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Postcolonial Futures

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Hostile Environments, Climate Justice, and the Politics of the Lifeboat

MATTHEW WHITTLE

Environmental breakdown has fast become a major driver of domestic and global migration, with the International Organization for Migration reporting that, by the mid-1990s, the number of 'environmental refugees' had surpassed 'all documented refugees from war and political persecution put together'.[1] According to their conservative forecasts, the increased severity of floods, storms, desertification, and coastal erosion may lead to the displacement of between twenty-five million and two-hundred million people by the year 2050. It is for this reason that migration and ecological crises need to be addressed together. One means of achieving this is to examine the most common analogy to emerge in critical and creative responses to the relationship between climate breakdown and global mobility – that of individual nation-states as lifeboats.

The different ways in which the lifeboat analogy is framed reveals a conflicting set of ideologies relating to the connections between ecological and refugee crises. In the following sections, I will identify the three most prevalent uses of the symbolism of the lifeboat. The first and most dominant is what I term 'lifeboat-nationalism', which mobilizes a vision of overpopulated lifeboat-nations as a means of promoting an interconnected set of policies based on nationalist isolationism and reproduction controls. The second, drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty's work, can be called the 'no lifeboats' position, which optimistically predicts that deepening ecological crises will spur a new sense of global solidarity. Lastly, Christian Parenti has warned of the politics of the 'armed lifeboat', predicting that climate breakdown will exacerbate existing forms of ethnonationalism and underpin the increased militarization of national and continental borders by the wealthy nations of the Global North.

Mapping these positions enables an interrogation of two interrelated, geopolitical responses to environmental breakdown: firstly, the widespread denial of/complacency about climate change by the very nations of the Global North most responsible, and secondly, the strengthening by those same countries of their borders in response to climate crisis-induced

migration. I will show how one necessary future direction of Postcolonial Studies involves the reengagement with long-standing concerns relating to global migration as a central preoccupation of the more recent 'ecocritcal turn'. Drawing these strands of inquiry together enables a productive examination of the confluence between reactionary 'hostile environment' foreign and domestic policies and the increasing environmental hostility to life due to anthropogenic climate breakdown.[2]

To demonstrate this, I will analyse the ways in which John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019) and Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013) reveal how dystopian fiction is able to both stage, satirize, and confront the stark premises of the lifeboat analogies formulated by ecologists, historians, and economic theorists. Where Lanchester depicts migration from outside Britain's borders and a partial return to oil use in a flooded, warming world, Wright focuses on both international *and* domestic migration alongside the history of Indigenous dispossession within wealthy nation-states. And while both dystopias challenge the socio-economic structures that are actively making the environment more hostile to life, *The Swan Book* goes further by inviting us to envision ecologically sound and just futures founded on human and more-than-human kinship. Placing Wright's depiction of the confluent experiences of environmental refugees and Aboriginal Australians in dialogue with the perspectives of Native American (specifically Potawatomi) scholars, Kyle Whyte and Robin Wall Kimmerer, demonstrates how debates about mobility, climate catastrophe, and interspecies relations need to be informed by Indigenous science and storytelling.[3]

The politics of the lifeboat

'Lifeboat-nationalism' is characterized by an isolationist and eugenicist rhetoric whereby the analogy assumes a Malthusian vision of the 'carrying capacity' of individual nations. The roots of this response to ecological breakdown lie in Garrett Hardin's now infamous article, 'Living on a Lifeboat' (1974), which assesses global policies devised to combat famine from a post-war American perspective. Here, Hardin states that the disparities between wealthy and poor nations 'are created by poor countries that are governed by rulers insufficiently wise and powerful', rather than viewing them as a legacy of colonial exploitation and under-development.[4] He therefore regards the pro-immigration and international aid initiatives of wealthy nations as a 'suicidal' response to the 'anguishing problems' of poverty and hunger.[5] In setting out a justification for American isolationism, Hardin uses the imagery of the lifeboat in the

following terms:

> Metaphorically, each rich nation amounts to a lifeboat full of comparatively rich people. The poor of the world are in other, much more crowded lifeboats. Continuously, so to speak, the poor fall out of their lifeboats and swim for a while in the water outside, hoping to be admitted to a rich lifeboat, or in some other way to benefit from the 'goodies' on board. What should the passengers on a rich lifeboat do?[6]

In answering this question, he argues for restrictions on mobility, democratic freedoms, and reproductive rights. Wealthy countries, he writes, should only admit 'political refugees' and 'men and women of unusual talents', while also limiting the 'usual democratic franchise' to avoid 'political instability'.[7] He says that 'a world government that is sovereign in reproductive matters' is needed to curtail what he describes as 'the rapidly-breeding poor'.[8] This stance recirculates the view, espoused in his earlier article, 'Tragedy of the Commons' (1968), that the 'only way we can preserve and nurture other and more precious freedoms is by relinquishing the freedom to breed'.[9]

In the twenty-first century, Hardin's lifeboat-nationalism has found a renewed audience of ecofascists where the analogy is used to further justify the policing of human rights and liberties. For the reactionary Finnish ecologist, Pentti Linkola, for instance, environmental catastrophe has been caused not by a rapacious and underregulated fossil fuel industry, but by the 'ever-increasing, mindless over-valuation' of human life.[10] Repurposing Hardin's rhetoric, Linkola asks:

> What to do when a ship carrying a hundred passengers has suddenly capsized and only one lifeboat is available for ten people in the water? When the lifeboat is full, those who hate life will try to pull more people onto it, thus drowning everyone. Those who love and respect life will instead grab an axe and sever the hands clinging to the gunwales.[11]

Revealing how a Malthusian concern with overpopulation can underpin a chilling return to eugenicist thought, this shockingly brutal imagery informs Linkola's call for an end to the 'emphasis on the inalienable right to life of foetuses, premature infants and the brain-dead'.[12] Alongside its abhorrent conclusions, just one of the major flaws in this evocation of the lifeboat is that it assumes an equivalence between nation-states and the implied democratic and equally distributed precariousness of life on the boat: for this imagined scenario to have any intellectual, let alone ethical, credibility the capsized passengers would all need to have equal access to both the lifeboat and the axe. And yet, we know that this is not the case

in terms of the socio-economic relations within and between nations in the era of late capitalism.

As well as informing an ecofascist commitment to eugenics, lifeboat-nationalism has re-emerged in more mainstream proposals for adapting to the conditions of climate catastrophe, most notably in *The Vanishing Face of Gaia* (2009) by the influential British environmental scientist, James Lovelock. Lovelock gained prominence in 1974 after formulating the Gaia hypothesis, which views the earth as a self-regulating eco-system. Yet, despite popularizing a transnational and holistic ecological vision, Lovelock's recent work espouses a politics of isolationism in response to what he predicts will be a 'great clamour from climate refugees'.[13] For Lovelock, ecological breakdown is now inevitable and he envisions a future of temperate 'lifeboat islands', such as Britain and New Zealand, and habitable 'continental oases', such as the northernmost regions of Canada, Scandinavia, and Siberia. On this basis, he argues that there is little point mobilizing for preventive policies, dismantling the carbon economy, or developing renewable energy initiatives, which he deems to be 'impractical and expensive'.[14] Instead, Lovelock asserts that humanity must 'face the appalling question of whom we can let aboard the lifeboats? And whom must we reject?'[15] The deeply troubling conclusion at which he arrives is a combination of isolationism and evolutionary fate. 'Our leaders', he asserts, should act 'out of selfish national interest' and see themselves as 'captains of the lifeboats that their nations might become'.[16] In time, Gaia's 'metabolic needs' will choose the 'million or so humans' it requires for 'the recycling of life's constituent elements'.[17] While Lovelock rejects the idea of 'planned selection' by humans in favour of selection by Gaia, he nevertheless echoes the eugenicist ethos of Hardin and Linkola when he imagines the future survivors of climate catastrophe to be 'strong in mind and body, whose fitness pays the price of the voyage'.[18] Those who perish will simply be of a weaker, less fortunate order of humanity, and their deaths will be a necessary stage in the evolutionary march of human life.

