

Post Nature and Ecocritical Epic in Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*

Costanza Mondo
Università degli Studi di Torino, Italia

Abstract Although in postcolonial ecocritical literature the agency of animals finds full recognition, representations of insects are so rare that curiosity arises about their untapped ecocritical meaning. Interestingly, in Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*, a chorus of mosquitoes takes centre stage. In the first section of this paper, I argue that Serpell's novel recontextualises classical references, placing them between adaptation to the conventions of epic poems and innovation. In the second section, the ecocritical meanings of the chorus of mosquitoes are analysed and framed in relation to the concepts of 'simulacrum' and post nature.

Keywords The Old Drift. Namwali Serpell. Post nature. Ecocriticism. Epic poems.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 De-Centring the Epic: Between Classical References and Innovation. – 3 Post Nature and the Drift of Epic. – 4 Conclusion: A Disjointed Simulacrum of Nature.



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2024-03-26
Accepted 2024-06-05
Published 2024-07-08

Open access

© 2024 Mondo | © 4.0



Citation Mondo, C. (2024). "Post Nature and Ecocritical Epic in Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*". *Lagoonscapes*, 4(1), [1-16] 31-46.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2024/01/002

1 Introduction

Reflecting on the discrepancy between bucolic scenarios and the altered face of nature in current times, Jesse Taylor stated that

In the Anthropocene, nature is more likely to be an antibiotic resistant microbe, an invasive species, or a superstorm than a harmonious pastoral scene. (2015, 882)

This way of thinking about nature outside of inadequate idyllic frames and observing its manifestations is one of the aspects that the Zambian writer Namwali Serpell deals with in her novel *The Old Drift* (2019), where she provides another example aligned with Taylor's reasoning: a swarm of mosquito drones spinning the threads of an epic narrative involving numerous characters whose destinies are tied to the tiny cyborg insects more than the human perspective can easily accept.

Undoubtedly, the ecocritical emphasis on alternative ways of seeing the environment, relating stories and producing knowledge has placed animals at the crossroad of new sensibilities and practices aimed at rethinking and decentering humans' positioning in the world. The convergence of animals, environment and literature is particularly strong in postcolonial ecocriticism. While Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* deals with human-nonhuman encounters through the character of Sharisha, a southern right whale with a "perfect bonnet of pure white callosities" (2005, 47), Ben Okri has recently imbued Blake's tiger with ecocritical hues by calling for a "Tiger spirit" (2023, 75) in order to spur humankind to take action against climate change. Literary criticism and theory, too, have used specific animals as conceptual keys to develop literary enquiries and outlining theoretical frameworks. Two good examples are the elephant, whose absence in *Heart of Darkness* has sparked Huggan and Tiffin's interest (2015, 162), and the dog, with Donna Haraway dedicating one of the chapters of *Staying with the Trouble* to the explanation of the practices of 'becoming-with' and 'response-ability' that she experiences alongside her dog Cayenne (2016, 104).

Yet, given the wide variety of these animals, it is interesting that Namwali Serpell draws attention to the ecocritical meanings possessed by a swarm of cyborg drones. In the curious form of mosquitoes, the often-neglected category of insects is of paramount importance in *The Old Drift*, the writer's first novel, which spans more than three generations of Zambians and the history of the country from the colonial period to recent times in a surprising move from realism to science fiction. Combining traits of different genres among which the historical novel, science fiction, magical realism and, especially, the epic poem, the novel is concerned with various themes that

emerge as the history of Zambia develops through the lives of the characters, such as colonialism, Zambian independence, HIV and resilience in the face of hardships. Ecocritical themes such as environmental exploitation, the sustainability of technological developments and e-waste are equally to be found in the plot. In Serpell's epic novel, mosquitoes become narrators in italicised choruses from the very beginning, directly addressing readers and highlighting their unacknowledged entomological agency and storytelling:

Your earliest tales were of animals, of course, beastly fables carved into cave walls. Well, it's time to turn the fables, we say, time for us to tell you what we know. (2020, 19)

In what follows, I will try to break new ground in the study of the relationship between animals and epic by focusing on the ways in which the chorus of mosquitoes both follows and upends the epic model, thus providing a variation on the literary uncertainty Namwali Serpell admitted to finding compelling (Cummins 2022). First, I will demonstrate how Serpell entwined the representation of the chorus of mosquitoes with threads from the classical tradition, echoing Virgil in particular, while adapting the conventions of the epic in a creative way. I will then move on to tease out some ecocritical principles outlined and deepened by her choice of narrators, especially the concept of post nature discussed by Timothy Clark and the ecocritical meaning of 'simulacrum'. Aside from addressing a lack of attention to the creative role of insects in ecocritical narratives and spurring new thoughts in the field of animal studies that has developed mainly within ecocriticism (Buell 2011, 106), this paper will also investigate a recent example of postcolonial ecocriticism whose environmental meaning is as powerful as its classical references are piercing.

