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Everyday Apocalypses: Debt and Dystopia in Nicole Dennis-Benn's *Here Comes the Sun*

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Abstract: Writing in November 2010 in the aftermath of a series of devastating hurricanes, Norman Girvan admitted to “a growing sense that Caribbean states may be more and more facing a challenge of existential threats”. By this, he continues, “I mean systemic challenges to the viability of our states as functioning socio-economic-ecological-political systems” due to “the intersection of climatic, economic, social and political developments”. In this article, I examine the specifically literary response to these existential threats. My focus is on Nicole Dennis-Benn’s novel *Here Comes the Sun* (2016), which offers a searing critique of what I term the apocalypse of the everyday, that is, of the way capitalism’s logics of social death and ecocide permeate every facet of contemporary quotidian practice. I am particularly interested in Dennis-Benn’s registration of the impact of debt colonialism on Jamaica. Debt, for Girvan, is one of the contributing factors to the existential threat facing the Caribbean. However, the temporality of debt also provides a useful optic for understanding how Dennis-Benn’s novel grapples with the effects of the ongoing catastrophe of slavery and the plantation system, as well as with the erosion of futurity in apocalyptic times.

Keywords: Caribbean; Nicole Dennis-Benn; apocalypse; tourism; debt

1. Introduction

Writing in November 2010 in the aftermath of a series of devastating hurricanes, Norman Girvan admitted to “a growing sense that Caribbean states may be more and more facing a challenge of existential threats”. By this, he continues, “I mean systemic challenges to the viability of our states as functioning socio-economic-ecological-political systems” due to “the intersection of climatic, economic, social and political developments”. Highlighting the increased frequency and intensity of hurricane activity in the region, Girvan expands on his concerns:

When you combine acute climate change-related stress of this kind with (a) the acute economic stress arising out of erosion of trade preferences and the failure to develop a new “insertion” into the global economy, (b) fiscal stress due to unsustainable debt burdens and the impact of the global economic crisis; and (c) the seeming incapacity of governments to control the impact of transnational crime; one must wonder if we are not in fact experiencing an overlapping and interconnected series of challenges which in their totality, challenge the assumptions underlying the ‘national statehood’ dispensation of the region. Suppose, in other words, that we are not dealing simply with a series of ‘natural disasters’, but rather with a deeper, more systemic threat to the viability of our societies as functional entities in any meaningful sense of the word? (Girvan 2010)



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Girvan concedes that “most of us are not likely to view our condition in such apocalyptic terms”, with “governments and opinion-makers” tending to see “each such phenomena as disconnected events” requiring a specific form of crisis management. However, crisis management, he argues, “is not a condition that lends itself to strategic thinking”; and “isn’t strategic thinking, that attempts to discern the connections among seemingly unrelated phenomena, not what is required? Indeed is it not a necessity for survival?” (Girvan 2010). Thinking apocalyptically, Girvan thus seems to suggest, can be a form of strategic thinking, one necessary if the existential threats to the Caribbean are to be properly understood.

Girvan is not the only one to frame the Caribbean’s current situation and future prospects in apocalyptic terms. Aaron Kamugisha has declared that the region “is in a state of tragedy and crisis, destroyed and corrupted by a postcolonial malaise wedded to neocolonialism” (Kamugisha 2019, p. 1). Indeed, with “the effect of climate change so severe and political-economic marginality so acute, [. . .] it is not apocalyptic to wonder if the Caribbean will survive as we know it into the second half of the current century” (Kamugisha 2021, p. 59). For Ryan Cecil Jobson, the “survival of the Caribbean hangs in the balance between the growth imperative of economic nationalism and the livelihoods of Caribbean peoples. Put differently, our criticism can no longer take for granted the existence of the Caribbean as a habitable geography” (Jobson 2020, p. 72). Martin Munro, meanwhile, has suggested that the region “stands at the edge of an apocalyptic abyss” (Munro 2015, p. 7).

