

ANTHROPOCENE GOTHIC, CAPITALOCENE GOTHIC: THE POLITICS OF ECOHORROR

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IT IS BECOMING increasingly commonplace to assert that the gothic provides a vocabulary uniquely suited to our present geohistorical moment, in which unfolding transformations to the Earth System are placing the biosphere in the shadow of existential threat. ‘If there is a new direction in Gothic Studies,’ writes Holly-Gale Millette, ‘it is one centred by the critical acceptance of the degeneration and ruin that the human has wrought in its epoch’ (2020b, 91). ‘The Gothic seems . . . well placed to capture these anxieties’ about ‘climate change and environmental damage’, Andrew Smith and William Hughes concur (2013, 5), in one sense because gothic has always understood – in the words of Justin Edwards, Rune Graulund and Johan Höglund – that ‘[d]igging in the dirt is a hazardous pursuit’. Contemporary global heating – overwhelmingly the product of two centuries of fossil extraction – would seem to confirm the point. However, as Edwards, Graulund and Höglund note, getting to the bottom of current biospheric shifts – determining what has caused these – demands further excavation, thus requiring ‘the introspective, abject historical work in which gothic always engaged its audience’ (2022, xi).

What is emerging from this gothic mining of the depths is by no means beyond debate. Millette and Edwards, Graulund and Höglund choose to locate their accounts of gothic in the Anthropocene – the age in which ‘man’ is culpable – but all these critics rightly acknowledge other ways of naming our present planetary situation. Though it is subtitled ‘The Gothic Anthropocene’, Edwards, Graulund and Höglund’s *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth* is structured into sections that attend also to ‘Plantationocene’, ‘Chthulucene’ and ‘Capitalocene’ – concepts that can each be understood as providing a certain perspective on the relationship between human societies and the rest of nature. Importantly, however, the terms also designate distinct political projects, which differently identify the drivers and effects of the biospheric transformations that are currently under way. Grasping this point is crucial, because it shows that the struggle over how we name the present is not a matter of semantic finickiness: to name, in other words, is to locate accountability, and so to make possible certain kinds of action and demand such action from certain groups. This applies also to the Anthropocene, though the concept is sometimes reverted to as a kind of neutral catch-all theory, and, as we shall see, this manoeuvre is not always helpful. The notion that the human species has brought the Earth System to its current state of collapse is as much an ideological interpretation as its more directly political conceptual bedfellows – ‘Capitalocene’ (Moore 2016), ‘Plantationocene’ (Haraway 2015) and ‘Proletarocene’

(Allison et al. 2021) in particular – and the fact that it is not always treated as such might itself raise our critical suspicions.

Taking as its starting point the fact that the different ‘-cenes’ entail different origin stories of the planetary emergency, this chapter will examine how such interpretations give rise to their own distinct gothic aesthetics and strategies, shedding light in turn on the politics of certain ecohorror forms. Case studies are provided by South African dramatist and filmmaker Jaco Bouwer’s *Gaia* (2021) and by Senegalese director Mati Diop’s *Atlantics* (2019), two texts that deploy markedly different gothic vocabularies to engage with climate and cognate crises. It is worth pointing out here that the South-South comparison is deliberate: this corpus enables a development of Edwards, Graulund and Höglund’s existing discussion of aesthetic variation across global eco-gothic production, in which the authors read these differences chiefly as expressing divergent experiences of the climate emergency on either side of the hemispheric divide (2022, xix–xxi). It is crucial to account for the uneven distribution of socio-ecological crisis throughout the still relatively (but increasingly less) insulated Global North and the already catastrophically affected South. The twenty nations most vulnerable to the effects of global heating are, as Vishwas Satgar writes, all located across ‘Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America and the Pacific’ (2018, 4) – the same regions, as Jason Hickel has recently confirmed, that are least responsible for emissions (2020, e402–3). It is important too, however, to keep in sight the climate inequalities that internally fracture North and South, and which, as Jason W. Moore shows, cut along axes of race, gender and class (2019, 54). These intraregional differences may shed more light on the distinct gothic approaches taken by Bouwer’s and Diop’s films. However, as we will see, these texts also remind us that where one stands on the multiscalar map of climate inequality might affect not only one’s experience, but also one’s interpretation of the planetary situation, shaping answers to the questions of who is accountable, and of when and where the greatest threat lies.

It is different assumptions regarding precisely these issues that underwrite the gothic strategies deployed in *Gaia* and *Atlantics*, with the result that these texts can be read as paradigmatic examples of an ‘Anthropocene’ and ‘Capitalocene’ Gothic respectively. Bouwer’s film explicitly positions itself in the so-called ‘age of man’, where – as Millette puts it – ‘human beings have created environments in which their communities . . . may become unsustainable’, and so have ushered in a ‘post-human’ condition characterised by ‘a relationship between humans and their hybrid . . . others’ (2020a, 3). Drawing on gothic’s long-standing function as a counternarrative to Enlightenment humanism, Bouwer figures this human/nature entanglement as a monstrous return of the repressed, which places the human species as a whole on the brink of reabsorption into a vengeful biosphere. Ultimately, however, the film demonstrates with remarkable clarity some of the limitations that inhere in related Anthropocene and posthumanist accounts of planetary emergency, prioritising an abstract sense of human/nature imbrication at the expense of actually existing racialised and gendered climate inequalities, with the result that the (humanist) discourses from which these derive are (inadvertently) reinscribed. Diop’s *Atlantics* takes a different approach. Less interested in gothic’s anti- or post-humanist possibilities, the text is instead legible through accounts that connect early gothic writing to the wide-scale transformation of society and environment represented by industrialisation in Britain. As in these readings, Diop’s gothic captures the anxious and disorienting experience of socio-ecological shifts, which are unfolding – in *Atlantics* – in

the Senegalese capital of Dakar. The film also, however, attempts to make sense of this bewildering local situation, by carefully mapping intersecting colonial, patriarchal and capitalist relationships that extend across history and global geography to unevenly produce the present.

