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Peripheral Adaptation: Living with Climate Change in Doris Lessing's *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*

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Abstract

This article reads Doris Lessing's *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (1982) as speculative decolonial poetics, which stages resistance to imperial scientific governance at a collective level, remaking colonial epistemes of life itself. The novel's depiction of the imperial invention of a race as labour force and biological surplus through genetic engineering, constituting a planet as a laboratory, is an analogy for postwar neo-imperial governance of decolonized African nations through agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The temporary abandonment of postwar development programmes as a response to the Nixon shock in the early 1970s led to what has been called the African Crisis. A relation of transnational dependence between Europe, the US and former colonial territories could not withstand the financial crisis; peripheral nations found their export goods decreasing dramatically in value, and themselves unable to participate in international trade. In the novel, the core financial crisis is transformed into the unforeseeable shock of a sudden climate change – an ice age that arrives on Planet 8 without warning. While devastating the planet, this crisis also presents an opportunity to the planet's inhabitants for biosocial adaptation away from imperial genetic programming. By discovering and transforming their genetic constitution at a time of climate change, the Planet 8ers encounter the possibility of a different kind of freedom. I read this as Lessing's engagement with decolonial writing of the period that examines the scale of mounting a sustained resistance to colonization, of undoing infrastructures of neo-colonial resource extraction, of rewriting the invention of racialized populations – and, more broadly – the epistemological inheritance of imperial science. I consider Eugene Thacker's idea of "peripheral life" next to Lisa Stevenson's notion of "life beside itself" to read *Planet 8* within a genre of speculative decolonial poetics that resists biopolitical flattenings of life to its capitalism-in-nature valuations.

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Doris Lessing's 1982 science fiction novel, *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, is a fable of peasant survival in the mode of a speculative decolonial poetics, narrated from the peripheries of the world-system. It posits a radical vital politics as a response to the aftershocks of a global crisis, figured as rapid and unmitigated climate change. Set on a planet populated by a genetically engineered population, colonized and named Planet 8 by the interplanetary Canopean Empire, the novel continues the themes of genetic engineering and coercive adaptation of the preceding novels in the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series. The planet is an outpost of the Canopeans, a site of prospective bioextraction: the engineered population has been marked out for future breeding programmes with humans back on Shikasta (a Canopean name for Earth), and are instructed to mine for raw materials in the meantime. The novel is narrated by one of the Planet 8ers, Doeg, whose voice shifts between "me" and "we," and who is trusted by both the Canopeans and the Planet 8ers to represent the planet's human communities. Doeg describes Planet 8 as "favoured," with a generally mild climate, comparable to Earth with its hot centre, temperate masses, and frigid poles (14). But as the novel begins, this is changing. Cold winds have arrived on Planet 8, and snow begins to fall. The planet is entering an ice age.

The inhabitants of the planet are forced to adapt; their assigned Canopean Agent, Johor, insists they build a huge wall that will protect them against the fierce storms, but this is only a temporary solution. The Planet 8ers confront their impending extinction as an engineered species while trying to grapple with the terms of their existence, now compelled to understand the reality of their colonized present, which has determined and managed every aspect of their lives, leaving them ill-equipped to deal with this crisis. What follows is a meditation on communities at the peripheries negotiating survival in the midst of a shock to the (inter)world-system. This is told through an epigenetic analogy that reconfigures the biopolitical imperative for the Planet 8ers to stay alive as an imperial resource, into a different mode of living freedom.

Planet 8 was published ten years after the Nixon shock, when newly decolonized African nations were still undergoing the long-term fallout of the breakdown of Bretton Woods and the 1973 oil crisis. This was a phase of both decolonization and neo-colonial restructuring of the global economy into debtor and donor states (this conflict was the prevailing theme of the Sixth Pan-African Congress in Tanzania, in 1974). Nixon's attempts to ease the crisis for the US involved freezing wages and prices domestically, placing surcharges on imports, and ending the dollar's convertibility into gold. This effectively recentred purchasing power to the US, and meant abandoning the postwar international money system established at Bretton Woods in 1944. Giovanni Arrighi describes the effect of these measures as "cold winds of competition blowing" over the world-system (334). The shock also saw the abandonment of mid-century development initiatives in decolonial nations. It revealed much about the state of global governance and the post-colonial division of former colonial centres and colonized peripheries and semi-peripheries into North/South, not least in the devastation it caused for the emerging markets of decolonizing nation-states.

Each text in the *Canopus* series explores the effects of an unforeseen and interplanetary shock – a cosmic realignment which causes a "Lock" between the Canopean Empire and its colonial territories to break. This shock registers differently, but consistently, at both local and interplanetary levels, as do the forms of damage control undertaken by Canopean colonial agents (eugenic programmes, humanitarian

interventions, and in the case of *Planet 8*, benevolent guidance). *Planet 8*'s focus on climate change on one hand analogizes an economic crisis as climate crisis, while also – at an empirical level – imagining this crisis working through "nature", to paraphrase Jason Moore (*Web of Life*). That is, the crisis is both produced by and entangled in processes of capitalist extraction: a manufactured unevenness that leaves the planet's inhabitants at a severe disadvantage when it comes to responding to sudden shocks. Writing in the context of Small Island Developing States in the Caribbean (SIDS), Leon Sealey-Huggins argues that the effects of climate change are not just technical and scientific problems, but are embedded in the production of inequality that neo-colonialism engenders: he writes, "we can only understand these existential threats by recognizing that some Caribbean states are the most indebted globally, an indebtedness that is itself traceable to relations of colonialism and imperialism" (2445). "Climate" reads as both metaphor and empirical category, both atmosphere and infrastructure. The island is also a key metaphor in this regime: it suggests a global topography organized around the ghettoization of underdevelopment through the construction of peripheries. These peripheries may be embedded in plain sight, within the political borders of core nations, but in practice they function as islands of dependency. Planet 8, then, is an island of dependency without the capacity to determine its own future.