My interest in this article is in the specifically literary response to the existential threats to the region outlined by Girvan and others. How have Caribbean writers taken up the challenge of apocalyptic thinking understood as a form of strategic thinking, a thinking capable of articulating the intersection of ecological, economic, social, and political crises, as well as their constitutive connection to the catastrophic history of colonialism? Over the past decade or so, a host of explicitly apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic fictions have emerged from the Caribbean. One thinks, for example, of Barbara Lalla’s *One Thousand Eyes* (2021), Diana McCauley’s *Daylight Come* (2020), Nalo Hopkinson’s “Inselberg” (2016), Ángel A. Rivera’s *La rabia útil de los Muertos* (2016), Alexandra Pagán Vélez’s *Horror-REAL* (2016), and Rita Indiana’s *Tentacle* (2015), to name but a few. Such texts conjure apocalyptic imaginaries in the search for formal and stylistic registers capable of illuminating the contemporary pressures that threaten future survival.¹

One of the key challenges of such literary apocalypticism, I will argue in what follows, is the question of temporality. On the one hand, Caribbean writers have long confronted the imperative to develop aesthetic forms that can address the haunting of the present by the legacies of past violence: as Kamau Brathwaite puts it, the “*history of catastrophe* [. . .] requires a *literature of catastrophe* to hold a broken mirror up to a broken nature” (Brathwaite 1995, p. 235; emphasis in original). On the other hand, to wonder, as Kamugisha does, if the Caribbean will survive as we know it into the second half of the current century is to confront the potentially “paralyzing *futurelessness* of catastrophe” (Small Axe Project 2011, p. 134; emphasis in original). The possible waning of any sense of futurity that comes from staring into the apocalyptic abyss coincides with what David Scott describes as a sense of the present as “stalled” or “stricken with immobility” following “the collapse of the social and political hopes that went into the anticolonial imagining and post-colonial making of national sovereignties” (Scott 2004, p. 1; 2014, p. 6). This combination of a haunting past, a stalled present, and an attenuated future is central to the narrative economy of the novel I focus on below: Nicole Dennis-Benn’s *Here Comes the Sun* (2016).

Set in Jamaica in the 1990s and centering on the experiences of a family of three women, Dennis-Benn’s text might not at first seem an obvious choice as a case study for assessing literary apocalyptic thinking. It does not take place in the aftermath of a real

catastrophic event in the way that, say, Xavier Navarro Aquino's *Velorio* (2022) offers a post-apocalyptic vision of Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria, or Myriam J. A. Chancy's *What Storm, What Thunder* (2021) documents the fallout from the 2010 Haitian earthquake. Nor does *Here Comes the Sun* conjure anything like the explicitly dystopian futures found in a wave of recent science-fiction works from the region. Nonetheless, in its depiction of racist and classist oppression, sexual abuse, environmental crisis, and the depredations of the tourism industry, Dennis-Benn's novel provides a searing critique of what I will term the apocalypse of the everyday, that is, of the way capitalism's logics of social death and ecocide permeate every facet of contemporary quotidian practice. In this context, even mundane actions like taking a shower (to use an example from the novel) can become freighted with apocalyptic dread in a situation where water is scarce due to drought conditions created by the effects of global climate breakdown. In analyzing *Here Comes the Sun*, I am particularly interested in its registration of the impact of debt on Jamaica. Debt, for Girvan, is one of the contributing factors to the existential threat facing the Caribbean. However, the temporality of debt also provides a useful optic for understanding how Dennis-Benn's novel grapples with the ongoing effects of a catastrophic history, as well as with the erosion of futurity in apocalyptic times. Indeed, a reckoning with debt, as both a financial burden and, more broadly, an "extractive regime" and a "mode of colonial politics" (Pérez-Rosario 2018), is crucial to the way *Here Comes the Sun* generates an everyday apocalyptic narrative that not only sketches the dystopian contours of the present but also illuminates the present as history. By doing so, it keeps alive the faint Utopian promise that there is still time to reshape the present and so chart out alternative futures to that of catastrophic socioecological collapse.

2. The Apocalypse of the Everyday

"Apocalyptic thought in the Caribbean as a whole", J. Michael Dash has written, is "very much a part of a Caribbean intellectual tradition" (Dash 2003, p. 35). Of the variety of apocalyptic discourses within this intellectual tradition, that which grasps the apocalypse not as a future yet to come but as an ongoing event that began with the colonization of the so-called New World has arguably had the most intellectual traction in recent years. It is a perspective brilliantly captured by Brathwaite, speaking in an interview in 2005 in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina:

My position on catastrophe [. . .] is, I'm so conscious of the enormity of slavery and the Middle Passage and I see that as an ongoing catastrophe. So whatever happens in the world after that, like tsunamis in the Far East and India and Indonesia, and 9/11, and now New Orleans, to me these are all aspects of that same original explosion, which I try constantly to understand. (Brathwaite 2005)

