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Apocalyptic Realism: ‘A New Category of the Event’

Apocalypse is commonly equated with the end of the world, a catastrophic event that will annihilate time and history. Evoked as future catastrophe it carries with it a sense of inevitability and historical determinism, what Frank Kermode has described as an ahistoric, universal and inevitable “concord” between predictions of the end and the futures that “[move] in on us” (8). The finality of apocalypse makes it a mode “preoccupied with [...] imminent total meltdown” and correspondingly the “need for immediate ‘total solution’” (Buell 202). As Frederick Buell puts it, “doomsterism was its reigning mode” (202). Indeed, the title of Buell’s seminal work, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life* captures this conventional sense of apocalypse. Apocalypse is the opposite of a way of life; its spectacular destruction is antithetical to living. Culture-makers, he suggests, should “abandon apocalypse for a sadder realism” that will allow us to “recognize crisis as a place where people dwell” (202).

In other words, we cannot dwell in apocalypse. It is too spectacular, too extreme, too panic-inducing, too much of an ending to be a space where we live. This recoil from apocalypse, the sense that apocalypse must be avoided at all costs, motors the plot of many an apocalyptic blockbuster film, SF novels like J.G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World*, and recent nonfiction best-sellers like David Wallace-Wells’s *The Uninhabitable Earth*. As Wallace-Wells puts it in an interview with the *New Statesman*: “We are entering into what you can call a theological era—we have brought the planet to the brink of real catastrophe [...] and we now have about the length of a single lifetime to *save our future*”

ISLE: *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 29.4 (Winter 2021), pp. 967–986

Advance Access publication March 22, 2021 doi:10.1093/isle/isab020

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(qtd. in Bourke 18, emphasis added). Climate apocalypse and the future cannot be one and the same; apocalypse is that which ends the future, and so the future is that which must be saved from apocalypse. Indeed Wallace-Wells's interview, tellingly titled "How to Face the Climate Apocalypse" is then subtitled "*the future we must avoid*" (Bourke 18, emphasis added). Such orientations toward an impending end confirm what Frank Kermode called the "sense of an ending" that gives meaning to those for whom the ending has not yet arrived: "ends bear down upon every important moment experienced by men in the midst" of time (26).

But this fear of apocalypse and the calls to action that accompany it depend inherently on the idea that apocalypse has not yet happened. In all these scenarios, apocalypse may be avoided—the future may still be saved—because apocalypse is a speculative projection. The "sense of an ending" which is still in the future is, it turns out, historically and socially specific. For outside the perspective of global hegemonies, apocalypse is often history. The sense of history as a repeated world-ending that happens "again and again and again" has been used to describe the experience of bodies and populations excised from futurity, including postcolonial subjects in the global South, Black communities inside and outside the United States, and Indigenous peoples under settler colonialism (Hurley and Jemisin 471).¹ For those groups deemed expendable by Western thought and Western institutions like colonialism, slavery, genocide, extractivism, and industrial capital, apocalypse has never been in the future.²

This excision of raced and Othered peoples from a shared future makes apocalypse a genre of selective historical expendability, a consequence of the ways in which the future is denied to subaltern subjects of various kinds. This denial of the future is found in Hegel's argument that Africa exists in a primitive state of nature which casts it outside history, or more generally in the "*negative interpretation*" which, according to Achille Mbembe, has always rendered Africa in the Western imaginary as a site of lack and nothingness (1, emphasis original). It repeats in the environmental racism of Lawrence Summers, former president of the World Bank, who oversaw neoliberal market adjustments that hamstringed postcolonial state economies and who advocated Africa as a global waste dump or sacrifice zone for the dirty industries of developed countries.³ Logics of selective expendability are again repeated in dismissals of Pacific islanders from a shared global future in the face of sea level rise, which carbon-producing countries are not acting to mitigate, and by the Malthusian calculus that devalues the global poor as hoards waiting to "die anyway" from disease or hunger (Sinha 153).⁴

Though not always called apocalypse, this history of environmental and other racism authorizes and brings about world-ending destruction for postcolonial, Black, and Indigenous subjects, consigning them to futurelessness or only enfolded them into Western capitalist futures as sacrificial subjects. As Jennifer Wenzel puts it, environmental harm and climate injustice are only “the most recent example of the Global South subsidizing the development of the Global North,” a dynamic that amounts to the “theft—of other people’s futures” (*Nature* 4, 5). For those robbed of a future, I argue that apocalypse does not belong within the genre of future speculation but becomes part of realism; it is “the most realistic genre for representing a scenario that is genuinely apocalyptic” (Hurley 764). For those sacrificed within racialized regimes of capitalism and colonialism, apocalypse is a genre of mimesis, that which most approximates the referential historical experience of being made futureless.