Anthropocene Gothic

Gaia opens with park rangers Gabi (Monique Rockman) and Winston (Anthony Oseyemi) on a surveillance mission in an area of South Africa covered by ancient woodland. The pair are separated when Gabi leaves her colleague to investigate the sudden disappearance of a drone, and, after becoming caught in a hunter's trap, encounters Barend (Carel Nel) and his teenage son Stefan (Alex van Dyk): a pair of white, Afrikaans-speaking, hessian-wearing 'survivalists' – the term used on *Gaia*'s website – who weave their own twine from natural forest fibres, and hunt animals in the woods with their hand-made bows and arrows. Barend, it turns out, is a former scientist, but now lives a hermit's life on the forest's bounty, periodically making votive offerings of whatever he and his son take to survive in a mysterious ritual of human/nature reciprocity. Stefan has had no prior contact with the outside world, but is drawn to Gabi – an attraction ambivalently sexualised by the film – and begrudgingly his father gives her shelter in their hut.

Winston is less fortunate. Alone in the woods, he is attacked by a strange, shrieking humanoid monster, whose body is grotesquely distorted by fungal outgrowths, and before long he himself is lying prone against a tree in the throes of his own mushroom transformation. Eventually Barend explains: an ancient mycelium network has been growing beneath the forest since before humans evolved, and is now about to unleash itself on the Earth's population in an act of retribution for the war on nature that has been waged by humanity since the industrial revolution. The fungus prefers *Homo sapiens*, and, once it has incubated in a particular body, erupts in a cloud of infectious spores, and so multiplies. The mushroom creature that attacks and infects Winston thus represents the fate for which all humans are destined: an enforced reincorporation into the biosphere that Barend frames as 'the apes return[ing] to the trees', and which appears inevitable unless – like Barend and Stefan – humans defer to Gaia, and live in reciprocity with 'her' (and here the gendering is noteworthy, as we shall see). It is those votive rituals, it turns out, that keep the survivalists immune: in return for their offerings they receive mushrooms that allow them to maintain their human form, despite the fungal spores nestled within their bodies.

The film makes clear reference to James Lovelock's famous Gaia hypothesis (1979), which holds that all disparate elements of the biosphere work together to sustain the conditions for life. It also corresponds closely to Bruno Latour's reassessment of Lovelock's work in the age of the Anthropocene, when, he argues, climatic shifts are making distinct categories of 'Nature and the Human . . . more and more implausible' (2017, chap. 4), with the result that we as a species are now called to 'face Gaia' – to acknowledge that we have never been separate from the rest of nature. This, however, is a far-from-straightforward task, since – as Latour himself has argued at length (1993) – the epistemic tradition hegemonised since the Enlightenment hinges precisely on a categorical distinction between Humans and Nature. This anthropo-ecological binary is also informed – importantly – by discourses of race and gender, so that the human of

Enlightenment humanism is in fact quite specifically – as Latour puts it – a ‘Western, Masculine Subject’ (2017, chap. 2). I will return to this latter point shortly; here it is important to note, as Amitav Ghosh has done, that from the vantage of an epistemic position which assumes humans and nature are separate, Anthropocene events acquire the status of the returning repressed. They are encountered as what Ghosh calls the ‘environmental uncanny’ (2016, 32), in instances of which the apprehension of a disavowed human/nature imbrication comes to be loaded with a nightmarish quality of dread and threat.

Ghosh’s commentary is quite obviously relevant to Bouwer’s film, and to the monstrously hybrid fungal creatures in particular, who – as emblems and agents of the biosphere’s revenge on humanity – can be understood precisely as uncanny metaphors for anthropogenic shifts in the Earth System. Drawing directly on the resources of horror fiction, *Gaia* would also seem to corroborate Ghosh’s influential argument – predicated in part on his account of the environmental uncanny – that speculative fiction provides the literary language best equipped to address present planetary shifts. This is because, in Ghosh’s view, canonical realism remains wedded to the Enlightenment’s system of knowledge; in the ‘outhouses’ of literary production, however – in science fiction, fantasy and the gothic – the binary on which this system is founded has always been treated as a fluid, transgressable line (2016, 66). Similar observations provide the foundation for analyses of gothic fictions as – in Fred Botting’s formulation – ‘counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values’ (1996, 1). Where these prioritise categorical separations, in other words, gothic presents scenarios in which, as Jerrold Hogle has it, ‘opposed positions of many kinds keep blurring into each other’ (2002, 16). In this way, gothic can be understood to retrieve complex and hybrid identities – racialised, gendered, anthropo-ecological – for which the tidy narrative of the human and all its others does not account.

