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Sarah Nuttall

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## ON PLUVIALITY: READING FOR RAIN IN NAMWALI SERPELL'S *THE OLD DRIFT*

*Sarah Nuttall*

Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of the  
Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

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**hydrocolonialism**  
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*Pluviality, a term I have developed in relation to heavy rainfall and flooding – its timescapes and material and textual conditions – is the focus of this analysis of Namwali Serpell's magisterial 2019 novel, *The Old Drift*. Located largely in Zambia, it is nevertheless a novel of the Zambezi watershed, and of hydrocolonial and southern African regional proportions. Encompassing both human and non-human narrators and protagonists, its centrepiece is the Kariba Dam, the largest hydro-electrical dam in the world at the time of its construction. This is a very rainy novel, alert to the region's histories of flooding and to the ever-heavier rainfall of accelerating climate change, in one of the regions of the world most susceptible to its present and coming effects. I focus on the novel's pluviality as material, historical and narrative mode, traced in its registers of water and wit, prescience and prophecy, as it surges, silts and drifts across the literary landscapes of African fiction.*

Re-reading the literatures of the southern African region for rain reveals a striking cumulative material and imaginative universe. Pluviality, as I have called it, preoccupies itself with heavy rainfall and flooding, but also with the fluvial flows, ubiquitous wetnesses and manifold waters that pool, stagnate, drift and roil as a result. Conceptually, the term implies a material condition and a relation to time, and thus to geology and history, that we can refer to as “pluvial time”. The pluvial lies at the centre of an accelerating climate change that exacerbates both drought and heavy rain (Nuttall 2020). Reading for rain is rendering postcolonial worlds hydrocolonial (Hofmeyr 2019), pluvial and regional in their historical and material formations. I begin with just two notable pluvial moments in the literatures of this region, in part to offer glimpses of some initial traces of a fictional landscape barely, yet critically, articulated, signalling a larger project I intend to undertake soon. This is followed by a detailed analysis of the text that will form the basis of this essay, Namwali Serpell’s *The Old Drift* (2019).

*Serowe, Botswana.* A place that has seen “more drought years than rain years”, writes Bessie Head in 1981, so that it is the “rain pattern” of the former she knows best. It rains “sparsely, unpredictably, fiercely and violently” (x) from November to January; for the rest of summer, rain-winds appear, blowing in wetness from the horizon. *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* has generally been read for its close depictions of subsistence agriculture and other modes of daily work shaped by the social and temporal rhythms of a Botswanan village in the aftermaths of colonialism, seldom for its more precise pluvialities in this “mainly arid place, with little surface water” (see Livingstone 2019). In her earlier short story collection, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), Head had suggested that rain constitutes a material but also a moral imagination. “You may see no rivers on the ground but we keep the rivers inside us”, says one of her characters in relation to living with drought and the death it sometimes brings with it. “Sometimes we see the rain clouds gather even though not a cloud appears in the sky” (168).

*Maputo, Mozambique.* In Mia Couto’s 1994 short story collection *Rain and Other Stories*, rain falls ubiquitously as a “meteorological matter” but also as an earth vein capable of generating renewal from the ashes and hollow ruins of war-torn landscapes and psyches. In the title story, characters irrigate or “intirrigate” themselves (“how many years has it been since it last rained like this?”) (47). As it pelts down for days, “melodic and divine” after the war has finally ended, it suggests that something remains, in the words of the prologue, “earth protected, intact”: “the rain hasn’t forgotten how to fall” notes Tristereza, although the narrator is sceptical: “Is the calamitous drought not being followed by a punishing rain? ... Won’t the waters prove too much, falling with such malignant generosity?” (48–49). Couto’s repertoires of rain are inflected towards personal and political repair; yet so

many of the characters across the stories seek to soak their faces in rain, to drip with water, that they offer us something of a rain gauge reading of a more meteorological and material sort.

Head and Couto's pluvial modes breathe regional depth and breadth into an archive of under-thought but, the minute one sees it, widespread literary renderings of water: sea, river, dam and rain – as the introduction to this special issue shows. That we ought to think in terms of regionscapes instead of ongoing literary nationscapes is implied not least by the flood plains, water basins, cyclone paths and river flows that cross many or all of the countries of southern Africa in their flows, wetways and pluvial logics.