2 De-Centring the Epic: Between Classical References and Innovation

Namwali Serpell stated that "What we think of as novel often emerges out of the combination of pre-existing cultures or traditions" (Lea 2019). Thus, to discuss the classical echoes woven into Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* is not a variation on what Chakrabarty called the "inequality of ignorance" (2008, 28), but rather allows us to discover a part of the novel whose importance and layers of meaning are heightened by Serpell's evident familiarity with Latin and Greek classics. To make this point, one could cite the epigraph of the novel - a quote from Seamus Heaney's translation of book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid* -, the nods to *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* (Serpell 2020, 263), the mythological references embodied by a character called

Sibilla (Monaco 2020, 103) and the author's clear interest in the etymologies of Greek and Latin words, such as 'Anopheles' (Serpell 2020, 431), 'error' (2) and 'commensalism' (402). Some of these references, especially the etymologies and the epigraph concerning Virgil's Elysian Fields, have ecocritical traits for their reversal of anthropocentric assumptions and the representation of nature. It ought to be specified that Serpell's is not the only novel in African postcolonial literature that rewrites and re-works the classics, thus engendering a fecund literary cross-pollination and widening of horizons. It is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to cover the many African anglophone novels steeped in classical mythology; yet, a significative example ought to be made so as to also clarify the innovations in Serpell's epic novel.

The Nigerian author Chigozie Obioma has recently experimented with the epic genre in *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019b), a novel with echoes of *The Odyssey* (Meyer 2019), an epic poem whose charm also partly animates Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (Alam 2019). Since the writer confessed to being familiar with Greek mythology (Obioma 2019b), in his text, classical references could reasonably be expected to be more piercing than generic echoes of Homer's classic. Indeed, *An Orchestra of Minorities* may resonate more specifically with Apollonius Rhodius's version of Medea and Jason's myth – in what, if purposeful, Mason would call a “specific unmarked intertextual reference” (2019, 82). In *Jason and the Argonauts*, Jason and Medea run away together with the stolen golden fleece but are intercepted by a fleet led by Absyrtus, Medea's brother. He is lured into a meeting with his sister – who pretends to be ready to betray Jason and the Argonauts – but finds death awaiting him: he is mercilessly felled by Jason's sword. In the myth, the horror of murder and the perennial stain it means for Medea, given that she is complicit in fratricide, is symbolically represented by Absyrtus's last gesture:

he caught,
in both his hands, the crimson geyser streaming
out of the wound and smeared his sister's mantle
and silver veil as she recoiled from him.
(Poochigian 2014, 168, book 4, vv. 603-6)

At the beginning of *An Orchestra of Minorities*, Chinonso runs into Ndali, a young woman who is on the verge of attempting suicide, and decides that the best way to convince her not to jump from a bridge is to show her the utter horror of drowning. Yet, in order to do this, he has to sacrifice two chickens, winged animals that he loves deeply. After letting them plunge into the river, a white feather ominously lingers on his hand as if to mark him, reminiscent of the splash of Absyrtus's gushing blood on Medea's bright garments:

he watched the birds struggle against the thermal, whipping their wings violently against the wind as they battled desperately for their lives but failed. A feather landed on the skin of his hand, but he beat it off with such haste and violence that he felt a quick pain. (Obioma 2019b, 14)

The tragic echoes that Obioma masterly evokes and that vividly underpin this passage are heightened by the tangible impression that Chinonso's sacrifice of the chickens and his prioritising Ndali over what he loves will have a heavier import on the story than readers can fully grasp for the moment. Like Absyrtus's murder, the sacrifice of the chickens marks a point of no return deeply imbued with a sense of foreboding.

