentaria* shows that colonial resource exploitation in the form of mining generates a multitude of negative repercussions for the Indigenous Australian population. Both texts link colonialism to catastrophe and emphasize colonialism's enduring impacts on human-nonhuman relationships.

Building on my discussion in Chapter 1, I show that human relationships with individual nonhuman animals are crucial to the narrative handling of environmental catastrophe. Human encounters with animals play a vital role in these texts: they function as moments of reflection in which characters renegotiate their relationships with increasingly unpredictable environments and work through the traumatic environmental events they experience. *Thinner than Skin* and *Carpentaria* depict animals as characters and subjects in their own right – as co-inhabitants of a rapidly changing world. *Thinner than Skin* draws attention to the role animals play in the colonial project. It illustrates that animal bodies become imbricated in colonial logics of order and

control; different animal species either help Indigenous populations work through catastrophe or actively contribute to their marginalization by pushing out native species on which these communities have long relied. Presenting a nuanced portrait of the impacts of colonialism on human-nonhuman relationships, the text uses animals and animal imagery to work through traumatic environmental events.

Carpentaria's representation of animals is equally complex, but it functions differently. While *Thinner than Skin* at times inverts human and nonhuman descriptors, relying on the conventional human-nonhuman binary to communicate the idea that traumatic experiences make it difficult to render catastrophe, Wright's novel breaks these binaries down entirely. It challenges conventional Enlightenment conceptions of animality, rejecting the division between human and animal, organic and inorganic, living and nonliving. In both texts, animals fulfill important narrative functions, serving as a key site for working through catastrophic events, but while *Thinner than Skin* only uses animals to work through catastrophe, *Carpentaria* also uses them to envision a possible recovery, renewal, or return to normality after catastrophe. Taken together, these two texts exemplify the central role animals play in the way postcolonial populations experience and negotiate catastrophe, and in the way postcolonial narratives render catastrophe.

The catastrophes occurring in Khan's and Wright's novels cannot be explicitly attributed to climate change, but both novels make it clear that they operate in environments heavily shaped by human activity – environments which are today highly vulnerable to climate change impacts. Kate Rigby, who discusses *Carpentaria* at length in *Dancing with Disaster*, argues that the novel is “a work of literature that counters the implicit disavowals of human responsibility for stirring up the elements” (148). And indeed, the novel goes to great lengths to show anthropogenic

impacts on the Australian environment. Increases in the frequency of extreme weather events, for example, are an important indicator of climate change, and one character in *Carpentaria* comments on these directly: ““Last couple of years, there was one every few weeks, another cyclone jumping around. Whoever heard of that before?”” (Wright 397).⁹⁷ *Thinner than Skin* signals its engagement with climate change by framing the narrative through a research trip undertaken by scientists aiming to study glaciers.

Glaciers in the eastern Himalayas are receding. Some say the Alps will be ice-free by 2100. Greenland’s glaciers are melting so fast they could sink southern California and Bangladesh. But in parts of Pakistan, glaciers could be expanding. It was a possibility Wes and Farhana had come to explore. (Khan 43)

Glacial “growth and decline” are equal indicators of climate change, Khan informs her readers (44). Both novels deal with anthropogenic impacts on the environment obliquely, through their close attention to catastrophe.

I begin Parts 1 and 2 with a synopsis and literature review for each novel. Next, I move into a discussion of the post/colonial laws that govern the material realities of life for the central characters in each novel. I unpack these novels’ structure, movement, and use of perspective in scenes that feature encounters between humanity and animality to show the extent to which these texts rely on animals in their treatment of violent environmental events. Finally, I close with a detailed analysis of the catastrophes that occur at the end of each novel.

⁹⁷ For more on the relationship between extreme weather events, changing weather patterns, and climate change, see the Introduction.

Part 1: Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner than Skin*

Section 1: Synopsis and Literature Review

Khan's novel follows two groups of people traveling through northern Pakistan for different reasons. The first is a group made up of the Pakistani-born Nadir working to become a successful photographer in America, his Pakistani friend Irfan, as well his American girlfriend Farhana, who is also of Pakistani descent. Farhana is a scientist who studies glaciers, and she has convinced Nadir to take her to see her father's homeland in order to conduct a "comparative study of glaciers" in the region with her American colleague Wes (Khan 57). The second group of people the narrative follows is a Gujjar family.⁹⁸ Gujjars belong to an ethnic group that is Indigenous to the region. Gujjars are semi-nomadic: they practise seasonal migration, going up into the mountains to allow their cattle (buffalo, horse, sheep, and goats) to graze during the summer and returning to the lowlands during the winter (Khan 65; see also Shaheen and Jeelani, Rizwan, et al.). Gujjar people depend on their animals for subsistence; they play "a crucial role in their economy and social status" (Jeelani et al. 269). The Gujjar family in the novel is made up of Maryam, her husband Suleiman, her daughters Kiran and Jumanah, and her son Younis.

These two groups of people intersect in the Kaghan Valley, where Maryam's family tent is set up near a lake. Farhana, eager to expose Maryam's children to local tourist activities, convinces Suleiman to let her to take Kiran on a boat ride with her and Nadir. Maryam protests but Suleiman gives in: "[y]ou know we cannot refuse them. They are guests" (Khan 127). The boat ride ends in tragedy: a wave sends the boat rocking and Kiran falls into the water and drowns (112-114). Maryam, sick with grief, places Kiran's possessions into a box for safekeeping. Then, she makes her disreputable friend Ghafoor promise to bring her "justice"

⁹⁸ Some of the scholarship I refer to in this Section spells this name "Gujar."

(225). And when Ghafoor is forced into carrying a suspicious package for a group of even more disreputable men, he decides to kill two birds with one stone. He plants this second box on Nadir, hoping that whatever it contains will end up hurting him.

Ghafoor suspects – correctly, as it turns out – that the contents of the second box are dangerous. His orders to deliver the box come in the midst of a series of terrorist attacks in the region. Arrests (Khan 68), “bombings” (157), and “kidnappings” (157) are regularly reported on the news. The threat of terrorist activity is constant: “people [...] spent a lot of time looking around, trying not to slip in a city damaged not by one but a series of attacks, each more malevolent, more multipronged. On any given day, the target would be a mosque and a hotel; on another, a bus and a train” (24). Irfan must plan travel according to the most recent news report, avoiding dangerous areas and hiring an escort and a driver for safety. Maryam’s family is more deeply impacted by the rumours that terrorists are hiding in the region: police enter her home, threaten her, hurt her son, humiliate him, and urinate on her curtains (209-11). Thus, the repercussions of the terrorist violence are felt throughout the novel, even though every single one of the bombings occurs “off-stage” – conveyed as second-hand information, either recounted by other characters or announced on the radio. This constant threat of danger forms the background against which the rest of the novel’s plot unfolds. And it establishes from the very beginning the mistrust between locals (the Gujjars) and outsiders (the visiting scientists and photographer). The tragedy of Kiran’s death further cements this mistrust.

Kiran’s death is a device that allows the terrorism thread to become significant within the resolution of the larger plot. Driven by the desire to take vengeance for Kiran’s death, Ghafoor hides the suspicious box in Nadir’s pack. But there is a mix up, and Nadir ends up with the box containing Kiran’s possessions. When he is stopped by military men in a convoy of trucks,

searched, questioned, and beaten for suspicion of terrorism, the mix up is discovered (326-32). The news report immediately following this incident confirms that the second box did in fact contain a bomb: “[a] *bomb exploded in a hotel this morning, killing one foreigner and seven Pakistanis [...] Reports say the explosive was carried in a box, similar to the other devices used this summer*” (333-34). Kiran’s death thus sets the novel onto its course: it makes the world of the Gujjars clash with that of Americans and it renders the abstract awareness of terrorism in the region a concrete reality for Nadir and Maryam. Ultimately, Kiran’s death sets the stage for the final scenes of the novel, when these seemingly disparate narrative threads finally come together. But the threat of terrorism is only one of the sources of anxiety characters in the novel experience. Other sources of constant anxiety abound.

Thinner than Skin shows a commitment to presenting detailed psychological portraits of its characters. It moves between different characters’ perspectives, but it privileges Nadir’s and Maryam’s perspectives above all others. The story is thus grounded in these two characters’ different ways of seeing the world. Through its use of perspective, it offers a glimpse into the myriad forms of precarity that characters such as Maryam and her family experience under increasingly challenging ecological conditions. It highlights the way colonial laws have forced Indigenous populations to change their traditional lifeways and to adapt to increasingly precarious living conditions. By studying Khan’s use of perspective, I show how the text makes these connections between the aftermath of colonialism and present-day vulnerability, and how it uses animality to work through environmental trauma.

The novel is centrally concerned with ongoing ecological catastrophes that continue to shape the South Asian landscape. Partially set in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of northern Pakistan, the novel features several different kinds of catastrophes. I focus on two of them. The first

catastrophe is an exceptionally destructive earthquake. The details Khan provides about this earthquake – its location as well its repercussions on the local landscape and people – allow me to match it to a historical event: the earthquake that struck the Kashmir region in October 2005.⁹⁹ This destructive earthquake follows a minor one which traumatizes Nadir and causes Irfan to break his leg. The second catastrophe is the gradual disappearance of native species and their replacement by introduced species. Mentions of species disappearance recur throughout the text, and Khan makes it evident that it has devastating impacts on the locals. The novel clearly links this particular catastrophe to the aftermath of colonialism. My analysis of *Thinner than Skin* revolves around these two different types of ecological catastrophe. I focus on moments in which the text spotlights the historical forces that contribute to present-day ecological vulnerability. I also emphasize narrative movement in passages in which characters experience and recollect traumatic events. By analyzing narrative movement in specific scenes, I show that traumatic environmental events resist narrative representation, and that the text uses animals as a way of making catastrophe manageable.

Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner than Skin* was published in 2012. It is the most recent novel I work with and, as such, there are few published critical essays on it. The vast majority of critical responses to Khan's novel read it through the lens of belonging, postcolonial studies, Partition studies, and studies in post-9/11 literature.¹⁰⁰ Munazza Yaqoob's chapter in

⁹⁹ I am not the first to make this connection. In the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Pakistan*, Muneeza Shamsie also suggests that the final earthquake in Khan's novel corresponds to a real historical event. However, she incorrectly states that the earthquake happened in 2007 rather than 2005.

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Tolle's review of the novel talks about it in terms of its contrasting of insider and outsider perspectives: a "tourist's view of Pakistan" versus "a Pakistani community's perspective of Western visitors" (132). He notes that "each character in Khan's novel suffers from his or her own sense of unbelonging" (132), and I agree with this assessment. Muneeza Shamsie, who examines a series of Pakistani novels written in English, looks at how colonialism and Partition affect rural life and traditional lifeways. I conduct a similar investigation below, although my approach to the text is much more focused on environment and ecology. Aroosa Kanwal examines the text in the context of 9/11 and the war on terror. She argues that "in contrast to those second-generation writers who have focused for the most part on what has happened since 9/11," *Thinner than Skin* as well as many of Khan's other

Ecocriticism of the Global South is most useful to my analysis of the novel. Examining the text through the lens of unequal development and environmental consciousness, Yaqoob responds to the way Pakistani novels engage with “important environmental issues such as overpopulation and massive food consumption, physical and psychological health of human beings living in urban spaces, value systems of people in relation to natural surroundings, and the culture of mindless consumption” (249). *Thinner than Skin* makes a number of these environmental impacts obvious, and Yaqoob goes to great lengths to contextualize the text’s representation of degraded environments. She explains that “[a]bysmally low environmental standards for industry” (250) in Pakistan have resulted in “toxic emissions and water and air pollution that have collectively become the biggest cause of multiple diseases” (250). Today, “Pakistan suffers from the world’s highest environmental pollution rates” (249). The environmental impact of human activity form the backdrop of Khan’s narrative. Yaqoob argues that the text is among contemporary Pakistani novels that “hold[...] a mirror to the appalling environmental conditions in Pakistan” (250). Yaqoob’s approach to *Thinner than Skin* most closely resembles my own, and I draw on her insights in my analysis of the novel’s rendering of the environment and human-animal relationships.

Section 2: Colonial Law and Human-Nonhuman Relationships

Despite the fact that Nadir grew up in Pakistan and has visited mountains and glaciers as a child, his relationship with the local landscape is completely different from Maryam’s. Nadir is not used to sleeping in a tent. He is clumsy and has trouble keeping up with the rest of his group on their ascent of Ultar Sar (Khan 302). Maryam, on the other hand, is perfectly at home

novels “foreground[...] pre-9/11 cultural, social, political and historical causes that underlie the recent global stereotyping of Muslims and Islam” (73). Kanwal only deals with *Thinner than Skin* in passing, and spends a lot more time on Khan’s other published works.

outdoors. Her daily routine consists of taking care of her family's animals (horses, buffalo, goats, sheep, and sheepdogs), educating her children, and teaching them to perform various types of work. She has lived her entire life following seasonal patterns, and relying only on the animals and plants in the region for sustenance. Because of the seasonal migration she and her family perform, she knows the Kaghan Valley like the back of her hand. But the world she lives in is different than it was only a few generations ago. Legislation restricting the grazing rights and tree-cutting rights of the local population is now in place, and Maryam laments how much harder these laws have made her life.

The laws in question are the Indian Forest Acts,¹⁰¹ on which is based the subsequent Jammu and Kashmir Forest Act of 1987, which governs the ownership of forests in the part of Pakistan Khan's novel depicts. I pause here for an overview of how forest laws have evolved over the past century and a half in British India and present-day Pakistan. As the following paragraphs show, the laws in place in early twenty-first century Pakistan, when *Thinner than Skin* is set, grew out of British colonial laws, and in large part re-entrench the same colonial principles of control which limit Gujjar peoples' access to forest resources and disrupt their traditional lifeways and relationships with specific animal species, thus increasing their vulnerability to environmental change.

The objective of the Indian Forest Acts was to codify land ownership and to lay out state and individual rights as they related to natural resources. These Acts generated in what is today Pakistan significant social and economic changes, and drastically reduced people's rights to what

¹⁰¹ Environmental historian Mahesh Rangarajan explains that the 1865 Act "was the first step towards a rule of property for the forests of British India" (162). Although its aim was to "extinguish all customary forest rights" (162), the Act in effect provided "only a limited degree of state intrusion and control" over forests (163). It was therefore seen by many colonial officials as insufficient, and was severely criticized; "as early as 1868 proposals for its amendments were submitted to the government" (Ribbentrop 15). The 1878 Indian Forest Act sought to address the shortcomings of the 1865 one.

used to be common (public) land.¹⁰² These rigid laws which rely on “fixed territorial boundaries, where rights of occupation and usage are clearly defined, where limits are clearly drawn” are incompatible with the lifeways of the Gujjar people; they cannot accommodate “collective and unwritten customary rights, the uncontrolled complementarity between agriculture and open forest, the migratory habits of shifting cultivators and nomadic herdsmen” (Pouchepadass 2065). In many colonial environments, Pouchepadass explains, such laws resulted in the social groups who relied on common lands being “brought under strict control or displaced” (2065).

During the English Enclosure Movement, when land became private (legally enclosed), it was also typically physically enclosed with a fence, hedge, or ditch (“Enclosure”; see also Wordie 484). The same tendency of fencing off privately-owned land extends to Northern Pakistan, greatly complicating the seasonal migration Maryam undertakes with her family. She speaks of spending the summer “crossing into fenced-off fields, costing the family hefty fines and possibly even confiscation” (Khan 153) – penalties which are outlined in the colonial Cattle Trespass Act of 1871, and subsequently in the postcolonial Cattle Trespass Act of 1977, which bears a marked resemblance to this earlier legislation (see British India, Imperial Legislative Council, Council of State and Central Legislative Assembly. *The Cattle Trespass Act. 1871*; Government of India, Parliament, Council of States and House of the People. *The Cattle Trespass Act. 1977*). In fact, fences are mentioned several times throughout the novel (Khan 153, 196, 221), and always in a negative light. One fence that Maryam encounters in a forest is so

¹⁰² Similar changes had been going on in England for centuries. The English Enclosure Movement refers to the period between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries during which much of the land that had traditionally been held in common (and that was used by landless peasants to grow food and to graze their animals) was gradually privatized, thus eliminating common rights to it. Enclosed land “was free of all common rights, except possibly for a right of way” (Wordie 484; see also “Enclosure”). The enclosure of waste lands (meaning lands that were not inhabited and were not being used for agricultural purposes), woodlands, and other common lands triggered drastic social and economic changes in English society, forcing people who relied on the land for subsistence to completely change the way they lived (Gay 146-47). The Indian Forest Acts have much the same effect on the Gujjar people.

well-hidden that her horse accidentally impales himself on it: “the stallion was skewered by a barbed wire fence so slyly concealed in the forest even an owl could not have seen it” (196). In this passage about the fence, two different types of violence against Gujjar peoples come together: physical violence against the animals on whom Gujjar communities rely, and cosmopolitical violence against the Gujjar peoples themselves. This second type of violence does not cause physical harm, per se, but it prevents Gujjars from moving freely, and thus severs the relationship they had traditionally had with the landscape of the region.¹⁰³ The novel’s recurrent mentions of Maryam’s difficulties with fences, barbed wire, trespassing through fields and forests, timber taxes, and fines all refer to legislation put in place through the Indian Forest Acts.

There are three types of forests in India: reserve forests, protected forests, and village forests.¹⁰⁴ Through a series of laws that ensure that local governments and their representatives (Forest-officials) can legally acquire a piece of land and declare it reserve forest (British India, Imperial Legislative Council, Council of State and Central Legislative Assembly. The Indian Forest Act, 1878, Section 3), the 1878 Forest Act enables the government to make a piece of land completely off-limits to locals. The Act is crafted to give the government the maximum amount of control over land and resources.¹⁰⁵ It made it possible to “exclude rural land users and

¹⁰³ See the work of Isabelle Stengers for an in-depth discussion of cosmopolitan violence.

¹⁰⁴ The 1878 Act determines the rights of the State vis-à-vis certain forests based on the legal category to which the forest in questions belongs. The “The Condition of the Forest Area in Relation to the Inhabitants of the Country” in the *Accounts and Papers of the House of Commons* lay out these categories:

Hence we have three classes of forest in India—

- (1.) Forest in which the right of the State is absolute, in some of which, as a matter of policy, the free exercise of privileges is allowed;
- (2.) Forests which are the property of the State, but which are burdened with legal rights, prescriptive or granted; and
- (3.) Forests which are the property of individuals or communities, but in which the State has rights either of all or certain kinds of growing trees. (United Kingdom, Parliament, House of Commons. *Accounts and Papers of the House of Commons* 63)

¹⁰⁵ Guha points this out too: he explains that the Act “provided for a great deal of flexibility in interpretation,” which allowed Forest-officers and other government officials to interpret and exercise the law as it best suited them (1942). This also meant that laws were applied differently in different regions, or by different officials.

promote the growth of commercially valuable [tree] species on a larger scale than ever before” (Rangarajan 165). The Act was therefore very lucrative to the British administration. In the years following the passing of the Act, more and more large tracts of land were declared reserved or protected, blocking local from using resources from these areas.¹⁰⁶ The Act cemented government control over Indian forests, making it illegal for people to enter into certain lands with their cattle, to allow their cattle to graze there, to gather or remove any vegetation, or to hunt or fish on the land (British India, Imperial Legislative Council, Council of State and Central Legislative Assembly. The Indian Forest Act, 1878, Section 25). It prevented the local population from gathering food and fuel as they had traditionally done, and set strict penalties including steep fines and up to six months of imprisonment for those who disobey (Section 25).¹⁰⁷

This 1878 Act was subsequently repealed and then re-enacted in the form of the 1927 Indian Forest Act. This new piece of legislation is almost identical to the 1878 Act: it reproduces 81 of its original 84 sections (Guha 1940; see also British India, Imperial Legislative Council, Council of State and Central Legislative Assembly. The Indian Forest Act, 1927), with only minor changes to the wording. The 1927 Act likewise gives the State government a great deal of control over Indian forests. All reserve forests are the property of the government and are strictly

¹⁰⁶ Even “lands not being the property of the government” fall under government control (British India, Imperial Legislative Council, Council of State and Central Legislative Assembly. The Indian Forest Act, 1878, Section 35). Section 36 ensures that the state can take control of forests that are owned by villages: “The Local Government [...] may declare that all or any of the provisions of this Act relating to reserved forests shall apply to such forest” (Section 36). And the state made wide use of this allowance. Guha shows that the area of reserved forest increased significantly in the years following the passing of the 1878 Act:

the 14,000 square miles of state forest in 1878 [...] had increased to 56,000 square miles of reserved forest and 20,000 square miles of protected forests in 1890 – the corresponding figures for 1900 being 8,14,000 and 8,300 square miles, respectively. Given increased demand for forest resources and the relatively precious position of the protected forests from the point of view of the government, these were gradually converted into reserved forests. (1941)

¹⁰⁷ Jacques Pouchepadass acknowledges the impact of colonialism on the way people access natural resources (2060), but he cautions readers against the assumption that in pre-colonial times, everyone had equal access to resources (2060).

controlled, and Section 3 makes it lawful for the government to declare any forest over which it has certain rights a reserve forest:¹⁰⁸

“The State Government may constitute any forest-land or waste-land which is the property of Government, or over which the Government has proprietary rights, or to the whole or any part of the forest-produce of which the Government is entitled, a reserved forest in the manner hereinafter provided.” (British India, Imperial Legislative Council, Council of State and Central Legislative Assembly. The Indian Forest Act, 1927, Section 3)

The government even has control over village forests. It can regulate exactly how much timber a person can gather, or exactly where and how long a person can allow their cattle to graze: it can “make rules for regulating the management of village-forests, prescribing the conditions under which the community to which any such assignment is made may be provided with timber or other forest-produce or pasture” (Section 28, Subsection 2).

When Pakistan and India became separate and independent nations in 1947, Pakistan inherited the Government of India Act of 1935 as a provisional constitution (which has since been amended several times). It also inherited the colonial laws that the British administration established in colonial India (Pakistan, Supreme Court of Pakistan, “The Judicial System of Pakistan” 5). And today, those laws remain largely the same (1). A 2015 publication by the Supreme Court of Pakistan explains that “whereas the system may not fully suit the genius of our

¹⁰⁸ In a reserved forest, people are forbidden from making clearings, trespassing (with or without cattle), removing rocks or vegetation, causing “any damage” to trees, hunting, or fishing (British India, Imperial Legislative Council, Council of State and Central Legislative Assembly. The Indian Forest Act, 1927, Section 26). The state can also “declare the provisions of this Chapter applicable to any forest-land or waste-land which [...] is the property of Government” (Section 29) and “declare any trees or class of trees in a protected forest to be reserved” (Section 30, Subsection a), thus extending the strict rules which apply to reserve forests to protected forests. It can also “suspend” the rights of individuals over that forest for up to “thirty years” (Section 30, Subsection b), thus completely cutting people off from their source of livelihood.

people or meet the local conditions, its continued application and practice has made it intelligible to the common man” (1). It insists, however, that contemporary Pakistani law is “not an entirely foreign transplant” (1); “adaptations and modifications” have been made to the original colonial legislation (5). These modifications include changes to the wording and terminology of laws, changes to their titles, and the introduction of certain aspects of Islamic law. A large portion of the colonial legislation, however, remain the same.

Current laws governing the ownership of forests, for example, are very similar to the British colonial laws. Comparing the 1878 or 1927 Indian Forest Acts with the 1987 Jammu and Kashmir Forest Act – the piece of legislation governing the ownership of forests in the part of Pakistan Khan’s novel depicts – makes the significant similarities between them stand out. The structure of the Jammu and Kashmir Forest Act is largely the same as that of earlier colonial forest legislation, with the notable difference that the nomenclature for categories of forests has been changed: reserved forests are now referred to as “demarcated,” and protected forests are referred to as “undemarcated” (Government of India, Parliament, Council of States and House of the People. The Jammu and Kashmir Forest Act). It lays out the same restrictions for demarcated forests as the 1927 Act did for reserved forests (Section 6). It also features more severe penalties for infringement (Section 6, Subjection j). Similarly to earlier legislation, the 1987 Act provides the government with power of both demarcated and undemarcated forests (Section 12), and lays out a long list of penalties for offences in undemarcated forests (Section 13).¹⁰⁹ Given the

¹⁰⁹ These offences are largely the same as in the 1927 Act; it is illegal to “damage” trees, to cut branches, and to remove vegetation from the forest (Government of India, Parliament, Council of States and House of the People. The Jammu and Kashmir Forest Act, Section 13). Hunting and fishing are no longer illegal, but new offences have also made the list. The 1987 Act also retains government control over village-owned forests, echoing the same wording from the earlier Indian Forest Acts:

The Government may from time to time make rules for regulating management of village forests prescribing the conditions under which the village community to which any such assignment is made may be provided with timber or other forest produce or pasture and their duties for the protection and improvements of such forests. (Section 14A)

remarkable parallels between the colonial 1878 and 1927 Indian Forest Acts and the 1987 Jammu and Kashmir Forest Act, Maryam's grievances about unfair laws and taxes can refer as much to the original colonial legislation as to the subsequent post-independence Pakistani legislation that was enacted in its place.

In *Thinner than Skin*, Maryam explains that timber used to be free, but that there is now a tax on timber and other natural resources:

In the days when Maryam was carried on her mother's back, the way she would later carry Kiran, her mother would explain that timber and thatching grass had once been free. The forest department would take away the materials each spring, when the families dismantled their huts and headed for the mountains, and give back the same timber each autumn, when they returned. She told Maryam it was the Angrez who invented the whole business, the whole revenue-generating forest policy that bound the herders, forcing them to pay a grazing fee and tree-cutting fee. Before the Angrez, they had been free to graze and chop. (Khan 250-51)

The taxes Maryam laments are outlined in the Section 14A of the 1987 Act. Gujjars have long relied on the forest for food and fuel, but the Act eliminates many of the customary rights on which they depend, such as rights to access the forest and gather resources.¹¹⁰ These mechanisms of control and revenue-generation imposed on the use of natural resources directly

¹¹⁰ The Act significantly decreases individuals' rights to forest resources, and in some circumstances, gives the state the power to eliminate these rights entirely:

Whenever, in a demarcated forest, fire is caused wilfully or by gross negligence, or trees are felled or killed repeatedly without permission, the Chief. [sic] Conservator may (notwithstanding that any penalty has been inflicted under section 6) direct that in such forest or any portion thereof the exercise of all or any rights or concessions or privileges of pasture or to forest produce shall be suspended for a period [...] not exceeding five years [...]. (Government of India, Parliament, Council of States and House of the People. The Jammu and Kashmir Forest Act, Section 7)

It also gives the government power to inflict collective punishment if the law is not obeyed: the government can "inflict a collective fine on such village or villages, limited in amount to one Year's land revenue of the village or villages concerned" (Section 8).

impact Maryam and her family, making it unaffordable for them to continue living as they have for generations. These Acts are designed to give the government control over the land and its resources. Khan's narrator asserts: "[e]veryone wants our land, people said. Everyone wants our rivers, our sea" (Khan 240). And indeed, the 1987 Act makes it clear that the government owns not only the forests, but the waterways and the resources being moved from one place to another as well: "[t]he control of all rivers and their banks as regards the floating of timber, as well as the control of all timber and other forest produce in transit by land or water is vested in the Government who may from time to time make rules to regulate the transit of all timber and other forest produce" (Government of India, Parliament, Council of States and House of the People. The Jammu and Kashmir Forest Act, Section 15).

Khan shows her readers that the restrictions on the use of natural resources force Gujjar people to change their traditional practices and lifeways in order to subsist in changing conditions.¹¹¹ Their relationships with the nonhuman world must change as well. For "centuries," locals had obeyed certain rules in their use of natural resources. There was, for example, an unwritten "law that said the people of this valley must wait fifty years for each pine, deodar, and fir to reach maturity. Only after maturity could each be cut" (Khan 248). But present conditions have made this law impractical: "[h]ardly anyone waited anymore" (248).

Colonial laws pressured – "tricked" – many members of Maryam's own family into buying "small plots of land" to avoid paying the government yearly fees on the use of natural resources (251).¹¹² In so doing, they became locked into a sedentary agricultural lifestyle. The

¹¹¹ The conditions Khan describes here are reminiscent of what Rob Nixon calls "displacement without moving" (19). Advancing "a more radical notion of displacement [which] instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them," Nixon defines displacement without moving as "a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (19).

¹¹² I briefly discuss the rise in sedentarization in the early years of the British administration in later paragraphs. For more information, see the work of Mahesh Rangarajan.

state dictated what they planted, “and when”: “[t]he same cash crops, year after year, and for whom? The same people who took away their grazing rights” (251). This tactic of creating legal structures that force people into a position in which they have to grow a small number of cash crops every year is common to British colonialism (see Sourabh and Myllyntaus as well as Karmakar). It was enacted in colonial India as well, when the British started to use Indian land to grow poppies, cotton, and tea for export (Karmakar 277-78). Trapping people in a system of agricultural production that benefits the state while maintaining the population’s hungry and impoverished status is characteristic of the way British colonialism concomitantly exploits land and people. In addition to imposing laws restricting grazing, the state avidly pursues those who are deemed to break these laws:

The inspector had fined them for grazing on prohibited land, and this time, it was not about a sheep nibbling two stalks of a ginger plant, but an entire flock ripping apart an entire field. It was a lie. The field had been rotten to begin with, and they had been nowhere near it. (The field had been rotten because the land was easily destroyed in the floods the previous year. The land was easily destroyed because it had no trees. It had no trees because the same inspector grew fat each time the forest was torn down. There was always a beginning, hard as it was to keep track of sometimes.)¹¹³ (Khan 212)

Colonial laws governing land and resource use constitute the “beginning” to which Khan refers here (212). This passage shows the long-term effects of colonial laws on the local environment: it reveals the slow violence these laws enact on the environment, and show how exactly it impacts Gujjar lives and livelihoods.

¹¹³ The law Maryam is accused of breaking is the Cattle Trespass Act, 1977 (Government of India, Parliament, Council of States and House of the People. The Cattle Trespass Act, Section 10).

British colonial administrations unambiguously placed blame for environmental degradation in the colonies on the local Indigenous population and their grazing animals.¹¹⁴ This is a pattern that can be observed in British colonies across the world, but studies conducted by contemporary biogeographers and environmental scientists offer narratives that differ significantly from the ones presented in colonial reports on forest administration. Geographer Udo Schickhoff's work, for example, puts the conclusions of the colonial forest administration into perspective (see also the work of Rangarajan and of Guha). He conducts a historical analysis of forest cover changes in the Kaghan Valley, beginning in the Neolithic period and tracing changes in forest cover up until the 1990s. After walking the reader through the changes that took place over several millennia, Schickhoff concludes: “[f]ar-reaching, rapid changes in the distribution of forests and agricultural lands occurred only after the commencement of British administration in 1847” (Schickhoff 9). Before this time, the area was “thinly populated” (9) and “still largely covered with forests” (10); “[s]easonal migration of nomadic Gujars and their livestock to the alpine pastures was insignificant” (10). But in the first two decades of British rule, the region’s “political situation stabilized” (10), resulting in “increasing population and

¹¹⁴ “The Condition of the Forest Area in Relation to the Inhabitants of the Country,” published in the *Accounts and Papers of the House of Commons*, speaks of “wild people” and of “uncivilized hill tribes” (United Kingdom, Parliament, House of Commons. *Accounts and Papers of the House of Commons* 63) that inhabit the Western parts of British-occupied India, ravaging its forests. The “Forests of Cedar” section of “The Forests of India as Regards their Direct Utility” in the *Accounts* accuses the locals of indiscriminate tree felling, of over-working the forest, and states that the British government “had fortunately saved them [the forests]” (6). The document also attributes significant damage to forests to the local population and their grazing animals:

Another great source of damage is grazing. Numerous flocks of sheep and goats, which are driven to the upper grass lands during the summer season, pass through the forests on their way to and from the pasture grounds, and roam about by thousands: though they do not eat the young conifers, they browse them down, and young trees so injured rarely or never recover. Add to this the carelessness of the shepherds encamping in the vicinity and leaving fires alight, or kindling green wood so that the smoke may drive away the flies from their flocks, causes forest fires, the effect of which, in the inflammable conifer forests, can be readily imagined. (9)

The document concludes that “[i]t is therefore absolutely essential to prohibit grazing and fires in all forests which we hope to reproduce or to restore.” (64). The *Accounts* directly attribute loss of forest cover to the behaviors and lifeways of local nomadic peoples, blaming them for the environmental degradation in Northern Pakistan.

prospering agriculture” (10). The number of grazing cattle increases along with the population, and forest is cleared to make room for railways and arable land (10). At the same time, demand for timber skyrockets, “far surpass[ing] that of the commercial timber cutting prior to the railway building era” (10). Thus, the era in which the British took control of the region coincides with rapid social, political, and economic transformation which in turn fueled the cutting down of more and more trees. And in order to capitalize on the growing demand for timber, the British government set up “an increasingly efficient framework of governmental control, which gradually denied the local populations free access to their traditional natural resource bases, at a time when their numbers were beginning to increase” (Pouchepadass 2061). Mahesh Rangarajan arrives at similar conclusions about the impacts of colonialism on the forests of Pakistan (Rangarajan 159).¹¹⁵

Schickhoff’s and Rangarajan’s analyses show that the colonial era coincides with a time of significant deforestation in the Kaghan Valley. It is also a time of increased population, increased demand for timber, and increased economic pressure to become sedentary and to

¹¹⁵ Rangarajan recognizes that Gujjars and other groups who lived “on the fringes of arable society” were considered by the British “responsible for deforestation in addition to being lawless and unproductive” (161). But as his article demonstrates, there is more to the narrative than that. Rangarajan writes that, prior to the entrenchment of colonial law, “[c]ustomary restraints on the use of trees” ensured that the forest was not overexploited and that vegetation was able to renew itself (149). But under the British, “colonial land control and commercialisation led to deforestation” (148). He attributes British attitudes towards forests, in part, to the manifestations of the Agricultural Revolution in Great Britain:

Their own military history and the Agricultural Revolution often disposed them to a negative view of woodlands. Troops in seventeenth century Ireland had speedily levelled forests to deny cover to Irish rebels who were known as woodkernes. [...] the cutting of trees and the cultivation of wastes were taken to be signs of progress. Forests had long been seen as the abode of robbers and other disorderly people. (152)

Rangarajan argues that these same attitudes came into play in the administration of Indian forests. The same military tactics of clearing the land of trees were employed in early British India: “British rulers hoped to consolidate their control by extending cultivation. The denudation of the countryside helped them gain a military advantage against their foes” (153). Likewise, the “general distrust” of “indigenous forest users” such as the Gujjars led to systematic “efforts to bind them down to plough cultivation or to wage labour” (158). Pouchepadass also discusses widespread colonial efforts to encourage local populations to “adopt sedentary ways of life as settled cultivators or agricultural labourers” (2065). He explains that the colonial mindset was uncomfortable with the perceived “mobility and indiscipline” of non-sedentary lifestyles (2065); the impetus to make people sedentary was thus part of the larger colonial project of maintaining control over a land and a people, and of generation a sense of “order” in both.

cultivate the land – changes that call for trees to be cut down *en masse*. These are changes Maryam’s ancestors experienced first hand. Maryam knows that the state engages in massive-scale land clearing (Khan 212), that forests are “diminishing” (215) because of the logging industry, and that the amount of land available for grazing is shrinking rapidly. These transformations of the local landscape, coupled with the imposition of laws that govern how the remaining natural resources can be used, are distinguishing features of colonial environmental exploitation.¹¹⁶

The novel takes its critique of post/colonial environmental management a step further, revealing the unequal ways ecological vulnerability is distributed in the region: “[t]he forest inspector did not allow the timber mafia to fell the trees near his home, only those further away” (Khan 206). The forest inspector is in the state’s pockets: he can do whatever he pleases without experiencing the repercussions of the environmental degradation he causes. The forest near his house is preserved, allowing him to maintain the illusion of pristine, untouched nature in his immediate surroundings – another allusion to colonial power.¹¹⁷ Muneeza Yaqoob writes at length about “unequal development” in Pakistan (251), placing it alongside the “degradation of natural surroundings and resources and the deleterious impact on human habitats and communities” (250). Yaqoob argues that *Thinner than Skin* makes these types of connections obvious; I add that it also links them to imperialism.