Then, as if these were various vital tributaries to a future river flow, Namwali Serpell's hydrological and pluvial *tour de force*, *The Old Drift*, floods the literary regionscape, arriving on the scene, all 563 pages of it, in 2019. I will spend much of the rest of this essay discussing it, foregrounding its pluvial and hydrocolonial tendencies. Suffice to say, at this point, that the novel is a multi-generational narrative coursing in and out of the history of Zambia, told through the lives of three families over three generations in three sections, with a matriarchal bent: The Grandmothers, The Mothers and The Children. It begins as follows: “Zt. ZZt. ZZZzzzzZZZzzzzZZZzzzzz ZZZZzzzzzzzzZZZzzzzzzZZZzzzzzo’ona” (1), which is the whining of mosquitoes, with a slight doffing of the cap, beating of a wing, to the word “Shona” (Z’ona). They are African mosquitoes, then, who form first a chorus, an African Greek chorus, and then a swarm, eventually a hive mind. Turning back to the epigraph, from Virgil's *The Aeneid*, book VI, we encounter Aeneas, stumbling upon the river Lethe at the far end of a valley, drawn to “a hovering multitude, innumerable / Nations and gathered clans”, and asking what is before him: “What was the river drifting past beyond them / Who were the ones in such populous throng / Beside it?” “Spirits”, Anchises answers. Serpell's ambition is to resituate this oldest of stories, and questions, on the Zambezi river in southern Africa, with its rains and floodplains, its river drifts, its mosquitoes, its colonial histories and inspirited waters, its Falls and, eventually, its Kariba Dam.

In a book of multiple intelligences, the mosquitoes of *The Old Drift* are its whirling devilish intelligences. They are all at once the non-human omniscient narrators of an all-too-human story told down the generations, a meta-narratorial chorus many millennia more ancient than the Greeks – and an increasingly techno-animist intelligence superseding the merely human stories we tell. Further, they are the spirits of “nations and gathered clans”, the ancestral hanging in *elastic severalty* (Serpell 2019, 19), a historical hyperconsciousness garnering and gathering its spiritual force as it hovers over humanity, future and past, all. Bearing witness, too, to human error and folly, this *bare ruinous choir*, this *chorus of gossipy mites* (19), are made in rain. The stagnant wetnesses and swampy thin waters that gather after

rainfall and last longer after flooding are fertile breeding grounds for one of the most ancient species of all: *We meet you wherever there is standing water ... whenever you collect water ... you're cupping an amniotic crib for us. The story of a place is the story of its water*, buzzes the mosquito chorus, and *the Kariba Dam is no exception*. But long before the Dam there is a river, the great Zambezi, and its Victoria Falls, known to Tonga people as Mosi-oa-Tunya; before that, *the fat rains* (78).

The novel is named in part for the narrowest and deepest stretch of the Zambezi, eight kilometres above the Falls. Since this is the story of a nation, “not a kingdom or a people”, as the zzz chorus avers on the novel’s opening page, it begins with a white man, a *mzungu*. The latter should be taken less as a matter of skin, than a *tendency*: (1) colonial adventurers, pioneers and marauders attempting to follow in the footsteps of Livingstone’s search for the source of the Nile, wandering and violent. The Old Drift itself has many histories and multiple names: a place, for example, which *mzungu* found most conducive for “drifting a body across” (4); an entry point too, into North-Western Rhodesia, later part of Zambia; known first as Sekute’s Drift, then Clarke’s Drift, “no one knows when it became The Old Drift” (4). The Zambezi, moreover, is a river frequently in flood, capable of upending attempts at coloniality and control, and regional in its reach, flowing across six African countries to reach the Indian Ocean. Drifting and flooding as means of understanding a different political, narrative and material etymology of water, and time, is where this novel will take us.

As with all extraordinary books, Serpell’s novel is a “theory of everything”. But two of its vital strands have to do with the attempted conquests of water and atmosphere in the making of Zambian decolonization and its back-histories of coloniality. The Kariba Dam, on the one hand, and Edward Nkolo-so’s Zambian National Academy of Science, Space Research and Philosophy, and his attempts to send Afronauts to the moon on the other, situate the novel in precisely rendered historical events while also igniting its partially speculative sweeps. Most analyses at the time of writing have focused on the better recognized tropes of land and/as nation in the novel; I focus in what follows on the novel’s wet logics – its recurrent rain, its riverine reticulations, including its drifts and inspirited waters, its rising floodwaters over time and the mega-dam construction which became a potent marker, in all its ambiguity, of Zambian modernity (and infrastructural neglect) across several generations.