Brathwaite's understanding of slavery and the Middle Passage as an apocalyptic explosion that continues to reverberate in the present is complimented by those critics who, drawing on the work of the Plantation School of Caribbean economists (notably Lloyd Best, Kari Levitt, and George Beckford), highlight the ongoing centrality of the exploitative logics of the colonial plantation system to contemporary societies in the Caribbean and beyond. Typically, for such critics, the plantation is not simply a mode of agriculture or economic institution; it is also a socio-political formation combining intensive ecological extraction, specifically racialized and gendered forms of social domination, and precociously modern forms of management, governance, and finance (Manjapra 2018, p. 363). This model of plantation economy was honed in the Caribbean from the 1500s to the 1700s and then exported across the globe, with the result that, despite major transformations in the world economy, there today exists an "interlinked global plantation political economy" that "continue[s] to extract institutional rents using taxation, infrastructure, environmental,

social, and other policies that rigidly control labour, race, ethnic, urban, and rural relations” (Woods 2007, p. 57). As Katherine McKittrick puts it: in “agriculture, banking, and mining, in trade and tourism, and across other colonial and postcolonial spaces—the prison, the city, the resort—a plantation logic characteristic of (but not identical to) slavery emerges in the present both ideologically and materially” (McKittrick 2013, p. 3). The present, in other words, is littered with the debris of plantation history.

Perhaps one of the clearest instances in the Caribbean of how the plantation model shapes contemporary social and economic institutions is the tourism industry. As McKittrick alludes to, and as many critics have pointed out, in “a number of crucial ways, tourism has grown out of and sustains the plantation economy” (Strachan 1995, p. 9). The plantations, writes Ian Gregory Strachan, “laid the economic, political, cultural and social groundwork that has enabled tourism to function so effectively in the Caribbean. As an institution of colonization, the plantation established a political and economic dependency on the metropolitan centres that tourism merely extends” (Strachan 1995, p. 9). The pernicious effects of tourism’s perpetuation of the logic of the plantation system—sharply dissected, of course, in works such as Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* (1988) and Olive Senior’s “Meditation on Yellow” (1994)—are at the heart of Dennis-Benn’s *Here Comes the Sun*. Indeed, the novel’s exploration of the industry’s racist, sexist, and ecocidal dynamics is what allows it to draw the connections between the various crises confronting Jamaica, as well as to dramatize the difficulty of escaping the catastrophic legacies of the past.

Very quickly, in the narrative, parallels are established between the experience of slavery and the experience of servicing foreign tourists. The opening chapter focuses on Margot, one of the central protagonists, alongside her younger sister, Thandi, and mother, Delores. The novel presents the hotel in which Margot works as, in Janelle Rodriques’s words, a “fantastical but very real world, in which Black humanity must be negated for tourism” (Rodriques 2021, p. 66). Drawing on Orlando Patterson’s writing on slavery as social death, Rodriques notes that “much like a slave has no value except as ‘an extension of his master’s power’ (Patterson), Margot sees little value in functions that do not serve her master and projects no identity beyond the mirage-machine of the hotel-plantation” (Rodriques 2021, p. 66). In a telling scene, after Margot has left work for the day and is speaking to a local taxi driver, we are told:

She smiles at him—it’s a slow, easy smile; her first real one all day. Her job entails a conscious movement of the jaw, a curve of the mouth to reveal teeth, all teeth—a distraction from the eyes, which never hold the same enthusiasm, but are practiced all the same to maintain eye contact with guests. “It’s a wonderful day at Palm Star Resort, how may I help you?” “Good morning, sir”. “Yes, ma’am, let me get that for you”. “No, sir, we don’t offer a direct shuttle to Kingston, but there’s one to Ocho Rios”. “May I help you with anything else, ma’am?” “Your shuttle is outside waiting on you, sir”. “You have a good day, now. I’m here if you need anything. No problem”. (Dennis-Benn 2017, p. 12)

Here, we see the affective labor required of Margot to project an exoticized fantasy of service for the tourist to consume. The mask of subservience she dons recalls Derek Walcott’s description of the “rictus of a smile” that characterizes how, “from shame of necessity”, the Caribbean islands “sell themselves” in “tourist brochures” (Walcott 1998, p. 81). Simultaneously, it is a reminder of Fanon’s account in *Black Skin, White Masks* of the way in which the colonizer demanded of the Black subject “service with a smile, every time”—a demand underwritten by fear and force (Fanon 1986, p. 35).