References to imperialism and the uneven ecological distribution of its impacts pervade the novel. This point is frequently made in relation to oil. A modern version of the spice, timber, opium, or silk that fueled colonial trade in the past, oil becomes in the novel a symbol of empire-

¹¹⁶ I provide a brief overview of this history in Chapter 1, Section 3. See J. Murphy as well as Grove and Damodaran for more on how the South Asian landscape was shaped by colonialism.

¹¹⁷ See my discussion of the fantasy of unspoiled landscapes in Chapter 1; see also *Didur* 43 and *Casid* 45-47.

building: “a 3,000-kilometer pipeline running through Xinjiang Province would start pumping oil as early as next year. It was a throwback to the ties forged on the ancient Silk Road” (238).^{118,119}

The novel’s constant references to oil, the state, and the “Angrez” solidify the link between colonial resource extraction and the severe negative impacts on the local Gujjar population.

There is a growing body of humanities and social science scholarship that focuses specifically on oil in all its sociocultural, environmental, and political dimensions. Such studies in petroculture (petroleum culture) belong to a broader field of research called the energy humanities.¹²⁰ *After Oil*, a publication by the Petrocultures Research Group, explains that “[o]il composes space and shapes culture” (16). Oil is inherently social; it “names a way of organizing society, of bringing people together, and of keeping them apart” (17). It births “middle-class opportunity and material privilege in the West,” and, at the same time, it produces the mirror effect in other parts of the world, accelerating “precarity and mass unemployment” (17). Khan’s narrator makes it a point to emphasize oil’s paradoxical and unevenly distributed effects. In *Living Oil*, environmental studies scholar Stephanie LeMenager argues that “literary and cultural critics often ignore how the national frame obscures the regional impacts of oil” (12). She advocates instead for a regional framework for engaging with oil in fiction, one that would better “activate[...] vital historical and ecological frames, opening an explicit point of view onto

¹¹⁸ The pipeline Khan refers to is not yet operational. Its construction is a part of the 2016 CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) infrastructural initiative.

¹¹⁹ Amitav Ghosh draws a comparison between the oil and spice as well. In his field-defining review in which he coins the term “petroculture” (later picked up by environmental studies scholars such as Imre Szeman and Stephanie LeMenager), Ghosh likens the present-day oil industry to the sixteenth-century spice trade (Ghosh, “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter in the Novel,” in Szeman and Boyer’s *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*).

¹²⁰ Research in this field “position[s] oil and energy as the fulcrum around which many of today’s most pressing social, economic, and political issues must be analyzed and understood” (Wilson et al. 4). In their 2017 *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer define the goals of the energy humanities as follows:

The point is [...] to turn phenomena such as global warming, species extinction, and environmental degradation inside out, so as to reveal how the use and abuse of energy have contributed to the making of what Anna Tsing terms the ‘damaged planet’. We wish to shed light on the fuel apparatus of modernity, which is all too often invisible or subterranean, but which pumps and seeps into the groundwaters of politics, culture, institutions, and knowledge in unexpected ways. (Szeman and Boyer 9)

global-scale forces and flows, such that we can see and sense them” (LeMenager 12-13). *Thinner than Skin* offers such a regional frame for studying oil’s entanglement with globalization, imperialism, and ecological degradation, and for analyzing the ways oil and oil pipelines figure in contemporary literary imagination.

Oil recurs throughout Khan’s *Thinner than Skin* in connection with extreme wealth and abject poverty. In one of the towns Nadir visits, he sees a graffiti that reads: “*Pipelineistan 4 Hu?*” (Khan 238). The graffiti speaks to two important issues that the novel tackles. First, the idea that countries like Pakistan are nameless, unimportant places that only figure in global conversations in relation to extracting and moving oil – and second, the question of who all this oil will benefit. Khan’s narrator provides the answer: “[d]espite the billions of dollars invested, ethnic Kazakhs and Uyghurs still lived below the poverty line, deprived of their ancestral homes. These men were refugees; they were also fugitives” (238).¹²¹ This passage is reminiscent of many others in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*: it emphasizes the fact that despite all the infrastructural development in the region, profits are sucked up by the powerful few.¹²² The local poor experience none of the economic benefits of these changes – in fact, they bear the brunt of the environmental devastation that the pipelines inevitably cause.¹²³ The region’s past as a space of colonial environmental exploitation makes it highly vulnerable to further degradation. This constant threat of future risks pervades the novel.

¹²¹ The novel insists on exposing the poverty that surrounds Nadir in Pakistan. While enjoying a meal at a restaurant, he starts contemplating the conditions in which local Pakistanis live: “I began thinking how odd it was, the way the best-fed at the table was the one being lavished, when three-quarters of the Pakistani population lived under \$2 a day. 40 percent had no access to drinking water. 50 percent no sanitation. I could smell the open gutter out on the street” (Khan 31).

¹²² See my discussion of *The Inheritance of Loss*, Chapter 1.

¹²³ Oil pipeline leaks and spills are a regular occurrence. A 2017 report shows that, in the USA alone, the crude oil pipeline system “has averaged one significant incident and a total of ~570 barrels released per year per 1000 miles of pipe, over the past 10 years” (Donaghy and Stewart). While there is no data on the pipeline Khan refers to specifically since it is not yet operational, it is safe to extrapolate from global pipeline leak statistics that these too will pose significant ecological risks to the region.

Section 3: Ecological Vulnerability and Earthquakes

The mountains and glaciers of Gilgit-Baltistan are a threatening presence. They loom in the background of the plot, picturesque but deadly, like “serrated knives” against the sky (301). Ultar Sar, the peak that Nadir and his group have come to climb, is described in particularly ominous language:

[...] I heard a groan. It was not a human voice. It was not a rockfall. This was a groan that came from somewhere else. The first thought that entered my mind, *a whale*. [...]

I'd never heard a whale sing but I imagined it might be like this. It was the sound of sheer bulk. A lunge through a dark void of unimaginable weight, as the lungs sought release. And I was carried along, higher, higher, till I heard the first suck of air in the form of a crack. The beast kept pulling me toward itself. As the snapping and heaving grew louder, I heard the distinctive tone of ice, and it was as if an ancient corpse were trying to break free of its colossal tomb.

I was at the glacier. (Khan 312)

During the ascent, Nadir can hear the earth “groan[ing]” (312) and “rumbl[ing]” (310). He can feel it “move” beneath his feet (303), the ice “creaking” (310) and “cracking” (313). The sense of instability and precarity he experiences on Ultar Sar pervades the novel. These mountains regularly bury entire towns under landslides and crush people under falling boulders (338-39). The region is permanently at risk of being destroyed – if not by falling rocks then by flooding from rivers or glacier melt.¹²⁴ Khan makes this vulnerability explicit: “[i]t was a fragile town; another flood or earthquake and it might not survive at all. It was already barely keeping afloat” (246). By filtering the narrative through the eyes of Nadir and Maryam, the reader gets both the

¹²⁴ Landslides are common in the region (see Hewitt), but flooding in the region is far more “devastating” (Tariq and Van De Giesen 11; see also Farooqi et al.).

abstract sense of fear and awe that the mountains and glaciers inspire in the photographer, and the much more concrete fears about daily subsistence that the herder experiences. The narrative thus establishes the region's vulnerability to a variety of environmental risks, and then expands upon these risks through snippets of local news that catch Nadir's attention and through Maryam's recollections of traumatic environmental events in the area.

One of these events is the severe flooding that "gushed a kilometer up the highway" (Khan 266). Nadir learns that "[y]esterday the Gilgit River had thrust into a mosque, sweeping away twelve worshippers, including three children. Two children were still missing, the third was dead" (266). He also hears a story about another similarly violent event: a local tells him that the first group of people to live in the region were hit by a landslide that killed "[a]ll but two" of them (270). Earthquakes, mudslides, landslides, and falling rocks are part of daily life in the region – they are even woven into the origin stories that the locals tell about their ancestors.

Maryam, unlike Nadir, is intimately familiar with such events. She recalls how, "[a]fter the earthquake," her family had been forced to take a different route during their migration (Khan 337). In past years, they had "camped at the foot of a glacier, in potato fields that ripened swiftly under the blanket of steaming dung the cattle bestowed" (338). But excessive rains had "washed" the field away (338): "[i]t had happened plenty of times before, though never like this" (338). Maryam knows that it is all because of the glacier: "[d]one with keeping all that pressure locked inside, it let the world feel its pulse, taking the fields, the homes, the cattle, and the grain" (338). This unprecedented flooding directly impacts Maryam and her family. Maryam observes changes that her ancestors never witnessed – these never-before-seen events speak to the region's changing conditions under climate change. The novel thus harnesses Maryam's intimate

familiarity with the region, using her recollections to generate a before-and-after view of the altered landscape.

As the narrative progresses, mentions of the earth moving and rocks falling become increasingly frequent. Within the last fifty pages of the text, several traumatic events happen in quick succession: Nadir experiences several close calls with death (Khan 305, 308), Irfan falls into a crevasse and breaks his leg when the ground moves (316), Nadir is severely beaten by authorities for suspicion of terrorism (326-32), and, finally, the novel ends with a rendering of the 2005 earthquake (338-39). Nadir's environmental trauma is most intense when the ground beneath his feet starts to move and his friend Irfan falls into a crevasse and is injured; Maryam's is the most intense in the aftermath of the earthquake. The novel's use of perspective becomes particularly useful in recording these events: it foregrounds characters' traumatic experiences of violent environmental events. However, the text's treatment of these events also indicates that such traumatic experiences are not fully representable.

Nadir's trauma resists being rendered in the narrative. During the ascent of Ultar Sar, Nadir comes very close to dying several times. First, he is injured when a boulder rolls away beneath him, causing him to fall (Khan 303). Next, he almost dies when lightning strikes and boulders come crashing down the mountainside, rolling over the exact spot he had been standing in seconds prior: "[a] second bolt: I saw a rock the size of a house charge down the mountain's side. A third: the rock smashed into pieces as it bounced on the slope" (305). Nadir gets out of the way just in time: "[i]f I were on that side of the ravine instead of this one, I'd be dead" (305). He tries to keep his emotions under control, but his fear starts to take over: "I was checking my watch compulsively now. I was beginning to feel the altitude. [...] My lungs no longer felt clean but swollen. So did my feet. [...] I was being watched" (306).

He loses track of where he is going, and, to his “horror,” ends up once again on a ledge, “past a gap,” standing on a “crumbling wall” (Khan 308). He almost dies once again, and it causes his mind to start to spiralling: “[i]t was as though something was willing me to do it. It was not my will! These were not my legs!” (309). It is clear that he is starting to unravel. His thoughts become increasingly erratic and illogical, and he seems to lose control over his actions: “I think I shouted, *These are not my legs!* before it dawned on me that this was a terrible time to shout. [...] I had to think clearly what to do next. And then I had to stop thinking. I had to act. Stop thinking. Stop thinking” (309). He soon starts hearing things: “[a] leopard or the escort? A ghost or Farhana? There was a creaking too; like the night, the stones were turning in their sleep” (310).¹²⁵ The nearer Nadir gets to the glacier, the less the reader knows what is going on because the narrative becomes disorientating due to its being filtered through the perspective of a severely distressed man.

When Nadir finally reaches the glacier, he sees his best friend Irfan and his girlfriend Farhana kissing on the edge of a crevasse (Khan 313-14). He is crushed by this betrayal and his mind starts spinning:

Then came ugliness. I saw the crevasse behind Irfan. I saw the indigo wash of light pouring off the drop, the fin-like gash of ultramarine swirling around the snowy edges now melting in the sun, and farther, the wide black mouth into which he might fall. It would be easy to slip. I couldn't see the depth; perhaps it would only cause minor injury. (314)

As a part of him considers pushing Irfan, another part of him resists: “[m]y mind stepped in and slapped my hand away. How could I picture Irfan this way? What demons had possessed me?”

¹²⁵ This reference to a ghost is not entirely surprising. After Kiran drowns and he fails to rescue her, Nadir starts seeing her everywhere. He refers to these hallucinations as ghosts.

(314). Nadir is of two minds. The text mirrors this doubling by splitting his mind from his body: “[m]y hand lashed back. Good demons. Easy, just walk and push” (314). Nadir is so distressed that his mind is unable to process what actually happened: “What exactly happened when I’d approached them? *Had* I approached them? I couldn’t remember. I remembered some things only” (315-16, original emphasis). This inability to remember is later echoed in Maryam’s inability to recall the details of the earthquake. Although they both experience the traumatic event, they are unable to recall or relay it in a way that renders it understandable.

Nadir does, however, remember certain things about the earth moving and Irfan falling. He remembers “wondering” if he has the strength to push Irfan off the edge – “[a]nd the glacier had heard” (Khan 316):

A ray of sun had tickled her rib; she began to sweat. Adjusting her spine, she shrank, expanded, then advanced. They were fools to stand on that rib, but even so, I would not have thought it possible, the way their position moved, sliding closer to the edge, as she oscillated so very slightly, to and fro, a micrometer shrug, and Irfan was slipping backward, while Farhana’s eyes opened at last. (316)

It is unclear if this is another earthquake or simply a large chunk of ice moving beneath their feet, but when the ground shifts, Irfan falls and is trapped in the crevasse. And the narrative, filtered through Nadir’s eyes, turns away from Irfan to focus instead on the landscape: “I could see it now. Ultar’s shadow. The sun had peeled off his mask” (316). While his friend lays the bottom of a crevasse, Nadir’s mind races: “[t]here was a legend about that mountain but I couldn’t remember it. No doubt it involved a demon and a death” (316). He is incapable of processing what just happened, and the narrative, following his train of thought, goes off in another direction, contemplating how “sublime” Irfan and Farhana had looked while kissing

(316). Then, Nadir tosses Irfan his pack: “[t]here’s water left” (316). Without another word, Nadir begins his descent, ignoring the others who call after him.

The above passages show how trauma affects the narrative rendering of an event. Traumatic experiences resist representation. During the ascent of Ultar Sar, the narrative gradually moves away from recording events and starts focusing more intently on Nadir’s inner monologue, on his thoughts and fears. As this happens, the language becomes increasingly abstract and fantastical rather than concrete and factual: “leopard[s]” (Khan 310), “beast[s]” (312), “demons” (314), and “ghost[s]” (310) enter the narrative as Nadir retreats further into his own mind to shield himself from what is going on around him.

The passage in which Maryam recollects the exceptionally destructive earthquake also illustrates how the narrative moves in moments when the perspective it is filtered through cannot fully process the event. The text resists fully representing catastrophe. Maryam felt the earth moving, and recalls its impacts on the route her family takes during their migration: “[w]hen the earthquake bucked the land, it left behind a small artificial lake. They had been forced to trek around this” (Khan 338).¹²⁶ The earthquake throws off the rhythm of her family’s life: because of it, it took them “longer to leave the plains. A part of her feared they would never leave at all” (338). But ultimately, Maryam and her family were the lucky ones – they survived. The nearby town, however, was completely buried: “*Balakot is completely lost*” (338).

Maryam’s memories of the event are unclear: “[e]ven now, months later, she could do no more than isolate a few details of their combined devastation” (Khan 338). The horrors she witnessed resist recollection, and, by extension, narrative representation. The novel offers no concrete visual images of a town buried under rubble. Rather, the descriptions of the earthquake

¹²⁶ It is possible that the artificial lake Khan refers to here is the lake that formed in Attabad, following a landslide that Tariq and Gomes believe was caused by the 2005 earthquake (1).

and its aftermath that the text provides are much more abstract: “Maryam had never heard so much terror, or breathed so much death. The goddess had finally unleashed upon their valley the full weight of her wrath, and more men, women, and children than Maryam had ever seen now lay buried beneath it” (338). There are no visual cues to go on – only impressionistic snippets. The brief descriptions of Maryam’s recollections resist representation – they are about feeling, sensation, rather than about the rational processing of information which is necessary for relaying facts and providing descriptions. The other survivors are unable to provide better accounts of the event: “shocked,” they “stared past the cameras and far into the heavy dust of their past lives” (338).

The 2005 Kashmir earthquake to which this passage refers was, in fact, extraordinarily devastating. It killed over 86,000 people and displaced approximately four million (Owen et al. 1). It also triggered thousands of landslides that buried many nearby towns, including Balakot (1). The largest of these earthquake-triggered landslides, named the Hattian Bala landslide, buried approximately 450 people along with several villages (4). As Tariq and Gomes show, the region is completely transformed by the earthquake, and has experienced “widening” landslides in the years following the 2005 catastrophe (Tariq and Gomes 3). They explain that, in the aftermath of earthquakes, landslides are more likely to occur “due to the loosening of bedrock and other stratified soil layers. Such loosely suspended land masses could easily be converted into debris flow by minor tremors and pore-water pressure due to heavy rainfall experienced by the region during rainy season” (Tariq and Gomes 7). Tariq and Gomes as well as Owen et al. both link landslide occurrence in the region to anthropogenic activity, particularly to “deforestation” and “soil erosion” (Tariq and Gomes 7) as well as “road construction” (Owen et

al. 7). Owen et al. calculate that “[a]nthropogenic excavations and terracing” contributed to over fifty percent of the landslides his team surveyed in the areas affected by the 2005 earthquake (8).

The *U.S. Geological Survey* explains that the earthquake was the result of “the continental collision of the India and Eurasia [tectonic] plates” (“M 7.6 – Pakistan”). Owing to its proximity to the meeting of these two tectonic plates, northern Pakistan is “one of the most seismically hazardous regions on Earth” (“M 7.6 – Pakistan”). Earthquakes are therefore relatively common there. The *Survey* shows 1,268 earthquakes varying in intensity from magnitude 3.2 (minor) to 7.6 (major) recorded in Gilgit-Baltistan and the surrounding areas of northwestern Kashmir (to the east) and the Afghani Hindu Kush region (to the west) between 1955 and 2019. But data also shows that earthquakes of certain magnitudes are gradually becoming increasingly frequent (Usman 928-29). Muhammad Usman argues that this change in earthquake frequency is linked to climate change, and he is not the first to make this argument.¹²⁷ He explains that rising temperatures cause the glaciers in northern Pakistan to melt; “as the glaciers melt their load on [the tectonic] plate lessens,” resulting in the “greater likelihood of an earthquake [in order] to relieve the large strain underneath” (926-27). Bill McGuire goes into greater detail on this connection. He writes that although it is not possible to tie climate change to any specific geological event, “there is a powerful consensus that the melting of large ice sheets leads to a combination of spectacular uplift and a period of increased earthquake activity as tectonic strain that has accrued on faults beneath and adjacent to the ice sheets is released” (McGuire 133). *Thinner than Skin*’s representation of the 2005 earthquake may not connect it with climate change in any explicit manner, but it does position it within a continuum of other

¹²⁷ Bill McGuire’s *Waking the Giant: How a Changing Climate Triggers Earthquakes, Tsunamis and Volcanoes* as well as Liu et al.’ 2009 article in *Nature* also argue for a connection between climate change and a rise in earthquake frequency. See my Introduction for more on this connection.

catastrophes such as species disappearances that have followed in the wake of colonial environmental exploitation and have made the lifeways of the Gujjar family the novel focuses on increasingly precarious.

The destruction that the 2005 earthquake caused was unprecedented: never before had an earthquake in the Himalayan region caused a surface rupture, and the 2005 earthquake caused a rupture of over seventy-five kilometers (Naranjo). The event is so traumatic for the region that it is no surprise Khan's narrator resists providing concrete visuals of the event. Such a catastrophe, the novel implies, cannot be rendered. It cannot even be properly recollected. Khan's use of perspective and narrative movement allow the novel both to render the catastrophe and, at the same time, to resist rendering it. In this way, the novel shows how traumatic experiences of violent environmental events affect the narrative treatment of catastrophe.

Section 4: Disappearance of Local Species

Thinner than Skin records ongoing large-scale environmental changes in northern Pakistan, including land clearing, sedentarization, pipeline construction, and so forth. These changes in the landscape are paired with changes in local fauna. In her discussion of contemporary environmental conditions in *Virtual Menageries*, Jody Berland illuminates this relationship between human-animal relationships, environmental degradation, and human-caused environmental catastrophes:

[...] our politicians are madly terminating regulations protecting endangered species and bodies of water; palm oil producers are eliminating so much forest that orangutans, Sumatran tigers, and some parrots will be extinct in the wild in no time, giraffes and elephants the week after that; [...] hermit crabs are living in tin cans, whales are

devouring plastic, every time I go into social media I risk becoming paralyzed with distress.” (2)

Berland’s catalogue of these instances in which animals become the vehicles for rendering visible the impacts of contemporary human-driven environmental change signals the central role animals must play in contemporary disaster studies and humanistic analyses of representations of catastrophe. Her work also explicitly links human-animal relationships with colonial expansion and the colonial conquest of the natural world (7-9).

In *Thinner than Skin*, perhaps the most significant and direct impact of colonialism on Gujjar lifeways is the introduction of foreign livestock breeds that push out Indigenous livestock breeds. In focusing on Maryam’s perspective, Khan draws attention to the ways these changes continue to enact colonial violence: they disrupt traditional Indigenous lifeways, sever traditional relationships with native animal species, and contribute to the further marginalization of these communities. Gujjars live off of cattle rearing. By fueling the disappearance of native animal breeds through the introduction of foreign breeds, the state compromises their ability to make ends meet. In the sections of the novel told from Maryam’s perspective, the narrator explains that cattle rearing is “becoming a curse” (Khan 214) because of “the dying indigenous breeds and the restrictions on grazing in a diminishing forest” (214-15). Maryam’s family used to own many horses, but there were only two left: the mare Namasha and her filly Loi Tara. They both belong to the “Kaliani” breed (207). Maryam recalls that only a generation ago, there had been many other breeds of horses in the region:

In her father’s time, there had been the Nukra, Bharssi, even the Yarkandi breed, said to have come down from the Fergana Valley long ago, perhaps with her people. [...] Now

all those breeds were lost, forever. By the time Kiran was her age, the Kaliani breed too might be extinct. (207)

The disappearance of varied local species and their replacement with a small number of foreign species is becoming increasingly common worldwide. In fact, studies of indigenous livestock breeds show that the total number of existing breeds is declining globally (Hall and Ruane 815). 16% of all livestock breeds that existed in the twentieth century have already disappeared, and another 15% are “defined as rare” (815).¹²⁸

A study by the Tribal Research and Cultural Foundation (TRCF), a Gujjar-led organization, tracks the disappearance of indigenous livestock breeds over the past several decades. The study concludes that nomadic Gujjar and Bakerwal tribes in the Jammu and Kashmir region have lost twelve breeds of horse, goats, sheep, and dogs over the past half-century or so (see Jameel; Sharma; “12 Species of Animals Extinct in J&K: Study”; “Gujjars Lose Rare Species, Some on Verge of Extinction: Study.”) Yarkandi, Nukra, and Bharssi horses, as *Thinner than Skin* accurately states, are already extinct, while Jaskardi horses and Kaliani horses (the breed to which Namasha and Loi Tara belong) are rare and “on the verge of extinction” (Jameel). In fact, worldwide, “[a]ll the indigenous horse breeds show declining trends” (Ahlawat et al. 222). Local sheep and goat breeds are likewise disappearing:

Some of the traditional [breeds] of sheep which have already disappeared include

Ghidord Phamphri, Punchi Bakerwali, Bani, and Karnahi. The study further says that in

¹²⁸ Accurate statistics about livestock breed diversity in northern Pakistan are hard to come by, since there is a dearth of published research on this subject (Hall and Ruane 815). Even the “Domestic Animal Diversity Information System” published by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation reports that risk of disappearance is “Unknown” for 90.12% of the farmed and domesticated animals in Asia (“Domestic Animal Diversity Information System (DAD-IS)”). The difficulty of researching the disappearance of indigenous livestock breeds lies in the fact that the vast majority of databases of livestock breeds were compiled long after the breeds in question disappeared, and extinct breeds do not appear in these lists at all.

goat species, Kaghani, Lubdi and Kilan are on the verge of extinction whereas Gurziya, Belori, Lamdi and Goodri [...] have already disappeared. (Jameel)

Six more rare livestock breeds are on “the verge of extinction” in the surrounding Himalayan belt (Jameel).

The disappearance of native goat and sheep breeds is one of Maryam’s major grievances. She tells Kiran about the “fat Australian sheep the government was selling them, to replace the thin desi kind” (Khan 190). The TRCF study attributes the dying out of indigenous sheep breeds to the government’s 1968 introduction of “foreign high-yielding breeds,” namely the Australian Merino sheep (Jameel; see also “12 Species of Animals Extinct in J&K: Study”). At first, the Australian sheep seemed like a good investment to Maryam: they yield twice as much meat as native sheep breeds (Khan 190). But Maryam quickly discovers that there is a catch:

they were finding out, too late, that fat foreign sheep were not as strong as thin desi sheep. They could not survive the icy winds and sudden snowdrifts of Kaghan Valley.

They were fussy eaters. And they were slow-moving, adjusting poorly to nomadic living and complaining too much. (190)

Maryam calls the Australian sheep “sedentary” (190). Ill-adapted to Gujjar nomadic lifestyles, they fail survive long enough for their high price to be worthwhile: “[i]f they don’t live even half as long as our sheep, where is the gain from all that wool and meat?” (190). Native goat breeds are also being replaced with foreign ones: “[t]he government replaced the sturdy Kaghani goats and the fierce Kilan goats with those that yielded more mutton but ate all the feed and left the Indigenous goats bleating in hunger” (191).

Maryam’s grievances are consistent with scientific observations on how poorly-adapted foreign (“exotic”) livestock breeds are to harsher environments:

The majority of indigenous livestock around the world are bred locally and kept by small-scale livestock keepers and pastoralists, especially in developing nations. These breeds may be less productive than their high-yielding exotic relatives, but they are supremely adapted to the harsh environments where they dwell and can produce under conditions where other breeds cannot survive. Indigenous breeds are drought tolerant, as well as disease and heat resistant. In the 12,000 years since livestock were first domesticated, more than 7000 breeds have been developed, many of which have adapted to a specific habitat and been shaped, often over centuries, by the cultural preferences of a particular community. (Ahlawat et al. 226-227)

The Australian sheep also cause a great number of problems for Maryam's family.

Because of their "silly diet" (Khan 190), they "forced the herders into pastures that were closed to them," causing them to have to pay "[h]uge fines" (190) because of the 1977 Cattle Trespass Act.

By taking away Gujjars' "freedom to roam the land" through the fencing of government-owned lands and the imposition of fines for trespassing, the government is effectively "killing the sheep they had been forced to buy" (Khan 191). The novel thus illustrates how the residue of colonial mechanisms of environmental control operate in ways that rupture traditional human relationships with native species and force Indigenous populations into increasingly unsustainable living conditions. Here, introduced animals function as tools of the colonial laws I analyzed earlier: co-opted into neo/colonial schemes of control over the physical environment, they impede traditional human-nonhuman relationships and contribute to the marginalization of Gujjar peoples by pushing out the native species with which they have long had close relationships. Heather Davis and Zoe Todd point out that this deliberate severing of human-

animal relations is part and parcel of the colonial process, “because it was through this severing that dispossession and integration could take place” (771). In disrupting the bonds that Indigenous communities have long shared with certain animals, neo/colonial legal and administrative practices do much more than simply enact ecological violence. Todd, who has written extensively on how settler colonialism has disrupted Indigenous human relationships with fish in the Canadian prairies, explains that while animals “ensure human survival as a plentiful food source,” they also play a much more important role in structuring Indigenous social life. Human-animal relationships, Todd explains, “represent a whole host of social, cultural, and legal-governance principles that underpin life” in a given community (Todd). When native species disappear, the social and legal structures that these communities have negotiated with and through these animals are compromised as well.¹²⁹

With both animals and forests refracting colonial power, violence, and control, Maryam laments the vicious cycle she feels trapped in. Her reflections on how the world is changing, impacting the traditional lifeways of the Gujjar people, shed light on the multiple entwined historical, economic, and ecological forces that contribute to native species extinction and foreign species introduction. Her lengthy speeches to Kiran explicitly link colonial forces to current conditions of environmental vulnerability and economic precarity for her people. The disappearance of native horses, goats, and sheep, constitutes a slow-moving catastrophe for the Gujjar herders, whose lifeways are made increasingly precarious and unsustainable because of it. Animals and catastrophe come together in the text, and the text uses these same animals to work through catastrophe.

¹²⁹ I explore this topic in more detail in Part 2 of this Chapter.

Section 5: Animals and Catastrophe

Human relationships with animals make up a significant part of the novel's plot. And Khan uses animality as a narrative device through which her characters think through the traumatic events they experience. Faced with such events, both Maryam and Nadir turn to animality to cope with their experiences.

When Nadir witnesses Irfan's fall on Ultar Sar, his mind starts filtering events through the language of animality and the glacier starts to take on various animal characteristics. Ultar Sar becomes "beast" (Khan 312) – "*a whale*" (312) more precisely. Nadir sees its "fin-like gash" (314) and, further away, its "wide black mouth" (314). When Irfan falls, Nadir knows that he has fallen into that mouth, and that underneath him "lay a russet tongue of gravel between a file of punishing teeth" (316). Ghafoor, too, picks up on Ultar Sar's animality. He tells Nadir that glaciers hibernate, "[l]ike mammals and birds. When the sun shines, and the ice melts, they roll over" (318). His statement resonates with Nadir's description of the earth moving beneath their feet. Nadir speaks of the glacier's "rib" (316) and "spine" (316), which "shrank, expanded, then advanced" under the sun's heat (316). Ultimately, it is Ultar Sar's "shrug" that causes Irfan's fall (316).

Throughout the text, Nadir speaks of the mountains and glaciers as people. Local stories cast them as lovers: "Malika Parbat, Queen of the Mountains" (Khan 63) and "Nanga Parbat. Naked Mountain" (64). Nadir recurrently refers to Malika Parbat as "her" (63), speaks of its moods and habits (64), and likens its reflection in the lake to the mirror that newlyweds gaze into to see themselves married for the first time (63). He and Irfan likewise refer to Nanga Parbat by saying "him" (64). But in this particular moment in the text, the glacier stop being human and

becomes, instead, animal. Rendering it animal seems to make the trauma he experiences more manageable.

The text similarly uses animals to work through Maryam's trauma. The novel goes to great lengths to establish that Maryam and her children share a deep bond with their animals and learn a great deal about life through them. As a child, "Kiran saw her first disemboweled goat" (Khan 124):

[...] the goat's entrails lay splattered in the green, her juices mixing with those of the wet earth, the flies thick and droopy. [...] The goat's skin was peeled back, like a shawl, and the sun lit the sheen underneath. Perhaps it was this that left her thunderstruck. The sun, with which they prayed and sang, could cause a hurt to turn shiny before your eyes. Or perhaps it was the frailness of the hide. (124)

Kiran asked Maryam "if her skin was as thin as a goat's" (124), and her mother told her the truth: "[i]t was thinner. Which meant, of course, that if a goat could be shred that easily, so could a woman" (124). Maryam uses the goat to help her children learn about the frailty of life. The novel insists on this learning process: "[i]f that spring death found Kiran in the skin of a goat, by autumn, before they returned to the plains, it would find her again, this time, in the eyes of a buffalo" (125). Kiran witnesses the mare Namasha lose her first foal and then "the steed that sired it" – the one that had impaled itself on the barbed wire fence (125). She thus learns "that bitterness could immobilize two legs *and* four" (125), recognizing in animals the loss and trauma that she must have seen in people. Kiran learns to process grief, pain, and fear through her experiences with her family's animals. And when Maryam witnesses the devastation caused by the earthquake, she too thinks through animals to manage the trauma.

The movement of the text following the earthquake is worth noting. The narrative focuses on the earthquake and its repercussions for only brief moments, before turning away and focusing instead on Maryam's relationship with her animals. Immediately following the passage describing the earthquake, Maryam's thoughts return to her animals. She acknowledges not being able to remember everything that happened that day, but she remembers that the goat Makheri saved her life. Maryam had been watching Noor, the buffalo, when the earthquake occurred:

Noor's eyes had begun to roll high into her head. And her tail! It did not swat her back so much as stand upright, like a snake, jerking and twitching, as though about to drop! Maryam had been staring at the monstrous movements of her most placid beast when Makheri, the goat with the too-high teats, rammed her from behind, saving her life. In the space where Maryam had been sanding crashed a pistachio tree. How could it be? She had been harvesting the nuts of that tree not two weeks earlier. Noor now lay beneath it. Her tail still twitching. (Khan 338-39)

Unable to think anymore about the "devastation" (338), about the "men, woman, and children" buried under the rubble (338), Maryam's mind turns away from the earthquake and toward her animals. The movement of the text thus captures the character's inability to cope with the events she experienced and the things she witnessed. This shift happens once more in the following pages. Maryam notices missing tents in the valley: some people were scared away by the violence in the region, others were "crushed by a boulder when the earth moved" (339). As her thoughts drift to the other horrors she witnessed of late – "the boy found in the waterhole" (339), his limbs "broken" (297) and his head "crumpled like an aluminum can stamped on by a horse"

(297), and the “shopkeeper beaten to death by policemen” (339) – she recalls the loss of Loi Tara, Namasha’s filly.

Police return repeatedly to Maryam’s home to question her family about the terrorist activity in the region. One day, they beat Younis badly, and Maryam pleads with them: “*take anything you want but the children*” (340). They take Loi Tara. Maryam knows Namasha blames her for this loss: “Maryam did not dare approach Namasha anymore. Only her husband had that privilege now” (Khan 340). She and Suleiman share an unspoken understanding: “even her husband did not ask the mare to carry a single item—not a lamb or even a copper bowl—on her back on their migration to the highlands. She would have thrown it off anyway” (340). They know that Namasha’s pain is profound, and they respect it: “[t]here was a limit to the extent of baggage any creature should hold” (340). Maryam and Suleiman’s relationship with Namasha shows a recognition of her grief and pain. It even shows a considerable amount of guilt. The text here shows Maryam recognizing her own grief in Namasha’s. The movement of the passage is equally significant. Once more, the text turns away from violence, trauma, and death, and turns instead to Maryam’s relationship with her animals. Sticking to Maryam’s perspective, the text’s movement follows the meanderings of her thoughts. Maryam must periodically turn away from the devastation of the region in order to be able to cope with it. By filtering the experience of the earthquake and its aftermath through Maryam’s eyes, the novel shows that animals function as a site for negotiating traumatic experiences of violent environmental events.

Section 6: Conclusion

Thinner than Skin handles different types of catastrophes: slow-moving catastrophes such as species disappearance as well as catastrophes that are “immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space” (Nixon 2) such as the 2005 earthquake. Although brief sections of the

novel are rendered from other characters' points of view, the text always returns to either Maryam's or Nadir's perspectives. This control over narrative perspective allows Khan to manipulate the way catastrophe is represented. *Thinner than Skin* demonstrates that traumatic environmental events resist simplistic representation. The text both renders catastrophe and resists fully rendering it, thus drawing attention to the way employing the perspective of a traumatized character affects the literary representation of violent environmental events.