In *Gaia*, this gothic function is mobilised specifically to excavate a repressed, and now lethal, interconnectivity of human life in the wider biosphere. The gesture is intended, at the same time, to explode the Enlightenment’s illusion of human exceptionalism by revealing that – in the age of climate and cognate crises – we are all, always already incontrovertibly posthuman. These, I propose, are characteristic features of Anthropocene Gothic, which overall can be defined as a mode that takes the following as read: (1) that, in Millette’s words, ‘as a species, we have hollowed out the Earth for our own devices’ (2020b, 90); (2) that the effects of this process demonstrate our imbrication in the rest of nature; and (3) that the retrieval of this interrelationship in figures of the environmental uncanny puts paid to humanism’s human, driving instead towards a non-anthropocentric conception of human/nature relationality.

Post/Humanism in the Popular Anthropocene: Pitfalls

Gaia is, as we have seen, a film that allegorises unfolding planetary shifts in gothic figures, whose hybridity suggests these transformations have a human origin. In this way, the text subscribes to an analysis of climate and cognate crises which Moore terms ‘the Popular Anthropocene’. Different from ‘the Geological Anthropocene’ – a ‘deliberate abstraction . . . in order to clarify the . . . relations of humans (as a species) and the biosphere’ – the Popular Anthropocene is a discourse ‘about the historical development, and contemporary realities, of planetary crisis’ (Moore 2019, 50). It is

both an origin story and a future projection: a ‘narrative’ – in Moore’s words – ‘of Humanity doing terrible things to Nature’ (2019, 50), and consequently of Human posterity paying the price.

This, as Moore points out, is a deeply ‘faulty analytic’ (2019, 53), which at a very basic level simply gets the picture of actually existing biospheric shifts very wrong. As we have already seen, it is not humanity generally that is currently confronting climate and cognate crises, but instead the global poor – a category disproportionately composed, Moore confirms, of ‘women, neo-colonial populations, [and] peoples of colour’ (2019, 54). This real inequality suggests in turn that at the root of changes to the Earth System is not humanity overall, but rather interlocking systems of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. Thus, Moore writes, ‘the problem is not *Man* and *Nature*, but *certain* men committed to the profitable destruction of most humans and the rest of nature’ (2019, 53). The category of the universally culpable, universally vulnerable ‘anthropos’ on which the Popular Anthropocene hinges abstracts and flattens out these differences. It risks obscuring, in this way, actually existing socio-ecological inequalities, and so perpetuating these as a result.

The same point can be made, importantly, with respect to critical framings of the Anthropocene and planetary crisis which hold that everywhere this is urgently exposing a posthuman condition. As Austin Lillywhite has cogently argued, the suggestion that the human species should be rethought to accommodate its real interconnection with the biosphere – while not without value – has tended to prioritise universal relationality at the expense of actually differentiated racialised and gendered experiences. This manoeuvre is questionable because it ultimately legitimates a surreptitious recourse, in the project of imagining posthuman entanglements, to precisely the racialising and gendering narratives that drive such inequality in the material world. ‘The problem’, as Lillywhite puts it, ‘is the way that certain mainstream . . . discourses erase difference in the interest of valorizing the common network while simultaneously relying on explicitly racialised [and gendered] figures and tropes’ (2018, 107). In other words, because the posthuman – like the human of the Anthropocene – assumes that race and gender are somehow subordinate in importance to an overarching planetary situation, frameworks hinging on these concepts ultimately give themselves licence to ignore, and so reassert, how race and gender work together with forces that decimate the biosphere. Viewed in this way, it seems eminently possible that, as Lillywhite writes, ‘the new posthumanism is just another generalization taking the place of the old, hegemonizing concept of the human’ (2018, 101), and this risk is clearly borne out by *Gaia’s* Anthropocene Gothic, as I shall outline in what follows. The film mobilises the gothic to imagine present crises as the resurgence of repressed entanglements proper to this geological epoch, but does so in terms that draw on suspect visions of indigeneity and gendered identity, ultimately presenting us with a posthuman figure who – apart from his ability to transmit the mycelium spores – is virtually indistinguishable from the human of the Enlightenment tradition.

Indigeneity and Afrikaner Historiography

Gaia’s investment in the Popular Anthropocene is perhaps most clearly evidenced by the film’s envisioning of ecological cataclysm as a threat that obtains at the level of the species. The monstrous fungus incubates, as Barend has explained, in *Homo sapiens*,

and accordingly it is *Homo sapiens* overall who will be punished by the avenging Gaia: forced – in the character’s words – to ‘return to the trees’ as mycelium-human hybrids. It is striking how this narrative of universal vulnerability differs from the actually existing South African context in which *Gaia* takes place. Cues across the film indicate this local setting: the badge on Gabi and Winston’s uniforms closely resembles the South African National Parks’ logo, for example, much of the dialogue is in Afrikaans, and a snide reference to ‘democracy’ in one of Barend’s diatribes obliquely suggests dissatisfaction with the post-apartheid nation. The interest in locality does not seem to extend, however, to the issue of socio-ecological crisis with which the film is centrally concerned. Following the global pattern, vulnerability to the future and already unfolding effects of the changing biosphere is concentrated in South Africa disproportionately among the nation’s poor – a demographic still strongly racialised and gendered, despite the fall of the racist and heteropatriarchal apartheid state in 1994.¹ *Gaia* is clearly intended to provide a sweeping, mythic vision of the Anthropocene – of a species’ cosmic rise and fall – and this, perhaps along with an interest in garnering international attention, is probably why the film does not concern itself with the local nitty-gritty of South Africa’s radically uneven day-to-day. This is not to say, however, that such a strategy is without issues, and these arise precisely from the abstract scale in which the text operates, and which obscures the real contouring of socio-ecological shifts in South Africa and elsewhere – thereby replicating at the level of narrative the logic that drives inequality.