Lovelock's fatalist position focuses purely on an ecological understanding of the world, which leads to his callous investment in isolationism and natural selection as the only possible means of preventing outright human extinction. The lifeboat-nationalist position – that humans should adapt to the worst extremes of climate catastrophe by what amounts to genocide, re-enforced national borders, and/or the policing of reproductive rights – is confronted elsewhere with perspectives that recognize how, under capitalism, survival is determined by the inequitable

distribution of wealth and resources. As Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore state: 'We may all be in the same boat when it comes to climate change, but most of us are in steerage.'[19] In her rebuttal of the insistence that each nation-state has a limited 'carrying capacity', Meehan Crist contends that 'it isn't just the total number of humans that matters, but the way humans organise to use the available resources'.[20] Where the lifeboat analogy is adopted to interrogate the confluences between ecological breakdown and global capitalism it has informed both the 'no lifeboats' and the 'armed lifeboats' positions; the former predicts that climate change will level existing socio-economic inequalities, while the latter sees climate change as exacerbating them.

The first position is evident in Dipesh Chakrabarty's article 'The Climate of History: Four Theses'. In this influential essay, Chakrabarty acknowledges that climate change 'will no doubt accentuate the logic of inequality that runs through the rule of capital', yet he is also insistent that 'Unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged.'[21] For Chakrabarty, ecological collapse will act as a great leveller. It may well have been forged by the fires of capitalist-imperial expansion and industrialization, but its effects will ultimately beseech us to think in terms of a collective human species; rather than resort to competition between classes or nation-states, it points us intellectually to 'a universal that arises from a shared sense of catastrophe'.[22] One of the most vocal dissenting views of this position comes from the ecological Marxist critic, Andreas Malm, who criticizes Chakrabarty for 'disconnecting climate change from issues of justice'.[23] In *Fossil Capital*, Malm avers that 'For the foreseeable future – indeed as long as there are class societies on earth – there *will* be lifeboats for the rich and privileged, and there will *not* be any shared sense of catastrophe.'[24]

Counter to Chakrabarty's belief in global solidarity through ecological devastation, Christian Parenti warns that deepening environmental crises are fuelling what he calls a 'politics of the armed lifeboat' in wealthy, industrialized nations. According to Parenti, 'armed lifeboat' policies are characterized by 'open-ended counterinsurgency, militarized borders, aggressive anti-immigrant policing, and a mainstream proliferation of right-wing xenophobia'.[25] This analogy aligns with Mimi Sheller's argument in *Mobility Justice* (2018) that climate catastrophe may contribute to the 'narratives driving current politics' which invest in 'bolstering ethno-nationalist exclusion, hardening borders, strengthening energy independence, and competitive militarization'.[26] The 'armed lifeboat' stance, then, provides a powerful counter-narrative to the isolationism

underpinning lifeboat-nationalism while also foregrounding the durable disparities of wealth, military might, and the unequal access to resources that the 'no lifeboats' stance predicts will be flattened. Yet, Parenti also expresses a small but significant alignment with Chakrabarty regarding a 'shared sense of catastrophe', concluding that the 'struggling states of the Global South cannot collapse without eventually taking wealthy economies with them'.[27] Importantly for Parenti, then, the logic of pursuing a twinned approach of isolationism and inaction on climate change will mean that we are not all in the same boat but rather drowning in the same sea.