The novel goes to great lengths to illustrate the myriad ways in which the aftermath of colonial systems of environmental control continue to impact Gujjar people today. Khan shows that colonial legacies have rendered this region ecologically vulnerable and have disrupted the traditional lifeways of the people who have lived there for generations. In studying movement and perspective in the text, I trace both how the text connects colonialism to catastrophe and environmental vulnerability, and how it uses animality to work through characters' experiences of traumatic environmental events. The text uses animals to shine light on the catastrophic consequences of species disappearance in northern Pakistan and to allow characters to cope with traumatic environmental events. Animality, literal and metaphorical, plays a critical role both in the way this text represents traumatic events and in the way characters work through them. Native animal species provide Gujjar people with sustenance and stability. In the novel, meaningful, long-standing relationships with animals belonging to native species – such as Namasha, Noor, Makheri, and Loi Tara – make catastrophe more manageable for environmentally vulnerable communities. Introduced animal species, by contrast, contribute to the increasing marginalization of Gujjar lifeways. Colonialism thus organizes possible relationships between postcolonial subjects and nonhuman animals, showing that colonial violence against humans sometimes works through animal bodies.

Part 2: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

Section 1: Synopsis and Literature Review

Carpentaria revolves around the stories and experiences of several Indigenous people living in the fictional town of Desperance, in northern Australia. It stages conflicts between the Indigenous inhabitants of Pricklebush, on the outskirts of the town, and the settlers living in the centre of town. It also handles conflicts between Indigenous Australians and the multinational mining company Gurfurrit. While the narrative moves between different narrative perspectives, it follows three central characters: the fisherman and skilled taxidermist Normal (Norm) Phantom, Mozzie Fishman, a practitioner of traditional Waanyi religion, and Norm's son Will, the activist who left home to join Mozzie and his followers on a spiritual journey.

Carpentaria, set in the Gulf of Carpentaria, opens with an Indigenous Australian creation myth and closes with a dramatization of a particularly destructive cyclone that struck northern Australia in 1972. Grounding the novel in real historical conditions and in a real historical catastrophic event, and harnessing the cosmologies and storytelling tropes that characterize Indigenous Australian oral traditions, Wright produces a disorientating narrative mode that I call Indigenous realism.¹³⁰ The novel links colonization to catastrophe and explores the way

¹³⁰ There are scholars who call Wright's novel "magical realism," but there is considerable scholarly resistance to the application of this term to Indigenous works, because its naming "reflect[s] a Eurocentric theoretical vision" (Maufort, "Forging an 'Aboriginal Realism'" 21). Marc Maufort and Alison Ravenscroft use the term "Aboriginal realism" instead. This term designates works by Indigenous authors which draw extensively on Indigenous myth and storytelling (Maufort, "'Listen to Them Cry out from Their Dreaming'" 56), and which "combine[...] elements drawn from Euro-American realism with elements derived from an Aboriginal world vision" (Maufort, "Forging an 'Aboriginal Realism'" 16). An adaptation of the term magic(al) realism, "Aboriginal realism" works to challenge and decentre "the certainties of Western realistic perception" (21). Maufort qualifies it as a "hybrid" form (16). Ravenscroft does not use this descriptor. Her discussion of "Aboriginal realism" focuses on the fact that it is a literary mode that Indigenous authors such as Alexis Wright employ to articulate a "true story" about their experience of and relationship to the world (Ravenscroft 211). In fact, Wright herself applies this term to *Carpentaria*: "[s]ome people call the book magic realism but really in a way, it's an Aboriginal realism which carries all sorts of things" (qtd. in Ravenscroft 220). The voice of the novel, Wright explains, is the "voice of Aboriginal elders speaking about people and country, talking about what Aboriginal culture is [...]" (qtd. in Ravenscroft 211). I highlight the elements of Indigenous myth and storytelling which characterize this particular literary mode, so, following Alexis Wright's lead, I veer from the terminology and semantic baggage of magic(al)

characters cope with environmental catastrophe and colonial environmental exploitation. It is also one of the novels I work with that demonstrates most explicitly the way postcolonial literature harnesses nonhuman animal imagery to work through traumatic experiences and violent environmental events. Animals figure prominently in narrative moments in which characters work through trauma and learn to cope with catastrophe. They therefore function as pivotal figures in the narrative negotiation of catastrophe. They also fulfill the important narrative function of suturing together the different worlds across which the narrative unfolds. Moving in between the utilitarian worldview evidenced by white Australian characters and the spiritual Dreaming world of Indigenous Australian cosmology, the narrative seems to straddle the liminal space between two different planes of existence, which are sometimes represented in a binary and at other times blended together. Animals are shown in the text to have a foot in each world, and they thereby stabilize the narrative by allowing it to move freely in between these worlds.

The text's narrator is obsessed with animals. People, places, and things in the text all exist in-relation-to animals. Many of the human characters in the novel negotiate their being-in-the-world through and in connection to animals, because Indigenous Australian cosmologies cast subjects as always-already existing in-relation-to other beings.¹³¹ Subjects are defined in the text through their relationships with other subjects, places, and animals, and human subjectivity is recurrently discussed via animal imagery. Wright harnesses Indigenous Australian myth and storytelling to depict daily life as experienced by its Indigenous Australian characters, and to

realism. In keeping with my use of the term "Indigenous" rather than "Aboriginal" throughout this dissertation, I refer to this particular literary mode as Indigenous realism. This term allows me to highlight parallels between the Australian context and the literature of many other regions whose Indigenous authors employ similar literary modes which challenge the realist conventions of the European literary tradition. Using a similar comparative methodology to the one Chadwick Allen employs in *Trans-Indigenous*, my term aims to tease out connections and parallels between the storytelling modes of Indigenous authors from different geographical regions.

¹³¹ More on this later in this section.

show how human-animal relationships define these characters' experiences of catastrophic events. By incorporating Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives and worldviews into its construction of the everyday, the author also reveals how catastrophe generates the possible conditions for rebirth, regeneration, and the reestablishment of the "normal" life.

Indigenous Australian author Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* has been the subject of significant critical attention from scholars working in the fields of postcolonialism, globalization, and Indigenous studies.¹³² Lynda Ng and Ben Holgate also approach *Carpentaria* through the lens of globalization, but they do it in very different ways. While Ng's work focuses on the intersections of local and global narratives and histories, Holgate's central focus is the novel's engagement with what he calls magical realism.¹³³ Kate Rigby, whom I quote throughout this dissertation, analyzes the novel's engagement with extractive industries such as mining. Latha and Yesireddy also take up this angle, analyzing representations of Indigenous dispossession and argue that the novel functions as a "powerful indictment of the Australian mining industry"

¹³² Carole Ferrier, for example, places *Carpentaria* into dialogue with indigenous scholars' analyses of coloniality, postcoloniality, and the "racialised and sexualised stereotypes of black women" (37). Frances Devlin-Glass, on the other hand, figures among the numerous scholars who analyze the novel's engagement with Indigenous epistemology and knowledge systems. Devlin-Glass's article examines how the novel uses the image of the Rainbow serpent, an Indigenous creator god, to talk about both creation and destruction. She argues that the Rainbow serpent plays an important role in the narrative representation of ecological instability, and that it contributes to the novel's commentary on ways of resisting colonial power (Devlin-Glass, "A Politics of the Dreamtime" 393-394, 397-98). Her review of the novel takes a slightly different approach: it investigates how the text enmeshes local histories with the flows of global capital (Devlin-Glass, "Alexis Wright's 'Carpentaria'" 82).

¹³³ Holgate introduces to the conventional colonizer/colonized binary – which sees its mirror image in magical realism's pitting of the "real" against the imaginary or the magic – a third category. He argues that the magical realism of *Carpentaria* diverges from conventional postcolonial approaches to magical realism because of this third pole: "the Indigenous colonized; the white settler colonizer; and global economic forces that help perpetuate the ongoing colonization" (Holgate, "Unsettling Narratives" 634). Alison Ravenscroft too analyzes the binaries that define magical realism. She takes issue with the numerous literary critics that seem to only analyze *Carpentaria* in relation to renowned "white Australian novelists" (Ravenscroft 194). She argues that the moves these critics make "refuse the text's unfamiliarity, its strangeness to a white reader" (195). Ravenscroft also takes issue with scholars who only discuss the text in relation to magical realism, as she sees this limited view of the novel's narrative style as just another way of positioning *Carpentaria* within "a certain white Western critical strategy." (195). Ravenscroft claims that reading the text in this way reaffirms the "binary that associates Indigeneity with magic, irrationality, delusion and dream, and whiteness with realism, reality and rationality, and with consciousness, a wakeful state" (197). I further elaborate on *Carpentaria*'s use of elements that challenge the conventional European realist tradition below.

(136). Other scholarly analyses of Wright's novel, such as Carmen Concilio's and Demelza Hall's, engage with its representation and rhetorical use of waste. Their essays are helpful to my reading of space in the novel. Another cluster of scholars study the novel through the lens of critical animal studies. Archer-Lean et al., for example, argue that the novel is unusual in its treatment of animals because it shows "human uncertainty and open mindedness in encountering animal Otherness" (30). They write that the novel "compels movement away from understanding the human/nature relationship as disconnected, adversarial or hierarchal" (30). I agree. Their essay is useful to my analysis of how Wright deploys animal imagery. Meera Atkinson likewise reads the novel with attention to animals, working at the intersection of trauma studies and critical animal studies. She argues that Wright uses animals to talk about racist violence, and frames violence against animals and violence against Indigenous peoples as having a common source: white colonial hegemonic power (M. Atkinson 46).

Section 2: Racial/Racist Geographies and their Legacy

From the very beginning, Wright situates the novel's plot within a long history of racism and discrimination experienced by Indigenous Australians during and after colonialism. The location and layout of the town expose its past and present role in proliferating colonial ideologies. Punning on Esperance, the name of a real town in northern Australia (Rigby 156), the fictional town of Desperance works in the story to uncover the colonial logics that govern all aspects of life for Indigenous people in postcolonial Australia. Desperance was built "in the hectic heyday of colonial vigour" (Wright 3), to serve as a "port for the shipping trade for the hinterland of Northern Australia" (3). But one day the river that gave the town purpose "decided to change course, to bypass it by several kilometers" (3). Now useless as a port, "the town's continued existence was justified largely by xenophobic paranoia" (Rigby 157). The residents of

Desperance “stayed on to safeguard the northern coastline from invasion by the Yellow Peril” (Wright 3), and then later, “from boatloads of asylum seekers” (Rigby 157). By providing all of this information within the novel’s first three pages, Wright makes it clear that Desperance has long embodied racist colonial logics.

Much like the topography of towns Kim Scott describes in *Benang*, the physical layout of Desperance is “racially inscribed” (Rigby 157). Desperance’s “Uptown” area is almost exclusively white, and is inhabited by the town’s wealthier residents. These are the people aligned in the novel with England and empire. Uptown residents are “*dolce vita* type of people sitting in comfortable armchairs” (Wright 475); they have fenced homes and sip “tea from [...] rose floral china cup[s]” (45). They put on “airs and fancies” (48) and are offended when someone sets fire to the portrait of the Queen of England (166). Uptown is “sharply divided” (Rigby 157) from the Pricklebush, the poorer part of town inhabited predominantly by Indigenous people. Brewster comments that there is “almost no interaction or exchange between the indigenous ‘Pricklebush’ people and the white inhabitants of Uptown. The little that does occur is, in the main, exclusionary and violent or sexually predatory” (85). Pricklebush is located on the “edge of town, at the center of which lies the local rubbish dump” (Rigby 157). Pricklebush homes stand in stark contrast to Uptown homes (Wright 15); according to Uptown residents, Pricklebush is “an eyesore” (20).

Pricklebush functions in the novel as the antithesis of Uptown. Uptown is orderly, and already planning for a modern makeover, for “[f]ibreglass, steel-spiked, ironclad monuments” (Wright 20). Pricklebush, on the other hand, is made up of haphazard constructions, of “humpies” (4) built from “pieces of sheet iron, jerry cans, bits of car bodies, lengths of rope, logs, plastic, discarded curtains, and old clothing” (14). Descriptions of the “gloomy, slime-

dripping” dump and of the “smelly residue” on objects retrieved from it reinforce the dichotomy between these two spaces (16). In addition, Pricklebush perpetually looks like it is on the verge of being reclaimed by nature: it is located “amidst thickets of closely growing slender plants” with “a thousand thorny branches” (4), “right next to the mosquito-swarmed swamp” (13). The dichotomy set up between Uptown and Pricklebush is reinforced throughout the novel. Meinig argues that binary opposition such as this is the “dominant stereotype” of Australian history (19). In his book on Australian historical novels, Meinig explains that:

The central binary paradigm of the Australian context, as well as of colonialism and its aftermath in general, is that of nature versus culture. This governing opposition creates the stereotypical contrast between cultured white settlers and uncultured indigenous people, [...] between the cultural accomplishments of Great Britain and the overwhelming nature and materialism of Australia. (20)

These binary constructions “are organised in hierarchies, with the colonising force always occupying the superior pole. This pattern is typical for the colonial context” (19). The hierarchy between Uptown and Pricklebush is upheld, in part, through the novel’s references to waste and the rubbish dump.

Like *Benang*, *Carpentaria* uses the rubbish dump as a spatial marker to designate the area inhabited by Indigenous families, and to separate it from the space in which white families live. Wright’s descriptions of the appalling living conditions in Indigenous encampments echo those Scott provides in *Benang*: “all choked up, piled up together in trash humpies made of tin, cloth, and plastic too, salvaged from the rubbish dump” (Wright 4). “Not only are the Indigenous people of this place positioned as fringe dwellers, living in Third World conditions in a First World nation,” Rigby comments, “they are also obliged to reside on land that had itself been

trashed in the first wave of colonization” (157). The opening setting of *Carpentaria* unequivocally positions the story in a space shaped by colonial expansion, and descriptions of the town’s separation between white and Indigenous residents make the racist colonial logics that structure life in Desperance abundantly clear.

The name “Pricklebush” itself evokes colonization. It harkens back to the colonial introduction of the prickly pear cactus into Australia. Rigby explains that it was first brought to the continent in the 1860s and used to “create hedges around the colonists’ huts” (Rigby 157). The hedges were meant to both “deter Aboriginal attacks and to provide fresh fruit” (qtd. in Rigby 157). But the plant quickly spread and became invasive: “[a]ttempts to poison it in the early twentieth century failed” (157), and the ““empty poison drums which soon littered the country leached into waterholes and creeks’,” poisoning the land and the plants that managed to grow there (qtd. in Rigby 157). The fact that Desperance’s Indigenous people live in the Pricklebush is significant; the nickname serves as a constant reminder of the fact that Indigenous populations live in environments degraded by colonial attempt to dominate and exploit the environment.

In *Carpentaria*, as in the other texts I work with, Indigenous people and people of colour are the most directly and most immediately affected by catastrophic environmental events. Wright shows her Indigenous characters dealing with a wide range of tragic events and unequal circumstances: “poverty, race-based murders and rapes, deaths in custody, substance abuse, third-world housing, exclusion from power” – the list goes on (Devlin-Glass, “A Politics of the Dreamtime” 394). Rife with violent and traumatic events, the novel goes to great lengths to show that catastrophe is part of everyday life for Indigenous Australians.

Section 3: Catastrophe in the Novel: The Cyclone and the Mine

Carpentaria is centrally concerned with catastrophe, and in perhaps an even more obvious way than the other five texts I examine. Without explicitly using the term, Kate Rigby frames the novel as a work of disaster fiction because it ends with a violent cyclone which causes a flood and wipes away the town of Desperance in which the majority of the plot is set.¹³⁴ Much of the story revolves around the conflicts between the white inhabitants of Uptown and the Indigenous inhabitants of Pricklebush. Within Prickebush, there are two different factions. Westside Pricklebush's patriarch is Normal Phantom. Norm has four sons (the activist Will who sabotages the Gurfurrit mine, the disabled Kevin who was injured in a mining accident, and Inso and Donnie who work for the mine) and three daughters ("always pregnant Janice," "always flogged Patsy," and Girlie whom the ironically named Constable Truthful is perpetually trying to bed) (Wright 114). Norm's rival, Joseph Midnight, is the leader of Eastside Pricklebush. At the core of their rivalry is the question of land rights: each man maintains that he is the rightful owner of the land upon which Desperance is built, and each claims descentance from the original inhabitants of the area. Land rights are in fact central to the novel's plot, as much of the conflict is fueled by the construction of the Gurfurrit mine on "stolen" Indigenous land (403). The presence of the mine pervades all aspects of life for the Pricklebush inhabitants, and its impacts on the novel's characters are catastrophic. The mine is responsible for the splitting up of the Phantom family and for Kevin's disability, and it implicates the town of Desperance in a nation-wide manhunt for the activist and mine-saboteur Will Phantom. The novel makes it abundantly clear that catastrophe is a normal part of life for Desperance's Indigenous inhabitants.

¹³⁴ This is the only catastrophe Rigby examines in her monograph that takes place in the contemporary era; every other event she writes about predates the onset of anthropogenic climate change. Her analysis of *Carpentaria* is therefore invaluable to me (see Rigby 145-49).

It does this by foregrounding Indigenous people's recurrent struggles against the mine and their traumatic experiences of violent environmental events.

When the "nightmare cyclone" that closes the novel starts brewing, the vast majority of Desperance's inhabitants begin evacuating (Wright 474). Will stays behind at first, but winds quickly reach such strengths and speeds that he has difficulty remaining on his feet (467). Will has to "dodge[...], weave[...], and duck[...]" projectiles as he navigates his way through the town (467). Everything in the surrounding area turns into "flying missiles"; "corrugated-iron sheets peeling off the rooftops; pieces of timber, bits large and small of blue or clear-coloured plastic, broken tree branches, and everything else" (467) are now hurling through the air at dangerous speeds. The cyclone seems to have murderous intentions: Will felt it "attacking the building, ramming into it like sledgehammers, trying to tear it apart, as if it was looking for him" (477). The cyclone generates a "wild night of deafening madness" (473), followed by "nothing" (513). When the winds subside and the water begins to retreat, Desperance has been washed away:

This new reality had nothing to do with the order of man. There was no town of Desperance. It was gone. [...] The houses, the loading port, the boats and cars, every bit of every so-and-so's this or that, along with the remains of the pipeline for the ore from the mine, and even the barges and cargo snatched up by the cyclone, had travelled inland, and were coming back. Every bit of it had been crushed into a rolling mountainous wall that now included the hotel where only moments ago, Will Phantom had been standing. (487-88)

Only bare land devoid of any characterizing markers is left behind: "There was no sandbar. There were no mangroves. Yonder no tree country. Through the red light of dawn, he [Norm]

saw the shores of a flattened landscape which the cyclone had left in its wake. [...] Ahead, there was nothing” (512-13).

Rigby matches the novel’s dramatization of the cyclone to historical records of cyclone Tracy, which struck the town of Darwin in northern Australia on December 25, 1972 (Rigby 150; see also Evans 11-15).¹³⁵ Due to Darwin’s rather low population density, the cyclone only killed between sixty-five and seventy-one people (Rigby 150; see also Evans 13) but it almost completely swept away the entire township. Evans, author of *Disasters that Changed Australia*, describes cyclone Tracy as “a slow-building nightmare” (11), an incredibly powerful meteorological event that left Darwin looking like “a 250-square-mile rubbish dump” (13). “The destruction caused in Darwin by Cyclone Tracy,” Evans quotes from a report on the incident, “was the worst suffered by an Australian city in any disaster” (qtd. in Evans 13). *Carpentaria* engages with the cyclone’s destructive legacy, and places it in dialogue with a much longer history of destruction which fundamentally shapes daily life for the Indigenous population of northern Australia. The novel is rife with catastrophes, and it goes to great lengths to show that catastrophic events form the foundation of the everyday in Desperance.

In addition to the cyclone that closes the novel, *Carpentaria* also includes several other catastrophic events, all linked to the construction of the Gurfurrit International mine. In fact, the word “catastrophic” reappears several times in the text – three times in connection with the cyclone (Wright 473, 484, 489), and once in connection with the mine (438). Much of the imagery of destruction and devastation invoked in the novel is related to the mine. Within the novel’s opening pages, the narrator introduces the news that the “first multinational mining company” is coming to Carpentaria (8). The mine is situated within a continuum of “numerous

¹³⁵ Susan Barrett adds that the town of Esperance, on whose name Desperance puns, was also “hit by a violent storm which caused significant flooding” in 2007 (32).

short-lived profiteering schemes” which aimed to “serve the big company’s own interests as they set about pillaging the region’s treasure trove” (8). From its introduction into the narrative, the Gurfurrit mine is part of a scheme to exploit this far-away region for the benefit of a multinational company in a foreign land.¹³⁶ The news of the mine is initially met with a mix of anger at the complacency of local government representatives for selling out to foreign investors, and excitement at the prospect of better-paying jobs (8-9). But the negative consequences of the mine’s construction soon become clear in the text. Wright paints the mine as a source of grave environmental degradation, and this depiction is entirely consistent with available data about mining’s environmental impact.

The disastrous environmental impacts of mining have been documented all over the world.¹³⁷ Mining completely transforms a region’s topography, leaving behind massive quantities of both liquid and solid waste which causes “extensive and long-lasting disturbance to land” (Cooke and Johnson 42). Up until quite recently, these disturbances have gone under-regulated and under-reported because of inadequate oversight and regulations (see Mudd’s 2009 “The Sustainability of Mining in Australia: Key Production Trends and Their Environmental

¹³⁶ The Gurfurrit mine has been interpreted by literary scholar Eleni Pavlides as a “mock-up” of the Century Zinc mine, which was constructed in the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1997 (161). This interpretation makes sense, based on the many resemblances between the two (namely the history of Indigenous resistance to the construction of the Century Zinc mine, the acts of sabotage orchestrated against it, and the toxic discharge from the mine that poisoned nearby waterways.) Murrandoo Yanner, one of the two “Waanyi heroes” (Rigby 160) to whom Alexis Wright dedicates *Carpentaria*, played an active yet ultimately unsuccessful role in attempting to halt the mine’s construction. As such, Pavlides suggests that Yanner may be the inspiration behind the character of Will Phantom, who in the novel sabotages the mine in an effort to have it shut down (Pavlides 161). Like Murrandoo Yanner, Will’s efforts are unsuccessful, but he remains in the text a figure of resistance to colonial power.

Despite its record of breaching environmental regulations, the Century Zinc mine in northern Australia is still operational. In 2009, the mining company was fined over a hundred thousand dollars for “discharging toxic wastewater” into Page Creek (“Mine fined over wastewater discharge.”) Events such as this one reinforce the similarities between the Century Zinc mine and its fictional counterpart, the Gurfurrit mine. They also drive home the fact that Wright’s depictions of the mining’s environmental impact are quite realistic.

¹³⁷ See Cooke and Johnson’s “Ecological Restoration of Land with Particular Reference to the Mining of Metals and Industrial Minerals: A Review of Theory and Practice,” Mudd, G. M.’s *The Sustainability of Mining in Australia* and *An Assessment of the Sustainability of the Mining Industry in Australia*, Rod Allan’s “Introduction: Sustainable Mining in the Future,” as well as Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide’s “Guidebook for Evaluating Mining Project EIAs.”

Implications for the Future” and Rod Allan’s “Introduction: Sustainable Mining in the Future). Mining generates water pollution, the production of poisonous gases and dust, and land degradation caused by physical changes to the landscape as well as by chemical seepage into the soil (Monjezi et al. 2006). Water contaminated by mining activities can become acidic, which negatively affects local waterways, agriculture, as well as “fresh drinking waters and ecosystems” (207). It can thus be a serious threat to both humans and to the aquatic life-support systems in the region (207).¹³⁸ Pollution from mining can still be detected “hundreds of years after the mines close” (Allan 1). Historically, the pollution caused by mining has been “severe” (1), and when mines closed down, they would simply be abandoned, with little to no efforts made to remediate the affected lands (1). Today, environmental regulations give companies certain obligations to ‘restore’ affected lands, but Allan explains that no mine is free of negative environmental impacts, and that the extent of pollution from old mines in particular “make[...] cleanup virtually impossible” (2).

The landscape of Carpentaria is completely transformed by the Gurfurrit mine: mine waste is “*everywhere*” (Wright 391, original emphasis) and the ground is covered in “contaminated rubble” (391). “[G]igantic yellow mining equipment” which makes a “dull, monotonous clanging” is brought in to create “big open-cut holes” in the earth (98). The word “cut” recurs in descriptions of the landscape altered by mining (98, 337), linking these images of

¹³⁸ The *Guidebook for Evaluating Mining Project EIAs* (Environmental Impact Assessments) shows that the impact of this water pollution on local flora and fauna can be severe; “[m]any streams impacted by acid mine drainage have a pH value of 4 or lower – similar to battery acid. Plants, animals, and fish are unlikely to survive in streams such as this” (8). It goes on to describe how the acidity of the water can dissolve metals, which can be toxic even in very small quantities, and which “do not break down in the environment [...], providing a long-term source of contamination to the aquatic insects that live there, and the fish that feed on them” (9). Once these contaminants are in the water, they can “travel far, contaminating streams and groundwater for great distances” (9). What’s worse: “[e]ven with existing technology, acid mine drainage is virtually impossible to stop once the reactions begin” (9). Impacts on aquatic life “may range from immediate fish kills to sub-lethal, impacts affecting growth, behavior or the ability to reproduce” (9). These types of changes have the potential to completely disrupt local food-webs.

environmental changes to bodily wounds.¹³⁹ The narrator's vocabulary insists on this representation of the earth as a wounded body: passages describing machinery "gouging into the land" (149), seeking to tap a mineral "vein" (337), and referring to the "flesh of the earth" being "shunted [...] by pipelines" (384-85) strengthen this association.

Along with the heavy machinery and the deep holes came the "horrible devils" (Wright 98) who work for the mining company, spying and reporting on the locals, as well the barges used to transport the ore and the "big foreign tankers" docked off the coast (337). Regular "mishaps" (337) and "barges spilling ore and waste" (397) constantly cause further damage to the environment, making the country look "dirty" (398). "[H]undreds of kilometres of pipeline" are laid underground to transport the ore (337), and then it is discovered that the pipelines were built of the wrong material: they regularly burst in the summer heat from the sheer "pressure of ore travelling down the pipe" (363), spilling their contents underground and contaminating the soil and groundwater. Through her references to recurrent accidents and spills, Wright weaves the environmental impacts of the mine into the fabric of daily life for Indigenous Australians.¹⁴⁰ She makes the mine's widespread impacts impossible to miss.

The mine is extremely damaging to the local ecosystem. Will worries at length about the animals that, for reasons he cannot understand, flock to it:

Whenever he saw so many birds around the mine, it raised a lot of questions for him.

When would they realise the hazards of going there? How many evolutions would it take before the natural environment included mines in its inventory of fear? He and Old Joseph had sat in the hills and watched the water birds flock to the chemical-ridden tailings dams, where the water was highly concentrated with lead. Afterwards, when the

¹³⁹ This parallel representation of degraded land and wounded body also appears in Kim Scott's *Benang*.

¹⁴⁰ I use the "fabric" here following Frederic Jameson's usage in "No Magic, No Metaphor."

birds flew back to the spring-fed river, [...] they bred a mutation. The old prophet Joseph predicted mutated birds would drop out of the sky. No one knew what would happen to the migratory flocks anymore. (391-92)¹⁴¹

This passage links the environmental destruction the mine causes to harmful impacts on the region's wildlife. The mine complex may be surrounded by "impenetrable wall three and a half metres high" (392), but it is not enough to keep its damaging environmental impacts contained: "birds danced over it while wild animals clawed their way underneath" (392). The mine is thus shown to harm both the animals and the land. Its impact on humans – and on the Indigenous people who work in it – is no less damaging.

The construction of the mine brings about one tragic event after another. In addition to the environmental degradation the mine itself causes (Wright 337, 391-392, 398), there are also a series of "accidents" that set the mine up as the epicentre of tragic events in the novel. On his first day working in the mine, the very bright Kevin Phantom is caught up in an explosion which causes him to sustain serious injuries and end up with debilitating intellectual disabilities (104):

He went down the mine on the day he got the job and came out burnt and broken like barbecued spare ribs. He heard the ancestor's voice when an explosion with fiery rocks went flying at him—left, right, and centre. The boy they dragged out of the crush had been rendered an idiot and it was plain as day no prayers would undo the damage.

Even after the last scab healed nothing could put out the fire in his brains. (109)

Kevin's disabilities are a daily reminder of the mine's repercussions for the Phantom family and the town of Desperance more generally. Will Phantom, Kevin's brother, knows that the mine is part of a "crusade of killing" (393), that "[t]his war with the mine had no rules. Nothing was

¹⁴¹ This passage could possibly be an allusion to the poisoning of Page Creek and its impacts on local fauna.

sacred” (375). In order to survive the mine, one had to “first think of what the mine was capable of doing to him” (383). The wounded body of the earth and the wounded body of Kevin come together through the descriptions of the mine, and Father Danny’s dialogue with Will further solidifies this connection. Father Danny argues that the mine has gone too far, that “they cannot crush people just because they have the power to crush the landscape” (191). The mine in the text thus serves to link the marginalization of the local Indigenous population and the environmental destruction in the region with exploitative practices characteristic of colonial and neocolonial power relations. In this way, the mine in *Carpentaria* functions much like the references to oil pipelines in *Thinner than Skin*: it connects colonial histories with present day neocolonial economic relationships that perpetuate historic conditions of inequality.

Read with attention to the cyclone and the mine, both grounded in historical events, *Carpentaria* is a novel that revolves around catastrophe, and that emphasizes catastrophe’s ubiquity in the daily lives of Indigenous Australians. Wright uses the mine as a stand-in for colonial efforts to control, dominate, and exploit the environment, and to expose how the contemporary neocolonial economic relations that allow the mine to exist further contribute to the marginalization of Indigenous people. The author succinctly captures this web of relations:

Strange how a skyscraper in New York could cast spells like magic. It could keep a whole floor of workers occupied with knowing whether every single switch was up or down on every last monitoring device on Gurfurrit operations, in the spinifex mind you, on the other side of the world. It could cast a security net over the whole social reality of Desperance, keeping tabs on how much food was in the fridge, who had just replaced a lightbulb in town, or monitor the pulse rate of Kevin Phantom lying in a hospital, while he was trying to figure out whether to live or die. It could rock the town this way or that

to make stories. It could burn the Council office down, burn the Queen's picture, to gauge the reaction. (Wright 441)

This single passage illustrates the interconnectivity between the mine and the conditions of life for Indigenous people in *Desperance*. It strings together the mechanisms of empire (the Queen's picture) and the flows of global capital (the New York skyscraper) with the poverty in *Desperance* and the racial violence that landed Kevin in the hospital. The novel thus makes explicit the connections between empire, colonialism, and the present conditions of life for Indigenous Australians.

Section 4: Narrative Form: Dreaming, Indigenous Cosmologies, and Indigenous Realism

Alexis Wright, who belongs to the Waanyi nation, explains in "On Writing *Carpentaria*" that the novel is written "as though some old Aboriginal person was telling the story" (qtd. in Rigby 156). The vernacular of the novel "belongs to the diction of the tribal nations of the Gulf" – the part of Australia where the story unfolds (qtd. in Rigby 156). In addition to its diction, the narrative defamiliarizes readerly experience through its non-linearity: "twisting and turning, roiling and coiling [...], switching dizzyingly between timeframes and storylines, voices and perspectives," the narrative emulates the storytelling traditions of the Waanyi people (156). Rigby describes the novel's form as "decidedly unsettling for non-Aboriginal and perhaps also for non-Waanyi and urban Aboriginal readers" (156), and admits that, while reading it, she was "made powerfully aware that [she] was stepping into foreign territory" where she was forced to "accept that there is much in it that escapes [her] grasp" (156).

The novel's narrative style is certainly disorientating. The narrator moves from the experiences of one character to another regularly, fluidly, and sometimes quite unexpectedly. Moving in between different perspectives, jumping across great distances and going forward and

backward in time, the narrator seems to periodically hover above the action, observing and commenting on it from a distance, and intermittently plunging head-first into it, delving into the minds of characters and giving the reader full access to their thoughts, feelings, and memories. Never committing entirely to one character's viewpoint and regularly pitting one character's perspective against another's, the text allows one character's view of the world to exist simultaneously with other characters' completely different, and at times seemingly incompatible, views of the world. It thus allows for the simultaneous existence of many possible worlds. One of the ways this becomes apparent is through its recurrent references to Dreaming.

Dreaming (also referred to as Dreamtime) is today a widely used term in reference to Indigenous Australian cosmology and spirituality.¹⁴² Dreaming refers both to the “founding drama,” the creation myth common to many Australian Indigenous cultures, as well as to “continual, atemporal metaphysical reality” of the world (L. Hume 126). Vicki Grieves, a scholar of Warramay descent, provides a more detailed explanation. She writes that Dreaming is an “*underlining reality*” (Grieves 11, original emphasis) used to stand for Indigenous Australians’ “experience and knowledge of the manifestations and the secrets of Divinity” (qtd. in Grieves 11).

Edwards explains that applying Western concepts of linear time, which emphasize “beginnings, dates, eras and endings” (17), to Indigenous worldviews does not work:

The Western view is often contrasted with a cyclical view of time in which history is perceived as the regular recurrence of established patterns. The Aboriginal conception of time is too subtle to be identified directly with either of these views. [...] It is perhaps

¹⁴² The term was first coined by anthropologists to refer to the worldview held by many Indigenous Australian cultures. “Dreaming” is a mistranslation of Aranda words, and it was recently suggested that “Eternal Law” (L. Hume 126) or ““originating from eternity”” (qtd. in Grieves 8) might be a better translation.

best modelled, not as a series of circles which are ongoing but as a series of elliptical shapes with each one returning to the original starting point. (17)

Dreaming stories which recount the deeds of the Ancestors (or Dreaming beings) occur in time-outside-of-time; their eternal yet atemporal nature has been framed as occurring in the “everywhen” (L. Hume 126).¹⁴³ Dreaming stories are therefore understood to exist in a perpetual state of unfolding: they have already happened, they are happening now, and they will continue to happen in the future. *Carpentaria* operates in this everywhen temporality, generating several overlapping worlds in which past, present, and future coexist on the same plane. This makes the novel both extremely helpful for my analysis of the relationship between colonial past and present-day catastrophe, but also extremely complicated, as it means that the Rainbow serpent creator god, the Ancestors, the animals, the plants, the rocks, the land, and the human characters are all acting at the same time – with, alongside, or against one another. The novel’s opening passage, which I unpack below, exemplifies how this multiplicity of worlds and temporalities affects the narrative construction of the story.

In the Dreaming creation myth, the Ancestors “gave shape” to the world, imbued it with their essence, left tangible markers of themselves in the form of the physical environment, and laid down the “Law for all living Aborigines to follow” (L. Hume 126). As the Ancestors traveled, they left Dreaming paths in their wake and created sacred places where their life energy is stored. Then, the Ancestors returned to the earth, or, in other version of the myth, took to the skies. This story casts the Ancestors as part of the physical environment and the beings that inhabit it: “[a]ll things – land, humans and that which is both living and non-living – are interconnected through these Dreaming beings” (126). Through specific initiation rites,

¹⁴³ *Potiki* also engages with a similar kind of temporality, referring to it as “now-time.”

Indigenous peoples “become[...] identified with certain areas of land” (126), and claim rights to land “on the basis of their common descent with the spiritual forces and natural species” (Edwards 22).

This relationship between humans and tracts of land is not about ownership but about duty. Ambelin and Blaze Kwaymullina, who belong to the Palyku nation in Western Australia, explain that the right to inhabit a piece of land is premised in Indigenous cosmologies on “a responsibility to care for all the life within it,” to serve as the land’s “custodian” (195).