This slippage of metaphor and empirical object gestures to a deeper entanglement of concept and matter, and the co-production of natural and social worlds. Moore has offered a model for thinking past the "Nature/Society" dualism, suggesting instead a "double internality": "capitalism through nature . . . nature through capitalism" (*Web of Life* 1), through which work/energy is converted into value. For Moore, subverting the old dualism into an entanglement of capitalism through nature shows how class, gender, race, and nation are both "products and producers of the *oikeios*," via practices contingent on annihilation (*Web of Life* 12). Lessing imagines the experience of economic crisis for a peripheral economy as an existential threat, conveying the scale of devastation and the way in which the failure of disembodied capitalism annihilates the biological life it cultivates as surplus value.

How can decoloniality be practiced in an age of planetary crisis? If the rise of capitalism saw a "remaking of planetary life" that brought about a "revolution in ways of thinking and seeing the world" (Moore, 'Capitalocene' 605), then anti-capitalist decolonial praxis involves a comparable overturning. *Planet 8* incorporates the undocumented life-cost of geopolitical crisis into the wider Canopean archive, extinction figured beyond economic loss to the slow violence of biological extinction. But while devastating the planet, this crisis also inaugurates a poetics of adaptation among the planet's inhabitants, distinct from imperial genetic programming, which resists the conversion of their work/energy into value. By discovering and transforming their genetic constitution at a time of climate change, the Planet 8ers encounter the possibility of a different genre of freedom, a kind that I connect to epigenetic descriptions of biological change. This retelling of global crisis stages the entanglement of social and natural worlds, giving way to an account of living with climate change at the peripheries of the world-system, and the kinds of adaptation that this might involve, which do not necessarily involve staying alive. The Planet 8ers must adapt to rapid and unforeseen shifts in their circumstances to subvert the failure of care and the depletion of their strength through forced labour, positioned at the forefront of evolutionary change; an imaginative challenge to the terms of life itself as determined by racial capitalism.

In world-systems terms, the Planet 8ers are akin to a peripheral peasant class brought into existence by engineering, to contribute to global production. In his essay

on the *Into Our Labours* trilogy, John Berger argues, "peasant life is a life committed completely to survival," a characteristic "fully shared by peasants everywhere" (187). He refutes the idea that the peasantry is pre-modern, arguing instead that they are a necessary invention of capitalism: a group constituted historically through uneven development. Rather than being a remainder or waste product left over from the transition from feudalism into capitalism, Berger positions the peasantry as "integrated into the historical economic-cultural system" through their production of "necessary surplus" (188). Narratives focalized through these perspectives, then, bring into view material conditions of combined and uneven development: a rural subproleteriat producing surplus material for capitalist accumulation is brought into being alongside hypermodern structures in order to sustain these structures whose conditions of existence outside distribution, but within production, are made necessary by these structures. It is in the interests of capitalist imperialism to keep this class always outside the privileges of the core, while simultaneously within its regulatory mechanisms and extractive efforts. In what follows, I consider how Lessing analogizes this as a biological invention through the language of genetic engineering.

Constructing a Workforce: Canopus's Genetic Creations

Planet 8 depicts this uneven and combined incorporation of the peasantry as not only socio-historical, but also biological, collapsing the economic metaphor into the language of biological materiality. This makes space for understanding what Eugene Thacker has described as "globalisation as biological phenomenon," rather than simply economic, political, and cultural (*Global Genome* xvii). The Planet 8ers are the peasantry of the Canopean Empire, brought into existence primarily for the creation of surplus labour power and as physical storage for genetic stock. The Planet 8ers are genetic creations of Canopus, the product of stock from four species. They have been transported to the planet by Canopus under the broad project of Forced Evolution that the Canopeans undertake among most of their subject populations:

> Everything on Planet 8 that had been planned, built, made – everything that was not natural – was according to their specifications. The presence of our kind on the planet was because of them: because of Canopus. They had brought us here, a species created by them from stock originating on several planets. (11)

The Planet 8ers are objects in a Canopean system, created and governed for the purpose of a future symbiosis with inhabitants of another planet, Rohanda (a different Canopean name for Earth; the name changes to Shikasta after the breaking of the Lock). The Planet 8ers have no say over their own development: everything is determined for them by Canopus, who are also bringing another race on Rohanda "to a high level of evolution" for the sake of cross-breeding with the Planet 8ers (45). Johor tells Doeg that the Planet 8ers will be taken to Rohanda once this eugenic programme has been completed, where, he says, "'you will make a harmonious whole" (28).

Evolutionary change is reduced to a calculable, selective mechanism – easily manipulated. Biological matter is conceived as a series of coding objects (genes), which in turn can be rearranged at will by those with the knowledge of how to do this, leading to human advancement. This vision of life reduces it to an economic metaphor, where genes can be calculated and assigned value, in line with Francis Galton's vision of eugenics as "the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations" (321): the implication being that "racial qualities"

can be identified and categorized as part of a hierarchy of phenotypic attributes. Establishing a dynamic of dependence between themselves and the Planet 8ers, the Canopeans create a situation in which biological life is conditioned by economic inclusion, and inclusion is premised on the possibility of improvement. Both Johor and Doeg repeatedly collapse economic and biological analogies: Johor tells Doeg that the Canopean economy is "a very finely tuned one": "our growth, our existence, *what we are* is a unit, a unity, a whole – in a way that, as far as we know, does not exist anywhere else in our galaxy" (57; emphasis in original). This unity will be reflected in the prospective synthesis of the Rohandan and Planet 8 populations, which together will "become something quite extraordinary" (80), a vision embedded in a transhumanist vision of human futures: to create a Canopean utopia on Rohanda from the genetic material of various engineered or edited human populations.