While the mosquitoes have the first word, the human voiced text reticulates the waterlogged beginning. If the zzz choir bear buzzing witness to swathes of human history on and around the “flung water” (1) of the Falls in this territory that was “first a colony, then a protectorate, then a federation, then a country” where *the bazungu drifted in and settled the land* (2), it is one Peter M. Clark who makes the novel’s opening joke: “It sounds like a

sentence: Victoria Falls. A prophecy” (3). Coloniality’s reach, though, is no joke, and Serpell vividly articulates hydrocolonial violence right from the start. Clark declares that he “came for the Falls, and I stayed for them too” (3) and the colonizing discourses of settler and native, woman and insect are rendered with acuity, wisdom and wit, as Serpell parses early colonial drifting, wandering, violence and appropriation along the Zambezi, a place where white men turn Africans into “excellent river-boys” (4). Setting off to follow the Zambezi from the Falls all the way to the coast, with a fleet of African men and dugouts, Clark encounters mosquitoes, malaria, rivulets and tributaries, heavy rains – and failure. He returns bedraggled and viscous to the Old Drift and the hotel dining room of the new Victoria Falls Hotel. Here he encounters surveyors and engineers planning the railway bridge across the Zambezi that would nourish and facilitate Rhodes’ Cape to Cairo vertical dream. The bridge is completed in 1906, the Old Drift is moved upriver closer to the railway line built by the British South Africa Company and the town is renamed Livingstone, the capital of North-Western Rhodesia. Decades later the town would be moved again and called Lusaka.

Several decades and more than fifty pages later, the construction of the Kariba Dam is underway on the site of the Old Drift. The Dam was commissioned by the Rhodesian government in the late 1950s and built by British and Italian engineers and a large African workforce. The process of building Kariba is known for the creation of forced resettlements of 57,000 Tonga people from Zambia and Zimbabwe who had always lived alongside, and lived off, the Zambezi. They were removed and dumped in drier hinterlands, and Kariba became known amongst historians as the worst dam resettlement disaster in African history. Rob Nixon writes in *Slow Violence* that megadams like Kariba are “diversionary” in three senses: “They divert water – and through water, land – from the powerless to the powerful. But they also divert attention, their glistening enchantments throwing into shadow unimagined communities” (2011, 189). As Makuyana (n.d.), who is researching colonial constructions of Kariba as well as Tonga water cosmologies, writes:

“In colonising water, the Rhodesian government accomplished at least three imperial ends: the generation of ‘cheap’ electricity; the establishment of a tourist resort (a white enclave of game reserves); and alienated human and non-human life from the Zambezi River Basin” (n.p).

Built to serve the hydro-electric needs of the region, Kariba was also an instance of planned violence, a term I draw from the work of Boehmer and Davies (2018), typical of the deep ambiguities and ongoing colonialities of modernity’s mega-structures.

In Serpell’s vivid and multidimensional rendering, it is the late 1950s and the Kariba Dam is nearly complete, the Zambezi river is flooding earlier than usual and the scene at the site is described thus: “Despite the rain, it was crawling with men, fly-like amongst the beetling machines. It looked like a mammoth corpse, half-dissected or half-rotten. They had already lost so many men to it” (2019, 70). The flooding water seeps through a fault line and starts to fill the inside of the unfinished dam: “a swirling thrusting deluge, red as blood because of the copper in the dust” (70). Within the next few months, the river valley would be under water and multiple lives would be lost, including many Tonga lives, especially of those who refused to be resettled away from their ancestral lands.

The Dam construction site is portrayed as more monstrous than its modernist aspirations would allow: men appear as insects, crawling like flies in the mud, on a vast cement contraption that appears corpse-like in the rain, subject to a red deluge of copper dust that resembles fast flowing blood. Violent histories of labour exploitation, displacement and death, as well the Dam’s ultimate uncontainability, subject as it is to a river known for its extensive flooding, undercut watertight narratives of human progress and enlightened modernity.

One of the chief engineers, Federico (a double man, as his wife refers to him, having assumed his dead brother’s identity and engineering pedigree, and faking a limp in the process), sits in his office near the Dam site. While the other engineers spend their time out on the site, he has become “a living filing cabinet” of folders, blueprints, schedules, orders and receipts, the edges of the pages “curling from the humidity, their interiors riddled with holes from the ants” (68). He shuffles and slides them around energetically, “as if building the dam with thin flat slices”. Every morning he encases himself in his “unnecessary suit” and returns to his stacks of paper in service to hydrocolonialism’s bureaucratic obsession. As a chief Dam engineer, he had been assigned “a maid, a cook and a guard” and during the “diluvial floods of 1957” (69) must attempt to manage Operation Noah, a plan to relocate the wildlife, whose habitat was soon to be under water; the nascent African National Congress; dam labour strikes; “suicidal” Tonga elders who Tonga activists (supported by his wife) say have the right to stay with the ancestral dead, even if they would all be drowned when the river flooded; the spirits of the dead manifested in Nyami-nyami, the rivergod of the Zambezi; high water signals and the flood warning system. Eventually, the river floods vengefully as never before, the Tonga are forcibly resettled, the dam is named Kariba, meaning a *trap for the river* in Shona, and the Tonga vow that the river and its gods will undo the work of the colonial engineers. The mosquitoes take up the story:

“The feckless bazungu continued building the dam. When the flood came again, it lifted four men, plastered them to the dam like insects. The concrete was wet; the workers were dead; in the end, they built the dam around them. Strange tomb!” (78)

Kariba percolates Serpell's intergenerational story, and is an ambiguous touchstone across the severalty of sequences of Zambian independence and the lives lived in the shadow of decolonization and postcoloniality. While the Zambezi rushes and glides, the human characters narratively drift across this multi-generational novel. With so many characters and so many incidents, the story “moves like a silt-laden river; it pools, leaks into its tributaries, it floods over, it stagnates” (Mohamed 2019). Vitality, like a mosquito swarm, the narrative “hovers, drifts and turns elliptically to the same places” or to the founding scenes of the hydrocolonial (see Quinn 2019). *The Old Drift* draws forwards the hydrocolonial and its hydrological cycles – specifically, the dam, the river and the flood – to unsettle the land-based story of Zambia through several generations.

Rain, and its pluvial modes and cycles of hyperbolic wetness, pours down persistently on otherwise dry territorial readings of the history of the nation. It rains insistently across the novel, though not in the Afronauts section, as the new nation angles for lift-off (in the aftermath of its failure, Matha, the female astronaut, can't stop crying, pouring with tears, Marquez-like, for many years, however). Novelistic incidents and events occur after the rains, the rain arrives portentously and in a pedestrian way, as do terrific storms, torrential downpours, ankle-deep swamps, precipitous mud; forests become drunk with rain. Mosquitoes hover over still water, puddles, ponds, lakes, rivers and cesspools. Yet so rich is the narrative canvas and the pull of the prose that it is easy to miss the accumulating rain across the novel. Serpell is drawn to the wit and wetness of accidents, mistakes, jokes and chance that make history as much as serious, event-laden – and assumed to be dry or weatherless – time does. Serpell includes scenes encompassing the unpredictable weather of grief, jokes about *he* as the water and *she* as the floodgate of a dam, as well as arguments about the state of the Kariba Dam in revolutionaries' romances. Rain appears to infuse the act of reading as much as it does the writing: when the rain comes, “bringing with it the velvety scent of wet soil”, Isa[bella], the mother of Naila, “stared out at it for so long that when she turned back to the page, the letters seemed to drizzle down it”. All the while, “the ember tip of the mosquito coil crept slowly along its arc, leaving the scent of myrrh and a pile of cinders” (2019, 296). And where there is rain, there are mosquitoes, the author never forgets to remind us. This is a book literally framed by waterscapes: its three main sections (The Grandmothers, The Mothers and The Children) are preceded by a section called “The Falls” and closed by a final

section called “The Dam”. I will return below to the matriarchal generational sequence and their relationships to water below.

Almost surreptitiously, which is how climate change works, as the wet gets wetter, hyperbolically, Serpell crafts a novel which lets those waters in, triangulating a story of human history across generations, hydrological cycles of accelerating wetness – and insects, including those in their technologically enhanced forms. With those waters, so with human history and the stories we tell, avers the mosquito chorus: *Error, n, from the Latin errare: to stray or to vee or to wander* (12). To drift, too, as we will see. Not only was Livingstone searching for the source of the Nile in the wrong spot, but there are two Niles – one Blue, one White; error, errare, err: *to err is human*, they buzz. *You go hunting for a source, some ur-word or symbol and suddenly the path splits, cleaved by apostrophe or dash. The tongue forks* (2). As does the river.

As the narrative builds, the story of a river and of time (as a river) and therefore history and geology, is not the question of finding its source, its origin, especially as colonial frontier men were wont to do, but rather the *chaos of its capillarity* (2) That, moreover, is how, in Serpell’s rendering, the story of a place, a body, both human and non-human, and a world is to be written. Stories should be told, by implication and insinuation, with a mosquito eye. Mosquitoes see by using two compound eyes; each eye is made up of hundreds of small lenses called ommatidia. The multitude of ommatidia enables the mosquito to see from many directions at once. In this novel, Serpell does the same.

## II

One of the issues that Serpell’s characters argue about, inter-generationally, is the reason for the Kariba Dam’s current state of infrastructural neglect. The Dam is failing, infrastructurally, they all agree. For Joseph (the son of Ronald, Dean of Engineering at UNZA, the University of Zambia), the Dam is failing “because of gravity and the Change, not capitalism” (the Dam’s plunge wall is collapsing) (518). For Naila, the question is: “Why hasn’t it been fixed? Where did the money for fixing our infrastructure go?” and for Agnes, Joseph’s mother, whose politics are quite different from her husband Ronald’s:

Kariba Dam was cursed from the start. Thousands of people were displaced in the building of that dam ... The Italians did that ... The Brits are the ones who built the dam on the Zambezi instead of the Kafue. To keep electricity near the mines, or perhaps I should say to keep the power near the money. (Serpell 2019, 518)

Now, however, there is “neither money nor power [as in electricity]”, (518) avers Joseph, who gets ribbed by Jacob and Naila for his belief in incremental

change through existent structures rather than revolutionary action, including blowing up bridges and dams to finally force political change.