A closer consideration of the survivalist characters will begin to shed light on this last point: as we have seen, Barend and Stefan live simply but laboriously in the South African forest, whittling their own tools and traps, and hunting animals and gathering insects for food. Across this narrative there are references to colonial settlement, and to Afrikaner historiography in particular. For example, the film makes direct recourse to the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac, when – like Abraham – Barend is commanded by Gaia to sacrifice his son in a show of faith. We will recall that Abraham emerges from this encounter as leader of the chosen people and inheritor of the promised land, and it is worth noting that, for these reasons, his story has been associated in South Africa with the development of Afrikaner Nationalism² – the political doctrine that would be enshrined in law after the 1948 inauguration of the apartheid state. Unlike much of the Afrikaans literature in which this narrative was inscribed, however, *Gaia* emphatically refuses to present Barend and Stefan as farmers, or ‘boers’: the two do not earn their right to a place in the wilderness by carving an arable territory out from ‘the primeval bush’ – the scenario that J. M. Coetzee sees as paradigmatic of the conservative genre of the *plaasroman*, or South African farm novel (1988, 85). Instead, Gaia’s chosen people survive in the forest precisely by eschewing settled agriculture, and pursuing a hunter-gatherer existence. In the Southern African context, such a way of life is associated primarily with the San peoples indigenous to the Kalahari region – communities for whom contact with ‘European colonial agro-pastoralists’ in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries amounted to what the South African San Institute (SASI) calls ‘a protracted genocide’ (SASI, n.d.). Viewed in this light, Bouwer’s film can be understood in one sense as a speculative rewriting of Afrikaner historiography, in which – rather than decimating Indigenous peoples – the Afrikaner pioneer figure adopts a quasi-Indigenous mode of being, which is framed in the film as centred on a reciprocal and spiritual exchange with the more-than-human world.

This is the relationship that *Gaia* valorises as the (relatively) positive dimension of its figuring of the posthuman: Barend's hunter-gatherer existence offers the possibility of a human/nature interconnection that does not require the transformation of the human into fungal monster, but instead consists in a deferential acknowledgement of the biosphere as the condition of possibility for any instance of life. It is noteworthy, however, that though *Gaia* shifts the key terms of the South African pioneer narrative described by Coetzee – from taming the wilderness to living in harmony with it – the outcome remains essentially the same. Of the film's multiracial and multigendered cast of characters, it is only Barend and Stefan – white, male and associated with colonial history – who are allowed to survive, Barend having endured the attack Gabi launches during his Abrahamic attempt to sacrifice his son. He is subsequently able to make a blood offering to Gaia, leaving open the possibility that he may be able to retain his human form. Thus, if the film appears to endorse a non-Western way of life as the route into a sustainable posthuman ecology, this reciprocal relationship with nature – like the agrarian relationship of natural domination – functions ultimately to validate the figure most closely aligned in the text to precisely an Enlightenment conception of the human.

Goddess Discourse and its Discontents

The treatment of gender in the film operates in broadly similar terms: there is an effort in Bouwer's film – also visible in Latour's discussion of Gaia – to code the vengeful biosphere as a specifically feminised form of power. Not only is the mycelium network – Barend's 'God' – explicitly referred to as 'her' and 'she' throughout, but it is also suggested that the film's (two) women characters acquire a quasi-godlike status on merging with Gaia at the moment of death (and both of them are indeed killed off). Lily, Barend's wife and Stefan's mother, appears about halfway through the film, still 'living' in the forest, though now almost entirely fused with a tree. Gabi undergoes a similar transformation after she dies (on her request, at Stefan's hand), and morphs into an aesthetically pleasing bouquet of colourful mushrooms and ferns. Winston, who was euthanised by Barend much earlier in the film, is notably not afforded the same floral treatment.

Indeed, Gabi is elevated as a kind of martyr to Gaia: after she dies, Stefan is freed from attending to her, and goes off to the city to spread the spores that will make fungal monsters of all of humanity. In this way, the war against nature to which Barend has referred will be arrested. A triumph, then, for the feminised biosphere, but one that is significantly achieved at the direct expense of sacrificing the film's only active female character, so that – as with Barend – the role of posthuman hero is left to a figure who appears almost indistinguishable from the human he has supposedly superseded. The whole scenario resonates closely with those described in different contexts by Anne McClintock and Elleke Boehmer, in which the iconography of feminised power belies the very logic that undergirds gendered forms of oppression. Here, women's transformation into goddess figure – into 'Mama Afrika', as Boehmer notes (2005, 34), or the Afrikaner Nationalist '*volksmoeder*' in McClintock's study (1993, 72) – simply reasserts in reverential terms a (colonial) patriarchal hierarchy, in which women's value is tied to their capacity for social and biological reproduction.

The deification of the woman figure is thus at one and the same time a subalternising manoeuvre: 'symbolically she is ranged above the men,' writes Boehmer, 'in reality she is kept below them' (2005, 29). The comment sheds particular light on Gabi's representation across Bouwer's film, and specifically on her nearly seamless occupation of a maternal role in respect to Stefan – a shift that takes place with little discernible motivation, and is indeed rendered fairly implausible by the fact that she experiences his clearly sexualised interest in her as predatory at the outset. There is a sense, then, in which Gabi and also Lily are denied a more fully rounded subjectivity and characterisation through their subordination to the mythical role of mother, in which Gaia – the biosphere – is also placed. Any real power or agency that may be ascribed to this position is thus thoroughly defused, as ultimately all the mothers of the film – real, surrogate, autochthonous – turn out to be little more than symbolic props in the narrative of Stefan as *Gaia*'s principal and central agent.