The forced evolution of populations under Canopean dominion is achieved in part through "the Lock", which links the Canopean colonial cores to their colonized planets through vibrations, through which what they call "SOWF" is supplied, shorthand for the "Substance-Of-We Feeling". SOWF – ephemeral, invisible, a general atmosphere of connection and influence – is comparable to the disembodied force of postwar global finance. The Lock is analogous to the structure of dependency instituted between Global North and Global South for the sake of continued neo-colonial management of decolonial futures. The pseudo-collectivity suggested by "substance-of-we" masks the continued direction of peripheral resources to core nations.

The two institutions set up through the Bretton Woods monetary system, the IMF and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), employed the mechanisms of transnational finance capital to centralize global development and, to an extent, global governance. One of the two branches of the World Bank that focus on international development, the IBRD is based on human development, agriculture, environmental protection, infrastructure and construction projects; they also fund governance programmes on legal institutions and anti-corruption. Both the IMF and IMDB determine what needs to be done and how to do it, and manage the receipt and use of funds with which to carry out development, according to centrally determined criteria. Together, they effectively created a stranglehold by which to grant or disable certain peripheral economies' participation in global finance and exchange. These economies continue to operate within colonial constructions of other worlds, where the word "developing" replaces "civilizing," maintaining an uneven relation between core and peripheral economies to ensure the continuation of colonial power structures. SOWF is, then, analogous to finance capital without a country, governing flows to and from periphery and core. The "substance" of international governing bodies is the forms of value generated to channel influence in one direction, and resources in another. This ensures the management and control of these peripheral economies, both domestically and internationally, through a relation of borrowing and obligation.

Shadia Fahim reads *Planet 8* (and the whole series) through Lessing's interest in Sufism at the time of the series' publication. She argues that the novel depicts "the reconciliation between the individual and the collective consciousness . . . which signifies the fulfilment of descent and the first step towards ascent" (152). For Fahim, the *Canopus* novels (and also *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974)) build up to attempts by their protagonists to "transcend limited perspectives" (152). Sufism allows an interesting entry point into the discussion of perspective and self-understanding here, but is suggestive of a much more directed mode of change than I am proposing here. While Fahim argues that the Canopeans "strive to regain equilibrium" (139), I would

counter that this equilibrium is political and economic, rather than spiritual: the regaining of control over the mechanisms of its sovereign power. Angela Hague redeems the repetitive eugenic theme of forced evolution, arguing that it is "actually Lessing's depiction of a world in which intuitive consciousness emerges as a political stance that relinquishes power and control in favour of a symbiotic, collaborative relationship among diverse peoples and cultures" (298). Yet this symbiosis is embedded in an uneven relation of dependency, enforced through international sanctions.

The WReC group describes such a system as "characterised by vertical and horizontal integration, connection and interconnection, structurality and organisation, internal differentiation, a hierarchy of constitutive elements governed by specific 'logics' of determination and relationality" (8). Stuart Hall has distinguished these different views grammatically, defining "multi-cultural" (adjective) as "the social characteristics and problems of governance posed by any society with in which people from different cultural communities live together," and multiculturalism (substantive) as "the strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multi-cultural societies throw up" (209). Through forced evolution, Canopus manages the domestic concerns of its peoples, in terms of labour, biopower and culture.

Planet 8 immediately establishes a power dynamic between Canopus and the Planet 8ers analogous to that of North/South, or First/Third, rooting this in a biological analogy for life. This division is an invention that informs the management strategies of the Canopeans, through a kind of welfare colonialism (see Paine). Planet 8 is rich in resources, and the Canopeans make sure that the infrastructure for mining iron is put in place. The "best road on the planet" is constructed in order to transport materials from the mines (40). Another Planet 8er, Nonni, notes that:

> Before our town was built and we began mining, there was no centre for making iron, though it was made in a small way everywhere. It was Canopus who told us to look for iron here, and what to look for, and then how to work it and mix it with other metals. It was clear to us that these metals we were making would change the way we all lived. (41)

The passage describes the transition from small-scale production for local uses, to large-scale centralization of industry, and places the Planet 8ers on an extractive continuum. The sentences here are careful and methodical, as if reciting a list of instructions; Canopus is at the centre of it all, an abstract entity with a fixed set of guidelines, indivisible and absolute.

In *The Sirian Experiments*, it is made clear that the breaking of the Lock does not disrupt this imaginary, from a Canopean perspective. The preceding novel is told from the perspective of Ambien II, an agent from a rival, quasi-Stalinist empire called Sirius; she records an emergency conference between the two empires to discuss the failure of the Lock. There, she relates, "the general atmosphere of the conference was low and dispirited":

> Canopus had been shaken by the Rohanda failure, and was made miserable, as they freely confessed, because of the fate of the unfortunate Planet 8, which they now could not save and which, even as the conference took place, was being abandoned, with loss of life and potentiality. (77)

This is the only reference to Planet 8 in the other novels – it is a parenthetical note, a sad loss, a policy decision, distanced from the narrative of the Planet 8ers in another empire's archive, in the pages of another book. The loss for Canopus is potential: a speculative possibility for future use. Their sadness does not mean that they are prepared to concede anything with regard to their general organization or centralized decisions about who lives and who dies. As the Planet 8ers begin to die, the Canopeans are already mourning them as a failed experiment.