Serpell weaves a rich, beguiling and politically nuanced story around the current state of Kariba and the reasons for its impending breakdown. If one consults Google, however, on the vulnerability of the Dam to change, it is the engineers who are the accorded authority on likely outcomes. Since at least 2014, such accounts aver, engineers have been warning that the Kariba Dam has been in a dangerous, potentially fatal, state. Infrastructural neglect and climate change have acted together to make the breaching of the dam wall imminent. Built on a seemingly solid bed of basalt, the torrents from the spillway have eroded that bedrock over the years since, carving a vast crater that has undercut the dam's foundations. Without urgent repairs, a recent BBC report puts it, "the whole dam is likely to collapse". If that happened, "a tsunami-like wall of water would rip through the Zambezi valley, reaching the Mozambique border within eight hours" (Haslam 2014). Heavy rain is likely to release water from the dam, requiring tens of thousands of evacuations.

In the final sections of the novel, members of the youngest generation, Naila, Jacob and a reluctant Joseph, who is in love with Naila, are plotting revolution – this time against the postcolonial state, and its multiple modes of social (and infrastructural) neglect and oppression, now (it is 2023) including its unchecked and technologically enhanced state power. The displaced Tonga, placed in inland settlements when the dam was first being built, are "finally to be revenged" (Serpell 2019, 554). The nodes of the state-controlled digital systems are embedded in the walls of Kariba, and are to be disabled, using mini-drones called Mozkeetoze. Still, they argue, along the time-worn lines of African resistance politics: "We have to be careful about direct action, Joseph grumbled. It always just harms the people it's supposed to help. We're shutting down a dam that provides electricity for millions". Naila counters: "We're shutting it down just long enough to jam the cloud. Then we'll send out a signal to organize a resistance movement ... so we can operate outside government surveillance" (555). The rain starts to pour and they shout across the noise of the storm. Clouds are, by now, both disruptors of wi-fi signals and bringers of rain; mosquitoes are joined by Mozkeetoze, swarms of intelligent drones, and the Dam becomes the locus of two kinds of power: technopolitical and electrical.

Hedley Twidle, writing in this issue, discusses the strangeness of writing about the potential catastrophes of climate change. "Necessary fictions", perhaps, he reflects, thinking about Day Zero in Cape Town's 2017 drought, ones which, he continues, if people saw them as such, would, in themselves, risk such fictions becoming future realities. The challenge of thinking ecologically, he continues, relates to the problem of trying to capture two timescapes in one, namely "it will never happen"; "it is

happening”. Serpell’s solution is to give catastrophic pluviality an Afrofuturist tilt as her speculative and hydrocolonial near-future is embedded in near-fact or, at least, scientifically enhanced prediction. By the latter parts of her book it is 2023, or five years after the book would have been completed, the “unseasonal rain” is again pouring heavily, but now even more tumultuously than ever before, due to what characters refer to as The Change, a reference to climate change. The rains are flooding the streets of Lusaka, “cars drifting off like unwitting boats”, and pedestrians “clomp[ing] along in gumboots, the middle air a flotilla of umbrellas” (2019, 531). It is also swelling the Zambezi – with a force that is unprecedented and unaccounted for in revolutionary schemes.

Naila, Jacob and Joseph are on a boat on the Dam, having released the drones to target and disable the government controlled digital servers attached to the Dam wall. They feel a vibrating sound:

“The swarm? No, the water.” The water unharnessed. Naila craned her head towards the familiar thin grey curve on the horizon. It was not there. “The dam!” A wall of twisting mist rose where it had been, where it should be. “It’s gone!” Instead of causing a simple malfunction, the drones have blocked the sluices completely. The waters have risen and tumbled over the dam. Beneath the boat, ‘Nyami Nyami was tossing his whirlwind hair, arching his spiny necks. (Serpell 2019, 559)

The Great River, as the Zambezi is known in Shona, was flooding – letting loose a huge torrent, collapsing the Dam’s foundations and creating a hydrological mash-up of recombinant parts. “Lake Kariba would soon become a river. The dam would become a waterfall. And miles away, the Lusaka plateau ... would become an island” (559). At the very end of the human-told text, Naila is submerged, mid-sentence, by the flood waters – and we make a wry return, in some respects, to the story’s beginning: the power of the river itself, and its inspirited waters, beyond the mega-dam modernist fictions of twentieth-century industrial and colonial modernity.