Against Anthropocene Gothic

Thus, as *Gaia* demonstrates an Anthropocene Gothic mode, it also dramatises with particular clarity a set of problems that haunt this brand of ecogothic imaginary. The film deals, as we have seen, in the homogeneous category of *Homo sapiens* – of the 'anthropos'. It understands current planetary events as emerging from collective human activity, and offers its various figurations of a posthuman existence as representative of a repressed entanglement of our species with the biosphere. But in prioritising this vision of universal interconnectivity, *Gaia* also replicates the very social hierarchies from which the degradation of extra-human nature is inseparable, and indeed resonates uneasily – though presumably inadvertently – with certain political discourses that shaped South African history across the second half of the twentieth century. The ramifications of this approach emerge vividly at the end of the film, which shows Stefan carrying the fungus from the forest to the city: in the final scene, a quick-growing mould appears ominously on the remnants of a burger he has been eating in a fast-food restaurant. The conversion of the earth's population into Gaia's apostles has thus begun; the effects of the Anthropocene are about to be unleashed in all their force – though in reality, of course, these are already unfolding, and with most intensity among those communities and bodies who appear in the film in fetishised form. There is no room for this socio-ecological inequality in *Gaia*'s ultimate envisioning of environmental breakdown, which is presented as a danger to which all of humanity is about to be equally exposed. The racialised and gendered logic that has structured the film's posthuman ecologies thus resurfaces one last time, in an apocalyptic image which erases the experience of women and people of colour in South Africa and elsewhere.

The same sense is discernible in the dismissal of Anthropocene critiques as a kind of semantic preciousness. The suggestion that humans are transforming nature, and so it matters little how we phrase this situation, simply reasserts the value of generalising culpability to the level of the species, and thus skates over the deeper point that doing so effectively disarms any meaningful critical endeavour, by allowing the actual drivers of biospheric shifts – interlocking colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism – to drop out of sight, and so become inactionable. Anthropocene Gothic, which operates in a

posthuman vocabulary of monstrous human/nature hybridity, can be understood as a form of narrative that participates in this disabling obscurantism. There are, however, other modes in which the gothic has been mobilised to engage planetary emergency that do not proceed from the assumption that humans collectively are altering the Earth System.

Capitalocene Gothic: Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (2019)

Atlantics, the debut feature from Senegalese director Mati Diop, is a film that interweaves elements of love story and ghost story, drawing to do so on a transregional variety of Middle Eastern and African folkloric figures, including – as Namwali Serpell notes – the zombie and the djinn (2019, n.p.). There is a dreamy, meditative quality to the text, which is punctuated by resonant shots of the Atlantic Ocean, and which features a persistently hazy *mise en scène* that Lindsay Turner notes references the poor air quality in the city of Dakar – an effect, among other factors, of industrial production in the region (2020, 189). Action takes place often veiled in this smog, and focuses initially on the young couple Ada (Mame Bineta Sane) and Suleiman (Ibrahima Traoré), deeply in love, despite Ada's engagement to the wealthy but unlikeable businessman Omar (Babacar Sylla) – a match for which, her mother reminds her, she should be grateful, since it will take care of the financial difficulties that are an inevitable obstacle to a woman's single life. In contrast to Omar, Suleiman is poor: he is a construction worker on the ominous, fictional skyscraper that appears recurrently across the film – always wreathed in that characteristic haze – and which spectacularly dominates Dakar's otherwise modest urban skyline. When the film opens, Suleiman has not been paid for three months: desperate, he and his colleagues decide to make the dangerous sea-passage to Europe in a pirogue – a small vessel used by West Africa's coastal fishing communities. Tragically, the entire crew is drowned when a storm hits. Across the rest of the film, however, they return in spirit form to possess the bodies of their grief-stricken loved ones, in an effort to exact what they are owed. In a remarkable scene towards the end of the film, Ada's friends – all women she knows from a nightclub, the sisters and lovers of the migrant crew – surround the tower's building manager in a cemetery, their blanked-out eyes signalling their ghostly occupation by those they have lost. Together, men and women, living and dead, retrieve the money due to them, and then look on while the unfortunate boss digs the graves for the workers he, with his corporate antics, has effectively sent to their death.

A very different film, then, to Bouwer's discussed above, but one which is equally interested in the present as a moment of planetary crisis. Where *Gaia* draws on the possibilities of gothic as a counternarrative to the Enlightenment tradition that separates humans from the rest of nature, however, Diop summons a gothic scenario of the returning dead in order – as I will elaborate below – to capture the experience of life in a region already especially intensely affected by indissociable shifts in society and the biosphere. In this sense, her mobilisation of the gothic recalls critical work that emphasises close links between this mode's emergence and the large-scale socio-ecological transformations effected by industrialisation in Britain from the late eighteenth century. On such accounts, the anxious and ambivalent lexicon of the