The ghosts of slavery and colonial domination that haunt Margot’s interactions with the foreign guests at the hotel’s front desk appear too in her interactions with the male visitors she services sexually for money. Margot’s sideline is symptomatic of the way the

sexual violence intrinsic to the plantation system resurfaces in the tourist resort. Sex tourism in the contemporary Caribbean, writes Kamala Kempadoo, is “part of the informal package that is indirectly offered to the visitor”: territories “that once served as sex havens for the colonial elite are today frequented by sex tourists, and several of the island economies now depend upon the region’s racialized, sexualized image” (Kempadoo 2004, pp. 1, 118). Sex tourism’s reliance on a racialized, sexualized image of the Caribbean—one that has its roots in the exoticizing fantasies of colonial discourse—is neatly encapsulated in the descriptions of Margot’s sexual encounters. Musing on the desires of her clients, she notes that “many of these men want to know [. . .] if black nipples have in them the richness of topsoil after a thorough rain shower. They want to touch. And she lets them. She doesn’t see it as demeaning. She sees it as merely satisfying the curiosity of foreigners; foreigners who pay her good money to be the personal tour guide on the island of her body” (p. 10). This passage is indicative of the complex portrayal of sex work in *Here Comes the Sun*.² Margot’s attitude reveals how she sees such work as granting her agency and a degree of control (in her role as a “guide”) over the objectification she experiences. Certainly, over the course of the narrative, her sexual labor does allow her to advance socially and financially. However, it comes at the cost of her alienation from her own body and sexuality (she destroys her one meaningful erotic relationship with her female lover Verdene in her quest to secure social status). It also leaves her ostracized from her family and involves her perpetuating the exploitation she suffers through the deal she does with Alphonso, the hotel manager, to recruit and train young women as sex workers to be pimped out to tourists. Margot might have a degree of control as the foreigners’ “tour guide” around the “island of her body”, therefore, but as is underlined by allusions such as this to racist ideologies that conflate Black bodies with nonhuman nature, the impact of her participation in the (sex) tourism industry is hugely damaging, both socially and psychologically.

If the portrayal of Margot’s sex work thus emphasizes the intersection between sexual exploitation, racist fantasies, and colonial history, it also draws a further connection to the environmental violence central to the expansion of the tourism industry. Dennis-Benn herself has noted that in delving into the lives of her three protagonists in *Here Comes the Sun*, she wished to “parallel the exploitation of the land with the exploitation of the female body” (Revoyr 2016). In this regard, it is worth comparing the following two passages from the novel:

She sways high above Horace [one of Margot’s foreign clients] like a palm tree in a cool breeze [. . .] She rocks and sways, aware of the creeping chaos, the sensation that spreads from her groin all the way to his curled toes as though her orgasm had possessed his body too. When it’s all over, Margot spirals down and down, crashing like a big tree uprooted by nature’s merciless ax. She lies next to Horace, postcoital disgust and a lurking disappointment coiling in her belly like days-old milk. (p. 60)

The hotels are building along the coastlines. Slowly but surely they are coming, like a dark sea. Little Bay, which used to be two towns over from River Bank, was the first to go. Just five years ago the people of Little Bay left in droves, forced out of their homes and into the streets. [. . .] In the past, developers would wait for landslides and other natural disasters to do their dirty work. But when tourism became the bread and butter for the island’s economy, the developers and the government alike became ravenous, indifferent. In retaliation, people stole concrete blocks and cement and zinc from the new developments to rebuild homes in other places, but their pilfering brought soldiers with rifles and tear gas. The developers won the fight, and the people scattered like roaches. [. . .] It was as though their own land had turned on them—swallowed up their homes

and livestock and produce and spat out the remains. By the time the workmen arrived in River Bank, Little Bay had been long forgotten. (pp. 120–21)

The first passage draws attention once again to sex tourism's reliance on exoticizing fantasies of the Caribbean and its peoples, with Margot resembling the tourist brochure trope of a palm tree swaying in the breeze as she sits astride Horace. The description of her orgasm as a "creeping chaos" spreading down through her body to invade and possess Horace's is echoed in the description in the second passage of the hotels advancing "like a dark sea" along the coastline, invading and possessing the land. That Margot feels she is possessing Horace suggests a temporary reversal of power relations and underscores the sense of agency she acquires through her sex work. Ultimately, however, she finds herself "uprooted" like a tree under "nature's merciless ax" and plagued by self-disgust. There are parallels here with the way the hotels appearing on the coastline promise economic development and prosperity but, instead, devastate the landscape and uproot communities. Indeed, the nature of the "long forgotten" Little Bay's disappearance—its being effectively wiped from the map and erased from cultural memory—indicates the apocalyptic quality of tourism's transformation of local environments.