With the river, it is the mosquitoes who persist and prevail. *And so we roil in the oldest of drifts – a slow, slant spin at the pit of the world, the darkest heart of them all* (563). The oldest drift of them all, the planet’s biochemical heart – its darkest heart, again an ironic invocation of one of the oldest adages of them all, Africa as the heart of darkness, from which such brilliant literary fictions are assumed not to emanate (are the mosquitoes Serpell’s ultimate decolonizing gesture and signal?). *We’re an asterisk to nature, a flaw, a digression, a footnote, the drift, the diversion, the swerve, the clinamen*, buzz the Chorus:

... when atoms plummet like rain through the void, they deflect just enough that their paths divert ... every small stray opens up a new way, an Eden of forking

digressions ... Where you sought an origin, you find a vast babble and bubbling – which is also a silence: a chasm of smoke, thundering. Blind mouth! (Serpell 2019, 2)

Bronislaw Szersynski, in his 2018 essay “Drift as a Planetary Phenomenon”, published at the time that Serpell was writing and which she must almost certainly have read, writes that drifting can lead to a deeper understanding of the way all things move, within “the extended body of the earth” (136). He is acutely aware, as is Serpell, that drifting has a politics: the southern African word *mzungu* for white people means “people who wander”, he notes, and directly references the apparently aimless yet often violent perambulations of early explorers and missionaries, forerunners of latter-day Benjaminian *flâneurs*, he implies, pulled hither and thither in a privileged urban or global drift.

Szersynski asks, too, however, if there is a different means of approaching drifting as a critical practice. The opposite of drift, he asserts, is locomotion, which has a front and back and moves differently through the world, with a concentration towards the front end (139). Only a tiny part of the planet moves in this way, he notes, but for humans it is the “paradigm form of motion” (139) – the idea of a thing that moves under its own steam, as we say, referencing industrial modernity. The steam engine, hence the railway; the steamboat, too; and the Dam itself (does it have a front end?), which blocks and harnesses the river flow but cannot in the end, this novel implies, supersede the flow, the drift and the pluvial flood (see also Lavery [2017, 2020] on oceanic drifting). Put differently, dams damage rivers, and they get old, become unsafe, no longer serve their intended purpose, begin to appear as massive avatars to an age which failed to count the planetary costs of their infrastructural, human-centred edifices.

### III

If Serpell gives much novelistic attention to pluviality, the condition of heavy rain that we could refer to as an earth infrastructure that is biospheric in its capacities, then the novel makes us want to ask: how do storm and flood events and conditions allow us to think of infrastructures outside of the more classical registers of engineering? Mathur and da Cunha in their work on water refer to a ubiquitous wetness once belonging to ecosystems that were neither land nor water, “in which rain is held in soil, aquifers ... building materials, infrastructures of all kinds” (2014, 13).

In the first instance, the novel has a lot to say about engineers and engineering. While these figures appear perennially as the story unfolds, Serpell

frequently situates or upends their expertise with contesting considerations – political, cultural, elemental – and often articulated through the views and talents of women. We have already encountered Federico, the chief engineer at Kariba whose wife (Sibilla) supported the Tonga and their struggles to preserve their shoreline communities on the Zambezi. Pushed into retirement after his work on the North Power Cavern of the Kariba Dam is complete and the management of Kariba has been “Zambianized”, Federico, in older age, touts his technical knowledge about engineering and wonders what “those idiots know of the delicate balance of stone and water” (2019, 286). In a second, interracial, family line there is Agnes and Ronald; she is white and blind, he is black, Zambian and “can see”; she attends meetings of the revolutionary left at UNZA; he becomes the conservative Dean of Engineering. His research is on Kariba, specifically on the mechanics of closing it off, testing it – having an off switch, in Agnes’s lay-terms, when describing her husband’s research. The third line is traced through Matha and Godfrey, star Afronauts, Matha being the first woman in Zambia’s foiled Space Programme. Matha fixes engines and puts together circuit boards with wires and batteries and discusses technological accessories with BBC reporters. It is she, not he, who her grandson Jacob will invoke, when he uses his electronics expertise to build state of the art drones, the swarm with a hive mind that disables Kariba in the end – only to be superseded by the flowing, flooding waters. Engineers, that is, infrastructural and electrical, run in the families, and in each iteration their expertise is countered by other knowledges, new uses, less patriarchal histories, competing explanations of how the world, and its human and non-human histories and geologies, human-made and earth infrastructures, work.