In Serpell's *The Old Drift*, classical echoes punctuate the story, but are projected particularly onto the narratological sphere and the Greek chorus of mosquitoes. Framing and gently interrupting the story between chapters, the tiny insects craft a quasi-preface rooted in the colonial past of Zambia. Interestingly, the incipit of the mosquitoes' narration is devoid of the typical invocation that is a mainstay in Homeric epic poems. Epic narrations of African myths, such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The Perfect Nine*, usually entail an invocation too:

I, teller of this tale [...]
Implore the Giver Supreme to bestow peace in my heart, so
that
I can render this tale of Gĩkũyũ and Mũmbi and their Perfect
Nine,
Exactly the way the wind whispered it to my soul.
(2023, 11)

In this case, though, rather than asking to be granted a space for literary expression and invoking help in order to find their voice, the mosquitoes vocally claim the right to tell their story with no intermediaries for inspiration. Rather, they confidently draw attention to themselves and their role:

And who are we? Thin troubadours, the bare ruinous choir, a chorus of gossipy mites. Uncanny the singing that comes from certain husks. (Serpell 2020, 19)

One should also admire their patience, as the swarm agrees to relate the story in chronological order so as to make it easier for their human listeners to follow, although they would sooner adopt a more holistic perspective.

In Serpell's multi-tiered and varied story, the double scourges of malaria and HIV are dealt with, one haunting the colonial settlement

of *The Old Drift* and one impinging on the second generation of characters, with Dr Lee unsuccessfully trying to cure it once and for all. Brokering “*between flesh and disease*” (Serpell 2020, 431), the chorus of mosquitoes is obviously familiar with malaria and fevers, which led to the demise of innumerable people of note across the world since the inception of humankind, as the mosquitoes smugly remind:

Reckon the great men littered in our wake, or the wake of the fevers we carry: Dante. Vespucci. The King of Siam. Da Gama. Three of the Medicis. Oliver Cromwell. The twelve-day pope. Lord Byron. Livingstone, of course. Behold the might of the mite! (545)

From the very beginning, then, the swarm offers an alternative genealogy and highlights the havoc that can be wreaked by a pathogen and tiny creatures on the chessboard of human history.

Serpell’s novel is clearly not the only one to be concerned with illnesses in a way that could make a good case for the medical humanities. Among the most recent examples, suffice it to remember Abraham Verghese’s *The Covenant of Water* (2023) and its engagement with the themes of the lives of lepers and leprosy:

Leprosy deadens the nerves and is therefore painless; the real wound of leprosy, and the only pain they feel, is that of exile. (2023, 201)

What sets Serpell’s text apart from others is the narratological move of handing the narration over to the agents of contagion and making narrators of mosquitoes, which may seem to stretch what J.M. Coetzee called “sympathetic imagination” (2016, 35) to its limits. With this choice, Serpell’s novel applies to new contexts Dobrin’s blue ecocritical reflections on the microscales and macroscales – which for the scholar determine the fluid or solid perception of oceanic water (2021, 46) but in *The Old Drift* are seen as regulating a complex narratological frame – by undertaking the unprecedented task of fashioning a long epic solemnly related by a chorus of minuscule beings.

It has been aptly pointed out that the chorus of mosquitoes is reminiscent of that in Greek tragedy (Biasio 2021), but, in my opinion, Serpell’s text lends itself to reflections on the recontextualisation of the mechanisms of choruses not exclusively in Greek tragedy, but also comedy. Ancient choruses consisted of a single-voiced group of characters and their prominence varied noticeably depending on the author in question. While Aeschylus’s works display a use of chorus that puts it on equal footing with the characters, Sophocles’s tragedies reconsider the chorus’s prominence, as do Euripides’s works. In a similar vein, the mosquitoes are numerous individual insects but their common chorus springs from “*the effect of an elementary*

principle: with enough time, a swarm will evolve a conscience" (Serpell 2020, 19). As for Greek comedy, Serpell's chorus of nonhuman creatures almost invites comparison with some of Aristophanes's comedies, where choruses took the names of animals and gave titles to plays such as *The Frogs*, *The Birds* or *The Wasps*. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, it should be specified that in the latter comedy, the wasps are not talking insects but rather symbolic, in that the chorus is a group of judges. Thus, Serpell clearly takes a step forward by choosing 'real' mosquitoes and thus highlights that in her novel, characters cannot interact with the chorus, as happened in many classical works, because they are utterly unaware of their existence – and agency.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that the main comparison between Serpell's novel and classical texts involves the epic poem. Various forms of orality enrich the narration. When mosquitoes do not speak in rhyme – "*the feed has cut, interrupted abrupt*" (Serpell 2020, 562) – they still create sonic phenomena like assonances – "*Pondering this query – who are we really?*" (562). Even characters' speech in English is often transliterated as it is pronounced – "Put your peppas in!" (223) – in a way which is less redolent of the mechanism of Achebe's Nigerian English (Achebe 1997, 348) and more akin to the attention to the sonic dimension that can be found in the written speech of black enslaved people in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* – "Dat's jis' what I thinks" (2017) – and Amitav Ghosh's brilliant crafting of the lascars' idiom in *Sea of Poppies* – "Nevva mind: allo same-sem" (2009, 17).