early gothic text – caught, as Hogle shows, between the lure of a dying aristocracy and the new possibilities of class mobility (2002, 4)– registers the disorientation that breeds as established relations between social groups shift and change, and the relation between society and its environments is likewise reconfigured (Punter 1996, 192).³ Diop's ghost story can be understood in similar terms, as a text that engages a folklore-inflected gothic tradition to encode the bewildering sensorium of a contemporary West African lifeworld in violent socio-ecological flux. Instructive here is Adam Ashforth's concept of 'spiritual insecurity' (1998, 507), which is formulated for neoliberalising, post-apartheid South Africa, and describes a rupture to the social fabric profound enough to necessitate explication in terms of supernatural threat. In *Atlantics*, however, supernatural figures do not only *register* such a rupture as ontologically and epistemically confounding; they are also pressed into the service of mapping the histories and global connections that together produce the socio-ecological disturbance in question. In this way, the film is legible as an example of 'critical irrealism', in the Warwick Research Collective's (WReC) sense of the term: it is a text in which the relationship between the supernatural – the unreal – and the experience of deleterious socio-ecological shifts is deliberately infused with world-historical consciousness, and implemented to advance 'a negative critique of the world-order' (Deckard et al. 2015, 97).

There are multiple interweaving layers to Diop's critical irrealist narrative of material dispossession/spiritual possession, which, as I will show, incorporates labour exploitation, (gendered) social reproduction and the degradation of biophysical nature. The drivers of these processes are carefully traced out so that the film elucidates, and thus makes actionable, the transregional vectors out of which the tragedy of Ada and Suleiman emerges. Ultimately, then, *Atlantics* mobilises the gothic elements of its plot to raise and then address the question of why, at the present global conjuncture, certain lives are being rendered apparently expendable, both through their exposure to corrosive or toxifying environments, and through their subjection to violent labour practices that hamper survival at every turn. This is thus a gothic that sets little stock in the concept of the Anthropocene, with its notions of universal human culpability and universal human risk. As I will suggest by way of conclusion below, the film instead locates itself in a planetary present where capitalism, operating through colonialism, patriarchy and the objectification of nature, is the major force transforming the Earth System in uneven and historically redolent ways.

Labour Precarity

The critical function of the revenants in *Atlantics* is perhaps most immediately connected to the state of social precarity in which Suleiman and the other construction workers find themselves: they have been forced, through their destitution, to place their trust in a viciously capricious labour market, the aim of which is ultimately – the film makes eminently clear – to extract value from them without giving anything in return. The link between these circumstances and the spirits' journey back from the Atlantic is made quite explicit by the fact that, once possessed, the women repeatedly descend on and interrogate the besuited manager of the construction site in his lavish home. The restlessness of the dead is thus in a key sense shown to be an effect of

exploitation – and indeed it is their exploitation that has propelled Suleiman and the others towards the ocean in the first place. Diop thus uses the scenario of the returning dead to index a violent experience of being treated as expendable labour – one that is thus cast as sufficiently bewilderingly unjust to produce the sense of spiritual insecurity to which Ashforth refers.

At the same time, and in keeping with the critical irrealist agenda, *Atlantics* also locates this experience in the context of world-economic shifts. The spectacular tower is key in this respect, and recalls a host of actually existing ‘megaprojects’ which have emerged across the African continent during the postcolonial period. Prominent examples include the multi-million-dollar stadia built in South Africa for the 2010 football world cup, and – currently – Dakar’s own large-scale deep-water port facility, which according to President Macky Sall will be ‘the biggest private investment in the West African country’ (Reuters 2022). The last comment is particularly illuminating, because it highlights the model of ‘development’ for which the postcolonial megaproject is representative: namely, one that relies on attracting foreign capital (the port is being financed from Dubai), and originates with the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) across postcolonial states during the late-twentieth-century period of global neoliberalisation. Designed by institutions of international finance, SAPs were imposed to bring newly independent nations – including Senegal – in line with the demands of global capital, at the time seeking to depress the costs of labour and manufacturing by outsourcing these to regions across the southern hemisphere. Alongside ‘the removal of all restrictions on foreign investment’, Neil Lazarus explains, SAPs required ‘huge cuts in government spending and social provision, the slashing of wages . . . and deregulation in all sectors to ensure that all developments were driven by the logic of the market rather than by social need’ (2011, 9). As a result, SAPs ensured an influx of money into certain strata of postcolonial societies, but they also deepened the pre-existing hardships faced by the poor, who – like Suleiman – are subordinated to the whims of a deregulated labour market, with no access to the social safety net that would alleviate the destitution this breeds.

The tower functions as a visual shorthand for all of this in *Atlantics*, and so serves to locate the exploitation to which the restless dead are linked as the local effect of wider neoliberalising shifts in the system of capital. In this way, the haunting spirits of the migrant crew expose and critique a contemporary world order where – in a further mutation of colonial history – Africa continues to be treated as a site of cheap labour.