Indigenous groups share kinship bonds with the Ancestors, as well as with “animal, bird, marine and plant species” that are descendent from them, and this bond comes with a duty to care for the land that sustains these bonds (Edwards 24). In Dreaming, land is intrinsically connected with both spiritual and living beings; it is a “mediating agency” between the spirit world and the human world (L. Hume 126). Kinship binds humans with the Ancestors and with “all that exists on the land” (127). In *Carpentaria*, this is the connection that characters such as Joseph Midnight, Mozzie Fishman, Norm Phantom, and Will Phantom share with the Australian landscape. Mozzie knows the Dreaming stories, travels the Dreaming paths, and has memorized the list of all of the sacred Dreaming places, although he has not yet visited all of them. Will is likewise attuned to Dreaming world – he may not be able to speak the ancestral language that Mozzie knows, but he senses the spiritual presence that imbues all things, and he feels the deep sense of kinship with all beings that characterizes this worldview.

Vicki Grieves explains that the Dreaming and the everyday are “two co-existent realities” (11), that there is ““a single supervening reality that has “inside” and “outside” truths and stories”” (qtd. in Grieves 11). Dreaming beings and humans are “co-presences in one world” (qtd. in Grieves 11). In filtering select passages through the minds of characters who are tapped

into the Dreaming, the novel allows Dreaming stories to exist on the same plane as, and to be “juxtaposed with,” the banalities of daily life “and quotidian observations of modern existence in the Gulf” (Archer-Lean et al. 30). Grieves writes that “humans cannot hope to grasp the full knowledge of truths that are embedded in the Dreaming” (11), but they can develop as “visionaries” (11) – as people who have “a privileged understanding” of the Dreaming, and who can “*see right through*, their vision penetrating *all the way to the inside*” (Grieves 11, original emphasis). This is the type of insight that characters such as Will gain. By rendering their perception of the world through the text, the novel allows ancestral, human, and other-than-human dramas to unfold in the same space at the same time, thereby revealing many qualities of the mode I call Indigenous realism.

Magical realism is a “mode of narration that naturalises or normalises the supernatural” (Warnes 3). In magical realist texts, “real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence,” which means that “[o]n the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality” (3).¹⁴⁴ In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Zamora and Faris explain:

the propensity of magical realist text to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among those worlds – in phenomenal and spiritual regions where transformation, metamorphosis, dissolution are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism. So magical realism may be considered an extension of realism in its concern with the nature of reality and its

¹⁴⁴ Frances Devlin-Glass has a slightly different understanding of the relationship between the ordinary and the magical or mythical in conventional magical realist texts. She argues that Wright’s magical realism differs from traditional magical realism in that it embeds the mythological into the ordinary instead of loosening the narrative’s connection to the ordinary (Devlin-Glass, “A Politics of the Dreamtime” 393). Wright’s magical realism is for him one that “systematically estranges modernity” (393).

representation, at the same time that it resists the basic assumptions of post-enlightenment rationalism and literary realism. Mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female: these are boundaries to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned in magical realist texts. (6)

Because of the characteristics Zamora and Faris identify, magical realism has been accused of being “simply a drudge for a postmodernist postcolonialism obsessed with hybridity, liminality, and what Peter Hallward calls ‘the facile denunciation of binaries’” (Warnes 6-7).¹⁴⁵ It has also been accused, as Maufort explains, of reifying false binaries and upholding Eurocentric realistic perceptions (Maufort, “Forging an ‘Aboriginal Realism’” 21). In recognition of this, and following Alexis Wright’s statement that her work is not magical realism, I employ the term Indigenous realism to signal *Carpentaria*’s heavy reliance on the intermingling of Indigenous Australian and non-Indigenous Australian worldviews and relationships with the world. The text’s refusal to privilege one version of reality, or one approach to understanding reality, over another serves an important function in the narrative. The text’s attention to animals and its integration of Dreaming worldviews also challenge the conventions of the Western realist novel.

The novel opens with a description of the Rainbow serpent, a creator god that features in the art and oral histories of many Indigenous Australian cultures. In Waanyi worldviews, the Rainbow serpent “carves huge underground channels in limestone country in which vast numbers of fish and snakes spawn” (Devlin-Glass, “A Politics of the Dreamtime” 392) and sometimes manifests itself in cyclonic form (394). It is responsible for rerouting rivers – like the

¹⁴⁵ These are the binaries with which Holgate’s and Ravenscroft’s essays on *Carpentaria* engage. Both these authors see in conventional postcolonial approaches to magical realism a binarized construction of colonizer versus colonized, rational versus irrational.

one that bypassed Desperance making it useless as a port city – as well as for the deluge that destroys the town at the end of the novel. In selecting the image of the Rainbow serpent to open the story, Wright situates the novel’s plot within Waanyi cosmology and within traditional Waanyi understandings of human-nonhuman relationships (Archer-Lean et al. 30). The novel thus “takes as a given that the Dreamtime understanding of the serpent provides complex ecological understanding of the earth” (30).

The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from stars, laden with its own creative enormity. It moved graciously—if you had been watching with eyes of a bird, hovering in the sky far above the ground. Looking down at the serpent’s wet body, glistening from the ancient sunlight, long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time. It came down those billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the gulf of Carpentaria. [...] This is where the rainbow serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers. They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin.

(Wright 1)

The Rainbow serpent is presented here as a “a conflation of setting, character and plot” (Archer-Lean et al. 30). Traditional boundaries break down and all things interpenetrate one another, making it “impossible to determine character, action and setting as discrete elements of the text” (Warnes 30). Setting is no longer “an inferior element to be acted upon” (30) – it too participates in the novel’s action.

When Will is captured by the mine workers and his comrades orchestrate a distraction to allow him to flee, they end up being chased by the yellow-haired mine worker – a character that

the novel shows to be violent and cruel. Mine workers shoot at them and they start running away. And then, a rock intervenes:

Fate and precious moments are tied up together, and as the saying goes, *What goes around comes around*: the yellow-haired man tripped. Instantly, his head was split open at the temple by a rock that had, up to that moment, lain on the ground, embedded in soil that was thousands of seasons old, untouched by humankind since the ancestor had placed it in this spot, as if it had planned to do this incredible thing. (Wright 402)

Here, the ground itself takes vengeance upon the yellow-haired man. This passage exemplifies the way the novel plays with Dreamtime understandings of the sacred web of interconnectivity that permeates all things. The narrative presentation of causality here relies on a recognition of the fact that the land is an actant too.¹⁴⁶

The physical environment, depicted in the novel's opening passage in the form of the Rainbow serpent, is "given sentience" through its animal embodiment (Archer-Lean et al. 30). And indeed, Indigenous characters in the novel are able to interpret the world through reading animal behavior. Recognizing animals as actants and sentient beings, these characters take cues from their nonhuman kin on how they ought to behave in specific scenarios. Will's taking cues from the kingfisher when he is held captive at the mine, and his ability to predict the cyclone through observing birds, are examples of this recognition of animal insight. Through its attention to animals and its Indigenous realist commitment to allowing different realities and truths to exist

¹⁴⁶ I use the term "actant" following Jane Bennett's definition, which she borrows from Bruno Latour. For Bennett, an actant is "a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* viii). I use the terms actant/actancy instead of agent/agency because they allow me to treat human and other-than-human beings and forces in parallel manners and reject the primacy of human action.

at the same time, *Carpentaria* illustrates the central role animals play in helping characters prepare for, cope with, and work through catastrophic events.

Section 5: Animals in the Novel

Carpentaria is rife with nonhuman animal imagery, which makes sense for a narrative dealing with post/neocolonial power relations and efforts to suppress Indigenous resistance to mining expansion by a powerful multinational corporation. Meinig explains that animals are part of what made the Australian landscape so threatening to European settlers, part of why settlers worked so hard to establish control over the environment and over native flora and fauna. In Australia, “[o]n the upside-down face of the world,” settlers saw the “natural order” they were familiar with totally inverted: “black swans, rivers running inland, wood that will not float, birds that will not sing or fly” (qtd. in Meinig 20). Australian animals and plants make the landscape inherently threatening: they challenge European ideas of order and normality. And Wright’s novel goes to great lengths to further dismantle these arbitrary notions about animals and the environment.

Animals figure in the text in a multiplicity of conflicting ways – they are pests, they are ancestral spirits, they are companions, they are co-inhabitants of the land, they are taxidermy pieces, and they are food. They fulfil a multifaceted role in the novel, “beloved, mistreated and slaughtered, knowing, spiritual and prophetic by turns” (M. Atkinson 54). In moving between the different worlds that different characters live in, the text allows for the simultaneous coexistence of various different possible views on animals. The worldview of the mine workers and the citizens of Uptown sets animals up as things to be used: “[i]f you can’t use it, eat it, or fuck it, then it’s no bloody use to you” (Wright 34). But the perspectives of characters such as Will and Norm, the text’s “visionaries” (Grieves 11) who are specially attuned to animal behavior, show

that nonhuman beings are characters in their own right – actors in the narrative with whom humans can have meaningful and impactful relationships.

Humans and animals are recurrently represented in-relation-with one another. This portrayal falls in line with Indigenous Australian conceptions of human-animal relationships. Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina explain that “Aboriginal knowledge systems exist within the context of relationships, and because all relationships interconnect, so does all knowledge” (196). They write: “It is in the dynamic interplay between relationships that information is shaped, defined and becomes ‘known’” (196). This is precisely the way the text frames Will’s knowledge about the environment and the weather and his relationship with animals. In “acknowledging and respecting” his relationship with animals (197), Will becomes an adept and insightful observer of the natural world. Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina argue that acknowledging this interconnection is necessary for successful observation (197).

Will Phantom grew up fishing and hunting with his father Norm and with Elias Smith, a man of unknown origins who one day washes up on the shores of Desperance with no idea who he is or where he comes from. Norm and Elias rarely speak to one another, but they share a deep bond because of their intimate connection with the region’s fish and waterways. Norm thinks of himself as intrinsically connected with the sea: “[w]e are the flesh and blood of the sea and we are what the sea brings the land” (Wright 33). Norm does not mean this metaphorically; his ancestors are “the river people” (5) that are bound to the ancestral serpent that first descended onto the land of the Gulf of Carpentaria “before time began” (5). Norm is kin to the river and the fish: he could “grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father’s fathers did before him” (5).

Norm shares a bond with the fish that only Elias understands. Elias is “no river man” (Wright 164); he is a man of the sea. One day, Norm decides to take Elias to a place he thought was secret – “the groper’s place in the middle of the sea” (234) – and he is surprised to discover that “Elias already knew of it” (234). It is clear that Elias already shares a bond with the groper fish: “[t]he gropers started to rise in the water all around the boat, mingling closer and closer than they had ever done in all of the years Norm had gone on this pilgrimage” (234). This behavior is very unusual, and Norm knows it to be significant. He is certain “that there was communication between the fish and Elias” (234); “[t]hen, he saw the gentlest expression on Elias’s face as he looked up from the water” (234). Norm recognizes in Elias’ bond with the groper fish a deep love and respect. The two men’s friendship is strengthened through their communing with the gropers, and Norm comes to think of the gropers’ place as Elias’ “home” (235). When Elias dies, Norm knows it is his duty to take his friend back to that same place. It takes him more than two weeks to reach it, but he knows he has made it when he recognizes one particular groper: it is “one of his friends” (249). He buries Elias at sea, as “the sea swelled into life with the assembling gropers ploughing together through the water, vying for space next to the boat” (250-51). “Strangely,” the assembly of gropers reminds Norm “of the Pricklebush families gathering at funerals” (250). In recognizing familial bonds in groper behavior, the novel embraces the possibility of meaningful human-animal relationships and rejects the idea that multispecies bonds are somehow fundamentally different from or inferior to intrahuman bonds.

Norm and Elias are both fishermen; they understand the sea and how to read its signs, they know where to find animals, and they know how to read the behavior of fish and aquatic birds. Will learns these things from them starting at a very young age, and he grows up to be a man who takes his bond with the sea and the animals very seriously. He knows how to read the

landscape of the Gulf of Carpentaria, knows how to listen to the voices of animals and spirits, and “moves lightly through the bush to the beat of the muddied and cracked dancing feet of a million ancestors” (Wright 159). Norm “belonged to the sea like fish” (398), and Will “inherited” this “feeling for the sea” from his father (398). Throughout the novel, Will is one of the characters who is most intimately attuned to his bonds with the nonhuman world:

Will knew how the tides worked simply by looking at the movement of a tree, or where the moon crossed the sky, the light of day, or the appearance of the sea. He carried the tide in his body. Even way out in the desert, when he was on the Fishman’s convoy, a thousand miles away from the sea, he felt its rhythms. (397)

He sees the Ancestors and the Rainbow serpent in the physical environment, and senses the invisible web of relations that binds all things together: “The snake he once saw was the living atmosphere. Its body stretched from horizon to horizon, covering each point of a compass, and encasing them all” (200).

Animals reappear throughout the narrative, but they appear most often to characters such as Will and Norm. Their powers of observation and their recognition of the interconnectedness of all things give them access to aspects of reality which others are barred from. And it is through observing animals that they gain these insights. When the novel presents readers with Will’s or Norm’s view of the world, it depicts animals as beings that bridge the everyday world and the world of the Dreaming beings. Animals have a foot in each world – they exist in the past and in the present, on the material and the spiritual planes at once. Norm’s reflections on the groper fish are an excellent example of this. Norm recalls Elias once explaining to him that the “groper was the descendant of the giant dinosaur” (Wright 246). Norm “did not know whether it was true” because he had “other stories” (246) – Dreaming stories, rather than scientific

narratives. Elias goes on to explain that, “millions of years ago,” all of the Gulf was “covered with megafauna” and “massive” trees (246). Sometimes, he continues, when a person thought they were “walking on rock, it was really fossilised tree stumps from those times” (246). At the time, this piece of information was hard for Norm to imagine, but now, “Norm saw both these worlds wherever he looked at one [a groper]” (246). This passage shows a merging of different temporalities (now and “millions of years ago”) and different epistemologies (Indigenous worldviews versus western science) within the groper fish. The groper becomes for Norm a link between both worlds. The groper occupy this liminal space in the narrative because they are creatures that journeys “from the sky to the sea” (235), moving between the material and the spiritual worlds.

Through its deployment of these Dreaming tropes, the novel offers the reader glimpses of the world filtered through Waanyi cosmology. The novel is thus able to depict animals in nuanced and complex ways and to show how they serve to connect the Dreaming with the everyday. Animals also help Will prepare for and negotiate catastrophe.

Section 6: Animals and the Mine

Following Will’s act of sabotage on the Gurfurrit mine, a nation-wide manhunt is initiated to locate the culprit. After two years on the run, Will is eventually captured by mine workers. He is abducted by helicopter, beaten, tied up and gagged, and burned with a cigarette butt. His wife Hope is thrown out of the helicopter and, powerless to help her, he watches her fall into the ocean below (Wright 386). Will is eventually taken to a hangar near the mine, where he is detained by the mine workers, including the yellow-haired man. Despite the fact that he is filled with grief and rage at having just witnessed what he believes to be his wife’s murder, Will refuses to give to his captors the satisfaction of showing any weakness. He ignores their insults

and remains, on the surface, calm: “Will sat [...] and waited. He had time” (392). He focuses instead on the birds he sees in the grass. Here, the narrative gets temporarily side-tracked: the progression of the plot pauses as Will watches the birds, lost in thought.

In the grass, families of soft-rasping finches—white-spotted and blue, red, grey wrens, flew out of the grass, settled down ahead, then flew off again. They were quickly joined by hundreds of noisy, virginal white feathered cockatoos with their plumes of golden yellow standing straight up from their heads. Their wild screeching continued to gather momentum as they lifted straight towards the sun.

This was kingfisher country. A lone, deep-sea-blue kingfisher dashed across the sky in fright. Will watched its path across to the hills. (391)

The kingfisher reappears to Will many times throughout the text. It serves as an anchor that allows Will to keep it together when he is facing a crisis. The above quote marks the kingfisher’s first appearance in the text. It appears again shortly thereafter, when the mine workers are taunting the detained Will:

“You can see the mongrel’s eyes. He can’t wait to get his hands on us,” the yellow-haired one replied [...]. He found it necessary to torment Will a bit more. He needed some kind of reaction to his achievements for the day. Inches away from Will’s face, he taunted him [...]. Will stared past the man’s ravings to observe the blue kingfisher. (392-393)

The text once again returns to the kingfisher, revealing through its movement that Will relies on the bird as a source of strength and calm in this traumatic moment.

Will recognizes the bird and is “surprised” at its return: “it had flown into the hangar and was sitting on a rafter, as though it had been sent back to keep him company” (Wright 393). He blocks out the yellow-haired man’s voice, but as he watches his mouth move, he knows that he is

talking about plans to expand the mining project, “describing a crusade of killing; describing how it would not be long now, they would be christening the new pipeline” (393). The mine workers continue to taunt Will, telling him how they intend to kill him, but “Will had not heard the threats” (394). He stares into his captor’s eyes, and then turns back to the kingfisher. Will watches the bird and it “returned a steady gaze” (394). Then, “as though hypnotised, it closed its eyes and fell asleep” (394). Drained and grieving, Will too falls into “an exhausted sleep” (394). Will mirrors the kingfisher’s behavior throughout his captivity at the mine, and his falling asleep shortly after the kingfisher does makes this explicit.

There are several things going on in the kingfisher scene that need to be unpacked. The first is the movement of the text, and the second is its mirroring of human and animal behavior. The text moves between Will’s thoughts, the yellow-haired man, and the kingfisher. The kingfisher serves as a fixed point that unifies the passage, giving the action a rhythm and structure. Here, both Will and the yellow-haired man are fighting their own battle. The man is putting on a performance of bravado to intimidate Will and look tough in front of his coworkers; Will is fighting to not give into grief and rage. And the kingfisher serves as a source of calm in the midst of these private battles that the human characters are waging with themselves and with each other. The bird sits in the rafters and observes the scene below, calmly “preening its turquoise feathers” (394). Whenever Will cannot take looking at or listening to his captors anymore, he blocks them out and turns his attention back to the kingfisher. The text, following his gaze, turns away from human conflict to focus on bird behavior. And the kingfisher returns his gaze. This moment of contact, of mutual recognition, instills in Will a sense of calm which allows him to successfully navigate his captivity at the mine.

Immediately following his last glance at the kingfisher, Will begins “[w]hispering a refrain to himself—*Got to keep the wolves from the door, keeping free of the wolf pack, kill the wolves, keeping the wolves away*—he soon lost interest in food” (Wright 394, original emphasis). He begins “calculating distances and speed,” figuring out how far he is from the lagoon and “[h]ow long” it will take him to get there (394). Refusing to give in to his grief and hunger, he begins searching the building for an escape route and “laying out” a path through the bush. Through his recurrent turning back to the kingfisher, Will finds the strength to persevere despite his exhaustion and hunger and manages to keep his focus until his comrades create a distraction: “[o]ne becomes more confident when one’s not alone, and somehow, this was how Will felt” (396). The bird’s presence therefore plays an important role in determining Will’s state of mind, and serves to keep him calm and stable, even on what is probably one of the hardest days of his life.

Section 7: Animals and the Cyclone

Chapter 13, “The wash,” is rife with nonhuman imagery. This chapter follows Will as he makes his way through the bush back to Desperance after his captivity in the mine hangar. It is largely filtered through his perspective, and it is therefore highly attuned to animal behavior and to the Dreaming world. The text moves between the world in which the Ancestors are battling against one another, stirring up storms in the process, and the ordinary world in which panicked humans are evacuating the town. The text breaks down traditional binaries between human and animal, living and nonliving, material and spiritual. Animals function here to bring these seemingly opposed worlds together: they operate on both plains, and they allow Will to glimpse the world in different ways. Animals foreshadow the cyclone and navigate the chaos of the storm alongside him. When the cyclone finally dies down, the novel presents the entangled bodies of

Will and the plants and animals that washed out to sea as a single organism. The novel thus uses nonhuman beings to make sense of the conflicting worlds in the text and the conflicting cyclone narratives. They help the narrative render catastrophic events.

The first inkling Will has that a cyclone will strike comes in the form of a bird's cry: "[t]he single shrill cry of a windswept bird startled Will Phantom and he stopped dead in his tracks just to listen to it" (Wright 454). Will had never heard such a cry before (454): "Could he go so far as to say the bird was pierced with fear?" (454). Will watches the bird being pushed "further and further away in sheets of misty rain" (454), and reflects on the significance of the cry. It draws his attention to the sea: "[t]his was the sound which all species on earth must flee from when they hear it. Now, since he heard the piercing cry, Will grew more conscious of the wave trains in the Gulf basin piling themselves up onto the distant shores ahead of him" (455). Like "the thousands of pelicans that had sensed unseasonal change happening to parts of the inland salt-lake country from a place a thousand miles away unaffected by the rains," Will knows that something big is coming (457). He "sensed a mysterious change of great magnitude" (457); "[s]omehow he knew he was being prepared for change, instinctively, like an animal sniffing the air and sensing danger approaching, sensing a quickening in the atmosphere, sensing the future of a place" (457).

Will cannot put his finger on what exactly makes him certain of his premonition, but he knows that the birds are certain of theirs: "[t]his was the root of ultimate trust he thought, the knowledge of intuition, of understanding the vibrations of subtle movement in the environment" (Wright 458). He knows that the animals have access to knowledge that he does not, and as he watches them "acting in unison" (458), he accepts that he is heading straight "into the wall of the cyclone" (454). The final sign is one Will cannot ignore: "he saw a cyclone bird, the spiritual

messenger of the ancestral creation serpent. This big black bird was the ultimate signal that a big rain was coming” (462). Like a “pelagic salmon, single-mindedly travelling against the flow, or a barramundi being tugged by some invisible thread, to struggle back to the sea” (454), Will is determined to make it to Desperance, although he knows that what he is doing is incredibly dangerous. The narrative use of animals here signals the coming of the cyclone, makes Will’s frame of mind clear to the reader, and helps him mentally prepare for the danger he is about to face. It also reminds the reader that the cyclone is a manifestation of the Rainbow serpent. It therefore positions the storm as an event that is not simply a physical manifestation of meteorological conditions, but as a spiritual event that has special meaning in Indigenous Australian cosmologies.

By the time he reaches Desperance, “[t]he Bureau of Meteorology had called and translated the message from the ancestral spirits” (Wright 463). In response, the town was “evacuating,” and chaos ensued: “[d]rivers were panicking because they could not get out fast enough” (463). Will runs into Joseph Midnight, who warns him to be careful: “[b]ig fella coming this time—[...] Cover the town. Everything will go. Listen to the ocean” (466). Will knows that he is right:

[...] he heard the spirit waves being rolled in by the ancestral seawater creatures of the currents, and conspiring with the spirits of the sky and winds to crash into the land as though it was exploding. The earth murmured; the underground serpent, living in the underground river that was kilometres wide, responded with hostile growls. This was the old war of the ancestors making cyclones grow to use against one another. (466-67)

Will knows that the oncoming cyclone is only a product of the perpetual struggle between Dreaming beings. This passage paints a picture of the world in which the sea, the skies, and the

earth are actants operating according to their own devices, and working together or against one another in a battle that is older than time itself. Animals and natural forces become one; living and nonliving matter become indistinguishable in the Dreaming world in which every feature of the physical world is an extension of the Ancestors.

Will finally makes it into the pub of the Fishman Hotel, the last structure standing in Desperance, and he is shocked to find the barman Lloydie still there. While tidal waters rapidly rise higher and the town's residents evacuate, Lloydie is calmly drinking beer by the bar. Seeing "the ropes tied to the bar" (Wright 469), Will understands: Lloydie cannot leave, because he cannot abandon the mermaid trapped in the wood of his bar (469). The bar was built from "grey-brown planks salvaged locally from an ancient shipwreck" (339), and Lloydie sees in it "the spirit of the beautiful fish woman" (339). He would fastidiously clean the bar, "work[ing] on the wood carefully, in rhythmical motions, as though he was caressing a woman's skin" (339).

He felt her body responding to the soft touch of his hand. Moving her silvery body further towards him with every movement he made. When he looked at the wood he saw the outline of her body luxuriously posed and hungry for touching. It was fascinating to him that nobody else saw her moving her body around at him through the wood. He could hardly believe that she only had eyes for him, as though they were always alone.

(339)

Will had heard the rumours that circulated about Lloydie "worshipping a mermaid locked in wood," but he had never given them any credence (469). Will initially treats the mermaid story as a joke – "Of course, he was staying with his mermaid" (469) – but he has to change his mind when he sees the impossible. Will "looked at the wooden planks, then he had to look away" (469):

Had the wind affected his vision? For some strange reason, he saw movement inside the wood. There was a full-grown woman inside the wood, moving like a trapped fish, as though she was trying to swim free.

He looked again to make sure, then turned away again because he could see
Lloydie was watching [...]. (469)

The text accepts that the impossible is happening. Here again, multiple truths collide, and living and nonliving matter become one and the same. The mermaid herself, at times described as a “woman” (469) and at other times as a “she-fish” (339), also straddles the marginal space between possible and impossible, between human and nonhuman. Will goes up to the building’s attic to retrieve supplies, and when he returns, the lower floor where Lloydie was drinking beer is entirely flooded. He dives to search for Lloydie’s body, but he cannot find it anywhere. The bar is gone: “[s]he had taken Lloydie away” (486). The grammar here – in referring to both the bar and the mermaid jointly through the singular “she” – collapses the distinction between the nonliving wood of the bar and the living spirit trapped within it.

“People say when a humble man really listened and looked past the obvious, then he might fly with music into the unknown,” Will reflects (Wright 471). This is exactly what Will does: he accepts the limitations of his knowledge, and pays attention to the signs in the nonhuman world around him. This “humble human confusion” with which he confronts the nonhuman world (Archer-Lean et al. 30) grants him insight into realities and truths that are inaccessible to others. In this way, Will is just like his father, who “always kept watch” (Wright 472) and who always heeded the signs he saw in the environment: “[t]his was no mumbo jumbo either because other fishing men caught in the rain never saw it coming to save their souls” (472). These quasi-mystical signs are accepted as factual, and operate on the level of material

reality in the novel. *Carpentaria* therefore helps to “acknowledge[e] the anthropocentric limits of our capacity to *know* nature” (Archer-Lean et al. 31, original emphasis).

Retreating to the attic, Will decides to sit out the worst of the storm. The town is now deserted, but “he felt other presences in every creak and slamming of objects in the building. He was certain there were others nearby” (Wright 471). Here, the text begins to break down the barriers between different temporalities. Past and present collide as the spirits of the dead enter the bar.

Far into the night, Will sat against the wall, waiting, listening to the deafening winds, rain, and flooding waters converge, like sheets of powerful energy attacking the building. But he was never alone. The lost seafarers continued tramping about the building throughout the night. Will heard them moving around through the bar below, laughing at their fate, falling over furniture and picking it up and throwing it against the walls and tramping back into the rooms where they used to sleep. He knew when the waters receded, the sea would reclaim its dead folk and they would be gone before daybreak.

(472-73)

Boundaries between clear-cut categories can no longer be upheld. Inside the building, the spirits of dead fisherman trash the bar. Outside, chickens are no longer chickens: they “had now become wet deranged bleeding balls of flesh” (467). Hundreds of animals left behind when their humans fled the town become projectiles hurled in the wind, alongside “pieces of timber, bits large and small of blue or clear-coloured plastic, [...] plastic dolls, children’s toys, boxes and crates” (467). Confused animals penetrate into the building and escape from it in the blink of an eye: “[t]he grey cloud of swallows, a thousand pairs, in an instant of surreal flight flew through, and before he realised what had happened, they had disappeared into the clouds” (485). In the

chaos of the cyclone, living and dead bleed into one another, and the boundaries between inside and outside, real and imagined, start to break down.

In the distance, Will sees Hope and Bala getting into Norm's boat. This is another instance of reality collapsing in on itself: at the very same moment, Hope and Bala are in fact on Norm's boat, but they are very far away, traveling towards Desperance in an effort to find Will. The vision gives Will comfort: "[e]verything was fine because they were with Norm, and he would bring them home through the storm" (Wright 486). He allows himself to be swept away by the tidal surge and to "fall into its universe" (487). He soon finds himself in a "porridge of decaying fish," "spinifex grasses. Sticks. Green wood. Branches. Plastic. Plastic Malanda bottles. Green bags tied up with rubbish" (489).

In the mayhem of buoyant bodies, bloated animals floating by touched him ever so lightly. Green frogs resting on the dead hailed him: Vale! The herds. Poor nanny goats from the goat farm. Farewell! Bruiser's cattle and horses. Say goodbye, pack of dogs. Pussycats. Chookie fowl. Sad day for the animals of the bush. Kangaroo, wallaby, wild boars. Feral cats. Marsupial mice. Pelicans. (489)

Will is pulled out to sea in a "froth" made up of thousands of dead and living animal bodies (489). This unlikely assemblage heads towards him "with outstretched arms, purposely wanting to draw him to its huge, smothering body" (489-90).¹⁴⁷ When Will manages to turn around to look back towards Desperance, there is nothing left: the town has been "obliterated" (488). And through the destruction, Will sees something new and beautiful emerge: "[t]he bulwark of the

¹⁴⁷ Building on the work Deleuze and Guattari began in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Jane Bennett defines assemblage as "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 23). For Bennett, "Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within" (23-24). Natural ecosystems, the passengers of a city bus, and the contents of someone's purse are all examples of assemblages. Assemblages are temporary; once all of the passengers leave the bus or the purse is emptied, these assemblages cease to exist and new ones are formed.

spirits rose from the waters, and he saw nothing monstrous or hideous in this new creation taking shape, moving, rolling, changing appearance, and beauty in its strident crashing back into the water” (488). This new creation is “an extraordinary floating island of rubbish” (490), made up of all sorts of debris: pieces of the Fishman Hotel building, where he took refuge during the cyclone, “barges, ship’s hulls, fishing boats, prawners, plastic containers, timber” (491), and “dead marine life” (490), “tightly enmeshed into a solid mass” (490).¹⁴⁸ It has no stable form: it is slippery and shifting.

The island is huge, “a kilometre in length” (Wright 491), and Will manages to survive on it for several months. Birds come and go as they please, building their nests on the island out of the “bones of dead fish” (491). Their droppings “covered the entire surface in a thick fertilising habitat” (491), and eventually, “astonishing plants grew in profusion” (491):

Bobbing coconuts took root and grew into magnificent palm trees. Seedlings of mangrove, pandanus, and coastal dune grasses came with the tides, other plants blew on board as seed, and none withered away. A swarm of bees arrived, as did other insects, and stayed. All manner of life marooned in this place would sprout to vegetate the wreckage. A peanut that had floated for perhaps a decade landed one day and grew so profusely it became a tangle of vine-like stems reaching out over the surface to find crevices in which to sink.

A single rotting tomato containing an earthworm settled in the newspaper-lined base of a plywood fruit box, and grew. Within a season, tomato plants inhabited the island like weeds. The worm multiplied into hundreds and thousands of worms. The

¹⁴⁸ These islands of rubbish appear in the narrative once before. Will recalls fishing with Norm and Elias as a child, and seeing out at sea “roaming armadas of the world’s jetsam in flotillas that were like moving islands that you could walk on” (Wright 383).

worms spread like wildfire into every pokey hole of rotting rubbish and soon enough, a deep, nutrient-rich humus covered the entire island. Well! What have you? Peach, apricot, almonds, all grew. Guava, figs—fruit that came with the birds, stayed, and grew into beautiful trees. A wasted banana root survived for months in the sea until it settled on the island where it sent up one big fat shoot after another, in between a mango tree and the figs, then drooped with the weight of large bunches of fruit. (491-92)

The entanglement between human and nonhuman and between biotic and abiotic that Indigenous Australian cosmologies acknowledge and depend on is here made literal through the creation of this island of rubbish. In the wake of catastrophe, a new hybrid organic/inorganic, living/nonliving, human/animal organism comes into being. And Will “was full of wonder at its destiny, intertwined now with his own” (491). The island, perched on the floating debris of the Fishman Hotel and on “the remains of the pipeline [...] from the mine” (488), becomes an oasis of life created out of the gutted remains of the town of Desperance and the mine that for so long brought about only death and destruction. The rubbish island embodies a series of stark contradictions: caught up between the past and the future, between creation and destruction, it embodies the idea of catastrophe bringing about new beginnings and new, subversive human-animal relationships.

Section 8: New Beginnings

Catastrophe in *Carpentaria* creates the possible conditions for rebirth and renewal, and for the emergence of new forms of being and being-with. Both the explosion at the Gurfurrit mine and the cyclone at the end of the novel are framed through a discourse of creation and regeneration. The mine is the locus of ecological destruction in the novel, and the fire that Will’s comrades set to the bush around the mine to distract his captors and facilitate his escape

compounds this destruction. The fire leads to an explosion which produces the eventual conditions for regeneration.

Kicked up by the winds, the fire that the saboteurs set spreads quickly: the “whole place is going to blow” (Wright 399-400). They run for the fence surrounding the property and lie down on the ground to watch.

[...] the explosion was holy in its glory. All of it was gone. The whole mine, pride of the banana state, ended up looking like a big panorama of burnt chop suey. Wonderment was the ear on the ground listening to the great murmuring ancestor, and the earth shook the bodies of those ones lying flat on the ground in the hills. Then, it was dark with smoke and dust and everything turned silent for a long time.

“You think they heard it in Desperance?” some young lad whispered carefully through the settling dust, because he did not want to frighten anyone by making the first sound of this new beginning. (407)

The explosion wipes away the mine that had for so long degraded and poisoned the land. Its destruction marks a “new beginning” (408) for the Indigenous inhabitants of the region. Carmen Concilio, in her analysis of the novel, also points this out (29). She argues that this image of rebirth is not purely metaphorical. In fact, in this ecosystem, fire is a necessary component of ecological regeneration: “fire in Australia is life-giving – certain plants, such as banksias, will only germinate after their seeds have been burnt in a bushfire and heated to temperatures above 400°C” (Concilio 29). The fire and the explosion that take out the mine constitute a compounding of catastrophe, but they also produce the possible conditions for new life in the region.

The cyclone which washes away the town wipes out any final traces of the mine. It pulls the remaining bits of pipeline out to sea, and they too become part of the floating island of rubbish Will survives on for months. The discourse of (re)birth pervades the section of the novel handling Will's time on the island of rubbish. Following the cyclone, Will finds that he has "washed onto a wet, slippery object" (Wright 489). Then "he flinched. Something alive touched him" (489). In sharp contrast to the dead animal bodies trapped within the floating structure, the text here establishes an extended birth metaphor:

Will listened to the embryonic structure's strange whines echoing off into the darkness, then he realised the enormity of those sounds was familiar to him. He was astonished and then weakened by the feeling of helplessness that a man feels hearing the sounds of labour. He felt like he was an intruder to be clinging to a foetus inside the birth canal, listening to it, witnessing the journey of creation in the throes of a watery birth. (490)

References to birth abound in the above passage. The narrator also refers to the island as a "birthing wreck" (493), succinctly capturing its dichotomous pairing of creation and destruction.

Both the mine storyline and the cyclone storyline end in death and catastrophic destruction which, in turn, lead to (re)birth. The novel insists on this pattern of life emerging from death and on this collapsing of opposites. The silence following the explosion at the mine is mirrored with the silence of Norm and his grandson Bala (Will's son) as they disembark on the shores where the town used to be. As the two of them start walking, "Norm realised he could only hear his own feet slurping through the mud. [...] He said nothing" (Wright 514). They encounter "bony, hollow-ribbed, abandoned dogs" (514) that had fled to the hills when the cyclone came in and now "roamed along streets that no longer existed, searching for their owners" (514). The dogs "did not bark or howl. The shock of the cyclone had left them like this:

speechless, dumbfounded, unable to crack a bark. Unable to emit a sound out of their wide-opened mouths” (514). The dogs’ silence reinforces Norm’s and Bala’s. In the stillness, Norm heads to where his house once stood, in Westside Pricklebush. The text here signals the beginning of a return to normality, and it once again uses nonhuman imagery to make that clear.