In tracing connections with the epic poem, Serpell gives an important hint by choosing a quote from Virgil's *Aeneid* as the epigraph of her novel – a choice whose potential implications will be examined later. It is precisely in Virgil's oeuvre that a mosquito at the centre of a mock-epic can be found. Included in the *Appendix Vergiliana* and attributed to Virgil, "The Gnat" is a short poem celebrating the courage of a brave mosquito that alerts a sleeping shepherd of the danger posed by a snake slithering nearby:

A tiny nurseling of the moisture first
 Alarms the man, and warns him by its sting
 To shun his death: for where the eyelids were
 Exposing opened eyes and pupils, there
 [...] was struck
 The pupil by its weapon light.
 (Mooney 1916, vv. 275-280)

Instead of gratefulness, though, the mosquito is met only with the shepherd's anger and is killed by him along with the snake. After its death, the ghost of the mosquito comes back to his murderer and

berates him for his insensitivity and lack of gratitude:

While dearer was thy life
 To me than life itself I'm carried off
 By winds through empty space.
 (Mooney 1916, vv. 315-317)

The similarities between Serpell's chorus of mosquitoes and Virgil's gnat are probably more numerous than appears at first sight: the 'errant human' and the phantom image of the gnat will be analysed more in depth in the next section. For now, it is important to underscore the agency of the tiny insects that in Virgil's text makes the difference between life and death for the shepherd, and in Serpell's text leads to a reconsideration of the narrating voices of the epic poem through the evocation of classical models.

3 Post Nature and the Drift of Epic

After gradually introducing controversial technological developments and ultimately the creation of insect-shaped drones, Serpell waits for the novel to end before allowing the mosquitoes to disclose an unsettling piece of information:

It appears that we have a problem. [...] Are we red-blooded beasts or metallic machines? [...] Are we truly man's enemy, *Anopheles gambiae*, or the microdrones Jacob designed? If that's who we are, then this tale has explained our invention. The problem is that we'll still never know because...we've joined up with the local mosquitoes. [...] Half insects, half drones; perhaps all drones or none; maybe something between will emerge. But what a joke! What an error! What a lark indeed! A semi-cyborgian nation! (Serpell 2020, 562)

The mosquitoes' revelation turns out to be a literary application of Jesse Taylor's aforementioned reflections on the unexpected manifestations of nature in the Anthropocene, as well as Timothy Clark's thoughts. In Clark's opinion, "the incalculable interaction of imponderable contaminated, hybrid elements with unpredictable emergent effects" will replace the previous nature/culture distinction (2014, 80). Following Clark's argument on to *The Value of Ecocriticism*, it can be said that evident technological devices are not the only way in which altered nature can present itself to human eyes. In other words, it does not necessarily take a swarm of mosquito drones to frame the concept of post nature; a simple cherry tree is sufficient, like the tree in the poem "Loveliest of Trees" by Housman, which

Clark analyses through the lens of the Anthropocene:

the cherry trees in such a context may not even be the wild cherry [...], but a cultivated form, planted to decorate a 'woodland ride' and celebrated for reliably chiming with a human festival ('Eastertide'). (2019, 35)

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh muses on the moments of recognition of a living otherness as particularly uncanny:

Who can forget those moments when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive? As, for example, when an arabesque in the pattern of a carpet is revealed to be a dog's tail? (2017, 3)

Expanding on Ghosh's point, it can be said that it would be even more uncanny to realise that something we firmly thought of as 'natural' turned out to be utterly artificial and to have perfectly mimicked its natural referent to the point of tricking our senses. From the Renaissance, the concept of 'simulacrum' - the "*counterfeit*" (Baudrillard 1993, 50; italics in the original) that represents something but is ontologically different - is reactualised in a problematic modern transposition that Serpell's novel forces readers to contemplate. By the end of the story, we are all doubt-riddled readers who are left wondering about the real 'nature' of the flying creatures that have authored an epic - a practical application of the "literary uncertainty" that fascinates Serpell and that she has analysed in Thomas Pinchon and Henry James (Serpell 2008).