What do we learn then, about the future and the present from those for whom the world has already ended? How does apocalypse as an aspect of realism change the ways in which we can think about dwelling in a world that has been rendered futureless? Fredric Jameson has suggested that realism, more than other aesthetic genres, holds out the “possibility of *knowledge*” (218 emphasis original). This knowledge is not born out because realism reflects the extratextual world in an unmediated or objective way; rather the “aesthetic and epistemological” authority of realist works rest in their capacity for

programming their readers; by training them in new habits and practices, which amount to whole new subject positions in a new kind of space; producing new kinds of action, but by way of the production of new categories of the event and of experience, of temporality and of causality, which also preside over what will now come to be thought of as reality. Indeed, such narratives must ultimately produce that very category of Reality itself, of reference and of the referent, of the real (217, 228 emphasis original).

Realism produces effects in the real by producing knowledge of the real for readers; indeed, in doing so it produces our sense of reality itself. Drawing on Jameson, I submit that attending to apocalypse as a historical event makes it available to realism and therefore knowable as something other than the end of the world. Apocalyptic realism creates “new categories of the event” of apocalypse, new categories of apocalyptic temporality, causality, and effect which preside over how reality after apocalypse can be thought.⁵

As a “new category of the event,” apocalyptic realism reveals the causal factors that produce world-ending for some but not others, attuning readers to the particularity and unevenness of apocalyptic experience. As a consequence, apocalypse as event becomes thinkable as a historical product and localized effect rather than a totalizing ahistorical future. Indeed, in contrast to ‘the end of the world’ that commonly serves as a gloss for apocalypses yet-to-come, realist apocalypses remind us that we should not confuse “*a world for the world*” (Wenzel, *Nature* 24, emphasis original). In historicizing and particularizing apocalypse, apocalyptic realism suggests that the comprehensive world-ending of apocalyptic speculations are themselves particular to *a world*—that of global elites and powerholders still in the “middest” of time. By taking us into worlds selectively excised from a common future in which repair, transformation, or avoidance are unavailable, apocalypse can be re-diagnosed as the calculated sacrifice of some worlds and particular futures.

But in addition to this diagnostic work, apocalyptic realism paradoxically challenges the idea that apocalypse is coextensive with absolute destruction by revealing forms of agency and endurance that go on within ruined presents and foreclosed futures. Pheng Cheah has recently suggested that world is primarily a temporal category rather than a spatial extension that encompasses all the objects within it: “*World*, however, is originally a temporal category. Before the world can appear as an object, it must first *be*. A world only is and we are only worldly beings if there is already time” (2, emphasis original). Following Heidegger, Cheah posits that without time there is no world; it is the gift of time that produces world, that allows it to be. Our sense of inhabiting a world and having a world is durative, produced out of the openness of time.⁶

Thus, apocalypses-to-come are considered the end of the world because they are seen as the end of time. In contrast, apocalyptic realism takes us into times that have ended to reveal worlds within them. Worldly openings, however fraught and incomplete, are made visible and as such, in apocalyptic realism the end of the world is relativized as a damaged but durative time in which it is possible to dwell. What kind of dwelling occurs in apocalypse, and what kind of worlds are possible within damaged or suspended time, become conceivable as questions once the end of the world is revealed as in fact still an opening of world-giving time. Indeed, any sort of relationship to the future “presupposes the persistence of time and this is incalculable”; thus, even “unworlding points to the irreducible possibility of the opening of another world” (Cheah 10). Apocalyptic realism both traces the ways in which world-ending closures are historically produced and

the ways in which worlding goes on from within imposed forms of futurelessness. In this way it is a genre of oppositions or antinomies; apocalyptic realism diagnoses historically decreed forms of futurelessness *and* the ways in which these processes are never totalizing but instead prompt new forms of minor worldmaking and temporalization from within impositions of foreclosed time.⁷

The remainder of this article considers Indra Sinha's 2007 novel *Animal's People* as an example of apocalyptic realism. In turning to Sinha's text I do not suggest that the Bhopal gas explosion upon which the novel is based is characteristic of all real-world apocalypses, or even those experienced by postcolonial subjects and places in particular. The spectacularity of Bhopal's explosion is, for example, very different from the slow, decades-long oil pollution and gas flaring that have devastated the Niger Delta. But I do outline some aspects of Sinha's text that help make clear the stakes and value of realist apocalyptic perspectives.

Animal's People is interested in diagnosing the forces that have led to its destroyed world and in witnessing the forms of suffering these forces have produced. Apocalypse in this way is made an object of knowledge with discernable causes and effects. But such diagnosis is not linked to transformative possibilities of prevention or change. Because of the temporal shift in when apocalypse happens, the novel's attention to suffering and its historical causes is structured by a kind of aesthetic pessimism which refutes possibilities of future change; as a mode of witnessing historical, already-existing damage and rupture, apocalyptic realism's commitment to its referent rejects the idea that immense historical destruction can be significantly altered or repaired. Instead, Sinha's apocalyptic realism reveals the entrenched causes of, and witnesses the unmitigable effects of, historical apocalypse. In turn it critiques the ahistorical fetishization of suffering that so often mediates the knowledge Western audiences have of subjects in the global South.