‘One day,’ he [Norm] said to the boy, ‘your mum and dad are going to come and get you after the grass grows green, and when the clouds of grasshoppers have come and eaten the grass down and died in the wintertime, and when you have caught one big, fat barramundi in the lagoon. Can you wait until then?’ (514)

Norm invokes the daily practices of fishing and the cyclical rhythm of the seasons to reassure Bala that life will return to its regular course. Bala’s face “lit into a smile” (514) and Norm starts planning for the reconstruction of his house, in exact same spot where it stood before, “where the snake slept underneath” (515).

At this point, the stillness in the text is replaced with the deafening sounds of animal life. Abandoned dogs “howl for their owners” (515), and neither Norm nor Bala speak, “because neither would have heard the other” (515): “[i]t was much better to listen to the mass choir of frogs—green, grey, speckled, striped, big, and small, dozens of species all assembled around the two seafarers, as they walked” (515). The novel ends with “so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh” (515), reinforcing the image of rebirth, regeneration, and a return to normality. Importantly, this reestablishment of the order of everyday life is communicated through animal behavior. In ending the novel with these images of animals returning to their usual behaviors, Wright shows that catastrophe is part of the order of daily life in the region. She reinforces the notion that although it is destructive, catastrophe can also lead to rebirth and renewal.

Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, among others, have discussed catastrophe as historically recurring event in the lives of Indigenous peoples. They explain in “On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene” that “the current environmental crises which are named through the designation of the Anthropocene, can be viewed as a continuation of, rather than a break from, previous eras that begin with colonialism and extend through advanced capitalism” (Davis and Todd 771). Davis and Todd posit catastrophe as a continuation of normal conditions of life for postcolonial Indigenous subjects. Yarimar Bonilla complicates this take on catastrophe. In her keynote address “The Coloniality of Disaster: Race, Empire, and Emergency in Puerto Rico, USA,” Bonilla argues that the true catastrophe of Hurricane Maria was not the wind or the waves; it was the conditions of structural neglect which allowed this event to become a large-scale catastrophe in the first place (Bonilla). Without stating them explicitly, Bonilla’s address gestures towards many of the arguments I make here throughout, namely that catastrophe is and has long been the status quo for postcolonial subjects. At the same time, Bonilla insists that the conditions that Hurricane Maria created – the sense of suspended time produced by the lack of electricity, phones, or government services – actually became a period of “gestation” which made it possible for Puerto Ricans to imagine new futures (Bonilla).

The cyclone at the end of *Carpentaria* functions in much this same way, but it also adds in the element of cyclicity. Norm’s return to the exact spot his house stood in with the intention to rebuild, as well as his reliance on seasonal cycles in reassuring Bala, bring this element of cyclicity to the foreground. The cyclone at the end of *Carpentaria* can thus be situated somewhere in between rupture and continuity, destruction and resurgence. This catastrophe operates in a continuum of catastrophes that Will and his family have endured throughout the

novel, and, at the same time, produces the possible conditions for Bala and his grandfather to envision the beginning of a new cycle.

Section 9: Conclusion

Thinner than Skin and *Carpentaria* insist on the fact that catastrophe is part of everyday life for Indigenous Australians. Through their use of movement, perspective, and imagery, these novels reveal connections between colonialism and environmental vulnerability. Both texts place emphasis on subjective experiences of traumatic environmental events through their attention to characters' memories, thoughts, and feelings. In this way, *Thinner than Skin* and *Carpentaria* draw attention to the way narratives render catastrophe. Both texts also illustrate that traumatic environmental events resist simplistic representation. *Thinner than Skin* engages with the challenge of representing catastrophe by providing an abstract and impressionistic rendering of it, while *Carpentaria* overloads the reader with a catalogue of animals and objects hurling through the air or tangled together, ghosts and dead men causing havoc in a bar, and tales of mermaids locked in wood. Each text thus takes a completely different approach to negotiating catastrophe. *Thinner than Skin* represents catastrophe by not allowing readers to "see" it, while *Carpentaria* represents catastrophe by showing the reader so many things that it becomes overwhelming.

Khan uses animals to render traumatic events, and her characters use them to work through environmental trauma and make catastrophe manageable. Wright also positions animals as a crucial site for working through catastrophe and negotiating traumatic experiences. In her work, animals do even more: they help characters prepare for, cope with, and work through catastrophic events. They even play a role in generating the conditions of normality that Norm and Bala find reassuring and promising at the end of the novel. *Carpentaria* is dense and

disorientating, but when one focuses in on the way nonhuman imagery is used, it becomes clear that animals are crucial to both the novel's plot and form. Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina write that, in Indigenous Australian philosophy, “the universe is a pattern comprised of other patterns, of systems inside systems” (196).

Stand close to the pattern and you can focus on a single thread; stand a little further back and you can see how that thread connects to others; stand further back still and you can see it all – and it is only once you see it all that you recognise the pattern of the whole in every individual thread. The whole is more than the sum of its parts, and the whole is in all its parts. This is the pattern that the Ancestors made. (qtd. in Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina 196)

This is precisely how *Carpentaria* works. Individual passages do not reveal the extent of animals' role in the text. But by looking at the whole, at the multiple narrative and rhetorical functions that animals fulfill in the story, the pattern becomes clear. Animals help human characters prepare for danger and work through trauma, and they string together the multiple temporalities and worlds across which the text operates.

There are glimpses of this blurring of different realities in *Thinner than Skin*, when language slips between human and nonhuman descriptors in the narrative moments when Nadir is panicking, but this intermingling of worlds saturates *Carpentaria*. The interpenetration of worlds, realities, and temporalities is encoded into the narrative, breaking down traditional dichotomies between living and nonliving, human and nonhuman. The entangled bodies of Will the fishman hotel, the pipeline, the plants, and the animals at the end of the novel exemplifies the novel's commitment to rendering borders porous and conventional categories permeable.

Chapter 4:

Land Justice, Resistance, Recovery

Section 1: The Physical Environment

Environmental concerns in postcolonial spaces are always-already embedded in political and economic histories of exploitation. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Patricia Grace's *Potiki* connect contemporary ecological anxieties and traumatic environmental events to the aftermath of colonial intervention in the regions' landscapes. I have grouped these novels together under the rubric of land justice: they deal with issues of environmental conservation, struggles for land rights, and resistance to colonial power in postcolonial contexts. Focalizing land justice also draws attention to the way postcolonial novels negotiate the ecological catastrophes that the region experiences under climate change. By focusing on the representation of the physical environment in these novels, and by highlighting the way characters experience catastrophe, I highlight the aesthetic and structural devices that postcolonial authors use to contend with legacies of colonial environmental exploitation. In both novels, catastrophe is explicitly linked to colonial legacy, tying these regions' histories to their current ecological vulnerability under climate change.

The way *Hungry Tide* and *Potiki* represent physical environments makes these novels valuable tools for thinking through how human relations with the nonhuman environment are negotiated in the context of environmental management and exploitation. Specifically, I analyze representations of human characters' relationships with the immediate physical environment, characters' reflections on the nonhuman world, as well as characters' daily struggles with unstable ecological conditions and with catastrophic events. Chapter 3 analyzed human

relationships with individual nonhuman animals – this chapter broadens the scope of this analysis by turning to human relationships with land, plants, water, and other non-animal members of the other-than-human world. These “things” are usually relegated to the background as part of a novel’s setting. I pay particular attention to these nonhuman elements because they fulfill an important narrative function: they erode conventional conceptions of human domination over the nonhuman world and trouble simplistic ways of thinking about human relationships with the nonhuman.

Land and environment are at the core of the conflict in both texts. And, in both texts, they become central to the plot, the form, and the structure of the narrative. Land works in these novels as a site for insight, reflection, and renegotiation. The novels engage with human relationships with the environment in different ways; environmental concerns do not always appear to drive the narrative. Often, in fact, concern for environmental preservation and ecological stability seem to be backdrop elements against which the main plot – the human-driven plot – plays out. Yet just as the environment seems to take a backseat in the text, it reasserts itself as the central locus of the text, and in some instances, as a character in its own right. In the form of extreme weather events, acts of sabotage, or pollution, the physical environment constantly reasserts its central importance in the daily life of these novels’ characters. These events create narrative moments that illustrates the dependence of human life on the nonhuman environment of the story, driving home the absurdity of thinking about the story – any story – as if it were not always-already about human-nonhuman relationships. They also generate moments of reflection in which readers gain insight into the characters’ experiences of grief, trauma, and environmental instability. The narrative structure influences the way catastrophe is dealt with in the text.

Amitav Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement* that climate change rarely makes it into the “serious novel” because its effects seem all too unbelievable (7). He believes the novel form is ill-equipped for dealing with events that seem as extraordinary as ecological catastrophes. I argue that it is precisely the difficulty the novel has handling traumatic environmental events that makes it useful for thinking about catastrophe. These novels demonstrate that, for subjects living in postcolonial environments, environmental instability and catastrophe are woven into the fabric of daily life. To represent them accurately, then, would mean to depict them as elements that encroach into the everyday realities of characters, permeate it, and fundamentally shape it from within. This is precisely what the catastrophes in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* and Patricia Grace’s *Potiki* do. My analysis shows that the novel form is capable of productively engaging with catastrophe by framing it as a fundamental part of everyday life in many postcolonial environments. The stylistic elements and narrative structure of these texts create moments in which ecological instability can be reimagined differently. These works show that the novel form is well-equipped for imaginative engagements with catastrophe and traumatic environmental events.

Parts 1 and 2 each open with a synopsis and a review of existing critical responses to each novel. Next, I situate each of the novels in their respective historical, legal, political, and ecological context and outline each work’s form and structure. Then I proceed to engage with the primary texts themselves. In Part 1, this engagement is divided into four parts, each analysing a specific element of the text: the representation of the environment, the treatment of land management, the engagement with the politics at play in Project Tiger and the Morichjhāpi massacre, and the representation of individual experiences of catastrophe. Part 2, concerned with *Potiki*, proceeds differently. I first introduce how the novel strings together racism, colonial

capital, and relationships with the land. Then, I analyze how the novel uses relationships with land and environment to work through environmental vulnerability. I close by discussing the way the novel engages with catastrophes and the way it imagines post-catastrophe recovery.

Part 1: Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Section 1: Synopsis and Literature Review

Set in the present, *The Hungry Tide* revolves around two people who meet on their journey to the island of Lusibari, in the Sundarbans mangrove forest in coastal India. The first is Piya, an American-educated cetologist of Indian descent who has come to the tide country to study orcaella (river dolphins). The second is Kanai, an Indian translator and businessman who has come to retrieve his late uncle Nirmal's diary from his aunt Nilima. The diary contains a first-person account of experiences of the Morichjhāpi massacre of 1979 – a massacre conducted by the Indian government under the guise of environmental conservation. The story of the massacre and the history of political instability and violence in the Sundarbans therefore unfolds in segments throughout the novel, as Kanai reads the diary. Meanwhile, Piya learns about the region from a completely different perspective: she travels the waterways with her guide, Fokir the fisherman, and ends up caught in a cyclone with him.

Because of the traumatic environmental events it features, I read Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* as a work concerned primarily with catastrophe. The novel frames catastrophe as a normal part of life for the inhabitants of the Sundarbans, pushing readers to consider the transnational forces at play in the creation of unequal ecological conditions. *The Hungry Tide* struggles with catastrophe but ultimately offers useful insights into the connections between catastrophe, colonial conservation models, and land management practices. In its treatment of the plants, tides, and animals of the region, the novel undercuts simplistic Enlightenment

conceptions of the nonhuman environment and casts nonhuman beings as actants in the narrative. Most importantly, the novel exemplifies how novelistic form and structure can be deployed to expose and critique colonial thinking about land and environment as well as neocolonial economic and political dependencies in postcolonial nations.

Despite the fact Ghosh's fiction demonstrates sustained concern with ecological exploitation and climate change, critical responses to his work have by and large overlooked and undertheorized this aspect of his works. Instead, responses to his novels overwhelmingly focus on issues of postcolonial identity formations, globalization, and cosmopolitanism.¹⁴⁹ Rajender Kaur turns to the novel's treatment of ecology and environment. He examines the novel's representation of "deep time" (126), and argues that it condemns the impacts of Western environmentalism in postcolonial contexts. His is also the only article written specifically about *The Hungry Tide* to comment (in passing only) on the connection between colonialism and catastrophe. Rayson K. Alex and Divya Anand investigate the novel's critique of Project Tiger. Anand frames it as a conflict between species conservation and the dispossession of poor Indigenous communities, describing it as a problem of social hierarchy wherein animal conservation is privileged over human rights (157-58). Relatively few articles deal specifically with the novel's critique of postcolonial conservation, and equally few devote any time to the examination of the Morichjhāpi massacre (Weik, Rollason, Anand are among those that do).

¹⁴⁹ Pablo Mukherjee's, Terri Tomsy's, and Emily Johansen's articles focus on *The Hungry Tide*'s engagement with cosmopolitanism. Tomsy and Johansen explore the novel's treatment of social justice issues in the context of class relations (specifically rural/urban and bourgeois/subaltern relations), while Mukherjee highlights the novel's interrogation of "dominant conceptual categories [...] such as 'transnational' and 'translational'" (Mukherjee, *Surfing the second wave* 148). Christopher Rollason is also interested in the role of language and translation in the novel; he structures his argument around the difficulty of transcultural communication (2). Many other scholars, such as Pramod K. Nayar, Hylwel Dix, and Nishi Pulugurtha study the novel with attention to cross-cultural relations, border-crossing, and dispossession. Pulugurtha's analysis emphasizes the novel's dichotomous representation of subaltern politics and cosmopolitan politics (84). Dix examines how the novel's form contributes to its representation of refugees (130-31). Most readings, then, are primarily focused on human-human relationships, bypassing the tensions in human-nonhuman relationships that pervade the text.

While many articles acknowledge in their opening paragraphs that the novel exemplifies Ghosh's investment in environmental critique, they rarely elaborate on the connections between *The Hungry Tide*'s setting and its treatment of catastrophe. Among the few scholars to dwell on this connection is ecocritic Alexa Weik von Mossner. She reads the novel as a story "about the Sundarbans themselves" (Weik 120), and about the "environmental and social injustice" that characterizes the region's postcolonial history (Weik 120). Although she is ultimately interested in making an argument about "local" versus "global" cosmopolitanisms, about territorialized and deterritorialized ways of relating to place, she comments on the novel's resonances with the ecological catastrophes South Asia has had to contend with in recent years:

Reading Ghosh's novel after December 25, 2004, one cannot help but notice what seems to be almost a prediction of the catastrophic tsunami in Southeast Asia. While the two storm tides were caused by different natural phenomena—the surge in the novel by a cyclone and the tsunami surge by an earthquake—the images of islands submerged in moving, raging walls of water, and of people clinging for their lives to trees, blend both horribly and seamlessly. (Weik 129)

This brief reflection of the way *The Hungry Tide* speaks to current ecological crises in the region comes closest to the type of analytical work I am interested in here.

Section 2: The Sundarbans

Ghosh's novel is set in the Sundarbans mangrove forest on the Bay of Bengal, in India, and it features two very different catastrophes. It devotes entire pages to depictions of the region's environment. Particularly relevant to my analysis of the novel is its choice of setting and the great lengths to which its narrator goes to accurately depict the landscape of the region. The narrator's insistence on painting readers a picture of the surroundings suggests that the tide

country plays a role in this text that goes beyond that of serving as mere background for the novel's action.

The Sundarbans is situated in a region of the world that is highly prone to environmental catastrophes. Water-related catastrophes are particularly devastating here. The Sundarbans is a low-lying coastal area, and sea level rise there is 3.14 mm per year, which is very high compared to the global average (Raha et al.). In addition, 26% of the Indian coast is susceptible to erosion, and “[i]ncreased incidence of flooding, storm surges, and intense rainfall could worsen erosion [...]” (Ahmed and Suphachalasai 4). Erosion combined with sea level rise are particularly dangerous, because the Sundarbans serve as a natural buffer against tropical storms, protecting the megacities that lie just beyond the forest from the brunt of the winds and storm surges. With sea levels rising and erosion worsening, the forest is diminishing, leaving the rest of the Indian subcontinent more vulnerable to future catastrophes. And catastrophes are already extremely common here. Between 1990 and 2008, “more than 750 million people in South Asia were affected by at least one type of natural disaster, resulting in almost 230,000 deaths” (4). Climate change will only make such events “more destructive” (4).

South Asia as a whole is particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts. Temperature increases there are likely to surpass the global average (Ahmed and Suphachalasai 4). Summer rainfall is likely to increase, and “intense precipitation events” are likely to become more common (3). Though its exact impacts differ across the different climates of South Asia, climate change will drastically impact the South Asian economy:

Coastal areas and megacities are exposed to rising sea level and intensifying storm surges, while many inland regions will have to cope with heightening climate variability that results in too much or too little water. The rising temperature, coupled with increased

variation of extreme temperature, increases economic burdens, ranging from health risks to electricity bills. In parallel, local air and water quality continue to deteriorate. Extreme weather events only exacerbate the situation. (4)

The Sundarbans forest is extremely sensitive to climate change, and is already experiencing the effects of rising sea levels, seawater seeping into the soil (“Increasing Salinity in a Changing Climate Likely to Alter Sundarban’s Ecosystem”), and changes in monsoon patterns (Mahadevia and Vikas 7). It has also been the site of numerous catastrophes in recent years. In December 2004, the same year *The Hungry Tide* was published, one of the deadliest catastrophes in recorded history struck the Indian Ocean: an undersea megathrust earthquake followed by a massive tsunami resulted in the deaths of between 230,000 and 280,000 people throughout South and Southeast Asia. Photographs of the devastation caused by the event circulated in western news media and brought global attention to this ecologically vulnerable region. Since then, however, repeated catastrophes in the Bay of Bengal have failed to garner similar attention. In the past decade or so, the region has been hit by two major cyclones: Cyclone Sidr which caused 3,500 deaths in 2007, and Cyclone Aila which in 2009 caused 339 deaths and left one million people homeless across India and Bangladesh. It has also been the site of many catastrophes caused entirely by humans.¹⁵⁰ Given this history, it is impossible *not* to read *The Hungry Tide* in the context of catastrophe and vulnerability to climate change. The Sundarbans experiences large-scale catastrophes regularly, and *The Hungry Tide* depicts these events as part of daily routine for locals.

¹⁵⁰ In addition to cyclones, the Bay of Bengal has also experienced several major toxic spills in the past five years, which have only added to the ecological disruptions caused by climate change. 92,000 gallons of furnace oil spilled near Chundpai Dolphin Sanctuary (December 2014), a cargo vessel carrying 200 tons of Potash fertilizer capsized in the Bhola River (May 2015), 570 tons of coal spilled near Dhangmari Dolphin Sanctuary in Pashur River (October 2015), a ship carrying 1,245 tons of coal sank in Shela River (May 2016), a 2017 shipping disaster resulted in 1,000 tons of pit coal leaking into the Sundarbans waterway (January 2017), and last year, another coal ship sank, spilling 775 tonnes of coal in the Passur river (April 2018).

Section 3: Narrative Structure

The novel is split into two narrative threads, one following Piya and one following Kanai, as each character goes about exploring the region according to their own way of understanding the world. Piya studies the ecology of the region, while Kanai is much more interested in its history and cultural and linguistic heritage. The first narrative thread centres on Piya's experiences in the tide country. She meets a local fisherman named Fokir who knows the local waterways like the back of his hand, and goes out on his boat with him for days on end. She has come to conduct research on the river dolphin, and the novel ends with her putting together a conservation project to protect the species.

The second narrative thread is that of Nirmal's diary. It is also concerned with conservation, but from a different perspective. This thread works as a historical parallel to Piya's narrative, outlining the events leading up to the creation of the Project Tiger reserve, established in 1973 to protect the Bengal tiger, India's national animal. The diary works as a primary source document within the narrative, giving Kanai unique insight into a historical event that took place on the nearby island of Morichjhāpi.¹⁵¹ It records the settlement of Partition refugees on the island as well as their subsequent violent eviction by police and government forces to make room for a wildlife reserve. The diary thus serves as a temporal link connecting present-day conflicts surrounding human-nonhuman relationships in the region to the historical event known today as the Morichjhāpi massacre of 1979.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ The island's name is sometimes written Marichjhanpi or Marichjhapi in English. I use the spelling Morichjhāpi for consistency, because that is how Amitav Ghosh spells it in *The Hungry Tide*.

¹⁵² This event is usually referred to in history texts as the "Morichjhāpi incident." I do not use this term. "Incident" does not do justice to the events that took place between January and May 1979 on the island of Morichjhāpi. In his "Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhāpi Massacre," Ross Mallick calls the event a massacre. Amitav Ghosh writes in the *Author's Note* of *The Hungry Tide* that Mallick's 1999 article was the first ever treatment of this historical event in English (Ghosh 332). Since then, many other articles have been published on the subject, including Annu Jalais' "Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When Tigers Became 'Citizens', Refugees 'Tiger-Food.'"

The Hungry Tide moves smoothly between an omniscient third-person account of Piya's experiences and first-person excerpts from Nirmal's diary, forcing these two narratives into the same time-space. These two narratives are separated by several decades, but they take place in same physical space – the Sundarbans forest – and they refer to many of the same people and locations, making the narratives encroach onto one another and comment on one another. This narrative technique of the two parallel storylines makes it impossible not to view Piya's conservation efforts in the region in light of the colonial attitudes and prejudices enacted in the creation of Project Tiger. The narrative function of the diary becomes clear at the end of the novel, when the two narrative threads come together to reveal the entwined relationship between colonialism, conservation, and catastrophe in the region. Taken together, these two narrative threads present a complicated portrait of the region, past and present; they illustrate the connections between legacies of colonial land management and conservation practices as well as contemporary ecological vulnerability.

I bring out these connections and show how the language and structure of the text work to disrupt conventional ways of thinking about environment and of negotiating human relationships with environment and traumatic environmental events. I show that the representation of the environment in the novel combined with its narrative structure generates a sense of imagined temporal and spatial compression. This technique allows the work to grapple with issues that occur across large stretches of time, such as climate change. I demonstrate that Piya's experiences in the tide country push her to reflect on her own complicity in neocolonial economic power relations. Her newfound awareness manifests itself in the conservation model she ultimately envisions for Lusibari: a community-based, bottom-up, grassroots initiative that is mutually beneficial to both the human and nonhuman inhabitants of the region. Finally, I show

that the two intertwined narrative threads that make up the novel directly link colonialism to catastrophe.

Section 4: Space-Time Compression and Nonhuman Actants

The choice of setting in *The Hungry Tide* is not arbitrary. This is a setting that carries with it a plethora of historical, political, cultural, and ecological connotations that make it an ideal space for thinking about climate change and ecological instability. Rich in biodiversity and featuring an ever-changing landscape, this tidal region is made up of an archipelago of islands that stretches across ten thousand kilometers in coastal India and Bangladesh. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh describes it thus:

Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost impossible to believe that here, interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands. [...]

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as two hundred miles inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to reemerge hours later. (6-7)

Ghosh writes about this unstable and constantly shifting landscape in the opening pages of *The Great Derangement*. He explains that “[o]vernight a stretch of riverbank will disappear, sometimes taking houses and people with it; but elsewhere a shallow mud bank will arise and within weeks the shore will have broadened by several feet” (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 5-6). Even within the timeline of the novel, then, the landscape shifts dramatically. The region’s biophysical characteristics generate an effect of compressed time, as “the flow of water and silt is such that geological processes that usually unfold in deep time appear to occur at a speed where

they can be followed from week to week and month to month” (5). Changes which usually occur incredibly slowly are here observable in real time.

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh argues that one of the reasons fiction authors fail to depict climate change believably in their novels is that “[t]he *longue durée* is not the territory of the novel” (59). He believes that the novel is limited by the scope of time it can represent. For Ghosh, “it is precisely by excluding those inconceivably large forces, and by telescoping the changes into the duration of a limited-time horizon, that the novel becomes narratable” (61). Ghosh points out that climate change has already become a part of the everyday, but he assumes that we need to see epochs to recognize its effects. But climate change is occurring at an accelerating rate, making it possible to track its progress across increasingly short periods of time. And *The Hungry Tide* is set in a space in which Ghosh himself writes that geological time moves more quickly. Because it is set in this unique ecosystem and collapses two different timelines, the novel is able to engage with issues such as climate change and slow violence which usually progress so slowly that they go unremarked.

Although Ghosh’s critique of these formal shortcomings holds true for a great many novels, some works successfully manage to convey large portions of time and space in spite of these limitations. *The Hungry Tide* is one such text. It depicts a setting that is culturally and ecologically diverse, and that allow seemingly incompatible elements to intermingle and form unique spaces; in this way, it brings vast expanses of space and time together in a single site. As a result, the setting of this novel operates differently than most other settings.

The tide country is marked by migration and cross-cultural pollination. The diversity of human interaction across national, religious, and linguistic lines here makes the region particularly valuable for my analysis. In the novel, a boatman uses “Islamic invocations and a

mixture of Arabic, Persian and Bengali to worship a nominally Hindu goddess” (Mukherjee, “Surfing the Second Wave” 153). The legend of Bon Bibi which recurs throughout the novel is itself an amalgamation of different cultures and traditions.¹⁵³ The cultural diversity of the region, and its history as a refuge for political and environmental refugees from around the Bay of Bengal, makes the Sundarbans an ideal space for analyzing the interrelated relationship between history, politics, and ecology.

The narrative goes to great lengths to ensure that the reader is aware of the unique ecology of the forest. As Piya notes, there are “more species of fish in the Sundarbans than could be found in the whole continent of Europe” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 104). It is the “unusually varied composition of the water” that produces this biodiversity:

The waters of river and sea did not intermingle evenly in this part of the delta; rather, they interpenetrated each other, creating hundreds of different ecological niches, with streams of fresh water running along the floors of some channels, creating variations of salinity and turbidity. (104)

These unique features create a multitude of “floating biodome[s],” each forming their own distinct microenvironment: “[t]his proliferation of environments was responsible for creating and sustaining a dazzling variety of aquatic life forms – from gargantuan crocodiles to microscopic

¹⁵³ In his diary, Nirmal reflects on the legend:

It struck me that this legend had perhaps taken shape in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, just as new waves of settlers were moving into the tide country. And was it possible that this accounted for the way it was formed, from elements of legend and scripture, from the near and the far, Bangla and Arabic?

How could it be otherwise? For this I have seen confirmed many times, that the mudbanks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language, Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese, and who knows what else? Flowing into one another they create a proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow. And so it dawned on me: the tide country’s faith is something like one of its great mohonas, a meeting not just of many rivers, but a roundabout people can use to pass in many directions – from country to country and even between faiths and religions. (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 205-6)

fish” (105). These species all exist in proximity to one another, and the narrator describes how their living spaces shift according to the tides. This setting generates a sense of imagined spatial compression in the novel. Since it takes place in such a culturally and ecologically varied landscape, the novel can represent a compressed view of the expansive scales of space and time needed to recognize the effects of climate change.

From the beginning of the novel, the environment is represented as a character in its own right. The winds and the tides are made active players in the narrative, and the text ascribes narrative significance to the animals Piya encounters. Crabs, for example, who provide the forest with valuable ecosystem services, are depicted as actants who play a significant role in directing the plot. After sharing a boat with them for several days, Piya recognizes that crabs are “a sanitation department and a janitorial team rolled into one: they kept the mangroves alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them the trees would choke on their own debris” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 119). Later, Nirmal points out that “untold multitudes of crabs are burrowing into our bādh [embankment]” (172). He asks Fokir: “how long can this frail fence last against these monstrous appetites – the crabs and the tides, the winds and the storms?” (172).

The crabs become a driving force in the plot’s development:

It was not her own [Piya’s] intention that had brought her here today; it was the crabs – because they were Fokir’s livelihood and without them he would not have known to lead her to this pool where the Orcaella came. [...] Perhaps it was the crab that ruled the tide of her destiny. (119)

Through the structure of these sentences, nonhuman actors are positioned at the centre of human lives – as guiding the narrative.

Describing the Sundarbans in *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh writes that he believes that “the land here is demonstrably alive; that it does not exist solely, or even incidentally, as a stage for the enactment of human history; that it is [itself] a protagonist” (qtd. in Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 6, original square brackets). For Ghosh, the tidal region is a site that foregrounds nonhuman impact on human life. It is the unique ecological features of the Sundarbans as setting that allow Ghosh to represent the environment as a character, and arguably as one with more influence on the overall direction of the plot than most of the novel’s human characters. *The Hungry Tide* enables a type of thinking which frames the world as “populated by lively and essentially interactive materials, by bodies human and nonhuman” (Bennett, “Systems and Things” 224). The novel disrupts conventional ways of thinking wherein the human subject is the sole arbiter of actancy. Instead, it insists that the nonhuman too can be an actant – that the status of “actant” is not bestowed onto the nonhuman by the human, but is an inherent property of the nonhuman itself. This is an important distinction, one which goes against Enlightenment ways of thinking, wherein actancy is ordained by active human subjects and then projected onto a passive world of objects. The text thus frames human beings as actants embedded in a network of other-than-human actants. By making the nonhuman the driving force of the plot, Ghosh enacts the type of imaginative rearrangement that scholars invested in the nonhuman turn advocate.

The tide country is space in which human characters must exercise constant vigilance, as threats to their life are everywhere. Repeatedly, the text conjures up images of the “devouring tide” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 169) making its way further inland, encroaching on the lives and livelihoods of the locals. Nirmal describes it “eating its way through the earthworks, stalking them [the villagers] wherever they were” (169). It is even more dangerous than the man-eating

tiger: “[t]here was not one among them [...] who would not rather have stood before a tiger than have looked into the maws of that tide” (169). The tides and the winds are ever-present threats:

[...] the wind suddenly started up. Within moments it was on us – it attacked with that peculiar, *willful malevolence* that causes people to think of these storms as something other than wholly natural. The river had been calm minutes before, but now we found ourselves picked up and shaken by huge waves. (132-33, my emphasis)

The tides and the winds have a will of their own in the text, and so do the mudbanks and the mangroves. In one panicked moment, Kanai even imagines them actively working to eliminate him.

When he is left alone on an uninhabited island by Fokir, Kanai senses his surroundings come alive: “[l]ooking down, he discovered that a rope-like tendril had wrapped itself around his ankles. He felt his balance going and when he tried to slide a foot forward to correct it, his legs seemed to move in the wrong direction” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 268-69). At the same time as the text represents the plants and mud as actants, it takes away Kanai’s control over his own body, reversing the typical representations of humans as the dominant force. Kanai’s surroundings become an increasing threat to him as the “spear-like point” of a mangrove ventilator stabs him in the foot (271). He notices mangrove spores and roots all around him, “scattered like booby traps; [...] just below the surface, like camouflaged tripwires” (271). Here, the tidal forest is weaponized, having built up defenses to protect itself against potential intruders like him.

In the Sundarbans, humans are forced to contend with the inescapable presence of the nonhuman in order to survive. *The Hungry Tide* recurrently draws attention to the dangers present in this environment, be they tiger attacks (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 90-91, 241-44),

encounters with sharks (67) and crocodiles (67, 138), the ever-changing landscape (7, 168-72), or the constant threat of tropical storms (122-23, 287-88). Risk of these dangers will only increase as global climate change intensifies the processes of deforestation and coastal erosion. Scientists are already recording significant losses in mangrove density over the past few decades (Roy et al. 146). Most the region's inhabitants are dependent on the Sundarbans ecosystem for survival, "working variously as wood-cutters, fisherman, honey gatherers, leaves and grass gatherers" ("The Sundarbans"). This reliance on the land is a central focus for Ghosh. In *The Hungry Tide*, it is Nirmal who points out this interdependence: "everything which existed was interconnected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature" (282-83). In our current climate crisis, this dependence also puts inhabitants of the forest at a particular risk.

Increasingly "frequent cyclones and erratic monsoon raining pattern[s]" are significantly impacting the ecology of the Sundarbans forest (Mahadevia and Vikas 7). Climate change impacts endanger the 4.37 million people who live in the forest and who depend on forest resources for their subsistence (7). The vast majority of the region's inhabitants "work[...] variously as wood-cutters, fisherman, honey gatherers, leaves and grass gatherers" ("The Sundarbans"). With the increase in global temperatures, sea levels are rising, "islands are disappearing," and salt water is making its way further inland, compromising "the quality of soil and crops" (Mahadevia and Vikas 7; see also "Increasing Salinity in a Changing Climate Likely to Alter Sundarban's Ecosystem" and "Climate Change Could Drown out Sundarbans Tigers – Study"). These changes have triggered the dramatic destabilization of "fishing patterns, resulting in disastrous consequences for fishermen" (Mahadevia and Vikas 7), and shrinking the home range of Bengal tigers, thus increasing human-tiger conflicts in the region (Haque et al. 680). The lives of inhabitants of the Sundarbans is inextricably entwined with the region's

environmental conditions. These features of the region make it a particularly useful site for discussions of human relationships with the nonhuman.

In choosing such a setting, Ghosh keeps the relationship between humans and the environment at the forefront of daily life in the text. Fokir embodies this practise of constant vigilance. Piya observes: “[i]t’s like he’s always watching the water – even without being aware of it. [...] It’s as if he can see right into the river’s heart” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 221). It is well-established in the text that the tide country experiences violent storms, floods, and tiger attacks on a regular basis. These events, although extreme by some standards, are here routine. Life is precarious, and survival depends on the intimate knowledge of the region that Fokir possesses. His survival is contingent on his hyper-vigilance and his training in being attuned to his surroundings.

Section 5: Project Tiger and the Morichjhāpi Massacre

In reflecting on the tide country, Nirmal writes:

What would it take to submerge the tide country? Not much – a minuscule change in the level of the sea would be enough.

As I contemplated this prospect, it seemed to me that this might not be such a terrible outcome. These islands had seen so much suffering, so much hardship and poverty, so many catastrophes, so many failed dreams, that perhaps humankind would not be ill served by their loss. (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 179)

His thoughts drives home the fact that catastrophe is not an extraordinary event in this part of the world. *The Hungry Tide*, in fact, deals with two catastrophic events that the text’s structure parallels. The first is the Morichjhāpi massacre, which Nirmal writes about in his diary, and the second is the cyclone that takes Fokir’s life, which is recounted from Piya’s perspective. Each of

the novel's two narrative threads culminate in a catastrophic event. Indeed, the first entry in Nirmal's journal, dated shortly before massacre, explicitly frames the event in the language of catastrophe: "[t]he hours are slow in passing as they always are when you are waiting in fear for you know not what: I am reminded of the moments before the coming of a cyclone" (58).

Nirmal's diary documents the events taking place on the island of Morichjhāpi in the months leading up to the massacre of 1979. This storyline is a fictionalized first-person account of a real historical event wherein the government of India forcibly evacuated and killed Dalit refugees who had settled the island because it had been designated a tiger reserve.¹⁵⁴ Dalit is a term used to refer to Indigenous Indian communities that occupy lowest stratum of society.¹⁵⁵ Dalits exist outside of the caste system and are therefore considered to occupy the very bottom

¹⁵⁴ The refugees in question in Ghosh' novel are Namashudra, an agrarian and artisan community belonging to the Dalit caste. Before Partition, they led "one of the politically mobilised untouchables' movements in India" (Chowdhury 680). Partition severely weakened the Namashudra movement, "dividing [them] along religious lines, leaving them as a residue at the lowest rung of the society" (680). This led to their losing their political bargaining power, and resulted in them becoming "politically marginalised in both India and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh)" (680). *Round Table India*, an Indian news platform whose primarily goal is to aid in the advancement of Dalit people, published a piece that describes in great detail the political circumstances that led up to the massacre of Dalit refugees in 1979 (see Kumar et al.).