It is precisely in the reflections on nature and its appearance in the Anthropocene that *The Old Drift* creatively pulls together crucial strands of ecocritical thought. Mouthpieces for the meaning of altered nature and simultaneously clear examples thereof, the mosquito drones metanarratively outline post natural principles that deconstruct notions of human order and linear progress pitted against nature. Although the drones' preface is devoid of classical invocations, it becomes progressively clear that the aim of their epic is to sing the praises of something specific. More surprisingly, it is manifest that their admiration is not directed towards the characters and their epic endeavours, such as Lee's research to eradicate HIV, Matha's participation in Nkoloso's resistance or the youngest characters' attempt to free Zambians from the noxious control of technology. Of course, in their italicised choruses the drones often comment on the unfolding events of the story and the pivotal actions of some characters. Still, the real subject of their verses is eventually revealed in the following passage, where the insects offer a heretofore un contemplated alternative to man's binary thinking:

there is a third way, a moral you stumbled on, thinking it fatal, a flaw. To err is human, you say with great sadness. But we thinful singers give praise! To the drift, the diversion, that motion of motions! Obey the law of the flaw! If errare humanum est indeed, then it follows that si fallor, sum. [...] When atoms plummet like rain through the void, they deflect [...]. From this swerve, called the clinamen, come collision and cluster, both the binding and fleeing of matter. (Serpell 2020, 543)

The chorus of mosquitoes can be considered 'errant' not only in the sense that it wanders, but also that it extolls the error, the accident, the unexpected and unplanned, picking up and mocking Descartes's famous 'cogito ergo sum' along the way. Upon close observation, their very epic springs from an absolutely accidental event whose consequences ripple across the following generations. Back in colonial times in Zambia, in the settlement called 'the Old Drift,' a feverish man called Percy Clark suddenly struck Pietro Gavuzzi, an Italian hotelier, which in turn led to Gavuzzi's daughter hitting a servant, whose mind was impaired for the rest of his life. This is the original accident of this epic, what in more classical terms would be called Eris's golden apple at the gods' banquet, and, in a more modern (or post-modern) guise, "the explosion of consequences" (McEwan 2004, 17).

The mosquitoes' praise of the error has vital implications in terms of ecocritical theory. In *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty affirms that the Anthropocene was not inevitable:

Human civilization surely did not begin on condition that, one day in his history, man would have to shift from wood to coal and from coal to petroleum and gas. [...] there was much historical contingency. (2021, 39)

He then goes on to make a clear example in order to reveal the accidental nature of achievements often laid solely at the door of human ingeniousness:

Take the case of the agricultural revolution [...] of around 11,700 years ago. It was not just an expression of human inventiveness. It was made possible by certain changes in the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, a certain stability of the climate, and a degree of warming of the planet that followed the end of the Ice Age (the Pleistocene era) - *things over which human beings had no control*. (40; emphasis added)

Although in these passages Chakrabarty is explaining the reason why the concept of species, rather than capitalism, must be adopted

in order to discuss the Anthropocene, this excerpt pairs nicely with the mosquito's praise of contingency, accidents, drifts, as primary tools of nature: "*Evolution forged the entirety of life using only one tool: the mistake...*" (Serpell 2020, 431). Facing post nature involves deconstructing humanity's 'manifest destiny' and acknowledging the favourable conditions and accidents that resulted in beneficial developments.

It cannot be said that the mosquitoes had not warned the readers, though. In their very first chorus, they conclude with words that paraphrase Jeffrey Cohen's affirmation that Nature loves to turn classifying ladders into spirals and that it rather loves a vortex (2015, 2698). Indeed, whenever one seeks an origin,

the path splits, cleaved by apostrophe or dash. The tongue forks, speaks in two ways, which in turn fork and fork into a chaos of capillarity. Where you sought an origin, you find a vast babble which is also a silence: a chasm of smoke, thundering. Blind mouth! (Serpell 2020, 2)

These words touch also on the theme of silence, of voices and tongues telling two different stories, and thus perfectly introduce the theme of colonialism in Zambia.