At the same time, and in contrast to the sense of impasse and future foreclosure that its aesthetic pessimism confirms, the novel also reveals minor forms of agency, relationality, and community building within its ruined world. Apocalyptic realism in *Animal's People* historicizes world-ending destruction while leavening temporal stasis with agentic moves and the limited pursuit of change. Holding these antithetical stances toward futurity together, apocalyptic realism programs readers to consider apocalypse not as an event that ends the future but as a new category of simultaneous opening and foreclosure, a zone of temporal paradoxes rather than the bad certainty of the end of time.

I. Historicizing Apocalypse

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* is a fictionalization of the Bhopal gas explosion of 1984, which is often cited as the worst industrial disaster in modern history. For both Bhopal and Sinha's fictional city of Khaufpur ("city of terror") apocalypse has already happened and cannot be prevented. A full treatment of the factors leading to the Bhopal explosion and the experience of its aftermath is beyond the scope of this article, but Bhopal is in general perceived as a travesty of national and international justice, and an extreme example of the necropolitical maneuverings of both exploitive state governance and industrial capital.⁸

In brief, on the night of 2–3 December 1984, a pesticide plant in Bhopal, the capital of the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, exploded and released at least forty tons of poisonous gases into the surrounding city. The total composition of the gases has never been confirmed, but included methyl isocyanate (MIC), a volatile component of the pesticide Sevin, and possibly cyanide.⁹ Many of the poorest residents of Bhopal lived close to the factory and were unaware that the "medicines for plants" made inside could be harmful to humans (quoted in Nayar 53). Thousands of people were killed in the immediate aftermath of the explosion, and tens of thousands more have died since that night due to the slow-onset effects of toxic exposure.¹⁰ To this day, Bhopal's factory has not been cleaned and residual pesticides continue to poison the city's residents. In Khaufpur, a similar drama unfolds: the city and its residents have been subjected to a massive pesticide poisoning and the responsible American "Kampani" (company) goes unpunished. Meanwhile, the residents are plagued with bodily ills and pains, intensified poverty, and continue to be poisoned as pesticides left in the factory leak into soil and groundwater, reappearing in wells and mother's milk.

Sinha's novel is thus apocalyptic not only because one of the novel's characters, Ma Franci, refers to her city's poisoning as the "Apokalis" but because the world of Khaufpur is irrevocably altered and subsumed by the destruction of "that night, which no one in Khaufpur wants to remember, but nobody can forget" (1). Indeed the *medias res* of the narrator's opening words—"I used to be human once. So I'm told" places us already after the explosion; that night is the focal point around and from which the stories of Khaufpur's residents unfold (1). About Khaufpur before "that night" we know little and *Animal*, the novel's eponymous protagonist and narrator, explicitly satirizes nostalgic considerations of time before the explosion. Such reminiscences are dismissed for being like the empty words of "priests who whisper

magic in the ears of corpses" or those who would "tenderly [reassure] the turd lying in the dust, 'You still resemble the kebab you once were'" (1). Such scatological language brings us immediately into the realm of abjection and signals that *Animal's People* will tell the story of its apocalyptic present without romantic longing for the possibility of recuperation.¹¹ What's done is done. Those who are dead cannot be brought back to life, and the waste products of consumption (bodily or industrial) cannot be returned to a pure state. This opening, which insists on the irrevocability and fixity of past events, gestures to the pessimistic aesthetic that suffuses Sinha's novel, and which appears particularly in the ways it tracks the modernizing processes that led to its devastated world.

In following the consequences of the poisoning, *Animal's People* reveals and diagnoses the past ills that condition its apocalyptic present without suggesting these can be overturned.

These forces include national neglect and corruption, the inequalities embedded in liberal universalisms like rights and justice, corporate profiteering, and the expendability of poor life. The novel interrogates all these causal forces at length and they have been the subject of other scholarship so I recall them only briefly here.¹² First, the national government which should protect citizens is shown instead to collude with profit-driven bodies while neglecting civilian needs. The Chief Minister for one receives kickbacks from the "pollution board" and promised the city's residents clean water "three or four years ago" (268). Government hospitals meant to treat the poor instead exploit and neglect them, "[making] money out of misery" by sending them to shops to purchase medicine when treatment is "supposed to be given free" (24). Officials even blame the poor for their own poverty and the squalor in which they live: "It's *these people*, they don't know any better" (105, emphasis added). Such calculated negligence illuminates the strategies by which states manages which populations will live and which are "let die."¹³

In this vein, *Animal* points out that "rights, law, justice [...] such words are like shadows the moon makes" (3). Forced to walk on all fours after being exposed to the factory's gases, *Animal's* liminal bodily and social perspective allow him to critique the liberalism from which he is excluded, as an ideology that supposedly guarantees rights, laws, and justice to all. In his role as social outcast and critic, *Animal* constantly catalogues the hypocrisies of the law, especially the idea that rights and justice are universally accessible.¹⁴ For *Animal* as well as the poor of Khaufpur more generally, justice has never been fully accessible or efficacious. Indeed, the inadequacies of legal redress are, in Khaufpur as in Bhopal, grievously unavailable to those most in need of

it. As Nisha, an activist and Animal's romantic interest in the novel, complains: "when the government that is supposed to protect us manipulates the law against us, of what use then is the law?" (284). To support her point, the Kampani's case has stagnated in Khaufpur's court system for twenty years, passing through "thirteen judges" while the "Amrikan [American] defendants have not shown up in this court" (52).