But *Planet 8* does not dwell on this affect of colonial mourning, circumventing the tendency towards getting stuck in what Emilie Cameron has described as a "spectrogeographical lens": she argues that imagining Indigenous peoples as ghosts that haunt a neo-colonial landscape "reinscribes colonial relations even as they are characterised as 'post' colonial expressions of recognition and redress" (384). Lessing moves this affect of mourning ("made miserable") in *The Sirian Experiments* by focalizing *Planet 8* through the previous novel's "ghosts", decentring Canopus and their abdications of responsibility.

The debilitating impact of IMF and World Bank policies on Africa has been much discussed. Christina Kingston, Jackson Irikana and Kato Kingston argue, "Africa's underdevelopment has largely resulted from the ways in which African states have been created and political authority shaped through interactions with developed countries in the context of global economic and political systems," and that "the economic woes of Africa are due to the vagaries of the external environment which is controlled by the industrialized countries" (111). P. Thandika Mkandawire and Charles C. Soludo write that Africa "has turned into a pawn in the chessboard of experimentation for all manner of ill-digested development theories and pet hypotheses" (2). Similarly, Kingston, Irikana and Kingston argue that "development and underdevelopment in society are two sides of the same coin" (111). It is not that African countries have been slow or unable to take up the initiatives and training offered by the World Bank and other international funding agencies, but rather that this funding is premised on the condition that decolonial nations continue to produce surplus for neo-colonial powers. Thus, this power dynamic nurtures sustainable underdevelopment: the systematic denial of equitable standards from 'First' to 'Third' worlds as the basis on which the world-system is founded.

As a laboratory for development experiments, Africa has been constituted as a speculative realm, a site of potentiality and possibility, not for local interests, but for the sake of trying out markets, methods and products that can be brought into the domestic markets of global leaders. And consequently, a space for failed experiments and absorbed losses, made invisible by an always-already affect of mourning. Canopus's sorrow at the loss of Planet 8 is at the cancellation of a prospected future, rather than a shared grief for an annihilated present. Just as the world-system can absorb failed experiments in Africa, so can Canopus absorb the loss of Planet 8, despite the apparent pain. To borrow Mkandawire and Soludo's analogy: on the chessboard, these losses are calculable, rather than existential.

Using a biological analogy, Lessing shifts the affect of mourning to one of epistemic reconfiguration, pushing the metaphor of economic failure to biological adaptation. The narrative reconstitutes the grammar of life itself from an informatics, to an emergent poetics. Planet 8ers are empowered to seize the narrative of life away from the Canopeans, not for the sake of competition, but in a more ambivalent praxis of living. Before considering how this decolonial poetics appears, I want to contextualize *Planet 8* more explicitly within the context of the Nixon shock and its effects on the world-system.

Core Retreat, Peripheral Extinction: US Recentralization and the African Crisis

The wall that Johor commands the Planet 8ers to build is a speculative construction project, creating a need for the Planet 8ers to invest strength and resources in a Canopean venture, without the promise of a pay-off. It depletes their resources, meaning that they cannot build new dwelling places when the Ice arrives, because "we did not have the materials" (60). Rather than bailing them out by transporting them to another planet to save them from the ice, the Canopeans place the responsibility for survival on the Planet 8ers. The suggestion is met with "a near rebellion," when the Planet 8ers tell Johor that they do not have the capacity to construct the wall (12). This is the only moment of political resistance in the text; in the end, the wall is constructed, "a *useless* wall," says Doeg (13; emphasis in original). Nonetheless, this moment of resistance begins the process of their detachment from Canopus on their own terms.

As I have suggested, this struggle over resources is embedded in First/Third hierarchies that sustain colonial governing infrastructure, not through settler governments, but through neo-colonial resource and finance flows. Towards the end of the 1970s, the US was able to restore its economic dominion by "tightening [its] monetary policies," using private high finance to "regai[n] the upper hand in the global power struggle" (Arrighi, *Twentieth Century* 334, 333). This decreased the demand for Third World resources, leading to increased competition between these nations to supply to the US, and contributing significantly to the African Crisis of the late 1970s (Arrighi, "African Crisis" 334). While the excess liquidity of the early 1970s had resulted in the improvement of bargaining positions in Third World regions, the welfare of populations had not improved at a similar rate. The reversal in US fiscal policy "reflated both effective demand and investment in North America, while deflating it in the rest of the world" (Arrighi, "African Crisis" 22). This forking of destiny constituted a split between markets able to compete in supplying the North American demand for cheap industrial products, and those who could not; East Asian and, to a lesser extent, South Asian nations were in the first bracket, and African countries in the second (Arrighi, "African Crisis" 22). The redirection of capital flows saw Global South states requesting Global North governments to provide the credit needed for them to stay afloat, and the US in a particular position to be able to allow certain nations, in effect, to die out in economic terms. The US was able to restore their dominion post-crisis, but only through "a basic neglect of world governmental functions" and the recentralization of purchasing power (Arrighi, "African Crisis" 309).