As Ranajit Guha pointed out, the idea of empire has "something uncanny" (1997, 482) whose traits partly overlap with environmental uncanniness in the monumentality and sheer materiality of the Kariba dam, an ostensible rung of 'progress'. While colonisers reaped benefits from its construction, the local tribe of the Tonga was mercilessly displaced. In 1956, the dam started to be built by the Italian consortium of construction companies Impresit, took almost five years to be completed (Scammacca del Murgo 2021, 72-4) and radically altered the surrounding environment triggering a series of consequences. An example of the "instrumentalization of population dispersal" at the core of colonial governmentality (Quayson 2012, 344), the damming of the Zambezi River wields catastrophic consequences for the Tonga, as well as for local fauna:

They rescued the animals - 'Operation Noah' - then drove the Tonga off in tightly packed lorries. The people were banished from their homes to a land with no marshes, no river. (Serpell 2020, 78)

'Operation Noah' was the name of an initiative to allow the fauna to be saved when the water started to fill the reservoir, while around 57,000 Tonga were forced to leave their ancestral homes (Scammacca del Murgo 2021, 72, 75). As Colson points out, the district officers had experience of travelling from district to district but "had had no experience in moving villagers and had little on which to base

an estimate of what kinds and amounts of goods would be involved" (1971, 43). Even at the level of narrative structure, the dam occupies a key position: it features in the first chapter of the first section and its destruction is the culmination of the novel. Needless to say, the combination of climate change and an error of miscalculation resulted in the flooding: torrential rains had already destabilised the dam and the intervention of a swarm of mosquito drones programmed to block its flue was the tipping point of the situation. While the last generation of characters just wanted to tamper with an obnoxious form of technological control by blocking the dam, they end up causing massive flooding. Even in this case, they underestimated conditions over which they had no control and assumed that their actions were the only ones to possess agency in the environment. The ultimate disruption of the dam and the collapse of its heavy monumentality evidence the failure of a conception of progress based on the exploitation of people and nature, as well as the virtual destruction of the concept of linear progress in the colonial context.

After attacking the conception of linearity in human progress and in colonialism, the mosquitoes then engage in the dismantling of the notion of the *anthropos* in the Anthropocene:

Lee the brave, the bold, the bright. [...]. His ultimate aim is laudable, true: to free mankind of The Virus. But to do it that way, to play chromosomes, is to tinker with Nature's design. Foolish Pandora! Wilful Prometheus! Shirk primal laws at you peril! This is one topic to give us our due: we know far more virology than you do. (Serpell 2020, 375)

Timothy Clark characterises humans who undermine the environmental conditions of their own survival as "zombies" (2014, 86). It is surprising, then, that the very etymology of the word 'zombie' is teased out by the mosquitoes. Although the insects apply the concept to themselves with respect to the transmission of malaria, which they unwittingly carry, the fact that the insects are an expression of the voice of post nature may tie their use of 'zombie' to Clark's ecocritical framework. After all, the difference between mosquitoes and humans is not that big, as the chorus points out: "*We're both useless, ubiquitous species. But while you rule the earth and destroy it for kicks, we loaf about, unsung heroes*" (Serpell 2020, 545).

The voice of the chorus becomes more and more meaningful, especially because it could perfectly become the expression of Zambian wild nature (Monaco 2020, 97) - or, more specifically, post nature, which finds embodiment in swarms of partly artificial, partly flesh-and-blood mosquitoes. In a discussion about the development of consciousness, two characters from the last generation in the novel muse that "if the physical activities of the mind are like insects,

then consciousness is the swarm" [...] (Serpell 2020, 512) and then acknowledge that the swarm of mosquito drones is endowed with consciousness. Serpell disseminates information about the dire and altered condition of the environment during 'the Change,' such as wildly changing weather, torrential rains and sudden inexplicable earthquakes, which also feature at the end of her second novel, *The Furrows*: "A mountain walks, stumbles, then sweeps straight toward us, its ravenous mouth wide open" (2022, 266). It could be that the choruses are not only the voice of mosquitoes, but also the expression of the consciousness of a post nature ravaged by climate change.