The Wall and the armed lifeboat

A post-climate change dispensation of 'armed lifeboat' nations is envisioned in John Lanchester's Booker-longlisted dystopian novel, *The Wall* (2019). The narrative is set in Britain after a global event referred to only as 'the Change', where rising sea levels and desertification have destroyed crops and beaches.[28] These extreme ecological conditions have left most people 'starving and drowning, dying and desperate', but Britain has remained habitable.[29] Focusing on a post-Change world in which Britain has surrounded itself with a concrete border, Lanchester's narrative follows Joseph Kavanagh as he begins his conscripted two-year role on the Wall as a 'Defender'. With little training beyond how to use a gun, this posting principally involves killing climate refugees – commonly referred to by the dehumanizing label of 'Others' – to prevent them from crossing the border. When Kavanagh's unit are outnumbered and overrun by a flotilla of Others who manage to evade capture, he and his Defender partner, Hifa, bear partial responsibility and are exiled. Forced to exchange their 'lifeboat island' for a real lifeboat, they join the multitude of Others seeking sanctuary on the open seas.

While Lanchester's speculative future is in line with Lovelock's predictions regarding the habitability of temperate 'lifeboat' island-nations, the novel, as Kirsten Sandrock notes, both stages and satirizes a prevailing 'politics of isolationism'.[30] For instance, Kavanagh describes how Britain's immigration policy in the immediate years after the Change was 'one in, one out: for every Other who got over the Wall, one Defender would be put to sea'.[31] Here, Lanchester's dystopian form is able to expose the cruel absurdity of an obsession with the 'carrying capacity' of nation-states by taking it to its logical conclusion. Kavanagh notes that even this restrictive policy was regarded by the State as offering too much of an incentive, and so it was amended to give Others who crossed the border the option

of 'being euthenised, becoming Help or being put back to sea. ... Almost all of them choose to be Help', a condition which amounts to slave-labour.[32] Ultimately, then, alongside the militarization of Britain's border, the dystopian parameters of *The Wall* call for limits on immigration to be combined with a choice between political disenfranchisement or the death penalty.

The State-sanctioned execution and subjugation of climate refugees is upheld by a social structure that is based on pre-existing inequities of wealth both nationally and internationally. This is a feature of *The Wall's* dystopian world that sits in tension with the 'no lifeboats' position. Alongside reports of 'countries breaking down', Defenders hear of 'coordination between rich countries' to forestall the arrival of Others.[33] And where those safely located in rich, ecofascist states refer to the global watershed as 'the Change', the Others call it 'the ending': the stark contrast between the two points to the sense of managed, socio-economic transition for the former and apocalyptic finality for the latter.[34] The inequitable access to scarce resources also structures social relations within Britain, where only 'members of the elite' can use aviation fuel, allowing them to leave the country on private planes to 'talk to other members of the elite about the Change and the Others and what to do about them'.[35] Despite this, Ben De Bruyn maintains that, because Kavanagh experiences life as an Other, the 'basic message of Lanchester's novel' is that 'privileged citizens and irregular migrants are fundamentally similar, ... and climate change threatens to make environmental refugees of us all, with or without borders'.[36] And yet, this is not strictly the case: Kavanagh and Hifa do not become 'environmental refugees' but rather exiles from a safe, functioning, 'armed lifeboat' society. Their precarity has not been caused because ecological breakdown has reached Britain's shores, but because the lack of political or economic agency of lower-class conscripts means that they have no option but to be 'depressed, resentful, apprehensive, bitterly doing the worst thing in your life'.[37] And when Others breach the Wall, they have no power to appeal a ruling where the elites, whose planes contribute to the conditions of the Change, bear no accountability, while conscripts are forcibly expelled from their homes with little chance of survival. The fact that the State orchestrates a breeding programme 'so that there are enough people to man the Wall' ultimately suggests that this form of class exploitation, in tandem with international collaboration between wealthy states and the persecution of refugees, shows little sign of abating.[38]

The novel concludes with Kavanagh and Hifa building a new life together on a disused oil refinery, and it is here that we can see how a