There is a comparable logic at work in *Planet 8*. At first, Johor claims that the Canopean plan is still to transport the Planet 8ers to Rohanda, and that they will be sheltered from the worst of the Ice until then (27). Explaining the crisis as a change of "Alignments", he tells Doeg that Canopus has had to give up its hopes for the "stability and slow growth" of Planet 8 (28), resonant of the rhetoric of developmentalism; the emphasis is on bringing Planet 8 to a particular economic standard before they can be fully of use for Canopean purposes. By the time he returns to Planet 8, Johor tells them that they will not be saved. He comes alone, as a representative for Canopus at the deathbed of a dying colony: "I shall be with you for – quite a little time" (70), not to save, but in a performance of benevolent colonial guilt. Doeg realizes this, and his voice becomes "wild and angry" when speaking to Johor, resistance replacing his former stance of deference towards the Canopean Agents. At the beginning of the text, Doeg notes the "authority [the Canopeans] all had," is innate rather than structural, "an expression of inner qualities" rather than "a position in a hierarchy" (11); now, however, he challenges Johor on the structural inequality embedded in Canopean

relations with Planet 8, letting his voice "ring out in the cold silence" while shaming Johor's admission that they will not be saved, and interrogating Canopean biopolitical control: "'Have you planned that another species, another of your genetic creations is to enjoy Rohanda?'" he asks (70). Doeg's reference to "genetic creations" shows his awareness of the Planet 8ers position with regard to Canopus, not simply as progeny or wards, but as synthetic products put into existence for the sake of Canopean interests: the meaning of obedience to an origin is constituted differently. Rather than standing as the reason for obedience or duty, the oppressiveness of this debt of origin begins to be comprehended by the Planet 8ers.

No longer of use to Canopus, and no longer in the relation of teacher-pupil, the Planet 8ers begin to teach themselves about their relation to this changed environment. They make a journey around the planet, without Johor, "feeling a need to press on from place to place, as if elsewhere we could come on something that might aid us" (64). This journey prompts the Planet 8ers to imagine a different kind of origin story – and beyond this, a different account of life itself – by bringing into relief the fragility of their connection to Canopus, their supposed source of life. The Planet 8ers begin to understand that their bodies and minds have been conditioned to function as machines for the sake of Canopean power, and that their sense of themselves is limited to Canopean determinations of use-value.

During a public meeting of Planet 8ers in a town square to plead with Johor to save them, Doeg observes, "everyone around me seemed to be an automaton . . . was it possible that was how we all looked and sounded to Canopus?" (107) Defined by Canopus, the Planet 8ers function as machines, existing in the "shallow and surface parts of ourselves" (107), reduced to pure mechanism, the life-force sucked out of them. From a Canopean perspective, their value amounts to the genetic material they will one day contribute to the hybrid species the Canopeans were planning to breed. Doeg's realization that this is how the Planet 8ers appear to Canopus – as genetic repositories for a speculative eugenics project – helps to break the psychological hold that the Canopean Agents have over the population, for whom the Planet 8ers are simply machines that have fallen into disrepair.

As his fellow Planet 8ers plead with their benevolent master, Doeg realizes that they are now irrelevant to Canopus, having no more meaning than spare parts no longer needed. From here, a different kind of politics begins to emerge, which departs from the terms of Canopean authority (as both inscribing and governing infrastructure). The text turns at this point to a meditation on what survival might mean – and how living might appear – when, from a biopolitical perspective, a species is going extinct. That is, a vital politics which resists the reassertion of neo-colonial supremacy through narratives of extinction.

From Dead Labour to Vital Politics: Epigenetic Responses to Climate Change

After Johor tells the Planet 8ers that Canopus will not save them, the narrative departs from a critique of First World abandonment of Third World beneficiaries to consider the experience of living beside the governing logic of this world-system; this involves a radical epistemic break with an inheritance of a biopolitical, anthropocentric economy, which takes the preservation of life as its central value. The anthropologist Lisa Stevenson gives an account of "life beside itself" in her book on her time among the Canadian Inuit and their practices around care, survival, and death. For the Inuit, indigenous colonized peoples at the periphery, "there is something uncaring, even murderous" about forms of bureaucratic state care which are "primarily concerned with the maintenance of life itself . . . directed at populations rather than individuals" (3).

Inuit communities are forced to participate in a regime of life in which "death is to be conceived only as the unfortunate consequence of aging or diseased bodies"; in this logic, staying alive is the best outcome in a system of administered care that "requires life to become an indifferent value" (8, 7). But for the Inuit, in practice as well as ritual, "death was something that had to be attended to – again and again. The call of the world, in this case, could not be separated from the call of death" (9). Practices of attending to death become rituals that resist the state's arbitrary and impersonal regimes of care, and allow for an understanding of life that goes "beside" staying alive. This is anti-colonialism in a context of ontological uncertainty, and a politics of community resistance that involves an alternative ethical-philosophical framework for understanding living (and dying) well.

In *Planet 8*, attending to death inaugurates a new praxis and understanding of life. Doeg's anger at Johor passes. While the Planet 8ers' realization of Canopean violence could have led to an anti-colonial movement along the lines of a nationalist project, empowering an indigenous identity against a colonial one, *Planet 8* circumvents the discourse of nationalist politics by shifting the narrative focus away from Johor as an object to mobilize against. In doing so, *Planet 8* recalls what Frantz Fanon identified as a stumbling block to national liberation in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961): calling upon an indigenous heritage to demand recognition as nation-states. Fanon observes the tendency of "cultured individuals of the colonized race" to support the claim to national liberation by reviving or referring to a pre-colonial native history (168). He argues that this is usually unsuccessful as a counter to the colonial claim of barbarism (as the absence of historical record), partly because "the ideas expressed by the young colonized intelligentsia are widely professed by specialists in the mother country" (168). For Fanon, claiming a native history in order to counter the charge of barbarism replaces one form of destruction with another, given – he argues – that imperial anthropologists have already invented this native history, and that further recourse to it would simply add to further co-option.