4 Conclusion: A Disjointed Simulacrum of Nature

In the conclusion of this paper, it seems important to come full circle and make one last reflection on the very beginning of *The Old Drift*: not the first mosquito chorus, but the epigraph. Since the peritext is an important element located at the threshold of the text (Allen 2022, 100), one cannot help but reflect on the excerpt from Seamus Heaney's translation of book VI of the *Aeneid*:

Meanwhile, at the far end of a valley, Aeneas saw
A remote grove, bushy rustling thickets,
And the river Lethe somnolently flowing,
Lapping those peaceful haunts along its banks.
Here a hovering multitude, innumerable
Nations and gathered clans, kept the fields
Humming with life, like bees in meadows
On a clear summer day alighting on pied flowers
And wafting in mazy swarms around white lilies.
Aeneas startled at this unexpected sight
And in his bewilderment asked what was happening,
What was the river drifting past beyond them,
Who were the ones in such a populous throng
Beside it?
'Spirits,' Anchises answered.
(Heaney 2019, 38, book 6, vv. 945-59)

In this particular passage, Aeneas has descended into Hades's realm and is talking with the shade of his late father, so as to gain insights on the process that the souls who are waiting in the Elysian Fields have to go through before being allowed to reincarnate. In his palimpsestic reading of Serpell's novel, Angelo Monaco has interestingly argued that this intertextual reference brings to the fore the epic scale of the novel and the fact that River Lethe symbolises oblivion (2020, 96). As interesting as this interpretation might be, I would put forward an alternative

one which is closely entwined with Clark's reflections on post nature and the ecocritical application of the concept of 'simulacrum'.

It catches my attention that, in the *Aeneid*, the souls of the deceased are compared to a 'hovering multitude' and then to a swarm of bees, given the prominence that mosquitoes have in Serpell's novel. As underlined before, the mosquito drones perfectly exemplify the concept of post nature, not only inasmuch as they embody in the very fibres of their being the collapse of the flimsy distinction between nature and culture, but also in that they are cyborg mosquitoes which imitate flesh and blood insects. They can therefore be considered simulacra of mosquitoes as we normally intend them. On another level, the image of the Elysian Fields in which Anchises's soul lingers with many others offers an otherworldly representation of a pastoral *locus amoenus*:

They came into happy vistas and the green welcome
Of the Groves of the Fortunate Ones who dwell in joy.
Here a more spacious air sheds brightness
Over the land.
(Heaney 2019, 35, book 6, vv. 867-70)

To go back to Jesse Taylor's aforementioned quotation, nature is unlikely to manifest itself in this romantic guise in the Anthropocene, and it has probably never been so, notwithstanding its pastoral idealisation, a tendency which remained strong throughout the centuries: Buell stressed that even some early environmental writers romanticised rurality through "prettifying palliatives" that concealed transformations carried out by economic and class interests (2005, 14). Similar but slightly different to the cyborg mosquitoes, the Elysian Fields are a disjointed simulacrum of nature not only because they are otherworldly and belong to another incorporeal dimension, but also because in the Anthropocene they no longer represent their referent faithfully. While the mosquito drones perfectly mimic nature but then turn out to be ontologically different from 'natural' mosquitoes, the otherworldly Elysian Fields depict an image of nature, but they become a disjointed simulacrum in the Anthropocene, in that their referent has been considerably altered. When Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* his representation of a verdant nature could have been adherent to reality, but the passing of time has made it unfaithful to a referent that has been altered through the centuries. Therefore, it seems that Serpell employs a chiasmic structure to doubly highlight the uniqueness and paradoxes of post nature.

In my analysis, I have tried to demonstrate the extent to which Serpell's epic expands on ecocritical principles illustrated by scholars such as Timothy Clark, Jesse Taylor and Dipesh Chakrabarty. *The Old Drift* is peppered with classical references, and it becomes clear that the writer has managed to fashion an epic for modern times, by

carefully choosing other narrating voices, by de-centring the role of humans in history and by singing the praises of error. Post nature, scepticism towards linearity and acknowledgement of nonhuman agency are dealt with by the author through elliptical revelations disclosed at intervals by the chorus of mosquitoes. Gradually, readers realise that the voice of the chorus consists of a swarm of mosquitoes, then are faced with the nagging doubt that the insects may not be wholly flesh-and-blood and lastly that their voice might express something higher, such as the voice of post nature and climate change itself.