¹⁵⁵ There are over 200 million Dalits in India (Ovichegan). Himansu Charan Sadangi explains that "'Dalit' has come to mean things or persons who are cut, split, broken or torn asunder, scattered or crushed and destroyed" (Sadangi 1-2; see also Ovichegan). It is the name that the Dalit people have chosen to self-identify (Sandagi 21). Sadangi makes it clear that the word Dalit "does not mean [...] low-Caste or poor," but that it simply "refers to the deplorable state or condition to which a large group of people has been reduced" (2). Today, the term has taken on a more positive association, reflecting "a unified class movement against inequality" (Ovichegan).

Sadangi explains that despite laws that illegalize caste-based discrimination, Dalit people experience the brunt of caste-based discrimination:

[...] the Dalit communities are still subjected to extreme forms of social and economic exclusion and discrimination. They are not only denied access to common property (water, land) but are also denied equal opportunities in education and work. Their attempts to assert their rights are often met with strong resistance from the higher castes, resulting in massacres, rapes and other atrocities. (26)

Ovichegan assessment of the economic and sociopolitical conditions Dalit people experience in contemporary India is similar:

Despite the lip-service paid to egalitarianism and equality in Indian society, prejudice and segregation have long been part of the Dalit experience. Dalit communities continue to be restricted in their access to social benefits such as education, which in turn restricts their wider participation in Indian society and limits their opportunities in life. (Ovichegan)

Articles 15, 25, and 46 of the Constitution of India enshrine legal measures seeking to protect Dalit people from discrimination (Government of India, Constituent Assembly. Constitution). But data collected by the World Bank shows that there is still a significant gap between Dalit and non-Dalit people when it comes to education and employment options ("Dalits").

social rank.¹⁵⁶ Originally referring to members of specific groups, Dalit has come to designate a political affiliation.

Project Tiger was fueled by international funding and operated in ways that created an opposition between the welfare of locals and that of nonhuman animals. Ghosh's decision to write a story that ends with Piya kick-starting a dolphin conservation project in a place marked by this history of catastrophe and catastrophic conservation projects is not coincidental. The text is forcing the reader to think about these two storylines in connection to one another and harnesses real life events to call attention to contemporary conservation practices in postcolonial environments. The intrusion of this real historical event into the world of the novel, and the thinly veiled political critique that it brings with it, foreground the complicity of the West in the production of postcolonial vulnerability to climate change and ecological destruction.

In terms of the ensuring the survival of a threatened species, Project Tiger is one of the most successful conservation projects ever enacted.¹⁵⁷ Its impact on the local human population, however, has been nothing short of catastrophic. Launched in 1973, the aim of Project Tiger was to ensure the conservation of the endangered Bengal tiger whose habitat has been shrinking due to development. In addition to ensuring the survival of the tiger, the Project sought to combat poaching, minimize human-tiger encounters (attacks), and to allocate funds towards the relocation of population groups who occupied the territory designated by the Indian government as a reserve. But the most directly felt human impact of Project Tiger was the mass displacement

¹⁵⁶ See my discussion of caste in Chapter 2, Part 1.

¹⁵⁷ Project Tiger's website frames the project's impacts as an immense success: "Project Tiger has been more than successful in its endeavour and has put the endangered tiger, our national animal, on an assured path of recovery. In the contemporary global scenario, this effort hardly has any parallel" ("FAQ.") Unsurprisingly, there is no mention of the Morichjhāpi massacre anywhere on the website.

and massacre of refugees to create an empty park that would serve as a tiger reserve and breeding ground.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Kusum, Fokir's late mother, tells Nirmal that she ended up in Morichjhāpi some time after Partition (1947):¹⁵⁸

When the war broke out, our village was burned to ash; we crossed the border, there was nowhere else to go. We were met by police and taken away; in buses they drove us to a settlement camp. [...] But no matter how we tried, we couldn't settle there: rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood. [...] For months we prepared, we sold everything we owned. [...] we began to walk. (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 136-137)

After the division of Bengal, a large wave of refugees fled Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). The Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) and the military coup that followed (1975) triggered subsequent waves of refugee influx in the region (Chowdhury 666). Most of these refugees were caught by the police and ended up in settlement camps. In the camps, people lived in terrible conditions: “[t]here is virtually unanimous agreement that the conditions in many resettlement camps were deplorable, as numerous inquiries and official documents attest” (Mallick 105-6). Those who escaped the camps had nowhere to go back to, so they settled on an uninhabited island in the tide country. Fifteen thousand refugee families started walking along the railroads to get to Morichjhāpi (107).¹⁵⁹ But by the time they got there, a new government was in power, and the policy on refugees had changed. Many refugees were arrested along the way and returned to the camps. Kusum was among those who managed to return to East Bengal and finally settled on

¹⁵⁸ For more on the history of Partition, see Jill Didur's *Unsettling Partition*.

¹⁵⁹ Political pressures played a significant role in this resettlement. After being forcibly moved from settlement camp to settlement camp in inhospitable lands, the refugees were encouraged by the minister of the Marxist Forward Bloc to return to their “homeland” of East Bengal. See Mallick's and Jalais' articles for an in-depth analysis of the political circumstances surrounding this historical event.

the island of Morichjhāpi. By then, however, the area had been designated protected land under the Forest Acts (see Mallick 107). She and the other refugees who made it to the island were labeled squatters illegally occupying government land.

The diary records many exchanges between Nirmal and the villagers trying to make a peaceful life for themselves on the island. Nirmal himself is amazed by these people, their sense of community, and their organization in the building of this new society. He sees it as a sort of social experiment, “imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 141). Nirmal romanticizes their struggle against the government, but his conversations with Kusum bring the issue back to down to earth and make it clear that for people like her, this is not an ideological struggle but a matter of life and death. The refugees are not activists or protesters trying to make a point about Partition or colonialism or human rights; they are simply people who have lost their homes and have nowhere else to go, so they have settled there in the hopes of making a living off the land.

Nirmal seeks help from his wife Nilima, but she has too much at stake to risk opposing the government: “[i]f the politicians turn against us, we’re finished. I can’t take that chance” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 178). Nilima runs a hospital that receives funding from people she cannot afford to alienate. Her protests, however, echo lines used by conservation agencies who depict Indigenous populations as destroying wildlife through their unsustainable practices: “[t]hose people are squatters; [...] If they’re allowed to remain, people will think every island in the tide country can be seized. What will become of the forest, the environment? [...] The whole forest would disappear” (177). Nilima is cautious – she cannot afford to get mixed up in such a controversial affair that could sabotage the work of the Babadon Trust.

Ross Mallick's article reports that the refugees in Morichjhāpi received no popular support, and that they went months with the government and police forces doing everything they can to flush them out. In January 1979, the government enacted an economic blockade that prevented food and water from reaching the island's inhabitants. When that failed, a forcible evacuation was enacted in May, and violence ensued. There were reports of "police tear-gassing of refugees," sinking boats "which they needed to obtain rice and drinking water," and arresting people "attempting to work on the mainland or sell firewood from the reserve forest" (Mallick 110). The novel provides a dramatization of these events (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 209). The Morichjhāpi massacre and the events leading up to it are poorly documented; official records deny that any massacre occurred, or that any blockade was ever enacted, and list the casualties at two. Various other sources, however, place casualties somewhere between fifty and a thousand (see Chowdhury's and Mallick's articles for other reports of casualties). The press reported that "at least several hundred men, women, and children were said to have been killed in the operation and their bodies dumped in the river" (Mallick 111).^{160, 161}

¹⁶⁰ One of the difficulties in accurately estimating the number of casualties, Mallick explains, is that there were no human settlements downstream that could attest to the number of bodies floating down the river (114).

¹⁶¹ This event is very difficult to research because of a lack of primary source information, in English and otherwise. At the time, press coverage "or any other intervention on the part of the citizens" was successfully quashed by local authorities, despite the fact that the island is only seventy-five kilometres from Calcutta, the capital of West Bengal (Chowdhury 668). There were simply not enough witnesses or survivors willing to share their stories, so the Morichjhāpi massacre escaped public scrutiny for decades. Most articles about the event were written starting in the late 1990s (Chowdhury 664). In 2011, the *Hindustani Times* interviewed members of the Jotdar family, who traveled from a refugee camp in Dandakaranya (now Chhattisgarh) to Morichjhāpi and survived the massacre of 1979. But to this day, the family will "never admit to any outsider that they had ever been in Marichjhapi" (Bhattacharya). They are "still afraid" of the consequences of being found out – afraid of arrests, and afraid of "being sent back to Dandakaranya if their Marichjhapi link is discovered" (Bhattacharya). Debdata Chowdhury's recent article tackles the history of the massacre from the perspective of human rights, identity politics, and spatial justice. She writes that "history has always been selective [...] in its choice of narratives" (Chowdhury 665). The Morichjhāpi massacre is for her "conspicuous" in its absence – an absence which reveals "discrimination [...] in the process of deciding the 'historicity' of events" (665).

Section 6: Indigenous Peoples and Conservation Priorities

The rationale behind the forcible eviction of the refugees at Morichjhāpi was environmental concern. The land that the refugees happened to settle was reserve forest land – land which belonged to the government. The 1972 Wildlife Protection Act sets outlines different types of protected areas, and lists activities forbidden in those areas (Government of India, Parliament, Council of States and House of the People. The Wildlife Protection Act.). It is, for example, prohibited to “hunt” in certain areas (Section 9), except under very specific circumstances (Section 11), to “pick, uproot, damage[,] destroy, acquire or collect” certain types of plants (Section 17A, Subsection a), or to “destroy or damage the habitat of any wild animal” (Section 29). These laws in effect make it practically impossible for the refugees who settle in the region to sustain themselves. The area of the forest the refugees settled on was chosen to be the site of a tiger protection project jointly funded by the Indian state and the World Wildlife Fund. Mallick writes: “[t]he World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and other conservationist groups appear not to have taken any official positions on the subject, which was expedient given the controversy that might have arisen from foreign interference” (115). The author makes it clear that there is no evidence “on record” that NGOs put any pressure on the government to enact this eviction. Nevertheless, “environmental movement [...] achieved a victory from the result, though the massacre was not something the environmentalists publicized” (115). Mallick also insists that it was a widely known fact that “Indigenous peoples were being evicted by conservation projects,” but that the sheer numbers of refugees – an estimated 600,000 – made the expectation that NGOs provide some form of relief totally unrealistic (115).

International money was being poured into this project, and even though the sum was negligible, this made it a matter of concern: “schoolchildren in Britain, Belgium, Holland, and

Germany were raising money for Project Tiger” (Mallick 116). A newly independent India felt the pressure to present itself as a nation that cares about its wildlife. The money was therefore accepted because it was believed it would “enable the world community to have a sense of involvement in the campaign to protect a ‘World Heritage’” (116). Project Tiger’s Chief Conservator knew that “the greatest sacrifices were being made by the forest dwellers themselves”:

‘It was therefore laudable for European children to raise funds for saving tigers in another continent but equally praiseworthy, if not more, has been the silent and untrumpeted sacrifice of those who have shifted their century-old villages lock stock-and-barrel and of the thousands of tribals who forsook their sources of livelihood.’ (qtd. in Mallick 116)

For neglecting to consider the impacts of conservation efforts on the island dwellers, the Project was criticized for “for putting the interests of tigers ahead of people” (Mallick 116). Indeed, the whole project was organized in such a way that it created direct opposition between the welfare of local humans and that of local nonhuman animals.¹⁶² In his article, Ross Mallick does not shy away from making his feelings on the issue clear: “European children were raising money to preserve animals that ate poor Third World children” – although, he writes, this fact “probably escaped the notice of animal rights campaigners” (116). WWF literature from this era tended to “blame the poor for being the ‘most direct threat to wildlife and wildlands’” (Mallick 116), the same way colonizers in South Asia blamed Indigenous populations for contributing to deforestation.

The consequences of this opposition between human and animal welfare created by Project Tiger are perfectly summarized by Kusum, in her conversation with Nirmal. She recalls

¹⁶² One particular legal case Mallick references in which a villager who killed a tiger attacking his companions was prosecuted exemplifies this perfectly (116).

the sense of powerlessness she felt while she waited in her home for the forest guard and the police to come remove her and her neighbors from the island. Starving and unable to provide adequate food for her son Fokir, Kusum confides in Nirmal:

[...] the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt or dust. ‘This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all over the world.’ Every day, sitting here with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their name? Where do they live, these people? Do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things, it seemed to me that this whole world had become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No one could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 216-217)

Kusum’s words make such an impact on Nirmal that he is forced to lay down. Her speech conveys in one succinct paragraph the issues at stake in Project Tiger: the opposition created between the wellbeing of the refugees and that of the tigers by these conservation practices, the colonial attitudes inherent in this conservation model, and the obvious disconnection between the material realities of rural life in India and the ideas projected onto rural Indians by western conservation ideals. These are problems that Western colonial conservation models have long

been criticized for. Frequently, western conservation groups' representations of Indigenous peoples follow certain specific patterns.

Ross Mallick explains that the adversarial relationship between humans and animals that Project Tiger generated through its implementation is fueled by representations of rural and Indigenous subjects by western conservation groups. This representation is rooted in colonial Enlightenment philosophies and ways of Othering racialized and colonized Indigenous subjects. For a long time, Indigenous peoples have been represented in European literature and thought as sub-human, animalistic, and as associated with the natural world rather than the rational, “enlightened” world of European culture.¹⁶³ This notion that Indigenous people are “one with nature” justified representations of them as living harmoniously with the plants and animals with whom they cohabitate (Mallick 118). Such representations have rhetorical value for Western conservation groups, who are therefore invested in perpetuating them. In his article, Mallick analyses the *National Geographic Explorer* television program, using it as a “typical example” of how Indigenous subjects are represented according to the western conservation agenda. The program did not allow the villagers “to speak for themselves” (116). Instead, a narrator did all the talking: ““tiger doesn't just mean death, the tiger means life, because the tiger protects the forests which gives them food for their families. They know the tiger is necessary for the world to be whole, and the tiger is a price to be paid”” (qtd. in Mallick 116).

Such representations of Indigenous peoples efface the material realities of their lives and present them as living peacefully with the tigers. But as Mallick points out, the fact is that the villagers would be “better off if the tigers were nonexistent”:

¹⁶³ The discourse of animality and attention to human-animal relationships are valuable components of my analysis because animals have long functioned as a metaphor Europeans use(d) to talk about racialized and colonized populations, especially Indigenous peoples. For more on the relationship between colonialism, postcolonial theory, and critical animal studies, see Chapter 1, Sections 6 and 8.

For poor people there is no advantage to having tigers for it is they who pay the price with their lives, while the tourist operators and the politicians they finance reap the benefits. This is not something National Geographic is likely to say on television, so a folklore is invented to pretend there is a *mutual dependency* that makes the lives lost seem a necessary and accepted price to pay for conservation. (Mallick 116; my emphasis)

This portrayal of Indigenous people as living in harmony with nature lends itself perfectly to rhetoric used by conservation groups, who then use the interests of such marginalized human groups to fight against development in rural areas. Conservation groups represent Indigenous peoples as intentionally eco-conscious, as doing minimal harm to the environment by choice – they neglect the fact that these populations participate minimally in development because of technological and economic constraints. When poor rural people are seen degrading the environment, they no longer “conform to the way environmentalists need to portray them, and therefore tend to be ignored in the literature” (Mallick 118). This is where the mindset that Indigenous peoples are destructive to the environment and have unsustainable practices – which reappears throughout my case studies – comes into play.

Deemed irresponsible stewards of their land, the refugees at Morichjhāpi were evicted so that the forest reserve land could be protected from their damaging behaviors: “[t]he Marichjhapi refugees were environmentally unfriendly and so offered no campaign opportunity for national or international conservation groups” (Mallick 118-19). And the Indian government, “by adhering to an environmental agenda,” did not face opposition from international conservation groups (119). The refugees, he writes, “died unknown deaths because they did not conform to external perceptions and interests in Indian society or lobbies in the western world” (119).¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ One textual anecdote that illustrates this misguided valuation of tiger welfare over that of the local villagers is provided by Nilima, Nirmal’s wife. She recounts how, in the 1980s, a German naturalist postulated that tigers in the

There is therefore a dual characterization of Indigenous subjects by western conservation agendas: Indigenous peoples are both “part of” nature and living in harmony with wildlife, and, at the same time, destructive and lacking the compassion and understanding needed to foster more sustainable relationships with the natural world. The tension between these two seemingly incompatible characterizations is one that *The Hungry Tide* struggles with and ultimately fails to resolve.

Since much of the novel is filtered through Piya’s perspective, the reader constantly discovers new misguided assumptions that she makes about Fokir. Recurrently throughout the text, Piya makes observations that suggest she sees Fokir as a part of the Sundarbans’ wildlife. On many occasions, she notes the insight Fokir has into abrupt weather changes and quirks of the tide. She sees him as one with the tide country’s environment, and the narrator reveals that, while watching him and his son Tutul sleep, she cannot help but compare them to the dolphins she is observing: “[t]heir chests were moving in unison as they slept and the rhythm of their breathing reminded her of the pair of dolphins she had been watching earlier” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 115). She is thinking along the same lines as the conservation groups the novel critiques; in fact, in “Surfing the Second Wave,” Pablo Mukherjee qualifies Piya’s environmentalism as wedded to an idea of “‘benevolent’ imperialism” (152). Being an American-educated cetologist invested in the protection of wildlife, Piya assumes that a man who lives in proximity to dolphins, crabs, and tigers must be a lover of nature and animals – she maintains that she and Fokir have a bond because they both understand and appreciate wildlife. It is only when she sees Fokir participating

Sundarbans kill and eat humans so frequently because of a “shortage of fresh water” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 200): “[t]his idea had been received with great enthusiasm by the Forest Department, and several pools had been excavated to provide the tigers with fresh water” (200). Nilima is outraged: “[j]ust imagine that, [...] They were providing water for tigers! In a place where nobody thinks twice about human beings going thirsty!” (200).

in the killing of a tiger that she is confronted with the reality that he cannot afford to be an animal lover when the animals he must cohabit with are tigers.

When a wounded tiger that killed two people is set on fire by a group of villagers, Piya tries to stop them from hurting the animal. Fokir restrains her. After the fact, she cannot get what she has seen out of her head: “I keep seeing it again and again – the people, the flames. It was like something from some other time – before recorded history. I feel like I’ll never be able to get my mind around the – [...] The horror. [...] I wonder if I’ll ever be able to forget it” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 248). She feels that, in participating in the tiger’s killing, Fokir himself becomes “part of the horror” (248). Kanai finds her shock ridiculous. He points out that, for Fokir, dealing with tigers – sometimes by killing them – is simply “part of everyday life” (248). “Did you think he was some kind of grass-roots ecologist?” Kanai asks Piya, “He’s not. He’s a fisherman – he kills animals for a living” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 245). Piya struggles to recognize that for people in the tide country, tigers are not seen as precious biodiversity or as an endangered species, but as an immediate threat to their lives. Kanai confronts her with this reality. He puts the event into perspective:

It happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it, but we choose not to see it. Isn’t that a horror too – that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings?” (248)

Kanai insists on the regularity of these killings – on the fact that they are banal reality of life in the region. He calls Piya out: he sees her, a scientist and a conservationist, as complicit in the

horror she is condemning. “Because it was people like you,” he explains, “who made a push to protect wildlife here, without regard for the human costs” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 248). Kanai admits that he and other people of his class are complicit too, because they “have chosen to hide these costs, [...] in order to curry favor with Western patrons” (248). He concludes: “[i]t’s not hard to ignore the people who’re dying – after all, they are the poorest of the poor. But just ask yourself whether this would be allowed to happen anywhere else” (249).

After the tiger killing, Piya’s opinion of Fokir changes drastically. She realizes that their ways of relating to the nonhuman world are completely different, and that they do not share the bond she thought they had: “I was just being stupid. I guess it took something like this for me to get it straight. [...] It’s just, I thought somehow he’d be different” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 245). Pablo Mukherjee calls attention to a moment in the novel shortly after the tiger killing, during which Piya and Fokir sit silently in his boat together. The narrator writes that “something that had existed between them” had broken (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 290): “something had ended, leaving behind a pain of a kind that could not be understood because it never had a name” (290-91). Mukherjee argues that “what has ended is the eroticisation and exoticisation of difference” – “what replaced it is an acceptance of the specificity of difference, and a realisation of a universal solidarity. The pain is a birth pang as well as one of disenchantment” (Mukherjee, “Surfing the Second Wave” 156). I agree with his interpretation of the scene. The tiger killing marks a moment of recognition for Piya wherein her assumptions about Fokir and the other villagers are challenged and start to be renegotiated. But the textual element that allows for this renegotiation is the cyclone she endures with Fokir. It is only after surviving the catastrophe that Piya seems to have come to a fuller understanding of what it means to have to contend with the

danger of tigers and extreme weather events on a regular basis. The text shows that her brief stay in the tide country marks her deeply.

Section 7: Catastrophe and Environmental Trauma

The second thread that runs through the novel is the narrative of Piya's experience of catastrophe. On the ninth day out on the water, Piya and Fokir end up stranded on a deserted island during a cyclone. Since the novel is written in omniscient third-person, the narrator moving in and out of different characters' minds to shed light on their thoughts, the reader has access to Piya's experience of the cyclone.¹⁶⁵ In Fokir's boat, Piya observes the orcaella, tracks their route on her GPS, and gathers data. In the distance, a storm is brewing, but she and Fokir are several hours away from Lusibari and from shelter. They start making their way back towards Lusibari, "the boat groaning as if it were going to come apart any minute" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 307), but the storm moves faster than they do: "the wind kept strengthening and the dark stain in the sky seemed to spread faster and faster" (304).

The dark skies, inordinately strong winds, and stormy waters immediately make Piya think of catastrophe: "her mind strayed back to her phone. She remembered reading accounts of people making calls from under the wreckage of derailed trains, from the rubble of houses that had been demolished by earthquakes, from the burning towers of the World Trade center" (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 306). The cyclone has not hit them yet, but Piya is already experiencing this event as a catastrophe, and situating it alongside a series of other accidents and tragedies in her mind. As the winds grow stronger, she grows increasingly distressed. She even starts bargaining with the forces of nature: "[l]et it be on land, she said to herself, muttering

¹⁶⁵ The reader has no access to Fokir's experience – his perspective remains, throughout the novel, unknowable and inaccessible. He only has two lines of dialogue in the entire novel, and they must be translated by another character in order for Piya to understand them (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 222).

aloud, as if in prayer. Whatever happens, let it be on land. Not the water, please. Not the water” (307).

With a particularly strong gust of wind, Piya loses her backpack (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 307). The winds are now so strong that Piya and Fokir are forced to come ashore on a deserted island. They go inland and climb a mangrove tree, using an old sari to tie themselves to the trunk. Piya ends up sandwiched between the tree trunk and Fokir. The wind keeps growing in intensity: “[i]t was difficult to imagine that the wind could grow any stronger or more violent, yet Piya knew it would” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 312). Finally, the storm hits them: “Piya knew that the gale had reached full force when she saw something that looked like a whole island hanging suspended above their heads” (314). All around them, the waters are rising, the waves reaching incredible heights:

[...] its crest reared high above, dwarfing the tallest trees. It was a tidal wave sweeping in from the sea; everything in its path disappeared as it came thundering toward them. Piya’s mind went blank as disbelief yielded to recognition. Up to this point there had been no time for terror, no time to absorb the reality of the storm and to think about anything other than staying alive. But now it was as if death had announced its approach and there was nothing to do but wait for its arrival. (315)

This moment marks the first time in the narrative that Piya comes to a full recognition of the danger she is in. She, unlike Fokir, Horen, and the other villagers, has never experienced a cyclone. As they are engulfed by a tidal wave, Piya can tell from the pressure in her lungs that there are at least nine feet of water above their heads (315).

The eye of the storm passes them, and the tree is no longer shielding them from the wind. Fokir’s back is now receiving the full impact of the projectiles hurled around by the wind:

“[t]heir bodies were so close, so finely merged, that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could feel the blows raining down on his back” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 321). Eventually, Fokir is hit by a tree trunk and Piya can feel him passing away; she must sit out the rest of the storm tied to his lifeless body (321-23). When the storm passes, she takes his boat back to Lusibari. For the next several days, Piya is so traumatized that she cannot speak: she becomes “a strangely unnerving presence in the Guest House, a kind of human wraith, inwards, uncommunicative, leaden-faced” (325). Nilima doubts she will recover from it.

Despite evidence of her trauma, the novel makes it clear that the cyclone Piya endured was relatively minor. There are several other accounts of cyclones provided in the novel, including Nirmal’s recollections of an account written by European travelers, and these accounts allow the reader to view this storm in context. The event was not out of the ordinary for the region – on the contrary. Horen was caught in a cyclone once, in 1970, and he saw islands flood entirely. The boat he was on slammed into a tree trunk and fell apart, resulting in the drowning of a crewmember (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 287). Horen and his uncle Bolai survived by tying themselves to a tree:

They spend two days in the tree, without food or any additional water. When the floodwaters subsided they tried to make their way back to the nearest town. They had not gone far before they turned back: it was as if they were in the vicinity of some terrible battlefield massacre. There were corpses everywhere, and the land was carpeted with dead fish and livestock. They found out that three hundred thousand people had died. [...] That was Horen’s experience of a cyclone, and the memory of it would last him through a second lifetime – he never wanted to have it repeated. (288-89)

The reader is not granted access to Horen's thoughts and experiences to the same extent as Piya's, but it is made obvious that the storm he weathered was much more violent. This account enables the reader to see, in retrospect, that the cyclone during which Fokir died was not an extraordinary event – it was not even particularly deadly. Although the catastrophe Piya experienced marks a turning point in the narrative and a breakthrough point for her as a character, it was a completely routine event for the other inhabitants of the region. Catastrophe, in the tide country, is the norm.

After the cyclone, Piya seems to have shut down: her face is “stonily expressionless, as if to suggest that she had retreated deep within herself” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 325). Kanai believes that Piya is tortured by a feeling of accountability towards Fokir's wife and child, and acknowledges that this is “hardly surprising.” “Can you imagine what it was like for her to sit through the last hours of the storm, sheltered by Fokir's lifeless body?” he asks Nilima, “[l]eave aside the horror of the memory – imagine the guilt, the responsibility” (325). Piya leaves the tide country, but when returns, she enacts a plan to both protect the orcaella and make reparations to Fokir's family.

The novel makes it clear that the cyclone affected Piya psychologically, but that it also helped her see things from the position of one who must contend with the possibility of being caught in such violent environmental events on a daily basis. Determined to make something of the data she collected out on Fokir's boat, she writes up a report about river dolphins in the area. She lost all her equipment during the storm, but her GPS stayed intact: “Fokir took the boat into every little creek and gully where he'd ever seen a dolphin. That one map represents decades of work and volumes of knowledge. It's going to be the foundation of my own project” (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 328). The map Piya is left with represents the central role Indigenous knowledge

will play in this new dolphin conservation project. Piya's report sparks interest in the scientific community and she gets several offers of funding from conservation groups. But before making any decisions, Piya consults Nilima: "[y]ou know a lot about the people who live here. [...] I don't want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it" (327). She asks Nilima and Moyna to work with her, and insists that the local fishermen be involved in the conservation project. She even wants the Babadon Trust, the NGO that funds the local hospital Nilima runs, to share the funding she receives (327).¹⁶⁶

The novel therefore ends with Piya becoming the type of conservationist who harnesses Indigenous knowledge and wants to work with the local population to make sure that conservation projects do not cause harm to local communities. This type of approach to conservation stands in direct opposition to the practices enacted by the Indian government and the international NGOs during the planning phases of Project Tiger.¹⁶⁷ The novel is here

¹⁶⁶ It is necessary to point out here that the novel's ending is extremely facile. In tying the story up with the creation of an ethical, eco-conscious, locally-run, bottom-up conservation project that harnesses Indigenous knowledge, Ghosh displaces the problems Project Tiger continues to pose. One of these problems is, for example, the fact that tigers eat people while dolphins do not. It is convenient to end the novel with the creation of a dolphin conservation project, because it allows Ghosh not to deal with the issue that the other animals conserved in this area are dangerous to humans. This all-too-convenient ending is also criticized by Huggan and Tiffin in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*:

But the real clash of interests is displaced – perhaps deliberately – in Ghosh's novel. In recent decades, the strongest international pressure on the Indian government has been for tiger, not river dolphin, conservation, in large part because the Bengal tiger represents a prime example of a global signature species at mortal risk. [...] Piya's decision at the end of the novel to become a 'rooted cosmopolitan' rather than a 'footloose expert' (Shalini Randeria's terms, 2007) is only possible because the local people have no particular issue with the dolphins; the much more intractable problem of tiger sanctuary is thus displaced by the relatively easy 'dolphin solution', and neither a practical nor a philosophical answer to the situation of the tiger is offered in its place. (205)

¹⁶⁷ In 2006, two years after the publication of *The Hungry Tide*, the government of India passed the *Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act*, commonly known as the *Recognition of Forest Rights Act*. The Act aims to redress the historical injustices experienced by communities who have traditionally lived in forests and depended on the land for their subsistence. It recognizes the rights of these communities to live on and protect the land they have traditionally inhabited (see Government of India, Parliament, Council of States and House of the People. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act.). However, the implementation of this Act has triggered significant upheaval and protest in India, with critics claiming that, in practice, it further disenfranchises marginalized communities (see "State of Implementation of the Forest Rights Act - Summary Report").

offering an alternative to the types of conservation practices that the narrative of the Morichjhāpi massacre critiques.

Section 8: Conclusion

The cyclone marks a turning point in the plot, as both Piya and Kanai lose their most precious possession just before the storm reaches its full force. Piya loses her backpack (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 307) containing all her equipment and “all the data she had gathered over the past nine days” (306). She had specifically tied it down to the boat to avoid losing it, but then the wind grew so strong that “the entire hood tore away from the boat and went sailing off into the sky, with Piya’s backpack trailing behind it like the streamer of a kite” (307). In a parallel scene, Kanai is struggling to make it back to shore with his uncle’s diary intact: “Kanai cared about only one thing in the suitcase. [...] ‘I’ll wrap it in plastic so it won’t get wet. I want to take it with me.’” (309). Despite his preventative measures, the diary falls into the river and is lost:

[...] it was as if the wind had been waiting for this one unguarded moment: it spun him around and knocked him sideways into the water. He thrust his hands into the mud and came up sputtering. He scrambled to his feet just in time to see the notebook bobbing in the current some thirty feet away. It stayed on the surface for a couple of minutes before sinking out of sight. (310)

Both Piya and Kanai lose their “map” of the tide country – Piya’s being material-ecological and Kanai’s being historical-linguistic. Both sets of documents are records of important events in the region which help these outsiders negotiate the inhospitable space of the Sundarbans forest. And when catastrophe strikes, these maps disappear. All that is left are Piya’s and Kanai’s subjective experiences of the region. Piya loses all her scientific data and must use her memories of dolphin behavior in the region to convince conservation groups to donate to her

cause. Her report therefore ends up being “impressionistic” rather than factual (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 327). Likewise, Kanai, who was hoping to translate Nirmal’s diary and publish it, is now forced to render the narrative from memory. The cyclone, in effect, forces Piya and Kanai to think back on their experiences in the tide country, to challenge their impressions, and to renegotiate their relationships with the region without a map to fall back on. In this way, catastrophe forces a renegotiation of the experience of the physical environment in *The Hungry Tide*.

The combination of the way the text engages with catastrophe, colonial conservation models, and land management practices successfully performs a critique of (neo)colonial economic and political relationships in the independent Indian state and of colonial thinking about land and environment. The novel also works as a “wakeup call” for people like Piya whose positionality makes them incapable of understanding what it is like to have one’s life and livelihood contingent on weather fluctuations, ecological instabilities, and chance encounters with wildlife.

The way the narrative struggles with the tension between incompatible representations of Indigenous peoples is also very productive. At times, the narrator pairs the villagers with wildlife and nature, foregrounding the villagers’ reliance on the forest and implying a relationship of mutual dependency. During the cyclone, for example, the tigers and the humans are ‘in it together’ – fighting against the flooding and the extreme winds (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 320-21). At other times, the novel shows the villagers fighting for their lives against the tides, the winds, and the tigers. This tension in the relationship between the villagers and the nonhuman world is never resolved in the text, and it generates a more nuanced depiction of Indigenous subjects than many other works are capable of producing. The pairing together of racialized and

Indigenous postcolonial subjects with the natural world has a long history in the European tradition, and it comes with philosophical implications that I reject. Neither do I accept, however, the position that the lives of postcolonial subjects living in rural India can be completely divided from wildlife and environment. The material conditions of the lives of locals are such that environmental flux and instability, as well as laws pertaining to land use and animal protections, affect rural and Indigenous populations directly; Ghosh's novel illustrates this quite clearly. It is therefore useful to work through the ways such a text helps nuance and rethink currently available theorizations of human relationships with animals in the Anthropocene. I reject the idea that the villagers are 'one with nature' (or that Indigenous populations are one with nature and its animals, as WWF and many environmental organizations would have us think). But I also reject traditional continental philosophy's idea of humankind's separateness from "Nature;" this view falls apart in the physical space of the tide country, where humankind is inextricably bound to and enmeshed with the nonhuman environment in a very immediate way. The tension between these opposite views is perhaps more productive than any clear resolution could be.

The Hungry Tide struggles with catastrophe but it does succeed in representing it in a way that is intellectually useful. It undercuts conventional views of the nonhuman environment by showing that ways of thinking about the nonhuman world in continental philosophy simply do not work in this context. It also problematizes human relationships with nonhuman animals and the environment. Finally, by engaging with a catastrophic historical event and juxtaposing it with an extreme weather event that occurs frequently in the region, the novel frames catastrophe as part of everyday life in the Sundarbans. Through its representation of catastrophe, the text challenges readers to think about catastrophe as routine and to consider the transnational

economic forces at play in the creation of unequal ecological conditions. *Potiki* also foregrounds these forces and their impact on Indigenous populations in postcolonial environments.

Part 2: Patricia Grace's *Potiki*

Section 1: Synopsis and Literature Review

Grace's novel centres on the daily lives and struggles of a Māori community in New Zealand, focusing in particular on the stories and perspectives of members of the Tamihana family. Roimata is married to Hemi Tamihana, and they have four children: James, Tangimoana, Manu, and their adopted son Tokowaru-i-te-Marama (Toko for short). Granny Tamihana and Mary, Hemi's sister and Toko's biological mother, also feature prominently in the narrative. The novel revolves around the Tamihana family's daily life and struggles as unemployment becomes rampant in the community and Hemi loses his job, putting the family in dire financial straits. In order to make ends meet, the Tamihanas begin working their land and living off of the food they grow and the fish they catch. The main conflict in the plot is brought on when Mr. Dolman, a representative of a powerful company, comes to pressure the community into selling their ancestral land and moving their wharenuī (meeting house) and urupa (burial ground) in order to make room for a road and an entertainment complex that would serve as a tourist attraction (Moorfield, "Wharenuī"; Moorfield, "Urupa.")

The developers' desire for the land is unsurprising to the locals. These demands to sell the land recur throughout the text, interspersed with stories of other times in which similar demands were made of nearby communities. The hills beyond the urupa were sold long ago, and the community still regrets this major loss: "[t]he hills had gone, but that was before his time and there was nothing he could do about that, nothing anyone could do. What had happened there wasn't right but it was over and done with" (Grace 60). When the community refuses to give in

to Mr. Dolman, company employees flood the urupa, set the wharenuī on fire, and trigger an explosion that kills Toko. The flood, the fire, and the explosion constitute the major catastrophes that the community must contend with and recover from in the narrative. Through its use of perspective, the novel connects these catastrophes to colonial legacies and shows catastrophe to be a routine part of life for this community.