'shared sense of catastrophe' is also forestalled by Lanchester's inability to imagine a world beyond an anthropocentric control of fossil fuels. The refinery, as Sandrock argues, is symbolic of 'the twofold history of Western imperialism and environmental destruction, both of which are causes of global migrancy and ongoing sources of border conflict around the world'. The fact that it is derelict leads Sandrock to conclude that the rig is also a 'sign that the novel is exploring the beginning of the ending of Western modernity's border epistemologies'.[39] Similarly, De Bruyn argues that, because Kavanagh and Hifa are saved by the rig's sole inhabitant (a conveniently mute and emaciated man), the novel's conclusion suggests that 'the idea of home has not been completely abandoned, and strangers will on occasion still make you feel "welcome"'.[40] What these analyses neglect, however, is one of the novel's final images, which may not dramatize a return to the politics of the 'armed lifeboat', but does reveal a failure to progress beyond the logic of the fossil fuel economy. As well as discovering a bounty of sustenance and 'the complete works of Shakespeare' at the refinery, Kavanagh finds working lanterns, matches, and a supply of oil:

> I wanted to shout, oil, oil, oil! Light and heat. In that moment I realised something. I had internalised the idea that I would never again have light and heat – would never have control of them, would never be able to make it bright or make it warm, just by deciding that's what I wanted. An ordinary miracle, a thing we had done dozens, maybe hundreds of times a day all our lives before the sea, and which had then gone away forever, and now had come back. I felt something strange on my face and touched it and found that I was crying.[41]

Kavanagh's tearful cry of salvation at his ability to return to human control over the elements is not delivered with any degree of ironic distance, and despite his experience as an Other at sea, the novel ultimately fails to realize any sense of post-Change communal solidarity. Rather, his use of 'we' is instructive: it excludes the novel's Others, whose access to energy sources has been violently restricted by Defenders like himself, and it discounts the fact that the oil Kavanagh jubilantly celebrates is the very combustible material that has led to a flooded planet. This miraculous final moment, then, encapsulates the limits of Lanchester's dystopian tale of life after ecological breakdown: in *The Wall* it is possible to imagine the end of the world but not the end of fossil fuels.

Ways beyond the nation-as-lifeboat: three Indigenous stories

Despite their disparate geopolitical visions, the three 'lifeboat' analogies outlined above share a common rhetoric of precarity (whether it be

universal or uneven) and an outward-looking concern with how nation-states respond to climate refugees crossing the border. This means that each analogy cannot fully attend to the impact of climate breakdown on domestic migration, or its exacerbation of the ongoing settler colonial power relations internal to nation-states such as America, Canada, and Australia. In response, I will end with three Indigenous stories via the work of Kyle Whyte, Alexis Wright, and Robin Wall Kimmerer, each of which moves away from the universal/uneven instability implied by the nation-as-lifeboat analogies.

In his 'allegorical story of vessels', the Potawatomi scholar, Kyle Whyte, offers a 'way beyond the lifeboat' that forges connections between the crises of settler colonialism, capitalism, and climate change.[42] Whyte's allegory presents a world of canoes, aircraft-carriers, and hovercrafts, all of which 'are intricately connected to each other in various relations of interdependence' via 'power lines, bridges, ropes, shuttles and other materials'.[43] The canoes 'represent the many different Indigenous peoples everywhere and people who share their situation'.[44] The traces of individual 'boat-making style[s]' emphasizes a pan-Indigenous precarity that resists homogeneity, while the 'destroyed' canoes that litter the seafloor symbolize the extermination of Indigenous societies due to the histories of settler colonialism. The occupants of canoes remain close to the water, where they can 'observe firsthand trends in water quality and turbulence'. The aircraft-carriers, with their 'high-technology equipment' symbolize nation-states, a choice of imagery that has an affinity with Parenti's formulation but without the implied sense of mutual instability. In contrast to the warnings of the 'armed lifeboat' position, moreover, Whyte emphasizes how diasporic settlement is associated with socio-economic inequality within wealthy nations, writing that 'some people who were born on the canoes now live on the aircraft carriers, bringing with them shards of materials from the canoes that they often have to sell for food.' These communities are 'most exposed to the water' and thus 'more likely to be flooded'.[45] The giant hovercrafts that 'float above all the other vessels in the sky', represent corporations that support damaged aircraft carriers while canoes are 'tie[d] up ... like yoyos' and smashed.[46]