Through the metaphor of biological engineering, Lessing suggests the impossibility of return to a pre-colonial context, and the necessity of rewriting colonial epistemes. By depicting the Planet 8ers as creations of Canopus, without their own origin, the task of demonstrating a Planet 8 culture (making Planet 8 representative) is given to the present, and to what exists, rather than reviving a past or projecting a future. This is why the problem of resisting an origin is articulated in the first pages of the text: Lessing articulates the difficulty of subverting existence away from origin. Fanon's vision of a Black world can be read figuratively into *Planet 8* as a means of transforming the social organization imposed by Canopean imperialism. This would do away with regionalism based on North/South, First and Third Worlds, and the economic inequities manifesting from dividing the globe into different speeds of development, and undo a political economy of resource distribution based on the calculations of world powers. The Planet 8ers begin to use their resources to reconstitute their relation with and to the world around them, rather than waiting on the margins of empire for a utopia that will never arrive.

The metaphor of biological creation makes it possible to extend the material into the epistemic (rather than the reverse), and to transform the terms of material existence at the level of metaphor. Adaptation is loosed from its sequestered position in selectionist evolutionary agendas. New possibilities for survival emerge, which go beyond the neo-Darwinian model of reproductive success restricted to individuals passing on an inheritance. Instead, the prose pushes at the descriptions that hold together the web of life as an object for knowing. Through the crisis, referents that

articulate Canopean epistemological categorizations – human, animal, individual, population – are reconfigured into what Thacker might call a "molecular-wide" perspective (2013). This is not just an intellectual process for the Planet 8ers, but a means of survival, activated by their experience of the crisis.

This epistemic reconfiguration happens through an epigenetic analogy. This happens through two conceptual tropes of epigenetic research: first, the silences of unexpressed possibilities; and second, their responses to movement through their environment. Epigenetics is the study of heritable biological changes that do not involve DNA mutations; that is, the expression or silencing of extra-genic DNA, often in response to stimuli external to the germ-line (inside the organism or outside). Epigenetics suggests modes and temporalities of adaptation that are more complex and situated than the informatics, disembodied notion of DNA as a fixed blueprint for individual organisms. Up until the end of the Human Genome Project in the early 2000s, a common metaphor to describe epigenetic (non-coding) material in the genome was junk – a word that invokes the widespread dismissal of the importance of non-coding genetic material by mainstream molecular biology for much of the twentieth century.

But on Planet 8 at a time of planetary crisis, junk takes on new meaning. Having left their bodies behind, the Planet 8ers are able to comprehend, for the first time, different possibilities in and for their existence:

> When we looked back to that huddle of bodies under their piles of dirty skins, to see how far we had travelled from that mountain peak, we saw them as webs and veils of light, saw the frail lattice of the atomic structure, saw the vast space that had been what in fact we mostly were – though we had not had eyes to comprehend that, even if our minds knew the truth. (157)

This is a strikingly epigenetic description of biological matter: the "vast space" resembles descriptions of junk DNA. This vast space is not registered as abyssal or as infinite, but as mobile. Rather than being determined by the genes they have been programmed to express by Canopus, the Planet 8ers are now able to perceive alternatives to categories of life assigned to them. The terrain that opens to the Planet 8ers appears as a landscape of junk, spaces within themselves that they begin to perceive, "silences" as the parts of themselves which have not been programmed by Canopus (as established, Canopean biology is a resolutely deterministic one). These silences begin to speak for when their genetic programming does not prepare them for, analogies for their gaps in self-understanding, and the vast spaces between what is expressed and what is not. They are the silences of unexpressed possibilities.

How might this idea of unexpressed junk have come into Lessing's writing of alternative ways of understanding processes of genetic expression and inheritance? The 1970s were important years for epigenetics, specifically for research on non-coding material in the genome, unsettling the orthodoxy of Francis Crick's Central Dogma (1958). In 1983, the year after *Planet 8* was published, Barbara McClintock won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for her work on transposons, "jumping genes", or mobile genetic elements: genetic material that moves within the genome during the life-span of an individual organism. McClintock's experiments on maize, conducted in the 1940s and 1950s, challenged Francis Crick's suggestion of a unidirectional flow of information in the Central Dogma.

Epigenetic textuality in *Planet 8* can be read alongside the growing attention to epigenetics in this period in and outside the life sciences, in which research on the

mechanisms of adaptability and the mystery of genetic decisions and environmental interactions were not only being debated, but also recognized by global institutions. In contrast to the Central Dogma's linear model – DNA transcription leading to RNA translation to protein – McClintock's research put forward a complex, non-linear account of genetic expression: "If parts of the DNA might rearrange themselves in response to signals from other parts of the DNA, . . . and if these signals might themselves be subject to influence by the external environment of the cell," this would mean that information would "have to flow backward from protein to DNA" in order for the sequence of genes to "depend on factors beyond the genome" (Keller 9). *Planet 8* ruptures the idea of a one-way flow of information from nucleus (core) to cytoplasm (periphery), figured through Canopean genetic engineering. The Planet 8ers go from being imperial objects for future resource extraction to molecular agents, blurring the epistemological division of molecular and human life, presenting a complex picture of response and adaptation.