By moving between the perspectives of different members of the Tamihana family, the text foregrounds the viewpoints and experiences of marginalized Indigenous characters. The text focuses on Indigenous daily life in contemporary New Zealand and distances itself from the perspective and worldview of Mr. Dolman, his employees, and the New Zealand government. In so doing, the text reveals the racist and (neo)colonial attitudes inherent in the ways the company and the government relate to Māori characters, and links these attitudes to the Māori community's poverty, disenfranchisement, and disproportionate vulnerability to catastrophe and environmental degradation in the region. A great many lines of text are dedicated to descriptions of the land and of working the land. The text uses the land as a key narrative site for working through and coping with catastrophe.

Land forms the core of the conflict in the text. The environment becomes central to the plot and the aesthetic style of the story, driving readers to see land as more than simply a setting in which the human-centred plot unfolds. Land works as a site for reflection and insight, and relationships with the land become a source of calm and stability in the midst of changing environmental conditions. Human relationships with the environment are also nuanced in the novel in ways that challenge conventional Enlightenment modes of thinking about the environment. The novel thus disrupts simplistic ways of thinking about the environment, and primes the reader to engage with human-land relationships in different ways.

Patricia Grace is a New Zealander of mixed heritage; she has “Ngati Toa, Ngati Raukawa and Te Ati Awa ancestry” (Barker, “‘Decrepit, Deranged, Deformed’” 34). Her novel revolves around the daily lives of various members of a Māori community. Anthony Carrigan reads the story with attention to tourism and development, and their relationship to colonialism (61-69). Eva Rask Knudsen’s critical response to the text interrogates how non-Indigenous readers can engage with it, and posits non-Indigenous readers of Māori texts as entering into the story as guests. Patrice Wilson’s turns to the way in which the novel handles violence,¹⁶⁸ while Clare Barker analyzes the novel through the lens of disability studies.¹⁶⁹ Two dominant threads appear in the body of scholarship responding to *Potiki*. The first is scholarship that analyzes the novel through the lens of Indigenous sovereignty and its relationships with the land. The second is scholarship that analyzes the novel vis-à-vis its handling of time and temporality.

Briar Wood’s and Holly Walker’s essays belong to the first thread. Wood discusses how Grace’s work in relation to Māori political struggles for land governance in 1970s New Zealand, and Walker analyzes how the novel handles “development” (Walker 215), arguing that *Potiki* rejects development “as a Western ideology” (223). Patrick D. Murphy’s reading of the text follows a similar pattern. Murphy’s essay touches on postcolonial Indigenous populations’ disproportionate vulnerability to environmental degradation and catastrophe, but his analysis is

¹⁶⁸ Wilson places *Potiki* in conversation with a series of postcolonial texts that put violence on display and refuse to turn away from its gory details. *Potiki*, Wilson concludes, is different. Even the most violent scenes in the novel (the murder of Toko and the destruction of the building site) present violence in a way that “[does] not register [...] as violence” (Wilson 121). She argues that the novel’s form achieves this effect of diminishing violence. I discuss the novel’s form and engage with Wilson’s analysis of it in greater detail below.

¹⁶⁹ In “From Narrative Prosthesis to Disability Counternarrative,” Barker argues that that *Potiki* thwarts conventional readings of disability. Whereas disabled bodies are “usually interpreted in terms of the texts’ Maori cultural politics” and are used to comment on “indigenous disempowerment” (Barker, “From Narrative Prosthesis” 130), *Potiki* presents the disabled characters as “integrated and engaged members of their communities, as active agents within the cultural and political negotiations of the texts” (131). Barker argues that Grace’s narrative handling of disability “coincide[s] with progressive notions of disabled social agency, and utilise[s] strategies of representing disability that are politically enabling in terms of both disability and culture” (130-131). In “‘Decrepit, Deranged, Deformed,’” Barker conducts an analysis of embodiment and disability in the novel, weaving it into a wider discussion of conceptions of health and sickness (60).

centrally focused on cosmopolitanism and its connection with resilience. Murphy shows that the text deals with “the long-term erosion of the cultural continuity of the Maori people of New Zealand effected by conscious government policies, wartime exigencies, and economic modernization” (P. Murphy 158). He also goes on to discuss the environmental challenges the Tamihana family face, juxtaposing the threat of cultural destruction with “the immediate threat of destruction of the land [...] by tourist resort developers, who attempt to buy them out and, when that fails, to destroy the viability of their land by building on adjacent property, engaging in sabotage, and committing arson” (158). His reading of the text therefore comes closest to my own.

Articles by Miriam Fuchs, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin , Barbara Joyce Kinnane, and Elizabeth DeLoughrey all belong to the second thread. They respond to *Potiki* analyzing its representation of temporality, connecting it to the novel’s presentation of the narrative in the form of a series of interwoven stories. DeLoughrey’s analysis, like Kinnane’s, is centrally concerned with temporality in the text. She analyzes Grace’s use of spiral temporality, arguing that western concepts of time do not work when applied to the novel: “[r]ather than segregating the ‘past time’ of the ancestors from the ‘present time’ of the contemporary community, Grace employs a spiral temporality where past and future time is narratively re-experienced in what she terms the ‘now-time, centred in the being’” (DeLoughrey, “The Spiral Temporality” 60). I elaborate on this now-time below. Fuchs writes about the problems of using western culture and conventions as a measuring stick when reading Indigenous literature. She argues that using “modern narratology” (Fuchs 173) to read *Potiki* is inadequate, because it overlooks the novel’s complex narrative style and form and thus reduces it “to the familiar” (170). Perspective and storytelling style are central aspect of the text. “In fact,” Fuchs insists, “the process of dramatic

storytelling, and not plot, is nearly all there is to *Potiki*” (173). Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin make a similar argument in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*. They explain that reading *Potiki* vis-à-vis plot does not do the novel justice, because the novel is not about events but about people and the stories they share, stories that “effortlessly straddles past, present and future” (72). I agree that perspective and storytelling are central aspects of the novel’s rhetorical style.

One of the most important characters in the novel is Toko. The word “toko” designates “an elaborately decorated wooden figure that served as a material symbol of a Maori god” (Fuchs 172), and many of the authors who respond to *Potiki* spend a good deal of time discussing the symbolism of names and the fact the character of Toko works in the text both as an embodiment of Maui, a hero of Polynesian mythology, and as a Christ figure (DeLoughrey 60; Kinnane 86; Carrigan 66).¹⁷⁰ I pay particular attention to Toko’s perspective and his particular way of seeing the world because it sheds light on elements of the text that are necessary for understanding the connections between the text’s form and its plot.

The novel has been “widely understood” as a literary work that draws on historical events such as the Māori land march of 1975 and the occupation of tracts of land confiscated from the Māori by the New Zealand government (Wood 114). The 1975 land march served as “a protest against the continuing alienation of Māori land” (Schrader), and was followed by a series of land

¹⁷⁰ Ironically, the same scholars who insist on the importance of names’ symbolism in *Potiki*, and who vehemently argue against reading the novel for plot, ignore the fact that Grace chose to give her protagonists the family name of Tamihana. Wiremu Tamihana is a historical figure who was instrumental in the Māori King Movement – a political movement beginning in the mid-nineteenth century which aimed to appoint a Māori political leader in New Zealand (akin to the British monarch) who would put an end to British appropriation of Māori land. Adams and Meredith explain that the movement arose out a concern about “growing European settlement and the increasing demand for land,” and that it sought to appoint “a Māori king who would oppose any further sale of land” (Adams and Meredith). Grace’s decision to name her protagonists Tamihana supports my reading of the novel as a text that dramatizes Māori struggles for land rights and that connects colonial land management practices with present-day post/neocolonial exploitative relationships with the land.

occupation movements, some of the most well-known of which are the occupation at Bastion Point and the Raglan golf course. These protests for Māori land rights, Wood explains,

[...] emerged at a time when the movement of responsibility from the Department of Maori Affairs to Te Puni Kokiri or the Ministry of Māori Development signified the emergence of an altered relationship between state and iwi [tribes]—promotion of Māori language and culture was increasingly state responsibility. Māori people took more control in relevant state institutions, as well as controlling funding that emanated from compensation packages from the Waitangi Tribunal [a standing tribunal which examines breaches in treaties with the Maori people and makes recommendations for compensation]. (114)

The late twentieth century saw significant growth in the Indigenous sovereignty and land rights movements, in New Zealand as in many other colonized nations, and Grace's novel engages with this history and shows its continued repercussions into the present. Through the details she provides, Grace links the fictional land rights battle in which her characters are involved to historical conflicts for land ownership which were formative political events in the history of New Zealand. *Potiki* is a work that engages with the legacy of Indigenous environmental vulnerability and resistance to colonial land management practices.

Section 2: The Colonization of New Zealand: Historical and Environmental Context

Potiki is centrally concerned with Indigenous legal conflicts about land rights in colonial and postcolonial New Zealand. It is therefore important to understand the legal and historical context in which the novel intervenes. This Section provides an overview of the history of legal arrangements between settlers and Māori people in the context of land ownership. This overview shows how Māori people have been systematically dispossessed from their land and made

increasingly vulnerable to environmental disturbances. It thus places the struggle for land rights that the novel dramatizes in a continuum of legal battles Māori people have had to fight over a century and a half.

Annie E. Coombes, in her book on settler colonialism, writes that New Zealand, “unlike most colonies,” had “a foundational agreement between the [I]ndigenous people, Maori, and the Crown: the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, in which Maori were guaranteed sovereignty over their lands and resources” (102). What Coombes does not mention is that the agreement was drafted in English but that many of the Māori chiefs who signed it were presented with translations of the document (see Orange). These different versions of the treaty held fundamentally different significances (Orange). This discrepancy in the document meant that the British and the Māori left the signing with a different idea of what they had agreed to: they “had different understandings and expectations of the treaty” (Orange).¹⁷¹

In addition to the discrepancies between versions of the Treaty, the British Crown decided that even though not all Māori chiefs signed it, it still applied to all tribes and “placed all

¹⁷¹ The very first Article of the Treaty of Waitangi makes this discrepancy between the two versions of the document blatantly obvious. In the English version, the document states that the Māori cede complete sovereignty to the British crown:

The Chiefs of the Confederation of the United Tribes of New Zealand and the separate and independent Chiefs who have not become members of the Confederation cede to Her Majesty the Queen of England absolutely and without reservation all the rights and powers of Sovereignty which the said Confederation or Individual Chiefs respectively exercise or possess, or may be supposed to exercise or to possess over their respective Territories as the sole sovereigns thereof. (“Read the Treaty”)

In the Māori translation, however, Article 1 is fundamentally different. There is no Māori word for “sovereignty” (“Differences between the texts”); the Māori translation hence states that the Māori agree to give the Crown “te kawanatanga katoa,” or “complete *government* over their land” (“Differences between the texts”; original emphasis). The website for the New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage explains that there was no cultural precedent in New Zealand for the concept of “sovereignty” in the way the British understood it, and that Māori leaders therefore could not have understood the document they were signing in the same way the British did (“Differences between the texts”). Whether the discrepancy between these two versions of the document was intentional or not is a matter of some debate (“Differences between the texts”). Some believe the document “was prepared hastily and by amateurs who, intentionally or otherwise, used language that conveyed a particular meaning in Māori” but others maintain that those who prepared translated document “knew exactly what they were doing” (“Differences between the texts”). After all, this was not the first treaty between the British Crown and the Māori people, so there was certainly a legal and linguistic precedent for navigating the gap between English and Māori.

Māori under British authority” (Orange). The Crown also violated the Treaty in a variety of ways, including “ignor[ing] the protections the treaty was supposed to give Māori” (Orange). Actions such as these fueled political upheavals. Fearing challenge, the British responded by invading significant parts of New Zealand and confiscating large tracts of land (Orange). “By the end of the 19th century,” Orange writes, “most land was no longer in Māori ownership, and Māori had little political power” (Orange). Jones et al. write that “colonization has led to dispossession of land and destabilization of cultural foundations as well as social, economic, and political marginalization” of Māori people (54). The environmental impacts of colonization were no less dramatic.

New Zealand’s Indigenous population and its landscape were drastically affected by the arrival of Europeans (Royal).¹⁷² Starting in the early nineteenth century, when Europeans began to settle in New Zealand, conflict between Māori and Pakeha (non-Māori) people escalated, as did conflicts between Māori tribes themselves (Royal). Violence increased “as Māori sought to hold on to their land and local authority,” and the conflicts grew as settlers (who were predominantly British) made efforts to gain increasingly large tracts of land to accommodate their growing population (Royal). While many pieces of land were willingly and lawfully sold by the Māori to the Europeans, many others were unlawfully taken. Royal estimates that throughout the colonial period, Māori people lost “millions of acres of land,” partly “as the result of

¹⁷² The first human beings to arrive in New Zealand, namely the Polynesian populations which later gave rise to the distinct culture of the Māori, arrived relatively late to this environment: approximately eight hundred years ago, although there is disagreement about that date (Star). Due to the fact that humans were absent from the region for so long, the arrival of the Māori, and the later arrival of the settlers which caused an explosion in population and environmental degradation, completely transformed the landscape: environmental change in this part of the world “occurred far more quickly [...] than in any other landmass of similar size” (Star). Star argues that although the arrival of the Māori in a “pristine” environment did significantly alter its ecosystems, the later arrival of Europeans, their greater numbers, and their comings and goings from Europe, often bringing with them foreign species which would severely affect local flora and fauna, “had a correspondingly greater potential for environmental impact” (Star).

confiscation, and partly [as] the influence of new government institutions such as the Native Land Court,” which made significant changes in New Zealand land ownership paradigms, including enabling land to be transferred to one individual (Royal).¹⁷³ As settler populations increased, “Māori population declined because of epidemics of introduced European diseases such as influenza and measles” (Lambert).¹⁷⁴ At the same time, greater portions of New Zealand were being “cleared” of vegetation for the purposes of settlement and the building of roads and railways (Lambert).

As the number of settlers increased, they brought with them foreign animal and plant species, including foreign crop plants such as the potato, as well as new parasites and diseases (Wilmshurst, “Human effects on the environment – European impact”). Many of these foreign species have since become invasive, and have led to “a new period of extinctions and range reductions for native animals” (Wilmshurst, “Human effects on the environment – Impact on Animals”). Over time, the combined impact of these new arrivals was dramatic (see Wilmshurst, “Human effects on the environment – Impact on Animals” for a detailed review of species introductions and their impacts on various ecosystems in New Zealand). In addition, deforestation, fueled by demand for timber, drastically changed the composition of New Zealand’s forests, and local tree species were replaced with introduced ones (Wilmshurst,

¹⁷³ The Native Land Court, today called the Māori Land Court, was established through the 1865 Native Lands Act (Government of New Zealand, Parliament, House of Representatives. An Act to Amend and Consolidate the Laws relating to Lands in the Colony in which the Maori Proprietary Customs still exist and to provide for the ascertainment of the Titles to such Lands and for Regulating the Descent thereof and for other purposes, Section 5) In *“Te Kooti Tango Whenua”: The Native Land Court 1864-1909*, David Vernon Williams traces the history of this institution and its impact on land ownership in New Zealand. Williams writes that the government “sought to introduce a rapid individualisation of ancestral Maori land in order to ensure the availability of most of that land for settlement by Pakeha settlers” (82). He explains that “it was always assumed that if settlers wanted land then it must be found for them. [...] If this involved taking measures against Maori tribal landholdings that the Treaty of Waitangi was supposed to have guaranteed, then those measures would be taken” (82).

¹⁷⁴ Many other sociological impacts on the population resemble those listed by Grieves in her analysis of Australian Indigenous populations in the wake of colonialism (see Chapter 3, Part 2, Section 4).

“Human effects on the environment – European impact”) The total area of forest shrunk significantly: “[t]he remaining lowland forests and scrubland were burnt, drained, logged and cleared for farms and cropping. By 2005, forest cover was reduced to 24.8% of the total land area” (Wilmshurst, “Human effects on the environment – European impact”). The type of land clearing that settlers engaged in was particularly destructive. Land clearing for farming involved removing “tree stumps and the protective cover of ferns and scrub” (Wilmshurst, “Human effects on the environment – European impact”). This removal precipitated soil erosion, especially in hilly areas such as the one Patricia Grace describes in *Potiki*. Wilmshurst writes that this practice can “trigger massive slips” during rainfall, and “the runoff to rivers carries high sediment loads,” which leads to the silting up of estuarine systems (water systems situated between maritime and river environments) (Wilmshurst, “Human effects on the environment - European impact”). *Potiki* explores the impacts of some of these changes (erosion, silt run-off, range reductions of certain fish species) on the local Māori population. Work by Lambert, by Star, as well as by Jones et al. all emphasize the environmental impacts of European settlement in New Zealand, and Jones et al. specifically link colonization to New Zealand’s Indigenous population’s present-day vulnerability to climate change.¹⁷⁵ Patricia Grace’s *Potiki* foregrounds this uneven distribution of environmental vulnerability through its handling of the land rights battles and its depiction of poverty and marginalization in contemporary Māori communities.

¹⁷⁵ Jones et al. write that the impacts of climate change and environmental instability are experienced unevenly by different populations, “being influenced by geographic location, demographics including socioeconomic status, background burden of climate-related health conditions, health system capability, and capacity to adapt” (55). Echoing many of the other scientists I cite throughout this dissertation, they explain that climate change’s harmful impacts “will be disproportionately borne by the most disadvantaged populations, including indigenous peoples” (55). The socio-economic and political marginalization of Māori peoples in New Zealand, “perpetuated through colonial systems and structures,” fuel their disproportionate environmental vulnerability (55).

Section 3: Stories, Perspectives, and Now-Time

Toko has a “special knowing” (Grace 43), which gives him unique insights and allows him to see and know things that are imperceptible to other people. Despite being a child, he is very mature and intelligent. When the novel is filtered through his point of view, it generates the curious effect of being told from a perspective that is simultaneously mature and insightful and, at the same time, unmistakably child-like. Toko is aware that he is different from other children. He is physically disabled; “[t]here was nothing anyone could do about the crookedness of me” (43). He has special boots and he walks with crutches or uses a wheelchair. His special knowing, he believes, was given to him to make up for his disability: “[e]ven so my understanding was more than ordinary for a person who was five. [...] Given in place of a straight body, and to make up for almost drowning – nobody has told me that but I think it might be so” (55). Toko’s special knowing is often communicated in the form of stories: “[b]ut I have been given other gifts from before I was born. I know all of my stories” (43). Stories shape the world that Toko inhabits with his family.

From the beginning of the novel, the world the Tamihanas exists in is presented as a series of interconnected stories. When Roimata leaves her job as a teacher to care for and homeschool Toko and Manu (who suffers from night terrors and a whole range of fears that make him incapable of functioning in school), she decides not to “become once more the teacher that I had trained to be” (38). Instead,

I became instead a teller of stories, a listener to stories, a writer and a reader of stories, an enactor, a collector and a maker of stories. But I only shared in this. What really happened was that we all became a lot of these things – tellers, listeners, readers, writers, teacher and learners together. (38-39)

Stories make up the world of the novel. Toko's special knowing gives him a unique ability with stories: "[a]ll stories belong to him" (38). James comes home with "stories [...] of light and sound, of multiplying, dividing, adding and taking away" (40). Manu, on the other hand, leaves school because they have "no stories for him" (38). Granny Tamihana recounts her "weavings of sorrow and joy, of land and tides, sickness, death, hunger and work" (41), and Hemi comes home from the slaughterhouse with "stories of men with swinging knives and blood on their hands" (40).

These stories are not static: "[g]radually the stories were built upon, or they changed" (Grace 41). As work becomes scarce, Hemi's stories begin to change, focusing increasingly on the land upon which they live: "[m]ore and more he was telling about the land and how the land and the sea could care for us. [...] 'There are things I can tell you in stories,' he said, 'But I can show you too, and then you'll really know that everything we need is here'" (41). Land becomes a central focus in the novel, and a crucial vehicle for showing how the community's stories change throughout the narrative. These stories do not operate in linear temporality; much like the Dreaming stories in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, the stories the Tamihanas tell each other operate in a "now-time" (39).

As Roimata and collects and recounts stories, she discovers that even the "given stories," the legends and mythologies passed down through generations, are stories about the here and now (Grace 39):¹⁷⁶

It was a new discovery to find that these stories were, after all, about our own lives, were not distant, that there was no past or future, that all time is a now-time, centred in the being. It was a new realisation that the centred being in this now-time simply reaches out

¹⁷⁶ Patricia Grace tells Kinnane in an email exchange that the "given stories" refer to stories from Māori mythology (Kinnane iii).

in any direction towards the outer circles, these outer circles being named ‘past’ and ‘future’ only for our convenience. The being reaches out to grasp those adornments that become part of the self. So the ‘now’ is a giving and a receiving between the inner and the outer reaches, but the enormous difficulty is to achieve refinement in reciprocity, because the wheel, the spiral, is balanced so exquisitely. These are the things I came to realise as we told and retold our own-centre stories. (39)¹⁷⁷

The now-time of stories governs the novel. The narrative moves forward and backward in time, and recounts events that happen in the plot many different times, with varying degrees of detail each time. This produces the effect that things that happen much later in terms of chronological order seem to have already happened before, as they have already been recounted to the reader. Toko’s special knowing works in this way too. He explains: “[a]nd what I have known ever since then is that my knowing, my own knowingness, is different. It is a before and a now, and an after knowing, and not like the knowing that other people have. It is a now knowing as if everything is now” (52).

Toko’s knowing and the stories that govern the world the Tamihanas live in take place in a temporality that could be sketched out as a spiral, and Roimata makes it clear that both the stories themselves and the now-time in which they operate organizes their family life:

And although the stories all had different voices, and came from different times and places and understandings, though some were shown, enacted or written rather than told, each one was like a puzzle piece which tongued or grooved neatly to another. And this

¹⁷⁷ Scholars such as Miriam Fuchs, Helen Tiffin and Graham Huggan, Barbara Joyce Kinnane, and Elizabeth DeLoughrey pay particular attention to passages such as this one, in which the novel articulates the temporality in which it operates.

train of stories defined our lives, curving out from points on the spiral in ever-widening circles from which neither beginnings nor endings could be defined. (Grace 41)

Patrice Wilson, in her critical response to the novel, writes that *Potiki* is itself a “long story” which is presented via “several voices that show the shared-ness of the story by the Maori people,” (122) in order to “illustrate that though the voices change in the story, it is basically the same for all of the people, no matter how they may differ individually. Each voice is one that speaks from a shared experience of Maori life” (122). This description of the text resonates with Roimata’s discussion of the world of the novel, revealing the two as operating in parallel ways. Historical events, news reports, and conversations between neighbors all become interconnected stories that make up the world the Tamihanas inhabit. And in the now-time of stories, the distinction between past and present becomes irrelevant as they collapse into one another: “It’s your jumping-off place that tells you where you’ll land. The past is the future” (Grace 94).

Many of the events in the novel are presented as stories. The unusual events surrounding Toko’s birth are a story, placed on equal footing with Mary’s stories of “talking-man and angry-wife, trick-man and singing-girl, pretty-man and fighting-mother,” the carved figures in the wharenuī (Grace 41). The struggle of the people at Te Ope – a decades-long battle for land rights by a dispossessed Māori community – is also presented as a story. And the Tamihana family’s own struggle against Dolman and the land development project become stories too.

Because of Toko’s special knowing, he has a special relationship with stories – he seems to know all of the community’s stories regardless of whether or not they have happened yet. So Roimata, who recognizes Toko’s special knowing, becomes very concerned when he one day tells her, in a panicked state: “[t]he stories are changing,’ he said. [...] ‘When will they come? Are they coming soon?’” (Grace 70). When she presses him for more information about the

enemy they will face, Toko cannot give her any: “[w]e don’t know yet, but they have stolen from us” (46); “[w]e don’t know yet but it’s something to do with our lives.” (46); “[w]e don’t know, we can’t see them, but I think one day we’ll know” (46). Roimata recognizes that Toko is describing events that have not yet happened: “I held him to me and felt afraid” (46). It later becomes clear that Toko was foreseeing the coming of Mr. Dolman – nicknamed “Dollarman” by the community (88) – the stranger in the business suit who comes “to ask again for the land, and to ask also that the meeting-house and the urupa be moved to another place” (88).

Section 4: Racism and Colonial Capital

Dolman visits the community many times over the course of several months, “bringing one person and then another, and each person he brought looked like a twin of himself and had a twin story to tell” (Grace 96). He tries to convince the locals that moving their wharenuī and their urupa and giving up their land will be beneficial to them. He needs their land because it is right by the sea, and his development plans all hinge on waterfront access. He tries to persuade them through lengthy speeches which rely heavily on the language of “progress” (90) and financial gain:

First class accommodation, top restaurants, night club, recreation centre with its own golf links – eventually, covered parking facilities . . . and then of course the water amenities. These water amenities will be the best in the country and will attract people from all over the world . . . launch trips, fishing excursions, jet boating, every type of water and boating activity that is possible. Endless possibilities – I’ve mentioned the marine life areas . . . your shark tanks . . . [...] trained whales and seals etcetera. [...] it’s not just a tourist

thing. It's an amenity . . . [...] Well there's this great potential you see, and this million-dollar view to be capitalised on. (88-89)

His rhetoric of capital and financial gain do not have the desired effect on the locals.¹⁷⁸ They know that the entertainment complex he proposes will degrade the land and sea, and thereby compromise their ability to feed themselves:

We [...] did not want the sea or land changed. We [...] did not want the company to make zoos and circuses in the sea, or to put noise and pollution there, or to line the shore with palaces and castles, and souvenir shops, or to have restaurants rotating above the sea, lit up at night like star crafts landing their invaders on the shore.

Because soon there would be no fish, only pet ones that you went in lit underground tunnels to see at shark-feeding time, or any time you wanted. If you paid. (98)

Dolman's behavior and rhetoric reveal him to be an embodiment of the remains of colonial ideologies and colonial power extending into the present in the form of exploitative neocolonial economic and land management practices and racist attitudes towards Indigenous populations. He is repeatedly aligned with money and white hegemonic power, and the text makes it clear that the Māori community recognizes him as a figurehead of neocolonial capital encroaching on their lives and lands. They see his plans for development as a threat to their community, and they situate them along a continuum of threats that the Māori people have faced for generations:

[...] money and power were not a new threat. Money and power, at different times and in many different ways, had broken our tribes and our backs, and made us slaves, filled our

¹⁷⁸ In his analysis of *Potiki*, Anthony Carrigan points out that Dolman's speech is full of "capitalist idiom[s]" (Carrigan 63).

mouths with stones, hollowed the insides of us, set us at the edge and beyond the edge, and watched our children die. (132)

Granny Tamihana is all too familiar with such threats. In her youth, she endured poverty and hunger, “[s]he had been barred from places where those not of our race had been allowed to go freely,” “she had been robbed and mistreated by those whose floors she had scrubbed,” and she had “watched her children die” (140). The text places the racism, poverty, and marginalization that Māori people experience alongside the environmental degradation they are forced to contend with: “the landscape about her had continually changed, the sounds about her had changed” (140). In this way, the text frames the exploitation of the environment as part of the colonial legacy experienced by Indigenous communities in postcolonial New Zealand.

The novel exposes the historical legacy of Indigenous communities’ disproportionate vulnerability to colonial and postcolonial practices of environmental exploitation. Dolman is presented in the text as another manifestation of colonial power, its legacy, and its drive to control and commodify the land. This is emphasized both through his overt racism and his dismissal of worldviews and value systems which differ from his own. Faced with Dolman’s proposals, the community rallies together and takes a strong stand against the development project: “[t]his land we are on now [...] is all ancestral land – the ancestral land of the people here. [...] We’re working the land. We need what we’ve got. We will not sell land, nor will access be given” (Grace 89). Dolman presses them, but the people do not budge:

[...] we’ll never let this house be moved. Never. Even if we could allow that, then there is the piece of land behind here where our dead are buried, which you would need also. That is a sacred site, as we’ve said in our letters. [...] You will never get anyone to agree to it. [...] There is nothing you can say, no words, no amount of money. (91)

The community knows that an influx of tourists will only result in the “pollution of the water” (93), and in “crowds of people” – “people that can afford caviar and who import salmon, coming there and using up the fish. . . .”(93). The class differences between the tourists and the local Māori people become obvious here. Dolman tries to convince them that the increased tourist traffic will benefit the community, but they know very well that that is not true: “none of us wants to see any of the things you have outlined. [...] None of those things would be of any advantage to our people here, in fact we know they would be greatly to our disadvantage” (90). The text here expresses ideas that are echoed in Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* and Khan’s *Thinner than Skin*: tourism and development do not benefit the poor – on the contrary, the poor end up bearing their costs without reaping any of their benefits.

As Anthony Carrigan notes in *Postcolonial Tourism* (63), the Māori community and the company representative operate on completely different notions of progress. The community sees holding on to independence and sustainability as progress – Dolman sees these things as a lack of progress: “[a]nd progress?,” he interrogates them, “[w]ell it’s not . . . obvious” (Grace 90). Dolman cannot understand the community, and the community has difficulty explaining things to him: “[i]t was then that we all realised that the man had not, had never, understood anything we had ever said, and never would. My uncle tried to explain it all again. I think he felt sorry for the man” (100). The developers “did not understand that our choice was between poverty and self-destruction” (108). At the same time, the community cannot understand their hostile attitudes: “[i]t is not easy for those who do not have power, to understand the force of power” (118). Roimata explains to her children that the company representatives “think differently in their heads and have different importances” (99). And indeed, their ideologies and values are completely at odds with one another, with Dolman emphasizing capital gain and the

community holding on to environmental sustainability and their ability to sustain themselves through growing their own food.

Dolman eventually becomes frustrated and loses his composure, and his racism becomes explicit: “I must say I expected you people to be more accommodating. . . . [...] I mean I really believe that you people . . . have come a long way. . . .” (Grace 93). Realizing that no mutual understanding will come of the meeting, the community cuts it short. In this moment, as Dolman prepares to leave, Toko catches a glimpse of his eyes, and comes to see himself in the way that Dolman sees him:

My Granny stood and reached my sticks to me. She waited for me, bent and old, wiping her laughing tears.

I pulled myself up on my sticks. At the same time I looked up, and my eyes met the man’s eyes as he looked back. Eyes angry, but as well as anger there was something else coming into his eyes that came from the anger, but anger was only part of it.

Right then I saw what the man saw as he turned and looked at the three of us and as my eyes met his eyes. I saw what he saw. What he saw was brokenness, a broken race. He saw in my Granny, my Mary and me, a whole people, decrepit, deranged, deformed. That was what I knew. That was when I understood, not only the thoughts of the man, but also I understood the years of hurt, sorrow and enslavement that fisted within my Granny Tamihana’s heart. I understood, all at once, all the pain that she held inside her small and gentle self.

And the pain belonged to all of us, I understood that too. (102)

This passage is a perfect articulation of W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness – of a feeling of being split self which is experienced by marginalized groups in racist societies.¹⁷⁹

Toko is deeply affected by this realization, and the text makes it clear that many members of the community have also felt this way at one time or another during their lives. Hemi, Toko's adopted father, remembers that when he was young, Māori people “had been expected to hide things, to pretend they weren't what they were” (65).

Funny how you came to see yourself in the mould that others put you in, and how you began not to believe in yourself. You began to believe that you should hide away in the old seaweed like a sand flea, and that all you could do when disturbed was hop about and hope you wouldn't get stood on. But of course you did get stood on. Well their ancestors had been rubbished in schools, and in books, and everywhere. So were their customs, so was their language. Still were rubbished too, as far as he could see. Rubbished or ignored.
(65)

Hemi's comment that “you came to see yourself in the mould that others put you in” (65) echoes Toko's articulation of double consciousness, and drives home the idea that members of the community have long been subjected to structures that treat them as second-class citizens.

Reuben, a young Māori man who plays a central role in the Te Ope land rights legal battle, also experiences this double consciousness.

¹⁷⁹ Although the idea of double consciousness had already been discussed in different contexts (by Nietzsche, for example) before Du Bois wrote about it, I refer to Du Bois' use of the term because it corresponds most closely to the sentiment expressed by Toko, and then later again by Hemi and Reuben. Du Bois writes in *Souls of Black Folk* that “double-consciousness” is a “sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 8). He explains that it results in a splitting of the self, a “two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (8). Du Bois is speaking specifically about the experience of being a Black person in America, but his descriptions of this feeling of a split and conflicted self experienced by subjugated groups have been picked up by other scholars and applied to other historical and geographical contexts as well.

Unlike the young people of Hemi's generation, however, Reuben refuses to be made to feel inferior. He quarrels with his parents who expect him to stay in school and to work a regular job, telling them that they too are proliferating the notion that Māori people only become worthwhile members of society when they conform to white people's expectations of their behavior: "[a]ren't I something already? Aren't I? That's all I learn at school – that I'm not something, that my ancestors were rubbish and so I'm rubbish too. That's all I learn from the newspapers, that I'm nobody, or I'm bad and I belong in jail. You're telling me that now too" (Grace 74). Young people like Reuben make Hemi realize that things are changing, gradually, and that young Māori people are now stronger than they were a generation ago: "[t]hey were different, tougher than what his lot had been as kids. They didn't accept the messages they were receiving about themselves, couldn't afford to it they wanted to stay on the face of the earth" (65). Reuben rejects these messages: he leaves school and goes to live on land that Māori families at Te Ope are occupying – land that still belongs to them, but that they were unjustly removed from by the government many generations ago. Reuben's occupation of the Te Ope land and the community's rejection of Dolman's development proposals reveal a connection in the novel between turning back to the land and resisting racist and marginalizing socio-economic structures which uphold systems of white hegemonic power. Hemi's decision to bring his family back to the land strengthens this connection between land and resistance, and reveals the link between land and post-catastrophe recovery.

Section 5: Land and Resistance

The story of the Tamihana family's struggle against Dolman and the development project takes place in the wake of a much longer struggle for land rights by the nearby Māori community of Te Ope. The Te Ope people's fight to regain land that the government displaced them from

unfolds in the background of the novel's main plot, but it serves as important context for the battle the Tamihana family find themselves engaged in. The narrator explains that twenty-five families used to live in Te Ope:

The people who lived there were poor and could not develop the land, but they grew their own food and had plenty of firewood for their stoves and fireplaces. They were like us now, not having any work, but they were much more poor than we are now and had a very hard life [...].

Then later the war came. (Grace 71)

The government wanted their land “for purposes of war” (72). They had plans to turn the land into an air base, “because there was a good flat area there” (72). The Te Ope residents were told to pack up and go to “state houses” that were rented to them, and were promised that the land would be returned to them “when it was no longer needed for purposes of war” (72). The Te Ope residents “went quietly,” Roimata explains to her children, “because they were poor” (72). The novel quickly makes it clear, however, that the government had no intention of ever returning the land: “it has been said since that this was an excuse to scatter the people, destroy their homes, and take the land” (72).

The displaced people found themselves between a rock and a hard place: “[t]o pay rent was difficult for most because there was still no work for them. There was no land for gardens and no wood for their fires. These houses were scattered everywhere so that the family was separated, and also they didn't have their meeting-house any more” (Grace 72). And one day, they discovered that their former houses had been demolished. Government representatives explained to them that “the land could not be used as a landing field if it had houses on it” (72), and that they should not be upset, because “[t]he houses were derelict anyway” (72). They were

told that “[t]hey had been given better houses” and “should be grateful” (72-73). When they expressed concerns about paying rent because of widespread unemployment, they were told, “[i]f you really wanted a job you could find one” (73). This dismissive attitude adopted by the government and by representatives of powerful companies towards the Māori population pervades the novel. The figure of Dolman and the amorphous figure of “the government” which displaced the Te Ope people both function as manifestations of colonial power in the novel; both are repeatedly connected to white hegemonic power violating Indigenous communities’ land rights, severing their connections with their land, and compromising their ability to feed themselves and their families.