If Serpell harnesses a recognizably decolonial dimension to her story of the hydrological and hydrocolonial histories of the region, drawing in precolonial water cosmologies and ancestral and multi-spirited waters, she draws this together and in tandem with ecological knowledges that undercut colonial modernity’s wagers of progress. It is not surprising perhaps that Ronald and Agnes’s son, Lionel, is studying microbiology and virology at UNZA (the figure of the scientist being on the ascendant for the climate change and pandemic generation). Dams, earth scientists tell us, slow rivers, altering the timing of flows. Some hydropowered dams withhold and then release water to generate power for peak demand periods. These irregular releases destroy natural seasonal flow variations that trigger natural growth and reproduction cycles in many species. Dams change the ways rivers function. Diverting water for power can leave stretches below dams completely “dewatered”. This may work fine for human consumption and electricity, but aquatic life depends on steady flow to guide it. The Zambezi Basin, one of Africa’s largest, is a river system. The drainage area of the basin covers eight countries and is the main supplier of water, electricity and fish to

these regions. The basin is home to immense wet plains, responsible for the climatic regulation of a rich ecosystem of savannahs and humid forests that surround it.

As Serpell's story returns so routinely to the flood and the dam over-spill, we might reflect on a second dimension that engineers and developers have ignored or failed to account for. Hard, impervious cement spill-overs and drainage infrastructures actually generate high velocity floodwaters in heavy rain, rather than contain them. A river's spillover is much more effectively absorbed by surrounding earth – if it cannot do that, the floodwaters get worse. In heavy rain, this can rapidly generate worse flooding (PhysOrg 2021). In other words, hard surfaces, which cannot absorb rain, affect flows and give velocity to potentially catastrophic pluvial time.

Thirdly, part of this novel's clever and composite ommatidia-like eye is to consistently unfold narratives of human and non-human life as intersecting and juxtaposed modes of being in the world. If the human worlds Serpell writes about are embedded in a set of relations woven around a river and a dam, then the world seen from the vantage point of mosquitoes is preoccupied with puddles. Puddles appear frequently in the zzz of the mosquito chorus – and puddles effectively work as mini-dams, Lilliputian mega-dams. Dam engineers could learn from puddles, as the mosquito chorus might say, in a less didactic vein. Mosquitoes, a microbiologist might say, are a species which has shown very little morphological change for forty six million years, do not like falling rain, they like rain puddles, in which their larvae spend up to fourteen days before flying off. As the chorus chimes in:

“We meet you wherever there's standing water. You like to treat us like beasts of the wild but civilisation suits us fine. A puddle, a treehole or a lake works well; so does a tyre, a gutter, a pipe ...” And: “Not too long! There are threats all around! It's a cesspool, this puddle of Eden: birds and bacteria, fishes and ants, nematodes, whirligigs, lizards”. (261)

Puddles, biodiverse microhabitats, consist of small, naturally formed ridges (berms) and depressions (swales). The berms form from silt and organic matter like leaf litter, which act as mini-dams holding back the water in the swales behind them, Gregory Moore explains, meeting the needs of multiple different species. Puddles are “small reservoirs” where seeds of many plant species germinate (Moore 2021). Sometimes, the seeds have chemical inhibitors which hold off germination until a period of heavy rainfall. As engineers and developers pave more surfaces, “ironing the creases” from earth-made landscapes, they disable multiple microhabitats that support species persistence.

Perhaps we ought to speak of infrastructure’s drift. Brian Larkin, writing in 2013, saw infrastructures as “conceptually unruly” (327). More than this, we might think of them in relation to biospheric and elemental life that render them subject to forms and producers of effects not fully accounted for in the coloniality of their making. In some instances, this may reiterate early precolonial and decolonial ways of knowing and operating in the world. In others, it may mean learning from earth infrastructures best suited to biodiversity and embedded within the means and matter of drift.

#### IV

One of the apparent anomalies of *The Old Drift* is why Serpell might have one character covered in excessive hair, another blind, and a third unable to stop crying. Are these magic realist-indebted flourishes? More likely, they are intended to embed in the cast of characters the principle of error, of erring, of the mistake, including the genetic mutation, which the novel becomes interested in towards the end, in its virological phase. Interestingly, though, for our purposes in this essay, a further reading of Sibilla, Agnes and Matha, born of a quirk and a flourish, a pluvial aside and incantation, is how each are described in relation to rain, feminist pluvial time, making them the perfect progenitors in their imperfect forms, of this long story.