Likewise, Animal's "four-foot" body is an exemplary visual signifier of the ways in which workplace protections and other rights do not extend to global South subalterns (32). And the expendability of poor life is further captured in the rhetorical query an old woman makes to the American Kampani lawyers when they are finally forced to appear in Khaufpur's court: "You were making poisons to kill insects, but you killed us instead. I would like to ask, was there ever much difference, to you?" (306). The comparison between poor humanity and "insects"—useless, numerous, and killed with impunity—is obvious. Such a statement simultaneously captures the ways in which postcolonial humans and environments are deemed expendable by global powerholders and sacrificed within machineries of corporate profit.

Anecdotes like these work not as individual aberrations or arbitrary, isolatable instances, but as flare-ups within larger systemic processes; they provide moments when structuring background forces manifest in the foreground of bodily experience and narrative space. Thus, Sinha's novel reveals and diagnoses those forces that led to its apocalyptic present and which perpetuate its immiseration. But in *Animal's People* these causal factors are not mere cautionary tales; they are ongoing quandaries that the novel does not suggest can be systemically changed.

Indeed, poisoning extends from the past into the conceivable future, as when a young mother tells Elli, an American doctor who opens a free clinic in the city: "Our wells are full of poison. It's in the soil, water, in our blood, it's in our milk. Everything here is poisoned. If you stay here long enough, you will be too" (108). This inevitable futurity is emphasized in the fate of the woman's newborn, who cannot avoid drinking poison except by starving without breast milk; toxic effects traverse generations and warp the present trajectories of anyone who comes in contact with them. Likewise Zafar, a Gandhi-esque activist, wages a campaign for legal justice and accountability against the Kampani that spans most of the novel but is still unresolved by story's end. These examples gesture to the ways in which the present, itself determined by the poisoning, will continue; they suggest that the future will not be substantially different from the apocalyptic events of the past. Injustices continue, and the past reemerges in the present as unrelieved

pain, illness, and death. The continuity of poisoning and lack of redress for victims underscore how the temporal existence of Khaufpur is defined by “that night, always that fucking night” (5). Like a slow-moving bullet pulled from a trigger twenty years ago, the apocalypse in Khaufpur’s past continues to wreak havoc on the present and indeed makes the present one determined by that devastating past.

This pessimistic temporality is further underscored by Animal’s refusal to have surgery to straighten his back at story’s end. I will return to the personal significance of Animal’s choice later in this article but considered as a narrative feature rather than a characterological one for now, remaining the same signals that the novel will not easily manufacture radically different and better futures. Through this refusal, its deferment of legal progress, and its chronicling of the multi-generational effects of toxins, the novel’s pessimistic aesthetics imply that expectations for cathartic resolution and radical change may get in the way of apprehending the reality of inescapable harm endured by subjects in historically-produced apocalypses. The temporal and structural pessimism of apocalyptic realism is a product of its refusal to fantasize different futures and its conviction that apocalyptic pasts determine the presents that follow them. The future becomes from this perspective a zone of suspended or negated time. It has already arrived and cannot arrive again; apocalyptic presents become the once and future real. Indeed, Animal articulates this pessimism most directly: “Now o’clock, always now o’clock. In the Kingdom of the Poor, time doesn’t exist [. . .] hope dies in places like this, because hope lives in the future and there’s no future here” (185). This temporal suspension poses the future as only an extension of the current bad present and is confirmed in the novel’s closing line: “Tomorrow there will be more of us” (366). The tone of this line is ambiguous, but while it suggests that Western efforts to ignore the poor may become harder to do, it also confirms that the status of the poor will not change in the future.

Such pessimism is not an admission of victimization or hopelessness though so much as a response to the factors that produce apocalypse as history. In rejecting aspirations for transformation, Sinha’s apocalyptic realism makes apocalypse an object of knowledge by commenting on the entrenched and systemic quality of the processes that have led to its destroyed world. In historicizing apocalypse, apocalyptic realism makes clear that poverty and suffering are not the inevitable, ahistoric condition of Bhopal, Khaufpur, or other sites consigned to futurelessness; rather, like apocalypse itself, these conditions have been historically produced out of particular constellations of forces. That apocalyptic realism does not overturn that historical reality simply makes it a mode that has mimetic fidelity to the place of

postcolonial modernity within extractive colonialism and global capitalism as these systems pursue surplus value and leave waste behind.¹⁵

Zafar himself makes clear that the particular contaminants affecting his city are symptomatic of the production of industrial capital globally: "Is Khaufpur the only poisoned city? It is not. There are others and each one has its own Zafar. There'll be a Zafar in Mexico City and others in Hanoi and Manila and Halabja" (296). Thus, the toxic effects of corporate profiteering create an unequally distributed global apocalypse in the zones of resource exploitation and fungible humanity that compose the place of the global South in industrial capitalism. So too, Sinha explicitly uses language such as "smelting" and "red hot tongs" to describe the pain in Animal's back and to invoke the processes of industrial modernization that led to the factory explosion and its bleak aftermath (15).