Time passed, but the land that had been taken from the Te Ope people never became an air base. The houses were “gone,” and all “the trees have been chopped” (Grace 77), but the land remained unused and uninhabited. The people of Te Ope grew angry and started writing letters, which were met with either silence or patronising and placating responses. Years later, the land was made “into a playing-field by men on relief work” (77).¹⁸⁰ The people wrote letters “telling of how the promise had been broken” (77), and the stories of their struggle are passed down through the generations. Later yet, the land was turned into a park, and Reuben left school “to live on the land and he said that he would never leave the land again” (79). He set up camp in a

¹⁸⁰ The details Grace provides about what happens to the Te Ope land and how the Māori people respond to it resonate with what were, at the time of the novel’s publication, recent historical events. The 1978 Raglan golf course protest (also called the Whāingaroa protest) was caused by the New Zealand government taking “land from Māori [...] to use as a military airfield” (Keane). The government initially seized the land for use during the First World War, and then the 1928 Public Works Act codified the legal justification for keeping it. Much of the 1928 Act lays out the procedures by which the government can seize land to use “for any public work whatever” (Government of New Zealand, Parliament, House of Representatives. Public Works Act, Section 10). The Act explicitly states that if the land on which Indigenous communities live is not registered with the government as belonging to them, the government can seize the land without even giving its inhabitants notice (Section 22). At the time of the land seizure, Keane writes, the government made promises to return the land after the war, but the land “was not handed back [...] – instead part of it became a public golf course” (Keane). It is clear that Grace is drawing on the events surrounding the occupation of the Raglan golf course in the novel’s Te Ope plot line. The land was eventually returned to its Māori owners (Keane), just like in the novel.

corner of the park, “out of the way,” and started a garden “in a place which did not cause trouble to the people using the park” (80). Gradually, more and more people joined him: “[m]ost were of our race but some were not” (79). The people made gardens, and began growing “silverbeet and cabbage plants” (80). But the garden brought about a lot of anger: “[t]here were angry people, Roimata said, who called the garden destruction and wilful vandalism” (80). The camp was “attacked by angry people” several times (81): “[a] tent was torn down in the middle of the night, plants were pulled from the gardens and scattered. Rubbish was tipped at the tent openings, a bottle was thrown, glass was scattered on the ground” (81). Police were dispatched and Reuben was arrested for his “protest.” But Reuben and his supporters do not see themselves as protestors: “they were just people living their lives on land that belonged to them” (81).

Reuben’s fight for the Te Ope community’s land rights garnered a lot of attention, and many more families soon began supporting him: “[t]he land still belonged to the people just as Reuben and his family knew it did” (Grace 82-83). Eventually, the matter went to the courts, and “at last the court of enquiry showed it too” (83). Land rights battles are central to the plot of *Potiki*, but the goal of the community is not to take possession of the land in the same way the government and Dolman wish to do – they do not want to cut down the trees and to flatten the hills: “[t]hey [the hills] went from our hands long ago but we do not need them in our hands. We only need them to be there, to be left to heal, to be left for trees to grow on” (176). The community rely on the land in their daily lives, and the novel’s harnessing of the perspectives of various members of the Tamihana family drives this point home.

Section 6: Land, Community, Identity

Land is central to the form, aesthetic style, as well as the plot of *Potiki*. In many ways, it also gives a sense of stability and a rhythm to the novel. Land works as a narrative mechanism

for reflecting characters' differing personalities; it is intrinsically linked to community; it provides the sustenance off of which the Tamihana family lives; and it functions as a source of hope and strength in the midst of hardship and anxiety. In the chapters of the novel filtered through Roimata's perspective, human traits are often communicated using land and plant imagery. Roimata's only daughter Tangimoana is "not patient, but is as sharp-edged as sea rocks, and hears every whisper of the tide" (Grace 15). Tangimoana is very observant, has a sharp wit, and is quick to anger: "[s]he saw the strength of a bending branch not to be in its resilience, but in its ability to spring back and strike" (152). Her brother James is totally different: "quiet and sure, and with the patience that the earth has" (15). In the midst of all the instability the Tamihana family experiences, Roimata relies on her husband Hemi to keep her "rooted:" "[o]nly Hemi could secure me, he being as rooted to the earth as a tree is" (23). Hemi's personality is recurrently described using references to trees, roots and rootedness, as well as soil. This is no coincidence, as it is Hemi who brings the family back to the land when he loses his job at the slaughterhouse.

Hemi left school at age fifteen when his father died and his family needed help working their garden. He worked on the land for several years, "learning all that he could, and intended this to be his life's work, using the knowledge that had been given to him and eventually passing that knowledge on" (Grace 18). For some time, he was forced to take other work, but he "always knew that he would one day see the land supporting us all again" (18). This certainty, this absolute trust that Hemi has in the land, is echoed several times in the novel, like a refrain: "[h]e'd always known that one day he would return to the land, and that the land would support them all again" (60). When he is laid off, then, Hemi was "glad" (59).

He had important things to do, things that had been on his mind for years now, and he'd done nothing but talk about it. [...] His own apprenticeship, his own education, had been on the land, and after his father had died Grandfather Tamihana had taught him everything to do with planting, tending, gathering, storing and marketing. He'd been taught about the weather and seasons, the moon phases and the rituals to do with growing. At the same time he was made aware that he was being given knowledge on behalf of a people, and that they all trusted him with that knowledge. It wasn't only for him but for the family. (59)

The text thus returns to the land in the same way Hemi and his family do, generating a rhythm through its repeated invocations of the land their reliance on it. To be trusted with the knowledge of how to work the land is to be assigned the duty of care for the family, and the duty of passing on traditional knowledge to younger generations. The land supports the Tamihana family, and brings them together as they engage in the labor of working in their garden. There is plenty of work to do in order for the garden to support the family; the Tamihanas work all day, and “every day our work continued until after dark” (103). Land is thus central to kinship and community ties in the novel, and passing on knowledge about the land is a vital part of passing on cultural heritage. Granny Tamihana has a vast repertoire of knowledge about the land: she “has a memory for places and a knowledge of what grows and what the uses are of the various plants” (143).

There were all the things about the moons and tides, winds and currents, and how to find the fishing grounds, that needed to be told. Not just told but shown. There were skills like net mending and crayfish-pot making that needed to be passed on.

Then apart from the land and sea, apart from the survival things, there were their songs and their stories. There was their language. There would be more opportunity now to make sure that they, the older ones, handed on what they knew. (64-65)

This passage connects knowledge about the land and the sea and practical life skills with Māori language, song, and stories. It frames knowledge about gardening as an inherent part of the cultural heritage that the older generations of the family know they must pass on to the young people.

Land also plays an important role in defining identity for the members of the Tamihana family: “[t]hey knew that they belonged to the land, had known all along that there had to be a foothold otherwise you were dust blowing here there and everywhere – you were lost, gone” (61). Land anchors the family, and they adjust their daily routines to work with the natural rhythms of their environment: “[i]t was the charted rainfall, the sun, the hurricanes, the monsoons, the typhoons and snow, and it was the cross sections of mountains, rivers, land and soil that told people what their lives would be” (40). In the face of the adversity the Tamihanas and their neighbors face, land becomes a source of hope. Turning to the land becomes a way out of being trapped by a system in which Māori families always occupy the bottom of the social and economic strata of society. Land becomes, in fact, their only hope for making it through hard times. This is reinforced time and time again throughout the novel: “[g]o on the land or you’re out on the street” (78). Access to land and ability to work the land becomes “important for their survival” when jobs become scarce and growing their own food becomes their only means of feeding themselves (64).

Poverty and social unrest form the background of the narrative against which the stories of the Tamihanas’ daily life unfolds: “[i]t had been a very difficult year for a lot of people, with

fewer and fewer jobs and so many people out of work. It had been a time of stoppages and strikes, and so much unrest, and now he [Hemi] was out of work too” (Grace 59). Hemi was the Tamihanas’ only breadwinner, so his loss of employment means that the family must completely renegotiate their way of life. Everything that is not necessary is cut – they adopt a minimalist lifestyle of growing their own food, fishing regularly, and making everything from scratch.

Roimata is conscious of the fact that, to outsiders, they appear very poor:

[i]t was easy enough to laugh at the state of our clothing. Some of the skirts and jeans had been mended so many times that they were almost made up of patches. The socks and jerseys had been darned so many times that we could call them new again. Many went barefoot for most of the year to save their shoes for the cold months.

Our homes needed painting but there was no money for paint. [...] Our cars had been sold because there was no money for repairs, and no money for petrol. (104)

But she resists the word “poverty” and its connotations – she insists that many are worse off than they are, and that “[o]urs was a chosen poverty, though ‘poverty’ was not a good word for it” (103). “We did not have real poverty,” Roimata insists, “[w]e had homes and enough good food, or nearly always enough. We had people and land and a good spirit, and work that was important to us all” (108). Land, then, becomes the locus of Tamihana family life, the locus of the narrative, and the one thing that Roimata can hold onto in order to maintain hope about the future: “[a]nd they still had their land, that was something to feel good about. Still had everything, except the hills” (60). Every time Roimata’s thoughts return to the land, it soothes her and appeases her anxieties about making ends meet. The text’s returns to the land therefore coincide with moments in which the narrative is re-stabilized.

Other Māori families in the region also end up turning to the land in order to make it through challenging times. Roimata observes that “[t]hese days people were looking more to their land [...]. They had to if they didn’t want to be wiped off the face of the earth. There was more determination now – determination which had created hope, and hope in turn had created confidence, and energy” (Grace 60). Land becomes in the narrative a way of opting out of the systems that the Tamihanas and their neighbors perceive as trapping them in cycles of marginalization and reliance on jobs that are increasingly scarce. They reject Dolman’s offer to buy the land time and time again, because they know that the land can sustain them.

Section 7: Ecological Degradation

The Māori community “reject increasingly large sums of money” from Dolman (Fuchs 171). He eventually realizes he will not get them to sell, and he brings in workers, many of them Māori themselves, to dynamite the nearby hills in order to carve out a passage that would lead to the waterfront “through the back way” (Grace 106). One day, while working in the garden, the Tamihanas hear “detonations” and the “sound of road machines” (106). These are the same sounds that Granny Tamihana heard in her youth, when she experienced the landscape around her begin to change dramatically. In using this same reference, the novel presents Dolman’s development project as part of a long cycle of (post)colonial environmental degradation in the region. The Tamihanas observe as big trucks started bringing in materials, and “big machines were clearing large areas of land. The hills were being sliced away, and rock and rubble was being pushed into the sea” (Grace 109). The “destruction” (107) goes on for a long time, and the locals begin noticing changes in the environment: “[t]he sea became silted and yellow, the colour of the broken hills” (115). The changes in the sea forced them to change their fishing habits, to set the nets “at one of the further-most netting places because of the mud that now coloured the

more shoreward fishing spots” (111). Nearer to the shore, the water became so dirty that could not see the nets at all (111).

The Tamihanas are deeply saddened by the changes they observe and must contend with, but they know they have no power to stop the developers: “[w]e turned back to the gardens because there was nothing else we could do” (106). The text insists on the family’s attempts to turn away from the ecological degradation around them: “[s]o we tried to turn our backs on the hills and not look up. [...] We turned our eyes away from what was happening to the hills” (110) and “[w]e tried not to look at the hills and we tried to ignore, just adjacent to us, the changing shoreline, and tried not to talk about the yellow mud colour of the sea” (110). They had so much work to do in the garden that it was initially possible “not to be distracted by the blasting of the hills and the shore rock” and to “turn away from the walling and confining and spoiling of the sea” (145). But the changes in their environment quickly become so pronounced that they cannot look away anymore: “[w]e could not ignore the falling rock, the levelling of land, the arrival of materials, the new yellow colour of the sea” (152). Their daily life is completely turned on its head: “[w]e were living under the machines, and under a changing landscape, which can change you, shift the insides of you” (151). As ecological degradation in the region grows increasingly severe, tensions between the locals and the developers mount until they finally erupt, and the developer take vengeance on the community. The results are catastrophic for the locals.

Section 8: Floor, Fire, and Explosion

One morning, upon waking up, the community discovers that the area has been flooded: “we woke to water, surrounding our houses and entering some of them, and water spread like a lake where the gardens had been. We discovered later in the morning that one side of the urupa had begun to slide away” (Grace 114). In some places, the water was so deep that they were able

to row a boat there (127). The text explicitly connects the ecological degradation in the region, the flooding, and the development project spearheaded by Dolman.

On the side of the little hill of the urupa there was a bare patch showing rock. Our eyes turned there, fearing the sudden white sight of bone.

All of this happened because of the stripping of the hills, the cutting away of the land, the dislodgement of the sea rock and the blocking of the shore, or that's what we thought. But these were not the only reasons, as we later found. (115-16)

This last sentence foreshadows the community's discovery of the act of willful sabotage that the construction company enacted against the locals. As community members make their way to the urupa to assess the damage, they discover that "rock and chunks of concrete and bitumen had been piled in the creek bed" (116). By the time the blockage is cleared, "much of the water had soaked into the land" (116), destroying the garden that the Tamihana family had worked on all year. At first, the people did not think it was "deliberately done. They were angry about the lack of care of the road builders but did not think of intention" (116). But a Māori employee of the construction company comes to visit them and tells them otherwise: "[a]unt someone done this to you, to all of us. Someone from the job. [...] Cleared a place and . . . channelled the water to run down, to where the urupa . . ." (117).

The two main targets of the deliberate damming of the creek which flooded the area are the gardens and the urupa – the two central nodes around which community life revolves in the novel. The urupa is the burial ground which connects the community to its past, and the gardens are their source of food – that which was meant to bring them into the future. "The urupa and the gardens,' someone said. 'They're trying to kill us'" (Grace 128). *Potiki* makes clear that the

catastrophe that strikes the community is deliberately orchestrated, and meant to target spaces that are crucial to the cultural and literal survival of the Māori community in the region.

The second catastrophe in the novel strikes shortly after the first. In the middle of the night, the community discovers that someone has set fire to the whareniui:

‘The whareniui is on fire,’ he said. ‘And the people are running to the sea. They’re crying and shouting, and beating at the flames.’ [...]

The firemen were running with the hoses, jetting the water into the flames, but the roof had gone. The great head of the great ancestor that looked out towards the people whenever they advanced across the marae had gone. The arms that had been extended in welcome, and the sacred and intricate backbone that had run through the apex, as well as the patterned ribs adjoining the backbone, had caved, and dropped into the flames, and gone. (Grace 135-36)

The whareniui is another strategic target of the land developers’ acts of sabotage: it is the community meeting place, and destroying it symbolically destroys the community ties that the locals rely on to make it through these challenging times.¹⁸¹ Seeing the community undergo so much hardship, other Māori families come from afar to help them rebuild and recover. But catastrophe strikes yet again: Toko is killed in an explosion.

But it was when Toko pushed the swinging door open that there was a different sound, like a soft explosion, then Manu screamed out and there was a glimpse of light although

¹⁸¹ DeLoughrey argues that the flooding of the urupa, the burning down of the whareniui, and the destruction of the gardens constitute attacks on Māori history, on the community, and on their sustenance, respectively (DeLoughrey 74-75).

the house itself was in darkness still. [...] Our child's face had death on it, and I saw this, saw every death feature by the wild light of flame burning through his hair. (163)¹⁸²

The explosion was set to go off as Toko entered the newly rebuilt whareniui. Although it kills him, Manu and Mary, who are both present, are unharmed, and the building itself is not too badly damaged. The novel implies that the explosion was set up by workers of the construction company: “[y]ou bled the land, [...] you almost destroyed the sacred place in a time of rain. You fired our first house and now you've killed our brother” (160). It marks the final catastrophic event that affects the community in the novel. And the way in which the novel deals with the aftermath of these tragic events is significant. Rejecting the concept of a fixed ending, the text insists on the continuity of community daily life after catastrophe.

Section 9: Recovery, Cyclicity, and the Everyday

One important event that marks a return to daily routine for the community is the sabotage of the development project. The noise of “detonations” (166) and the sound of “engines” and “big machines” (Grace 166) recur once again in the text. These sounds were earlier associated with Granny Tamihana's memories of the transformation of the local landscape, and later with the arrival of the construction equipment in the hills and the subsequent tearing down of the trees, cutting of the land, and pollution of the water. This time, they signal the end of large-scale changes to the landscape. In a mirror image of the sabotages enacted against the Māori community's lives and livelihoods, a group of unidentified people – probably the Māori construction workers –¹⁸³ orchestrate a sabotage of the development project:

¹⁸² Like Walker, I interpret this passage to refer to a rigged explosion (Walker 221). Other critics have interpreted it as a fire bomb (Wilson 121).

¹⁸³ Patrice Wilson agrees that it is the Māori construction workers who orchestrate the destruction of the building site and the submerging of the construction equipment (Wilson 121).

Up on the hills the new road had been blasted and the machines were moving in, pushing asphalt and rock down the hillsides, heaping it and pushing it forward, tipping and tumbling it into scaffolding and foundations of new buildings, some of which were burning and falling. [...] The new road had been destroyed, the new structures had been flattened. The big machines were submerged in the sea. (166)

Evidently concluding that no project will succeed in this region, the construction company come retrieve their machines and leave for good: “[t]he hills have been quiet since” (169). The community can hardly contain their joy: “[w]hen breakfast was almost ready we all went out to the wharenuī and did a boisterous haka to wake the people up. It was a haka to wake them but it was also an expression of love and a shout of joy” (167). The text here emphasizes the cyclicity of events; it takes the sounds that initially accompanied death and destruction and uses them here to signal joy and healing.

The community works together to rebuild the wharenuī that burnt down, and they integrate into it the poupou (pillar) from the original building:

This poupou [...] was the link from old to new, that’s what everyone said. It was the piece that showed there was no real death, or showed perhaps that death is a coiled spring. This piece had been the last one carved for the old house, but had not been completed even then. And it became the first piece for the new house, which meant we were able in our new house to show a linking from the man who had no children of his own, and a linking from before that through him, connecting all of us to the great and ancient ancestor whose name the house had been given. (Grace 154)

The text demonstrates that land and community get the Tamihanas through the challenges they face. “Everything we need is here,” Roimata insists, “but for some years we had little contact

with other people as we struggled for our lives and our land” (145). She leans on Hemi, and on his unwavering trust in the land, and she leans also on those Māori families who come from far away to help them rebuild: “[i]t was good now to know new people and to feel their strength. It was good to have new skills and new ideas, and to listen to all the new stories told by all the people who came. It was good to have others to tell our own stories to, and to have them there sharing our land and our lives” (145). The language of the text collapses the distinction between land and community, presenting these things as one and the same: “[o]ur whanau [extended family] is the land and sea. Destroy the land and sea, we destroy ourselves” (98-99).

Showing the community working together to recuperate from the flood, the fire, and then the death of Toko, the text insists in the continuation of normal life after catastrophe: “[g]ood had followed what was not good, on the circle of our days” (Grace 145). In fact, in presenting these events as cyclical, the novel casts catastrophe as a regular part of life. One passage that makes this abundantly clear is a moment in which Toko, at that time still alive, reflects on Granny Tamihana’s stories.

And I can look back to that time and know that it was then, listening to Granny and watching her move about the wharekai, that I really understood her stories. For all my life up until then I had listened to all her stories, stories which she always told with a kind of joyfulness. But it was then [...] that I really understood that her life that truly been a life of loss and sorrow, and that loss and sorrow were ordinary in her life. (139-40)

Toko thinks back to the stories she has told him about being “mistreated” by her past employers, about having her family’s ancestral land taken, about being poor and “hungry and cold” and having watched helplessly as her children died because “although there had been government payments for others during the bad times [...], there had not been such benefits for people of our

race” (140). Toko realizes, “for the first time,” that, to Granny Tamihana, “loss and grief were ordinary and expected” – “pain was so ordinary, and sorrow so ordinary” (140). His reflection ends with another cyclical image, as he muses that pain and sorrow are so mundane to Granny Tamihana that they were “close, so close, to being almost joy – a kind of silent, shouting, gruelling ecstasy, as opposites turn near to each other on the many-stranded circle” (140). The text’s repeated evocations of cyclicity, and its insistence on setting up suffering and hardship as ordinary to members of the community, cast catastrophe as a part of everyday life in the text.

The text turns back to the land in its final pages, using descriptions of a changed but recovering landscape to drive home the idea that these cycles of destruction and recovery are part of the ordinary course of life: “[t]he hills will be scarred for some time, and the beach front spoiled. But the scars will heal as growth returns, because the forest is there always, coiled in the body of the land” (Grace 169). There is a sense of hope that pervades mentions of land towards the end of the novel – a trust that things will soon return to the way they once were. This is echoed many times in the novel’s final pages: “[t]he hills are quiet and the machines have been taken away. After a while the trees will begin to grow again and soon the water will be clear” (159). Here, again, the text returns to the land, and stability is restored to the narrative. Mentions of land in the final pages of the text coincides with a return to normal. The language of healing and recovery recurs in relation to the land, and it extends as well to the community that relies on it:

‘The hills are quiet now. [...] We only need them [...] to be left to heal, to be left for trees to grow on. With trees on the hills again our own corner is safe and we are who we are. [...] With trees on the hills we can keep our ground productive, our sacred places safe, our water clear. For all of us. (176)

Here, land is once again used as a narrative device. Throughout the text, it is harnessed to reinforce images of cyclicity – of recovery after destruction, and of rebirth after death. Toko’s reflections on the passionfruit vine, which was initially “dry and without life” (57), also makes this clear. The vine was doing poorly, so the family buried eel head and guts at its roots, and “the plant began to grow and grow (57). The branches began to swim everywhere like a multiplication of eels” (57).

It was as if the big eel head with its little seed-eyes was birthing out trail after trail of its young. All the little eels swarmed the shed walls and the trees, whipping their tails and latching them to the walls and branches, still growing and multiplying all the time, and the eel-vines had a thousand hidden eyes, a thousand tails and a thousand hidden hearts.

The hearts are dark and warm and fit in the cup of your hand. You can pull out the hearts without pain, and when you open them you find the thousand dark seed-eyes. The seeds are a new beginning, but started from a death. (57-58)

Toko reflects that “everything is like that” – “[e]nd is always beginning. Death is life” (58).

The novel thus uses land as a narrative device to illuminate character traits and worldviews. It also reveals that land is a source of hope to the Tamihana family, a source of stability and sustenance, and that it plays an important part in family and community life. Land helps the narrative work through catastrophe, presenting it as part of daily life for its marginalized characters. Land imagery contributes to the cyclical temporality in which the novel operates, driving home the idea that catastrophe is routine and that normal life continues in spite of it through its images of healing and joy after destruction. Land is in fact a primary character in the novel. It is not only foil for the Tamihana family: it is the primary a target of sabotage and the victim of slow violence. Land also plays a significant part in recovering from catastrophe.

Section 10: Conclusion

Patricia Grace's *Potiki* is at its core a story about catastrophe and recuperating from it. Throughout the text, the nonhuman environment is used as a means of working through and coping with catastrophe. The land is a source of calm and serenity in times of anxiety and precarity. Land and community are inextricably linked in the novel; together, these two things allow the Tamihana family and their community to recover from catastrophe. The novel also situates the land rights battles the Māori community face in the story within a long history of political struggles for land justice in postcolonial New Zealand. In this way, it frames the catastrophes that strike the community in the wake of land development in the region as part of the everyday for local Indigenous communities. Many of the critics who respond to Grace's novel discuss the text as a story about the everyday, a story in which not much happens – and indeed, the novel shows that catastrophe is mundane in postcolonial environments.

Land is central to the form, aesthetic style, as well as the plot of both *The Hungry Tide* and *Potiki*. In *The Hungry Tide*, the rapidly-changing landscape allows the novel to generate an impression of compressed time and space. This impression makes the historical account in the diary and Piya's present-day experiences come together. *Potiki* achieves a similar effect through its reliance on now-time. The temporality of the novel urges readers to see the struggle against Dolman and the developers in light of the Te Ope struggle. Land grounds each text in the history of its respective region, and works as a narrative mechanism for keeping the narrative on course. While *The Hungry Tide* spends a great deal of time discussing the land, *Potiki* is perhaps even more grounded in the physical environment. In the novel, land is intrinsically linked to community and it plays a central role in negotiating catastrophe as well as hope, resistance, and recovery.

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh writes about the tide country where *The Hungry Tide* takes place as a space that records its own history within its physical structure. The embankment along the river functions as “abacus and archive, [as] library of stories” for the villagers (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 168). The landscape becomes a historical record. Nirmal states: “[l]et’s see if you can pick out the spots where the embankment has been repaired. For each such repair I’ll give you a story” (168). Nirmal’s diary operates in a similar capacity by connecting Kanai to events from the region’s past. This movement from space to text is echoed once more as *The Hungry Tide*, too, records changes in the Sundarbans landscape. The role of the text as archive is a major concern for Ghosh, best articulated in his question about contemporary society’s seeming lack of response to climate change: “when readers and museum-goers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they not look, first and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance?” (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 11). In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh positions the documentary capacity of the novel alongside that of the Sundarbans landscape, and offers up both the novel and the space itself as evidence of the effects of anthropogenic climate change. *Potiki* functions in a similar manner, highlighting connections between colonial environmental destruction and its enduring repercussions. *Potiki* too treats the physical environment as a material record of long-term environmental damage, itself functioning as a record of New Zealand’s colonial environmental legacy. By tying past struggles for land recuperation and its impacts on the physical landscape of the region to a present-day storyline about a community’s fight to prevent further environmental destruction, Grace’s work records and represents the history of the space in which it unfolds.

Ghosh locates the novel’s power to reveal the changes taking place in the environment in recording or archiving catastrophe in a believable way. But the novel’s potential to disrupt

conventional ways of thinking about the nonhuman may be equally productive in bringing about the type of change for which Ghosh hopes. Both Ghosh's and Grace's novels exemplify fiction's power to destabilize outdated views of our relationship to the nonhuman, and in this way make possible the type of imaginative work that is necessary in the present moment. They also offer a useful counterweight to dominant discourses in Anthropocene scholarship which tend toward models of human hegemony. Rather than falling into the trap of presenting humans as the dominant force in a given ecosystem, Ghosh's novel situates human impact within a larger web of nonhuman beings that also act upon and shape the world. Grace's novel performs a similar move. It unsettles conventional ways of thinking about human relationships with the land. It makes land a central feature of the story, rather than simply a background element or a setting. It also shows that communities belong to the land, rather than the other way around. In this way, these works offer a more nuanced approach to conceptualizing the place of human animals in the Anthropocene, and disrupt conventional ways of thinking about human-environment relationships characteristic of European philosophy. The Anthropocene calls for a reordering of human priorities and ways of seeing and relating to the world. In many ways, these works succeed in doing just that.

Conclusion

British colonial legal, administrative, and ideological structures produced conditions that led to long-term environmental degradation which, today, makes South Asia and the South Pacific particularly vulnerable to ecological catastrophe and, more broadly, to the impacts of climate change. I have shown that anthropogenic climate change is linked to an increase in catastrophes in postcolonial environments, and that catastrophes and other environmental changes related to climate change disproportionately affect socioeconomically and politically marginalized Indigenous peoples and people of colour in postcolonial contexts. I have further demonstrated, through literary analysis, that contemporary postcolonial texts recognize and engage at length with the connection between colonialism and catastrophe. Colonialism, my case studies illustrate, generated the catastrophic environmental conditions in which postcolonial and Indigenous populations find themselves today, and neocolonial economic and political relationships continue to fuel the dispossession and disenfranchisement of marginalized populations. Colonialism, in brief, is an intrinsic part of present-day discussions about ecological catastrophe and environmental change in the era of climate change.

I am certainly not the first to point out the connection between colonialism and contemporary climate-related environmental changes. A 2018 study conducted by the University College of London, for example, frames this relationship in rather stark terms. This quantitative analysis of the impacts of colonialism – specifically the genocide of Indigenous peoples in the Americas – concludes that that “55 million indigenous people died following the European conquest of the Americas beginning in 1492” (Koch et al. 30). The study goes on to explain that this genocide resulted in “56 million hectares of land” returning to an uncultivated state, which

fostered the absorption of carbon into the soil and “led to an additional 7.4 Pg C being removed from the atmosphere” (30). Koch et al.’s findings are incredibly valuable to current climate change research, as they show that “human actions had global impacts on the Earth system in the centuries prior to the Industrial Revolution” (30). Their calculations allow scientists to estimate how many hectares of reforestation it would take to offset current carbon emissions: restoring 56 million hectares of forest would only equal “two years of fossil fuel emissions at the present rate” (qtd. in Milman).

The equivalency Koch et al. establish – that it takes 56 million hectares of forest to remove 7.4 Pg C from the atmosphere – is extremely helpful. It provides readers with a means of imagining the incomprehensibly massive volume of present-day greenhouse gas emissions. Linking the concrete image of a sea of trees with the abstract scientific calculation of “7.4 Pg C” gives readers a point of reference for understanding just how much of a drastic change it would take to nullify ongoing environmental damage. This image provides a means of making environmental damage graspable to lay people, for whom the scientific calculation “7.4 Pg C” means nothing. The imagined landscape covered in trees here speaks volumes compared to its abstract, numerical equivalent. This is precisely how I see my case studies working – they offer a concrete, manageable framework through which it becomes possible to better imagine and understand present-day environmental changes. Read alongside scientific studies and reports, these case studies offer a controlled storyline that helps readers make sense of environmental changes happening parts of the world they may have no access to and no familiarity with – changes so drastic that they may, at times, seem impossible.

Koch et al.’s study was picked up by *The Guardian* in 2019, and a narrative rendition of its findings was published to make the science more accessible to the general public.

Disseminating such findings to the public is certainly important, but *The Guardian's* coverage of the 2018 study is disturbing for a few reasons. I see the article as part of a recent trend in how “popular” (non-scientific) sources cover the relationship between climate change and colonialism. A growing number of such “lay” takes on the subject in question seem to arrive at rather distressing conclusions. Milman’s article, for example, discusses the impacts of colonialism in terms of their “benefits” on global temperatures. The article, “European Colonization of Americas Killed so Many it Cooled Earth’s Climate,” quotes extensively from Koch et al.’s study.

After explicitly linking colonialism to the genocide of 55 million Indigenous people, Milman proceeds with language that speaks of its global benefits: “[a]nd what we see from this study is the scale of *what’s required*, because the great dying resulted in an area the size of France being reforested and that gave us only a few parts per million” (qtd. in Milman, my emphasis). I am certainly not suggesting that the article (or the study) advocate genocide for environmental purposes. But I do want to stress this recent trend of hypothesizing about *what would have happened* had colonialism played out differently, and how that would have impacted contemporary climatic conditions. I have noticed this “thought experiment” gaining increasing attention over the past five years or so. Alarming, I see in these discussions a pattern that suggests colonialism was, in fact, “good” for the environment. Even Amitav Ghosh engages with this idea.

The Great Derangement considers the historical connection between colonialism and anthropogenic climate change, but arrives at a completely different conclusion than I do. Amitav Ghosh recognizes that contemporary anthropogenic environmental changes are attributable to longstanding economic, political, and military structures instituted under colonialism, but he

posits that colonialism may actually have had a positive impact on the global climate.

Decolonization, he explains, coincides with the Great Acceleration which saw booms in previously minor world economies (such as those in mainland Asia), leading to an increase in carbon emissions. Ghosh asks:

What would have happened if the decolonization and the dismantling of empires (including that of Japan) had occurred earlier, say, after the First World War? Would the economies of mainland Asia have accelerated earlier?

If the answer to this were yes, then another, equally important question would arise: Could it be the case that imperialism actually delayed the onset of the climate crisis by retarding the expansion of Asian and African economies? Is it possible that if the major twentieth-century empires had been dismantled earlier, then the landmark figure of 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would have been crossed long before it actually was?

It seems to me the answer is almost certainly yes. (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 109-10)

Although he acknowledges that “there can be no doubt that the climate crisis was brought on by the way in which the carbon economy evolved in the West” (114), he insists that, in the context of Asia, the critique of capitalist economic relationships “does not smoothly align with the critique of colonialism” (Heise, “Ursula K. Heise – Climate Stories”). Ghosh concedes that climate change today is a product of the global spread of capitalism, but he maintains a divide between colonialism and capitalism to which Ursula K. Heise, in her 2018 review of *The Great Derangement*, vehemently objects. Ghosh suggests that by diverting capital to the colonial metropolis, colonialism in Asia and Africa delayed these regions’ economic growth and thereby

slowed their movement towards being major contributors to global carbon emissions. In brief, Ghosh posits that colonialism may have had a positive impact on the global climate by “slowing down” economic and industrial growth in formerly colonized nations.

Heise challenges this argument. She points out that, had the colonization of Asia and Africa not happened, “it is also possible that alternative energy economies would have developed sooner, and that they might have done so at a time when the world population was far smaller than it is today” (Heise, “Ursula K. Heise – Climate Stories”). “Earlier decolonization and industrial development,” Heise points out, “if it went along with an empowerment of women as it has in some regions,” might also have resulted in significantly lower carbon emissions today (Heise, “Ursula K. Heise – Climate Stories”). This hypothesizing about *what could have been* is moot, but Heise’s rewriting of Ghosh’s thought experiment stands out against so many opposing hypotheses-narratives which reimagine colonialism’s positive environmental impacts on the population of the globe *as a whole*.

This emphasis on *the whole* is necessary for these imagined pasts to make logical sense – because, certainly, no one familiar with the impacts of colonialism on the populations and ecosystems of formerly colonized nations could buy into the narrative that it could be “good” for the environment. Such deflections from localized damaged environments (environments targeted by colonial power) towards a *holistic global health* (which dilutes the specificities of race, class, Indigeneity in the making of disproportionate environmental vulnerability) are necessary to support the types of flawed hypothesis-narratives that Ghosh explores here and that Milman’s article gestures towards. The fact is that colonialism and its myriad contemporary manifestations (neocolonial economic relationships, unsustainable tourism industries and practices, legal systems inherited from colonial times, top-down conservation models that ignore the

conservation impacts on Indigenous communities, etc.) continue to produce catastrophic environmental conditions today.

Through their form and movement, their use of perspective, and their handling of ecological catastrophe, my case studies implicitly and explicitly link colonial histories to present-day socioeconomic conditions. Taken together, they illustrate that the present-day socioecological marginalization of these communities was strategically produced through the legal, administrative, and ideological structures imposed by British colonial rule upon these communities and the ecosystems on which they relied. In focusing on the connection between the processes of colonization, colonial environmental management, and environmental change, I echo Anthony Carrigan's argument that that postcolonial studies could be productively reimagined as a form of disaster studies. I would add that disaster studies, too, can be reframed as a subset of postcolonial studies.

Such a conceptual reframing could help historicize analyses in the field of disaster studies by reminding scholars that ecological catastrophe is not simply an unfortunate occurrence but rather a series of conditions that were consciously, systematically, and painstakingly produced over time. Integrating perspectives from postcolonial studies into the social science-oriented field of disaster studies could also make room for the type of qualitative analysis at which humanities scholarship excels, and thus open up disaster studies to a new way of thinking and writing about catastrophe. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, incorporating knowledges and worldviews from the peoples historically affected by colonialism might help reframe catastrophe, and the particular conditions of life in the Anthropocene, as a long-standing status quo for postcolonial and Indigenous communities in South Asia and the South Pacific, as Davis and Todd suggest. Certainly, catastrophe has long been the norm in environments targeted by colonial resource

extraction and colonial environmental management tactics. Readjusting our analytic aperture to recognize this fact would benefit both postcolonial studies and disaster studies, and might even challenge scholars working on the novel form to expand their idea of routine phenomena in the everyday world of the contemporary postcolonial novel.

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