Gendered (Dis)Possession

Importantly, the film also nuances this assessment by foregrounding the gendered ramifications of labour market deregulation and intensifying poverty. Dinah Hannaford and Ellen E. Foley have highlighted how ‘the fallout from privatisation and structural adjustment reforms’ (2015, 210) has strongly destabilised established cultural paradigms of marriage in Senegal, chiefly by undermining the feasibility of the ‘gendered division of labour’ via which the marital relation is organised (207). Faced with precisely the kind of labour market precarity in which Diop’s Suleiman finds himself, young Senegalese men are increasingly unable to occupy the husband’s role of ‘good

provider' (208) – a situation that sheds particular light on the palpable relief Ada's mother expresses over her daughter's engagement to the wealthy Omar. It is important to note, however, that the conception of marriage in play here – one which situates husbands as wage-workers and women as overseers of the domestic realm – has its roots in colonial history, emerging from what Maria Mies, in her formative analysis of patriarchy and the world-economy, calls 'housewifization'. This is the process through which colonised women were dispossessed of their pre-existing social roles, and assigned the unpaid task of reproducing the colonial proletariat, on whom empire depended for its prosperity. The effect is an enduring situation in which – as Mies puts it – 'women, and not men, are the . . . labour force for the capitalist . . . accumulation process on a world scale' (2014, 116). In *Atlantics*, the constricted romantic possibilities available to Ada clearly reference the persistence of this gendered economic structure, but the film also gestures further, to the ways in which housewifisation is intensified and mutated in a present shaped by the effects of SAPs.

As Mies notes, the postcolonial period has witnessed escalating efforts to draw women across the Global South into the domain of waged work in a variety of ways, but this development should not be mistaken for a liberatory act: rather, as she notes, the discourse of housewifisation remains powerfully in effect, and is manipulated in the interest of framing work performed by women as illegitimate labour – 'what they do is not defined as work, but as an activity' (Mies 2014, 118) – with the result that it can be bought at low cost. Mies shows that such carefully orchestrated exploitation applies across the formal and informal sectors of the postcolonial economy, extending also – significantly – to sex work, which represents one of the few viable modes of survival available to women under conditions where (despite their supposedly increased access to the labour market) gainful waged work remains in effect gendered as male. This is important because it is suggested in *Atlantics*, especially by Ada's conservative friend Mariama (Mariama Gassama), that the heroine's unmarried female friends from the nightclub – the lovers and sisters of the lost crew – congregate in the smoky, neon-lit seaside bar precisely to sell sex. Making this observation, Serpell notes that after she abandons her engagement to Omar, Ada, too, runs away from her family to work in the nightclub (2019, n.p.). Thus, her story charts the shifting functions of housewifisation, first shining a light on a marital system in which the association of wage-labour with masculinity coercively inducts women into unpaid domestic service; and second, exposing how, in the present, the buckling of this same system compels women to take surreptitious or risky routes into the wage-economy, where what Mies calls their 'income generating activities' (2014, 115) are then stigmatised, not recognised as real work and so bought on the cheap. It is against the background of this latter point in particular that we may interpret Diop's decision to leave the matter of sex work at the level of insinuation in the film, so that (as in reality) the labour of the women in the nightclub remains the obscured substrate – what Marx called the 'hidden abode' – on which the world-economy depends.

The film thus acknowledges how the labour practices to which Suleiman and his colleagues are subject rely on a deeper set of gendered exploitations, which hinge on the construction of women's work – domestic or otherwise – as illegitimate and so freely appropriable. When the possessed women descend on the unfortunate construction manager – as they do at two key points across the film – they should not, then, be

understood as mere vehicles for the working men's spirits. Rather, as Serpell observes, their possession by the dead signals a communal or solidaristic form of redressive action, in which the postcolony's men and women come together in protest at their differential but interlinked exploitations (2019, n.p.).

Environmental Violence

Different facets of global inequality are thus reflected across the different dimensions of Diop's ghost story: the restlessness of the dead indexes the labour precarity that emerges from postcolonial structural adjustment, and the scenario of spirit possession registers the gendered exploitation that underpins and enables these depredations in the wage-economy. The film also, however, positions these indissociable forms of systemic violence in the context of unevenly distributed environmental shifts, from which it is thus suggested that they are inseparable. Scenes in which we see the characters receiving the ghosts of the migrant crew are illuminating in this respect. The process is physically distressing: the host bodies are shown staggering, collapsing, and all the time – crucially – gasping for breath. As Turner notes in her own assessment of Diop's film, 'it seems impossible to separate [t]his condition from the density of the air' (2020, 188), which we will recall is foregrounded throughout *Atlantics* by the film's characteristically hazy *mise en scène*.

Dakar's air is about five times more polluted than it should be to be safely breathable, Turner explains, and 'a certain amount of that pollution comes from . . . construction financed by multinational companies', while another proportion derives from 'goods manufactured by outside companies to be exported elsewhere' (2020, 188–9). Both construction megaprojects and the relocation of manufacturing to postcolonial nations are key consequences, as we have seen, of structural adjustment, and so the smog should be understood as in significant part an effect of the same socio-economic shifts responsible for the hardships endured by Suleiman, Ada and the rest of the characters. Indeed, as Rob Nixon points out in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), the outsourcing of material production to postcolonial regions in the late twentieth century was consciously informed not only by a social but also by an ecological calculus. It aimed to rectify what was constructed as an 'inefficient global imbalance in toxicity' by 'export[ing] rich nation garbage, toxic waste and heavily polluting industries to Africa' and other countries across the Global South (Nixon 2011, 1). To illustrate the point, Nixon quotes Lawrence Summers, former president of the World Bank: 'I've always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under polluted . . . [S]houldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?' (2011, 1).