And yet, even as *Animal's People* sets out to record the causes of apocalypse, it also testifies to practices of struggle, endurance, and making do that are inevitably part of living in such unchangeable damage. As Animal warns his audience early in the narrative, suffering in apocalyptic aftermaths does not subsume all subject positions available to Khaufpur's survivors nor does it eradicate all forms of agency: "I hated all that talk of 'poison victims,' I don't want to be pitied. I refuse to be some fucking bhonsdi-ka victim" (27). Insisting that readers have to "put up with how [he tells] it," Animal's narrative is one of witnessing the pain induced by historical world-ending, while also testifying to forms of living after the end of the world (2). This commitment to representing both victimization and agency, stasis and possibility, makes apocalypse a new category of event, one in which structural pessimism does not foreclose all possible action and in which imposed forms of world-ending are allayed by small forms of worlding, action, and endurance.

Time and again the novel underscores how suffering fosters innovation, limited forms of agency, and a commitment to community as strategies for living in damage.¹⁶ A shopkeeper gives Animal ingredients free of charge when Ma Franci, Animal's adoptive mother, becomes ill with malaria, and residents tell politicians attempting to foment inter-religious rivalry in the city that "There are no Muslims or Hindus here, there are just humans" (312). More generally, begging scams, siphoned television reception, home-made medicine, and improvised transportation like "Bhutt-bhutt pigs[s], it's a big three-wheeler, carries twenty people, front's snarled like a pig's snout" are all part of the kaleidoscope of social and material infrastructures that Animal's community uses to endure (151). These bricolagic strategies of making do with very limited resources orient readers to practices of

living in damage, rather than either structural transformation or passive victimization.

This is not to say that the body of Sinha's text downplays pain. Indeed, like the young mother mentioned above, a web of minor characters make clear how pervasive suffering is. The "singing breath" of Somraj, a once nationally-renowned singer, has been destroyed by the gases, Animal's neighbor Aliya suffers coughing and fever before eventually dying, and Shambu, whose body is described as "a sack of pain" must drink poisoned well water (130, 147). But Animal's narrative repudiates the passive victimization of apocalyptic subjects and instead records, over the duration of the novel, strategies of hustling, mutual support, relationality, and community-making employed by those who live within imposed futurelessness.

Such testimony contests ahistorical suffering but is still part of apocalyptic realism's critique of desires to save the future or for radical social transformation. While the story is peppered with hopes and pleasures, such as the growing love between Zafar and Nisha, these hopes are localized and individualized rather than harbingers of systemic change. Even the opening of Elli's medical clinic is of a piece with the novel's record of constrained and piecemeal endurance since she can treat symptoms of pain but not the underlying causes of environmental poisoning or the capitalist system in which the Kampani continues to operate. In refusing notions of wholesale progress and improvement while nonetheless attending to practices of resilience and relationality, apocalyptic realism both confirms and undermines its own pessimism, proposing structural immobility and limited agency in tandem to trouble the extremity of apocalypse as the end of all worldly possibility.

Indeed, these examples of worldmaking and survival in the face of unmitigable disaster are an important lesson of apocalyptic realism. Many things have ended, including Animal's ability to stand upright and the city's identity outside "that night." But as Animal reminds us, while some things end, "the poor remain" (366). How then do we measure or grasp ending? When those for whom the future has supposedly ended endure, surely ending cannot be understood without considering the terms and capacities their endurance makes visible. In the second section of this essay I therefore elaborate on a question posed at the beginning—what kind of dwelling is possible in apocalypse?

II. Living in Damage

Apocalyptic realism's emphasis on witnessing and its mimetic fidelity to the aftermaths of catastrophe demand that we take seriously the

fullness of its thick referentiality. Without recourse to either nihilism or escapism, apocalyptic realism encourages us to pay at least as much attention to modes of acting and enduring as to forms of dying and ending that give shape to life after the end of a world. In holding action and impasse together, apocalyptic realism's incompatibilities become "another category of the event" of apocalypse and apocalypse can become thinkable as a zone of paradoxical time rather than one totally determined by closure.

In elaborating the space that apocalyptic realism makes between openings and closings of the future, between stasis and the possibility of change or agency, I am inspired by the way Teresa Shewry has theorized hope in the environmentally threatened Pacific; she suggests that hope is a holding together of contradictory trajectories and feelings that "[do] not necessarily signal an effort or ability to undermine bleak narratives" but which nevertheless pursue "a relationship with the future" (16, 2). Hope is "never alone; it always exists intimately with experiences such as sorrow" (13–14). It registers the ways in which "life within certain parameters has been foreclosed" and yet remains "uncertain" or open to change (16).¹⁷ Like these theorists, Sinha suggests that world-ending is never totalizing, and that the project of pursuing better futures can neither fully escape nor be fully enclosed by a history of ending.¹⁸ Such openings from within temporal inertia gesture again to Cheah's conception of world as the gift of time. If from certain vantages the future seems foreclosed or suspended, *Animal's People* is also at pains to show how temporalization, the openness of time that creates a world, is persistently if incompletely available.