The erasure of Little Bay and the dislocation of its populace is not only another example of the haunting of the present by the violence of the colonial past; it also emphasizes how the development of the tourism industry threatens to obliterate any sense of historicity as such. When it is the turn of River Bank, Margot's native village, to suffer the fate of Little Bay, the bulldozers "appear overnight":

They stand in place like resting mammoths, their blades like curved tusks. It's as though they landed from the sky or were washed ashore. One by one they begin to knock down trees in the cove and along the river. They also take a chunk of the hill, cutting down the trees that cradle the limestone, which they chip away. Their big engines grind two-thousand-year-old tree trunks—trees the ancestors once hid behind, crouching in search of freedom. [...] Bits and pieces of rock scatter as trees are uprooted. (p. 289)

Here, the image of uprooted trees again calls back to the description of Margot following her sexual encounter with Horace, highlighting the entanglement of sexual exploitation, the ecological fallout from land development, and the legacies of plantation slavery. At the same time, the loss of the trunks behind which "the ancestors once hid" is also the loss of the histories of resistance to the plantation regime inscribed within the landscape. The past, then, is under threat of erasure except insofar as it subsists as the haunting specter of colonial violence, while the future itself has been colonized by the developmental logic of the hotel-plantation. It is in the context of this consequent reduction of experience to a sclerotic present that we can understand the narrative form and structure of Dennis-Benn's novel more generally while also drawing a fundamental connection to the other type of violence stalking *Here Comes the Sun*, that of the financial violence of debt.

Crucially, Jamaica's debt burden is inextricable from the history of the island's tourism industry since the 1970s. As part of the neoliberal structural adjustment policies it was forced to adopt in return for loans from the IMF and World Bank, Jamaica, like many nations in the Caribbean, was encouraged "to create new forms of export-orientated industry" (Mullings 2014, p. 104). In practice, this often led to a focus on tourism since the "stringent austerity measures of the IMF, combined with the World Bank's narrow focus on liberalization and deregulation strategies, left the region's governments with few alternative globally competitive exports" (Mullings 2014, p. 104). Tourism, moreover, appeared to offer countries a way to earn valuable foreign exchange that could be used to pay down the debts they had contracted (in reality, of course, with much of the industry controlled by transnational corporations, a "large proportion of the income gener-

ated from tourism remains outside the Caribbean”, with “leakage” rates as high as 90% (Kempadoo 2004, p. 116)). In Jamaica, the late 1970s and 1980s saw the government promoting the development of mass tourism and all-inclusive resorts, paving the way for a boom in the industry in the 1990s (Altink 2024, p. 6). This boom period is precisely the one in which *Here Comes the Sun* is set: at one point, we are told explicitly that the year is 1994. And while there are few direct references to Jamaica’s experience of neoliberal restructuring in the narrative, one character does exclaim tellingly: “Damn politicians. This country has gone to the dogs. Did you know that we owe the World Bank billions of dollars” (p. 50). The extraction of surpluses from Jamaica via the debt burden, then, is intimately connected to the sexist and racist violence to which women, in particular, are subjected in the novel as a result of the tourism industry. As Mimi Sheller observes of the use of debt as a form of (neo)colonial exploitation: the “production of indebtedness [...] leads directly to the unequal sexual economies that it turns out are common [...] in tourism zones [...]. The more general offshoring of sex tourism to island locations and the sexual exploitation of poverty [...] is another manifestation of debt, twisted into purchase of bodies” (Sheller 2018, p. 975). In other words, with the need to earn foreign currency to pay down the country’s debt encouraging the expansion of the tourism industry, and with sex tourism a central part of that industry, the servicing of the country’s financial burden falls particularly heavily on those working-class women of color compelled to enter the plantation-hotel complex.