Sibilla, born in Italy but as secret, illegitimate progeny, is born of shipwreck in Serpell’s telling: “the midwives were still circling the mother’s shipwrecked body”, she writes, “tending to her, murmuring like the sea, the child’s cries like that same sea breaking” (2019, 23). Of cursed “hectic blood”, an oracle card, a tarot in play. She is covered in hair, which falls down her body and to the floor, like a veil – hair that curls and creeps from her body when it rains. Confined and hidden, the young girl wanted to know “if it was in fact raining out there” and as she escapes into the world for the first time, the trees “started to tantrum” (30) and a storm was brewing. Soon she finds herself in the midst of a cyclone. The rains cascades, spewing precipitous mud everywhere: “she felt her hair tugging her back in so she began hauling it towards her, lock by lock, before it tried to swim off or drown her” (36). When she had finally lugged it all out of the currents, she finds herself tumbling on the shore of a rumbling river (36) and later: “if her inner whorl was a tornado, her hair was the vault of the sky – it held her to a horizon” (51). Sibilla appears here as mythical medieval queen, which, in fact, she is in Italian folklore, though such tales also have her as a maidservant in some versions: it is Serpell’s jest to subject her legendary locks to excessive growth and torrential rain – and arrival in the colony. Six months later, Sibilla is in Zambia with Frederico, who is building the

biggest dam in the world on the Zambezi river; and the Tonga treat her as an ancestral fetish: "She stood among them in the static of the rain, her wet black hair encasing her, the Zambezi raising its red hackles behind her. Then the wind came and it started to roil" (77).

Agnes, the second of the female lines whose story is told here, is playing tennis in England in 1962, when she meets Roland, whom she falls in love with without knowing he is black and African. Finding this out is described as a flood: "The revelation set Agnes vibrating with the force of a waterfall uncovered by the shifting of a great stone. In this flood was a current of amazement that this was possible: the not knowing of it" (93). To her father's objection she reminds him of his adage that "love is blind" – "not that blind", he retorts, sarcastically (96). She and Roland marry and make the long sea crossing – Mombasa, Nairobi, Mpika – to Zambia. There she lives in the unhappiness of her subsequent marriage, as Roland works on Kariba and she is confined in blindness and insight, despite her budding political radicalism, to the domestic realm.

And finally, Matha.

Matha, the smartest space cadet ("she even has "math" in her name!" [437]) who sees through, while appreciating, Ba'Nkolosa's blend of "science and fable, African technology and Western philosophy" (167); who wears a leather bomber jacket and loves Lusaka ("it was her second skin, she felt for the first time that the rhythm of her body matched the rhythm of her surroundings" [183]) – and fellow Afronaut Godfrey, and his band, the Just Rockets, playing at freedom rallies. A conspiracy of chance events means that she loses Godfrey, is saddled with a child and the loss of her spectacular career, as she feels it, unable to use her expertise and cleverness, and cries copiously for years, the salty water of the body's loss spilling endlessly over in a "deluge" (204). Years later, Godfrey reappears, in pouring rain: "A man moved towards her through the downpour. Drops bounced off his body and crossed the falling rain, their clash shaping an aura" (435). Years of grieving wetness and longing appear to be over. But they have drifted, their love has silted over. She becomes the chief engineering consultant to her grandson Jacob. "Only Matha Mwamba, star Afronaut, could teach him how to be a real engineer" (449).

## Conclusion

We deviate, we drift ...

The final two pages of this 563-page novel are narrated by the zzz choir, who summarize the human-centred story in something of a rhyming couplet (and

a mini-critique of an engineer’s view of the world?), a paean to chance and error: *their blueprints were old, their calculations too tight, they’d made no concession to chance. Indeed, their mistake – the Error of Errors – was simply forgetting the weather* (563). They further explicate, in the manner of a fable or a parable:

“The Change, and that season was ultra-disastrous. The rainfall that came was ten times the norm and the damned wall was already failing. When the drones blocked the flue, the Zambezi pushed through, and Kariba Dam tumbled down after”. (563)

As the mosquitoes speak from the vantage point of the “warm wet future”, they consider that the problem with human-told stories is their linearity: *All together at once is how a swarm sees but you humans go beginning to end* (19). What the world requires in order to be understood is in fact a way of seeing that is both curve and spiral: the curve of time, the *Archimedian spiral*, the celestial gyre, *turning inward and outward at once* (563). Each textual segment or chapter in Serpell’s book is marked off from the next by a small mosquito figure on the page. Thus she marks their ubiquitous, wet presence. But when the mosquito chorus, swarm and hive mind speaks, in italics, no page numbers are given on those pages. They do not partake in the linear, human-told novel form; they are, instead, the composite, curved, cosmic ommatidia eye.

In what precise manner, I wondered, after reading about the mosquito eye, do drones see? Serpell is much alive to the dangers of swarm surveillance in this book, the all-seeing Moskeetoze. Google could not tell me exactly, though the internet is very vexed about the fact that, with infrared sensing, drones can now see “inside houses”. The leading question at present is how one can best disappear from the prying eyes of drones. It turns out that the best way of blocking a drone eye is bad weather, especially heavy rains. Umbrellas, adds one study, are also good.

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Sarah Nuttall

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