This antinomy or paradox is visible if we return to moments in *Animal's People* that are most saturated by aesthetic pessimism to notice room for maneuver within them. For instance, it is during a hunger strike against the Kampani, as he wastes away from lack of food, water, and desiccating heat, that Zafar tells Animal there are poisoned cities all over the world, each with their own Zafar. This is arguably a moment in which Zafar is most pessimistic about the possibility of pursuing a different future from within the apocalyptic present. As Zafar wonders whether "all those weary bastards are as fucked as I am," Animals notes: "I think Zafar doesn't hear these words that are crawling out of his mouth. It's like he is this parched old corpse, uttering thoughts which have chewed him up from the inside [. . .] Never would I have expected it" (296, 297). Indeed, if Zafar has struggled with pessimism internally this revelation is jarring partly because in the rest of the novel he performs as a perennial optimist: "Always he's trying to find new reasons to praise the poor" and positing that "One day something must surely happen, why not today?" (113, 55).

Zafar's declaration that he and his campaign are "fucked" is, though, also the first time the text alerts us to a network of activists fighting against eco-apocalypses elsewhere. While the poisoning of other cities is indeed testament to the global reach of industrial capital and its sacrificial logics, this pattern is shadowed by resistance as these "other Zafars" in Mexico City, Hanoi, and Halabja appear at the edges of Khaufpur's own apocalypse.¹⁹ In a moment of deep pessimism in which Zafar concedes the impossibility of his fight, he also becomes visible as part of a global network of resistance to the same kinds of forces that have ended the world in Khaufpur. Though his personal despair is apparent, Zafar's words also place him in solidarity with others, and it becomes clear that he does not, as other parts of the narrative suggest, carry the "heavy burden of the world's pain" all alone (83). By revealing that Zafar and Khaufpur are neither the only poisoned cities nor the only sites of struggle against global toxicity and corporate malfeasance, the novel points to diffuse resistance in the face of impasse, to global action that occurs when it seems most futile.

The hunger strike and its aftermath also illuminate this dual structure of change and inertia within Khaufpur itself. Délice Williams notes that the strike is a moment that "yokes extreme bodily pessimism and political nihilism," but is also one where Zafar and the other strikers are able to "[recover] some degree of legal and political agency" by "seizing the terms of life and death" rather than having these terms imposed upon them (259).²⁰ More to the point, the hunger strike galvanizes the mass uprising of Khaufpur's ordinary citizens into attacks on the police and the shuttered pesticide factory. Provoked by (erroneous) news of Zafar's death in the strike, the people of Khaufpur erupt into destructive rage. Animal likens their anger to unstoppable forces of nature: "the fury of the people has been let loose who knows where it'll stop, it's a *storm* battering everything in its path, it's an *avalanche* pouring down a mountain, it's a *flood* that rises swiftly with no warning, it's a *fire* lit by lightning" (310, emphases added). By comparing the people's fury to these powerful and unpredictable forces, Animal's litany builds its own momentum, each metaphor amplifying the others to produce a sense of climax. Surely this confrontation will change everything, for as Animal declares, "never have I seen such fury" (314).

While crowds have protested against state forces elsewhere in the text, violent confrontation has not occurred at this scale, and indeed it is an eruption "no one could have predicted" (314). Here the novel draws attention to how popular rage transforms a "tide of ragged people" into a power that crashes the factory's gates and "sweeps [the police] away" (314). Fury over the death of Zafar and the Kampani's continued exploits give strength to those with none: "One man, he's

ragged, thin his ribs are like furrows ploughed in his flesh, no strength can he have for portering or load-lifting, but so filled with anger is his weak body that he has ripped a paving stone from out of the earth and flung it at the pandus" (314). The weak man is suddenly strong, the crowd in a rage that "will destroy what it touches" (310). The unprecedentedness of the crowd's anger seems to inaugurate a shift in apocalyptic stasis, to be a harbinger of newness.

And yet we are also let down almost immediately: "it can't last" and "soon the army will be called" to quash the riots (311). The crowd's fury is both a discernable change in the history of its corporate- and state-imposed futurelessness, and yet one that does not coalesce into sustained transformation. So too, the closing lines of *Animal's People*—"We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" can be read as before through a pessimistic aesthetic, as the inexorable continuation and proliferation of global poverty and selective futurelessness; but it also rings like a clarion call to action and solidarity amongst the global poor (366).²¹ That these tones cannot be separated makes these lines a condensed example of apocalyptic realism's simultaneous inhabitation of open and closed futures.