Here Comes the Sun most obviously stages this connection between debt colonialism, tourism, and sexual and racist violence in a scene recounting the moment when Margot’s mother, Delores, prostituted her daughter to a tourist when she was a teenager:

One day a tall, dark-haired man walked into Delores’s stall. He was wearing sunglasses, like most tourists. He had a presence about him, an air Delores associated with important people—white people. [...] The man pulled out a wad of cash and began to count it in front of Delores. Delores watched him count six hundred-dollar bills. She had never seen so much money in her life. The crispness of the bills and the scent of newness, which Delores thought was what wealth must smell like—the possibility of moving her family out of River Bank, affording her daughter’s school fee, books, and uniforms, buying a telephone and a landline for her to call people whenever she liked instead of waiting to use the neighbour’s phone—all these possibilities were too much to swallow all at once. ‘Sah—but she—she’s only fourteen’. ‘I’m staying right down there’. He gestured to the large cruise ship, which was in plain sight. ‘I’ll have her back before dinner’. (pp. 201–2)

The scene clearly emphasizes tourism’s imbrication in relations of racial domination and sexual exploitation. However, it also functions as an allegory of Jamaica’s relationship with the IMF and World Bank, the debt burden imposed on the country, and the violence with which it is entangled. Margot here stands as a figure for Jamaica, particularly Black, working-class Jamaica (a reading strengthened by the frequent conflation of Margot’s body with the island landscape during her sexual encounters with tourists). In this particular instance, meanwhile, Delores could be said to figure something like the national bourgeoisie, or at least those comprador elites who, in the aftermath of independence, sought to “exclude the masses from effective power” while serving as local agents for foreign capital (Thomas 1988, p. 72). Margot’s (Jamaica’s) future is mortgaged or sold off by Delores for an advance of money in the present, a transaction that does long-term damage to her selfhood (just as the IMF’s neoliberal restructuring of Jamaica has done long-term damage to the country’s productive economy). Indeed, Margot’s encounter with the tourist locks her into a treadmill of sexual exploitation that recalls the way the IMF loans to Jamaica locked

the island into a “borrowing treadmill” (Weis 2004, p. 466). Finally, just as the money earned from tourism tends not to remain in the Caribbean, so the money Delores earns from prostituting Margot does not bring the financial security she hopes for since it is stolen by her brother, who promptly disappears to the US.

This scene and the allegorical weight it carries are crucial to understanding the narrative economy of *Here Comes the Sun*. It is the catastrophic central event—the “original explosion”, in Brathwaite’s terms—around which the novel is organized. Margot’s rape is mirrored in Delores’ own prior sexual assault as a thirteen-year-old (which we learn of after the scene with Margot), as well as in Thandi’s rape as a young girl. The scene also encapsulates the interpersonal dynamics of debt and sacrifice that structure the relationship between Delores, Margot, and Thandi. Delores prostitutes Margot in the belief that it will ultimately improve their situation (“*Do it now and you’ll tank me lata*”, is her unspoken message to Margot as she sends her off with the tourist-rapist). Both Delores and Margot, meanwhile, believe that by sacrificing themselves in the present and forgoing their own future (in Margot’s case, by pursuing her work at the hotel at the expense of her relationship with Verdene), they will ensure Thandi has a better life. This, in turn, is felt as a kind of burden by Thandi:

‘Thandi, all these years we’ve been sending you to school, and you’re wasting time and paper on ah lousy art project and disappearing to do god knows what? Do you know how much ah sacrifice!’

Thandi clamps her hands over her ears and shakes her head. ‘Just stop! I don’t want to hear this speech’. (p. 132)

The sense of indebtedness Thandi is made to feel towards her mother and sister weighs on her like a financial debt weighs on a country, and like such financial debts, the bitter irony is that the debt only perpetuates the problem it was meant to solve. Delores’s and Margot’s cold-eyed determination to do whatever it takes to ensure a more secure future does not break the cycle of violence in which they are trapped but merely perpetuates it: by the end of the novel, as a result of her actions, Margot has to watch Thandi replicate the transactional sexual relationship with Alphonso that has scarred her own existence. *Here Comes the Sun* thus implicitly draws the connection between the intergenerational trauma of sexual abuse and the intergenerational violence of Jamaica’s ongoing debt burden.