The allegory envisions ecological breakdown as 'turbulence', which is created by the aircraft carrier engines and is intensified by 'the giant fans of the hovercrafts'.[47] While this turbulence affects all vessels, 'the canoes bear the brunt', causing some to

> sink completely into the water, their occupants escaping onto other canoes or, at times, onto aircraft carriers; others change their location in the water and detach from

> the aircraft carriers, in the process facing the onslaught of the disturbance caused by the hovercraft engines.[48]

In depicting the dilemma of having to turn towards corporations for survival despite the further disturbance this causes, Whyte's symbolism aligns with Naomi Klein's investigations into the 'economic pressure on Indigenous communities to make quick-and-dirty deals' with the very extractive industries that are causing ecological damage: 'This is the way the oil and gas industry holds on to power', she writes, 'by tossing temporary life rafts to the people it is drowning.'[49] In order to out-flank such 'life raft' deals, Klein affirms that non-Natives must commit to a relationship built upon reciprocity: as well as supporting the Indigenous land treaties that 'represent some of the most robust tools available to prevent ecological crisis', non-Natives must actively uphold Native self-determination with regards to health care, education, and economic opportunities.[50] Similarly, Whyte's allegory affirms that 'one way to lessen the turbulence and storminess is to change the design of the aircraft carriers and hovercrafts completely.'[51] Thus, the solution from 'an Indigenous perspective on climate justice' is not controls on migration or reproduction, but the systemic restructuring of society on equitable, anti-colonial grounds.[52]

Whyte's allegory of vessels goes beyond the various lifeboat analogies in its insistence that precarity and exposure to the excesses of climate breakdown also apply to the poorest and most marginalized social groups within wealthy nation-states. It emphasizes how many of the characteristics of the 'armed lifeboat' – namely ethnonationalist exclusion and militarization – are pointed inwards to restrict the socio-economic agency of Indigenous communities, migrants (and their descendants), and refugees. As Todd Miller acknowledges, climate refugees who manage to cross national borders 'find that the border operates not only around but within that entire country. It's something they must cross not once but every day'.[53] In *The Swan Book*, the Waanyi writer, Alexis Wright, goes further still in her depiction of the confluent, but not equivalent, experiences of climate refugees and Aboriginal Australians in a speculative future that, much like *The Wall*, has been shaped by droughts, flooding, land wars, and mass global migration.

The novel is set for the most part on a polluted, Army-run camp that detains both refugees from across flooded European nations and Aboriginal people. The white, European refugee, Bella Donna, describes how the rich escaped flood-hit regions by 'flying off in armadas of planes',

leaving the 'poverty people' like herself to 'walk herdlike, cursed from one border to another'.[54] Yet, while there may be a shared sense of catastrophe among the poor, the European refugees' recent experiences of climate-induced land loss are confronted by the history of settler colonial land appropriation: the refugees engage in 'lamenting conversation' about which nations were lost to flooding and wars, while the Aboriginal Australians 'already knew what it was like to lose Country'.[55] For the latter, this loss is experienced not only in terms of territorial displacement but also in forms of epistemic violence whereby the settler colonial State owns 'every line of buried song, stories, feelings, the sound of their voices, and every word spoken loudly on this place now'.[56] As such, Wright makes it clear that, for much of the Global North and many of the descendants of settlers in the Global South, the apocalyptic effects of human-induced climate catastrophe are thought of as being just over the horizon. Yet, as Kathryn Yusoff has noted, 'imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence'.[57]