But this holding together of agency and world-making alongside stasis and non-futurity is developed most extensively in the tension between the trajectory of Animal, the novel's protagonist, and the overall narrative form of *Animal's People* as a novel. For in many ways, Animal undergoes a recognizable *bildung* or journey of development, which is nowhere more apparent than in his decision not to have surgery on his back at novel's end. As mentioned previously, Animal's refusal to have surgery can be seen as part of the novel's repudiation of salvific thinking or desires for cathartic transformation. But considered now as a character trait rather than a feature of the novel's aesthetic pessimism, Animal's refusal of the surgery signifies differently. Since his back first bent Animal tells us he has been "filled with rage against all things that go or even stand on two legs. The list of my jealousies was endless" (2). Having been offered the opportunity to walk upright and given that his jealousy of all things on two legs is one of his defining traits, Animal's personal transformation is clear in his decision not to change.

Refusing surgery is accompanied by an acceptance of his "four-foot" body and a celebration of its capacities: "if I have this operation, I will be upright, true, but to walk I will need the help of sticks. I might have a wheelchair, but how far will that get me in the gullies of Khaufpur? Right now I can run and hop and carry kids on my back, I can climb hard trees, I've gone up mountains, roamed in jungles. Is life so bad?" (366) In contrast to the envy toward others and "raw disgust" that characterize his relationship with his own body when he begins

the narrative, Animal's personal journey is most obviously signaled by the acceptance of his body in these ending lines (2). Being "four-foot" is no longer only a bodily compartment forced on him by the Kampani's gases nor is it a degradation of two-foot normativity and ableism. Animal even notes that to walk upright he would "need the help of sticks," a prosthesis that would in a sense render him "four-foot" again, but in a version much less able than his own hands and feet. In embracing what his body can do, as it is, Animal comes to accept and define his body on his own terms.

Animal's characterological progress is signaled by other changes as well. Early in the story Animal is a loner who scorns community and "look[s] out for myself [. . .] before all others and every other thing" while at the end he is integrated into a community and is able to be considerate of others (17). Reunited with Zafar after the riots at the factory, Animal relinquishes his pursuit of Nisha, whom he has desired because "[s]he was the only person [. . .] who treated [him] as completely normal" (22). While he has worked throughout the plot to sabotage Zafar and Nisha's relationship in the hopes of pursuing Nisha himself, he is later able to support their romance: "You [Zafar] will marry Nisha and I'll be there cheering. I love the pair of you [. . .] With these words, which I had no idea would fly out of my mouth, a great peace enters my heart" (358). Animal's personal development or *bildung* is easily traced in these new relationships with others and with his "four-foot" body.

Yet Animal's growth is contradicted by the overall narrative structure of the novel, which is incomplete and episodic. While the content of his narrative offers progression and newness, the form of Animal's narrative appears as a series of disparate tapes that include not only his words but "gaps" with "long sections in which there is no speech, only sounds such as bicycle bells, birds, snatches of music and in one case several minutes of sustained and inexplicable laughter" (n.p.). This broken and at times nonsensical record ironizes or at least complicates the suggestion of forward movement developed through Animal's character.²² Thus in addition to its many instances of aesthetic pessimism, the novel's structure of fits, starts, and gaps troubles the idea of progress toward newness or the availability of different futures.

Putting his protagonist's journey and the formal structure of the narrative at odds, Sinha both reinforces the foreclosures of apocalypse and erodes them, interrupting temporal suspension with examples of future-oriented change and pursuits of agency. These dual temporalities complicate the certainty of apocalyptic finitude as minor forms of endurance contest the extremity of apocalypse's temporal closure. They do not completely overturn it or provide a pure alternative to the

bad present; yet in posing both pessimism and small forms of agency or change side by side, even embedding one in the other, apocalyptic realism helps us attune to futurity from within destroyed worlds that are saturated by suffering and loss.

III. Conclusion

Some ecocritics have called for the dismissal of apocalypse as an analytical category. One of the most well-known pieces in this vein is Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus's 2004 essay "The Death of Environmentalism," where they argue that apocalyptic scenarios "tend to create feelings of helplessness and isolation" that are antithetical to political engagement and action (30). Eben Kirksey insists similarly that we "reject apocalyptic thinking" and turn from "possible losses" to "shared futures" (6). Realist apocalypses by contrast help us attend to the dark side of shared futures by beginning from the perspectives of those excised from them, those whose sacrifice enables futures for corporations, dirty industries, and corrupt states.

More importantly, I have shown that apocalyptic realism suggests a new way to think about the event of apocalypse: not as the end of the future, but as the constrained pursuit of different futures from within what feels and looks like futurelessness. A realist apocalyptic work like *Animal's People* suggests that apocalyptic presents relate antithetically to the future, overdetermined by the past in some ways but nebulously open to change in others, neither totally captured by pessimism nor free of its grasp. *Animal's People* highlights the many kinds of action that take place within apocalypse, even as these acts do not culminate in structural transformation and seem unlikely to do so. Read in this way, apocalyptic realism further suggests that hope or agency are not necessarily to be found in newness. Newness is a long time coming, and those who struggle for the right to inhabit a future cannot count on newness as their only definition of futurity. Partial changes, deferred realizations, and piecemeal endurance all contest foreclosures of the future while not coalescing into transformation.