The assumption on which this proposal rests – namely, that African environments are disproportionately untainted and robust – bears little relation to reality. As Moore demonstrates clearly in his environmental history of the global sugar frontier, colonisation has, since the inauguration of transregional capitalism in the fifteenth century, always been an extractive ecological relation, through which '[n]utrients were pumped out of one ecosystem . . . and transferred to another' (2000, 413). 'In essence', he continues, colonised 'land was progressively mined until its relative exhaustion fettered profitability, whereupon capital was forced to seek out fresh lands' by expanding the imperial frontier (2000, 413–4). It is in no small part the cumulative effects of this

history – the progressive degradation and destabilisation of colonised environments – that render postcolonial regions disproportionately vulnerable to the crises currently unfolding across the biosphere. The inequality of these shifts is in turn compounded and intensified by contemporary practices such as those Summers mentions, which – as they continue to treat the postcolony as a disposable ecosystem – not only recall but precisely replicate the colonial relation in the present.

Atlantics' Dakar, wreathed in smog and overshadowed by its heavily symbolic tower, provides a vision of colonial- and capitalogenic climate inequality from the vantage of one of the climate emergency's frontlines – though the film also gestures beyond atmospheric pollution to other forms of environmental destruction. It is noteworthy in this respect that the small vessel in which the workers make their ill-fated journey is in fact a redolent socio-ecological symbol, and the namesake of what has become known over the last two decades as 'the pirogue phenomenon' (Mayault 2017, n.p.). Commercial overfishing in the Atlantic off the Senegal coast – an industrial-scale operation in which European, Chinese and Japanese trawlers feature prominently – increasingly means that pirogues can no longer fulfil their traditional purpose of catering to local communities, and are being used instead as migrant ferries – a function for which they are ill-equipped, as *Atlantics* grimly shows. This reality hovers behind the narrative of Suleiman and his fellow workers, providing the explanation as to why they have to sell their labour in a deeply exploitative multinational system, which in turn is transforming the Dakar air into that unbreathable smog. *Atlantics* conjures this multidimensional history of socio-ecological dispossession and toxification, and gives it palpable concrete form in those scenes of asphyxiation that accompany the arrival of the possessing ghosts.

Capitalocene Gothic

The haunting figures in *Atlantics* can thus be understood as encoding the disproportionate (gendered) social *and* environmental precarity that characterises life in Senegal's capital city. The pervasive scenes of the tower, dominating the Dakar skyline, serve to anchor these conditions in the context of late-twentieth-century structural adjustment and its after-effects, which – as we have seen – entrench and compound the racialised and gendered economic/ecological relationships cultivated under formal colonialism. Indeed, this history is summoned as the backdrop against which all action in the film takes place. The repeated, lingering shots of the ocean direct the viewer's attention to Atlantic crossings that pre-date Suleiman's, as Turner also notes (2020, 190): we are called to remember that Gorée Island off the Dakar coast is home to a door of no return, through which captive Africans passed en route to the plantations of the New World between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Atlantics'* linking of its present to this history is suggestive. It resonates with Aníbal Quijano's notion of 'coloniality' (2000, 533), which describes how, from the colonisation of the Americas onwards, the geopolitical landscape has been structured by a racialising principle, and how this serves to identify the exploitable, expendable populations and environments always required by the capitalist relation.

Coloniality is different, then, from formal colonialism which concludes (also in Senegal) around the middle of the twentieth century. It is instead a more surreptitious alliance between colonial hierarchies of racial difference and capitalist production,

which obtains – Quijano suggests – on a world scale into the present. ‘[T]he racial axis has a colonial origin,’ he writes, ‘but it has proven to be more durable . . . than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established. Therefore, the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of coloniality’ (2000, 533). Invoking a history that begins with enslavement and plantation ecologies, and persists into the neoliberal age, *Atlantics* would seem to proceed from a similar premise. This means in turn that the payment Suleiman and his crew return from the sea to collect perhaps exceeds the wage due to them. It can be understood, rather, as encompassing the wider and deeper historical debt owed to enslaved and colonised women and men, to exhausted ecosystems, with the fruits of whose unpaid work and energy the present world order has been unequally built.

Atlantics offers a perspective on this globally extensive socio-ecological system, but does so – significantly – from the vantage of contemporary Dakar, the complex sensorium of which is critically encoded in the ghostly narrative, as I have shown. As a result of this local rooting – historical, social, environmental – the film notably refuses to be read through sweeping abstractions: it is not humanity generally who either suffers from, or drives, the deleterious socio-ecological situation it witnesses, and accordingly the gothic figures in the narratives are not non-anthropocentric representatives of a repressed and universal human/nature connectivity. Indeed, where the Anthropocene Gothic prioritises these entanglements as superseding in their importance systems of racialised and gender power, *Atlantics* takes as central these latter structures and their inseparability from the history of capitalist exploitation and extraction. It is a text, then, that demonstrates a form of gothic which situates itself in what Moore calls the Capitalocene (2016, 81–9): the age in which capitalism, mobilising colonial discourses of race, heteropatriarchal conceptions of gender, and objectifying categories of biophysical nature, has brought the planetary system to its current state of unevenly unfolding collapse.

Notes

1. See, for example, Soheil Shayegh and Shouro Dasgupta’s analysis of the gendered and classed effects of climate emergency in South Africa (2022), or Suma Mani et al.’s account of land degradation and climate justice (2021).
2. A discussion of the narrative of the chosen people and its construction and function within Afrikaner Nationalism can be found in André Du Toit’s article ‘No Chosen People: The Myth of the Calvinist Origins of Afrikaner Nationalism and Racial Ideology’ (1983).
3. In ‘Decolonial Gothic’ (2022), I provide a more detailed account of gothic and the socio-ecological effects of industrialisation.

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