Looking out over the lake around which they have been accustomed to gather, now frozen, Doeg notes, "Populations under threat know silences that they understand nothing of in lighthearted times" (48). For the Planet 8ers, the silence before the crisis was Johor's silence in response to their rebellion. It was the silence of sovereign power and the impossibility of overcoming it: the noise of peripheral Planet 8 formulating a set of demands, in contrast with the silence of the colonial agent in a position to say nothing and to grant no favours. Post-crisis, the perception of new silences reposition the Planet 8ers as central to their own narrative, not in relation to the silences of their creators, but in the midst of a mobile terrain. These silences that they now are aware of can be read alongside genomic silence as the introns that stand for evolutionary flexibility, and the genes that have been silenced by the engineering of Canopus. Doeg articulates a growing collective awareness of what is not expressed, what is silent and silenced; while Johor might want to save them, the careful programming of Canopean interests means that he cannot. The Planet 8ers have not been programmed to survive this sudden atmosphere change, but there are silent parts of themselves that go beyond Canopean determinations.

The Planet 8ers begin to move away from understanding their lives as interludes in a cycle of birth, life and death, and to see that the surplus extracted by their rulers might be redirected to express something different or even transformational. Doeg relates:

> We were learning, we old ones, that in times when a species, a race, is under threat, drives and necessities built into the very substance of our flesh speak out in ways that we need never had known about if extremities had not come to squeeze the truths out of us. An older, a passing, generation needs to hand on goodness, something fine and high – even if it is only potential – to their children. (38)

This description can be related to epigenetic activation at a time of extreme climate change, and holds the recognition of potential to survive that they did not previously perceive. This might be transmitted to their offspring through gene memory – not through genetic mutations, but as the genetic memory of biological effects marked onto the material through the silencing or, in this case, the activation, of particular parts of the genome. These activations are entangled with the social requirement to adapt and survive. New expressions trace the repositioning of boundaries between the Planet 8ers

and their environment, who recognize for the first time both the vulnerability of their situation and the previously silent possibilities within them for survival.

The reconfiguration of epistemological boundaries between organism and environment takes place in a register of restlessness, through the journey a group of Planet 8ers make around the planet, during which the bond of possession between human and environment is broken up into an ecological vision of molecular life, refracted through decoloniality rather than spectrality. Their movement makes possible a change in their relation to the environment. Exhausted, they nonetheless make the journey, as if it will save them from their impending extinction, because "we felt some kind of restlessness . . . a need to press on from place to place, as if elsewhere we could come on something that might aid us" (64); they are "keeping, and in a conscious effort, our knowledge of our own possibilities, our potential for the future" (63). The words "possibilities" and "potential" are being used analogously to the way that Canopus describes the Planet 8ers, but with a crucial difference: they are moving in order to realize this potential, rather than saving it up for an unspecified future. Whereas for Canopus the population of Planet 8 is a vast, static reserve of genetic programming guaranteed for their exclusive use that might help them achieve a pre-determined potential at a later date, the Planet 8ers are using potential in a mobile and contingent sense, making the journey without any guarantee that the silences of their programming will be activated. By undertaking this journey with this potential in mind, in view of rediscovering it or activating it, the Planet 8ers depart from their construction as Canopean genetic goods, in view of the possibility that they might activate a previously silenced possibility. But what is at stake in considering this as a mode of survival, one that does not necessarily involve staying alive? In the final section, I consider Thacker's idea of "peripheral life" next to Stevenson's notion of "life beside itself" to read *Planet 8* as speculative decolonial poetics that resists biopolitical flattenings of life to its capitalism-in-nature valuations.

Microscopes, Molecules and Peripheral Life

The adaptation at work in *Planet 8* involves extending what is considered, epistemically and practically, as life. This is a way of drawing together postcolonial struggle, anti-nationalism and a new political realm for life itself in terms of molecular existence. Yet this last construction has difficult ethical implications: can there be an ethics of molecular life? The answer given by Thacker is yes, but that this would involve rethinking what constitutes "life itself", and what constitutes the social. In "Biophilosophy for the Twenty-First Century", Thacker names three philosophical paradigms for life itself, in roughly chronological order: soul (Aristotle), meat (Descartes) and pattern (postmodernism), which together "form a trinity" that is also a triptych, with soul in the centre, meat on the right, and pattern on the left; this is "an image of thought that continuously switches, swaps, displaces, and replaces the placeholder that defines life: from *psyche* to mechanism and animal electricity, to the 'gemmules' and 'pangens', to DNA and the 'code of life'" ("Biophilosophy" 123; emphasis in original). Getting away from this construction/reduction of life would mean departing from, on one hand, the division, ordering and interrelating of species and types (the "inward-turning aspect" of this thinking), and on the other, detaching from the "immunologic" of border control and boundary management, which marks out an individual through the self-nonself distinction ("Biophilosophy" 124).

The categorization of living forms into species and types is only sustainable when the self-nonself distinction can be upheld. As soon as it begins to unravel, so do the divisions of biological existence into genera, species and so on. Thacker uses the

example of an epidemic which "cannot be limited to an individual organism, for its very nature is to pass between organisms, and increasingly, to pass across species borders (and national borders)" ("Biophilosophy" 124). Considering the effect of transmission and movement of biological life that is not reducible to the description of organism, such as microbes, epidemics, swarms, packs, flocks, biopathways, parasitism, and so on, rather than centring life within discrete units of existence, the distinctions that uphold the division between social organization and ecological organization are compromised. Rather than thinking life as an essence or an organizing principle, Thacker writes, "what about considering life at the peripheries? Extrinsic life, a life always going outside itself, peripheral life" ("Biophilosophy" 125). His aim is not to devise a new ontology of life, but to change metaphorical infrastructure of life itself, re-routing it away from that of Aristotle in *De anima*, which he describes as a "two-fold framework of a principle of life (*psukhē*) and the bifurcation between Life and the living" ("After Life" 34). This account of life is an inheritance borne through Western philosophy, "highly stratified, the view down from on top of a pyramid of increasing complexity" ("After Life" 40), the concept that the Planet 8ers inherit from Canopus in their treatment of fellow living beings and the planet around them.