Such programming is not an invitation for readers to naturalize apocalypse or make light of its suffering. Rather, apocalyptic realism offers a training in resistance *vis-a-vis* inertia, and strategies for living in damage without succumbing to despair or escapism. Such training can only serve us well, as it becomes more and more apparent that apocalypse is where we all dwell now.²³ Challenging desires to save the future and nihilistic or despairing responses to the "sense of an ending," apocalyptic realism shows us two futures that cannot be separated. Living cannot go on; living will go on.

NOTES

1. Jessica Hurley and N.K. Jemesin, "An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing: An Interview with N. K. Jemisin." See also Kyle Powys Whyte, "Is it Colonial Déjà Vu? Indigenous Peoples and Climate Injustice."

2. Black scholar James Edward Ford III draws a similar distinction between what he calls major and minor apocalyptic discourses in "When Disaster Strikes."

3. Summers is infamous for commenting: "I've always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under polluted [...] shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?" quoted in Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (1). As recently as August 2020 Hiroko Tabuchi, Michael Corkery and Carlos Mureithi of the *New York Times* reported the endurance of this logic: "Big Oil Is in Trouble. Its Plan: Flood Africa With Plastic."

4. Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* is the touchstone in this line of thinking.

5. Writing about traumatic realism and representations of the Holocaust, Michael Rothberg argues similarly that realism can be epistemological and pedagogical, that it attempts to narrate atrocity as an object of knowledge. While Rothberg suggests that such knowledge implicates readers in posttraumatic culture, I argue that apocalyptic realism implicates readers in world-ending processes while also revising assumptions that apocalypse precludes agency and worldmaking. See Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism*.

6. This contrasts with theorizations of the world as spatial extension in world-systems theory or world literature; it also contrasts with definitions of world as an aesthetic effect. See Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds*.

7. See Debjani Ganguly, "Catastrophic Form and Planetary Realism" on realism as a genre of planetary antinomies. For Ganguli, realism's ability to incorporate other genres allows it to encompass planetary and localized scales of climate change. I make a related argument about realism's capacities to diagnose and witness a different antimony: that of worlding and world-ending.

8. For background on the explosion, see Dan Kurzman, *A Killing Wind*, Kim Fortun, *Advocacy After Bhopal*, and Suroopa Mukherjee, *Surviving Bhopal*.

9. See Dan Kurzman, *A Killing Wind*, chapter 3.

10. Accounts of the number of victims vary. See Kim Fortun, "Remembering Bhopal" and Fletcher, Ono, and Roy, "Justice for Bhopal."

11. For a nuanced discussion of abjection as activism in *Animal's People* see Délice Williams' "Spectacular Subjects."

12. See Justin Omar Johnston, "A Nother World in *Animal's People*," and Jennifer Rickel, "The Poor Remain."

13. This phrase is drawn from Foucault's description of biopolitics. See *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, especially the lecture of 17 March 1976.

14. Rob Nixon has associated this critical status with *Animal's* role as a modern picaro. See *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Chapter 1.

15. Postcolonial countries have been the extractive zones of capital as well as its dumping ground. The place of colonialism in the global expansion of capital is well known, but perhaps most famously theorized in Lenin's comments on colonialism in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. See also Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence*, and Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development*.

16. Rebecca Solnit has also argued that extraordinary communities arise in the wake of disasters. See *A Paradise Built in Hell*.

17. Writing about the Xhosa of South Africa in *Bulletproof*, Jennifer Wenzel has likewise argued that the aftermaths of apocalyptic prophecy can be sites of contest and the pursuit of better futures even though they are also scenes of devastation.

18. In their two-sided *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Anna Tsing, et al. similarly propose modes of attention that might "stem the tide of ruination" in the present (G1). They argue that since worlds have ended many times over, landscapes are populated by remnants of prior life that haunt temporalities of progress and require us to attend to the multiple worlds and times embedded in any landscape. See "Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene."

19. Sinha himself cites this global network: "Khaufpur is every place in which people have been poisoned and then abandoned." See "Bhopal: a novel quest for justice."

20. Jesse Oak Taylor in "Powers of Zero" also argues that the hunger strike is an example of the "power of nothing" where "attempts to close the body off from the necessities of life" is a means of galvanizing "powerful collective action" (188).

21. Jennifer Wenzel has argued that this line echoes Trotsky's call to international Marxist revolution. See *The Disposition of Nature* 236–37.

22. Stacey Balkan likewise notes that the episodic structure of *Animal's People* critiques notions of progress, arguing that *Animal's* narrative acts a *memento mori* tale. See "A Memento Mori Tale."

23. For instance, the 2018 IPCC *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C* predicted climate change effects for 3°C warming by 2100. Many of the predicted symptoms, such as increased drought, poverty, and species extinction, are already happening.

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