Bibliography

- Achebe, C. (1997). "English and the African Writer". *Transition*, 75/76, 342-9. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2935429>.
- Alam, R. (2019). "With 'Gun Island', Amitav Ghosh Turns Global Crises into Engaging Fiction". *The Washington Post*, 8 September. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/with-gun-island-amitav-ghosh-turns-global-crises-into-engaging-fiction/2019/09/08/efe6b35e-d0ce-11e9-b29b-a528dc82154a_story.html.
- Allen, G. (2022). *Intertextuality*. London: Routledge.
- Baudrillard, J. (1993). *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. London: Sage Publications.
- Biasio, N. (2021). "Dallo Zambia allo Spazio in 'Capelli, Lacrime e Zanzare', il Romanzo-Universo di Namwali Serpell". *CriticaLetteraria*, 23 settembre. <https://www.criticalletteraria.org/2021/09/namwali-serpell-capelli-lacrime-e-zanzare-fazi-editore.html>.
- Buell, L. (2005). *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Buell, L. (2011). "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends". *Qui Parle*, 19(2), 87-115. <https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0087>.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2008). *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2021). *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Clark, T. (2014). "Nature, Post Nature". Westling, L. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 75-89.
- Clark, T. (2019). *The Value of Ecocriticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coetzee, J.M. (2016). *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cohen, J.J. (2015). "The Sea Above". Cohen, J.J.; Duckert, L. (eds), *Elemental Ecocriticism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2299-865.
- Colson, E. (1971). *The Social Consequences of Resettlement: The Impact of the Kariba Resettlement Upon the Gwembe Tonga*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Cummins, A. (2022). "Namwali Serpell: 'I Find Uncertainty Compelling in Literature'". *The Guardian*, 13 August. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/aug/13/namwali-serpell-i-find-uncertainty-compelling-in-literature>.
- Dobrin, S.I. (2021). *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*. London: Routledge.

- Ghosh, A. (2009). *Sea of Poppies*. London: John Murray Press.
- Ghosh, A. (2017). *The Great Derangement*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Guha, R. (1997). "Not at Home in Empire". *Critical Inquiry*, 23(3), 482-93. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448839>.
- Haraway, D.J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Harper, F.E.W. (2017). *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted*. California: CreateSpace.
- Heaney, S. (2019). *Aeneid Book VI*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Huggan, G.; Tiffin, H. (2015). *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge.
- Lea, R. (2019). "Namwali Serpell: 'As a Young Woman I Wasn't Very Nice to Myself'". *The Guardian*, 30 April. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/30/namwali-serpell-the-old-drift-interview>.
- Mason, J. (2019). *Intertextuality in Practice*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- McEwan, I. (2004). *Enduring Love*. London: Vintage Books.
- Mda, Z. (2005). *The Whale Caller*. New York: Picador.
- Meyer, L. (2019). "The Chi and the Odyssey: A Conversation with Chigozie Obioma on *An Orchestra of Minorities*". *LARB*, 24 January. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-chi-and-the-odyssey-a-conversation-with-chigozie-obioma-on-an-orchestra-of-minorities/>.
- Monaco, A. (2020). "Narrative Form and Palimpsestic Memory in Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*". *Le Simplegadi*, 18(20), 92-106. <https://doi.org/10.17456/simple-159>.
- Mooney, J.J. (tr.) (1916). *The Minor Poems of Vergil: Comprising the Culex, Dirae, Lydia, Moretum, Copa, Priapeia, and Catalepton*. Birmingham: Cornish Brothers.
- Obioma, C. (2019a). "Chigozie Obioma: 'I Would Rush to the Library in my Lunch Break to Read the Odyssey'". *The Guardian*, 30 August. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/30/books-that-made-me-chigozie-obioma>.
- Obioma, C. (2019b). *An Orchestra of Minorities*. London: Abacus.
- Okri, B. (2023). *Tiger Work*. London: Head of Zeus.
- Poochigian, A. (2014). *Jason and the Argonauts*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Quayson, A. (2012). "Periods versus Concepts: Space Making and the Question of Postcolonial Literary History". *PMLA*, 127(2), 342-8. <https://doi.org/10.1632/pm1a.2012.127.2.342>.
- Scammacca del Murgo, F. (2021). *Sulle tracce di Livingstone: Storia di Zambia e Malawi e degli italiani che vi hanno viaggiato*. Modena: Infinito Edizioni.
- Serpell, N. (2008). "Mutual Exclusion, Oscillation, and Ethical Projection in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *The Turn of the Screw*". *Narrative*, 16(3), 223-55. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.0.0006>.
- Serpell, N. (2020). *The Old Drift*. London: Vintage.
- Serpell, N. (2022). *The Furrows*. London: Hogarth.
- Taylor, J.O. (2015). "Where Is Victorian Ecocriticism?". *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43(4), 877-94. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1060150315000315>.
- Vergheze, A. (2023). *The Covenant of Water*. London: Grove Press UK.
- Wa Thiong'o, N. (2023). *The Perfect Nine*. Dublin: Vintage.