The domestic precarity and historical exposure to militarized restrictions experienced by Aboriginal Australians is emphasized by Wright's deployment of vessel imagery. In *The Wall*, Lanchester shows the transition from safety inside Britain's borders to the insecurity of the raft at sea. By comparison, *The Swan Book* depicts life on dry land, but without the assumed security that such a condition suggests. Rather, the detention centre is located on a swamp littered with dilapidated 'military ships and vessels that had once been used by commandos, militants, militia, pirates, people sellers, cults, [and] refugees'.[58] Oblivia and Bella Donna make a home together in the 'rusting hull' of a ship 'with a long war record of stalking oceans'.[59] In this way, Wright's vessels symbolize a history of piratical colonial expansion, displacement, and slavery, within which the provisional family unit of the orphaned Oblivia and the stateless Bella Donna must make a home. Despite being land-locked, this home carries a level of insecurity commensurate with Kavanagh's life on the raft. This condition is underscored when the Aboriginal president, Warren Finch, orders the evacuation, dredging, and 'annihilation' of the camp having decided that its inhabitants 'had given up the right to sovereignty over their lives'.[60]

The divergence between *The Wall* and *The Swan Book* is also revealed in their final reflections on the implied futures of life on a flooded, warming planet. In the former, the potential for future survival is contained within Kavanagh and Hifa's relationship and their renewed

ability to use oil to control light and heat. In the latter, Oblivia does not forge a new union under catastrophic conditions. Her arranged marriage to Finch is curtailed by his assassination, leading her back to what remains of the swamp where 'her mind was only a lonely mansion for the stories of extinction'.[61] Kavanagh's discovery of the complete works of Shakespeare, moreover, points to Lanchester's suggestion that a connection to Britain's cultural heritage can survive ecological disaster, and his conservative message that canonical literature is the foundation of a post-Change society. By comparison, those escaping the superstorms that have flooded Australia's urban cities in *The Swan Book* are forced to abandon their 'treasured belongings', including 'Shakespeare's sonnets', and 'books of philosophy [and] music', as well as 'electronics, [and] cartons of beer'.[62] In Wright's dystopic vision, then, the struggle for survival renders both high and low culture ephemeral, and Western high art ultimately shares the fate of the already 'buried' Aboriginal songs and stories.

As well as dramatizing the uneven connections between climate refugees fleeing Europe, domestic refugees fleeing flooded cities, and the historical decimation of Indigenous cultures, Wright's narrative makes it clear that human displacement is linked too with non-human extinction and displacement. This is signalled by Oblivia's communion with the swans that have also found a home among the disused vessels of the swamp. Following the destruction of their habitats due to anthropogenic drought and desertification, the swans had 'become gypsies, searching the deserts for vast sheets of storm water'.[63] Sensing an affinity with the birds, Oblivia knew 'that the swan had been banished from wherever it should be singing its stories and was searching for its soul in her'.[64] The novel's epilogue sees Oblivia return to the swamp, where she sits on the hull of her old warship cradling the single-surviving black swan. This image holds two provisional futures in play at the same time. On the one hand, it acts as an interspecies pietà symbolizing human compassion for the more-than-human world along with the possibility of redemption and rebirth. Yet, at the same time, Wright resists imbuing either Oblivia or the swan with the burden of a hopeful futurity. Although Adelle L. Sefton-Rowston maintains that 'the swans ... represent the textual theme of hope', Wright's narrator insists that the last remaining swan 'was not interested in saving the world'.[65] And when the spectre of the 'drought woman' tells Oblivia, '*You have to carry the swan*', Oblivia 'thought she was being put upon by some proper big dependency that was now far too much for her'.[66] This conclusion may suggest an alignment with Lovelock's fatalism, but Wright's deployment of the dystopian form, as Allison Mackey argues,

offers 'an alternative to the sense of doomed temporality' that accompanies other accounts of ecological catastrophe. Avoiding both the fatalism of Lovelock and the jubilant catharsis of Lanchester, Wright's treatment of Oblivia's kinship with and uneasy stewardship of the swans suggests instead that 'negative emotions such as guilt and remorse might play potentially productive roles in the possibility of radical hope'.[67]

Wright's image of Oblivia nursing the dying black swan brings me to my final example of Indigenous storytelling that moves us away from the nation-as-lifeboat analogy and towards an ecocentric vision of climate justice. In *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), the Potawatomi botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer, recounts the Native creation story of Skywoman falling towards a body of water and being caught by non-human animals, who proceed to create the land upon which humans can live. As Kimmerer puts it, 'From the very beginning of the world the other species were a lifeboat for the people. Now, we must be theirs.'[68] The lifeboat symbolism here is rooted in the Great Lakes, the world's largest group of freshwater lakes and the ancestral home of the Potawatomi nation. As this is a body of water through which the US-Canada border runs, Kimmerer's retelling of this myth encapsulates the connection between international migration and climate breakdown. It is a lifeboat analogy about making inhospitable environments hospitable in a manner that works across both the national boundaries forged by settler colonialism and the exploitative, anthropocentric separation of humans from our more-than-human kin.