"What if staying alive has something do with witnessing the death in life?" asks Stevenson. "What if dying, and being borne along by those who love you, is also a way of being alive? How might we come to care for life that is constitutively beside itself, life that could never be fully itself?" (18) Stevenson's questions sketch a constellation of adjacent processes, drawn together in the necessary effort of attending to death, the form of care that the neo-colonial state is unwilling to undertake. In this absence – characteristic of the brutal totality of an indifferent biopolitical regime – refusal registers a mode of resistance: in this case, attending to life that is not living, to lost potential in the realm of the present conditional.

Lessing's absolute exteriority is based on life not lived, what is not-life, made perceptible in the dimension of the living; in Thacker's words, a "world 'without us', the life *sans soi*" ("After Life" 40). This is the vision of life that the Planet 8ers reach towards the end of their narrative. It comes about through using the resources dispatched by Canopus. Before the crisis, Canopus sent microscopes to the Planet 8ers (part of an educational outreach programme); after the crisis, they take on new functions. Looking through the lenses, the Planet 8ers see that they are part of a molecular world, and that their image of themselves as finite beings with beginnings and ends is "an illusion" (157). This changed perception does not alter their diminished desire to reproduce, but it does change the significance of their extinction. That is, it shifts the focus of existence from species survival to a re-configuring of decay and death.

The young Planet 8er, Alsi (another variation on Alice, a name invoked throughout the series), tells Johor that she remembers the moment when a certain kind of "naturalness and pleasantness ended" in her childhood, and that "it was when you, Canopus, brought the instrument that made small things visible" (123). Despite their provenance, the microscopes allow the Planet 8ers to break down the texture of their existence into finer grain than the myths handed down by Canopus. By making the existence of smaller elements visible, the microscopes open other worlds beyond their inhabitation of a planet on which everything they know and with which every relation has been determined by Canopus. They step out of their genealogical "circle of their parents and friendly adults" to gather together, finding that "our selves, that the ways we experienced ourselves, were all illusion" (125). The repetition of "our selves" and "ourselves" is important, as they constitute two kinds of self: the first is the sense of a

self that is distinct and individual to itself, and the second denotes the questioning of species-life, the foundations of what the Planet 8ers understand about their own existence. Both are challenged by the arrival of the microscopes.

The microscopes break the silences of the Planet 8ers' genomes through micro scales of representation, reaching and altering collective self-understanding. They introduce a molecular-wide perspective to the Planet 8ers presence to "themselves" and on the planet, allowing them to escape themselves as colonized automata, reduced to number and function. Dying, they lose their "old shapes", "what we had been", but still "mov[e] on together" as:

> patterns of matter, matter of a kind, since everything is – webs of matter or substance or something tangible, through sliding and intermingling and always becoming smaller and smaller – matter, a substance, for we were recognizing ourselves as existent; we were feelings, and thought, and will. (158)

The Planet 8ers turn the meaning of "matter" into something different, not the physical forms that they have now left behind, but another kind of matter that moves among other substances. Their existence is not confined to meat, soul or pattern, or any synthesis of the three; their existence escapes into non-life, into what is not liveable in any humanistic sense of existence. This experience is not lived in a sense of a conscious or identifiable individual or body. In the final pages, the eponymous Representative is not Doeg or Alsi, but named as "a conglomerate of individuals" that "swept on and up, like a shoal of fishes or a flock of birds"; they no longer see "wastes of snow and ice, no, but a perpetual shifting and changing"; they see the planet "in a myriad guises, or possibilities" (159-60). This vision cannot be named as simply ecological or planetary, but reformulates the idea of individual death; it attends to the life in death.

This molecular-wide perspective challenges "biological-biomedical" definitions of life (Thacker, "Biophilosophy" 133), and has implications for a renewed ethical relation with nonhuman and inanimate subjects. This perspective enables the Planet 8ers to consider their potential not in terms of mechanism or function, but in terms of "myriads" of "unachieved possibilities" of worlds, "each real and functioning of its own level . . . – each world every bit as valid and valuable as what we had known as real" (160). These are not parallel worlds in the sense of alternative dimensions, but worlds not lived. The dormancy of unexpressed genetic material is replaced by conceiving the silence differently, hearing potential as an always-already, rather than an end-goal.

To conclude: I have read *Planet 8* as a survival narrative of a peasant population brought into existence through neo-imperial capital, in which a decolonial poetics of resistance figures as the epistemological transformation of life itself. This resists forms of care administered by colonial powers, whose logic already includes genocide, and anticipates neo-colonial agendas of underdevelopment. The text reorients a poetics of decoloniality towards epistemological rupture, away from on one hand, a postcolonial spectral politics that continues the erasure of indigenous and colonised self-determinations, and on the other, political nationalism focused on replacing one origin story with another. The narrative of the Planet 8ers does not follow the model of anti-colonial resistance by which the new nation inherits the structural deficiencies and dependency of its colonial past, but rather seeks new forms of living. This moves from the spectral affects of welfare colonialism, perpetually in mourning for and haunted by excluded colonial subjects, to an ethics of ecological attentiveness. By weaving the

biological into the historical, Lessing is able both to assign responsibility and to imagine sites of resistance, attending to the enormity of racial capitalism's ontological violence, while also not allowing this history to be total, timeless, or absolute. This vision empowers a different foundation for existence to emerge outside the spectrogeography laid out by racial capitalism.

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