Conclusion

It is often assumed that responses to climate breakdown are the preserve of the Left, while the Right is dominated by a denial that favours the extractivist status quo. This is true only to a point. As this article has shown, across the Global North, governments are resisting systemic changes to the very industries causing global warming and biodiversity loss while responding to climate crisis-induced migration by policing the movement of people seeking sanctuary. Klein warns that 'rather than recognizing that we owe a debt to migrants forced to flee their lands as a result of our actions (and inactions)', the governments of the Global North 'will build ever more high-tech fortresses and adopt even more draconian anti-immigration laws'.[69] And according to Miller, the 'colonial lines of division' defining contemporary nation-states are one of the primary legacies of imperialism that work 'against survival in the crises of the living planet'.[70] At this perilous moment in the history of the planet, postcolonial analysis is able to challenge dominant 'lifeboat' discourses that use climate

breakdown to justify the restriction of human rights pertaining especially to women, the poor, Indigenous peoples, and people with disabilities. Countering such ecofascist responses to global warming means, firstly, including pan-Indigenous forms of science and storytelling in environmental discourses, and, secondly, aligning postcolonialism's long-standing ethical and intellectual preoccupation with global mobility to a vision of climate justice that frames ecological survival in anti-colonial and anti-capitalist terms. In short, we must commit to making the land, water, and air equitably hospitable for all life, and not limit ourselves to a future of anthropocentric survival on isolated, armed lifeboats.

NOTES

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2. This work is informed by my role as a Co-I on the project 'Hostile Environments: Policies, Stories, Responses', which is led by Prof. David Herd (Kent). The project is part of the Leverhulme-funded 'Tackling the UK's International Challenges' programme and offers a comparative analysis of 'hostile environment' policies across the UK, Italy, the USA, and Canada.
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Reshaping Narratives of Recovery in Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave*

NICOLE ONG

'We know rain
and floods;
and are well aware of storms;
but who the hell are you?'

– T. Sampath Kumar

In contrast to narratives that glorify foreign aid, *Terse Verse on the Tsunami* by the Indian-Canadian poet and short story author, T. Sampath Kumar, presents an unflinching look at the problematic issues that arise in the wake of a large-scale natural disaster.[1] Translated from Telugu, and written in tribute to the victims of the 2004 South Asian tsunami, this collection of one hundred epigrams represents the local community's oft-absent voice in the discourse of post-disaster crisis relief. In the epigram quoted above, Kumar, who worked among the locals in Tamil Nadu, India, between 2004 and 2009, captures an under-represented tension between the victims of the tsunami and the foreign aid workers. The epigram's final question challenges the saviour-victim trope that too often frames foreign aid narratives written by the communities who send 'help'. The workers are not, as we might expect, met by deferent and grateful locals. Rather, the hostile question, 'who the hell are you?', conveys how unfamiliar and intrusive they are. Even the tsunami, which killed over 300,000 people in over thirteen countries and rendered entire cities completely unrecognizable, appears more 'comprehensible' than their presence. By reframing this 'help' from the locals' perspective, the epigram confronts the aid workers' assumption that they can take their welcome in these devastated nations for granted: their perceived altruism does not preclude them from needing to account for themselves.

In his research on another community similarly forced to receive unsolicited and, at times, irrelevant foreign aid in the aftermath of the tsunami, American journalist, Ethan Watters, offers a compelling reason for the locals' hostility. His book, *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the*

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