Indeed, the novel’s emphasis on protagonists who find themselves seemingly stuck in an endless cycle, unable to progress, and repeating the same traumas might be said to evoke precisely the temporality of the debt relation. In their analysis of the “financial terror” of mass indebtedness, Lucí Cavallero and Verónica Gago define it as “a structure of obedience that operates over the day-to-day and time to come and forces us to take on the costs of structural adjustment in an individual and private way” (Cavallero and Gago 2021, p. 14). Debt, in other words, like the wage, is “a mechanism for the extraction of life time and labour time”. However, whereas “the wage functions by exploiting labour that has already taken place”, debt “exploits a time to come”: the financial obligation debt imposes is a “machine of capture” that lays claim to future labor (and life) time (Cavallero and Gago 2021, p. 18). It is, writes David Graeber, referring specifically to a country’s national debt, “money borrowed from future generations” (Graeber 2011, p. 358). By colonizing the future, therefore, the debt relation limits one’s horizon to the present. It is this lack of futurity or sense of stasis—one compounded by the erasure of cultural memory associated with the development of the plantation-hotel complex—that permeates Dennis-Benn’s narrative at every level.

Thus, for example, in addition to the repetitive cycles of trauma and abuse within which the central protagonists are trapped, we are introduced to several secondary characters who seem locked in a perpetual present. There is Delores’s mother, Grandma Merle,

who “fell silent” (p. 31) on the day her son left for the US, having stolen the money Delores received for prostituting Margot—money that allegorically stands for the wealth extracted from Jamaica in the form of debt repayments and profits from tourism. Merle is now a largely invisible, mute presence, confined to the corner of Delores’s house. There is also the neighbor, Miss Violet, for whom time stopped on the day her husband, Asafa, deserted her to go to the US with another woman:

The date—though currently 1 June 1994—is still 7 August 1988, according to the water-stained calendar hanging on a wall. Inside this house, Hurricane Gilbert has not yet come and devastated the island, flooding out some residents of River Bank. Inside this house, Edward Seaga is still Prime Minister of Jamaica, a yellowing picture of him pasted next to the calendar. Inside this house, a fisherman name Asafa still brings home lobster for his family. (p. 225)

Significantly, Grandma Merle and Miss Violet would presumably be of the generation that came of age during the anticolonial struggles of the 1960s. The fact that they both appear to be stuck in time, unable to move beyond a moment of trauma, gestures to the contemporary sense of the Caribbean present as, in Scott’s words, “stricken with immobility” following “the collapse of the social and political hopes” of the independence era, a collapse that was at least in part hastened by the impact of debt colonialism in the region.

This reduction to a stalled present is then confirmed on a formal level: tellingly, the narrative mode throughout *Here Comes the Sun* is the present tense. Moreover, there is a circularity to the novel, from its title, with its tourist brochure-style promise of good times, to its devastating final pages, in which Margot, alienated from her family, wanders aimlessly around her new beachside villa in a gated community, the fruits of her social ascent:

As Margot stands on the pool terrace, the sun, which hasn’t shown itself in days, makes its way from behind the soft, dove-gray clouds, bright and unflinching. The rectangular pool shimmers before Margot. Everything glitters in the new sunlight, just like Margot had always thought it would. Except for her lone, grainy figure on the water’s surface, dark in the face of the sun. (p. 345)

The promised sun has come, as it were: Margot has attained the supposedly better life for which she sacrificed so much. However, there is no sense of fulfillment or hope for the future here; instead, we confront a perpetuation of the logics of social death that structure the plantation-hotel. If the latter is, to recall Rodriques’s description, a “fantastical but very real world, in which Black humanity must be negated for tourism”, then Margot has ironically imprisoned herself in an analogous space: surrounded by the phantasmagoria of commodities she has purchased to fill her empty villa, she herself appears as a kind of phantom, a being leached of life—nothing but a “grainy figure”, a shadow on the surface of the water. The latter, moreover, functions as a mirror of the ecocidal logic of the plantation-hotel complex: the water in the pool is, we discover, being extracted from the sea in a manner that evokes the tourism industry’s catastrophic exploitation of water resources in the Caribbean (Pattullo 1996, p. 41), while also conjuring the specter of climate breakdown in the form of rising sea-levels. The novel thus ends on a vision of everyday apocalypse: individuals consigned to social death, communities uprooted and dispersed, ecosystems disrupted and degraded, and the future foreclosed.

3. Against Spectralization

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand suggests that Afrodiasporic peoples are haunted by “the spectre of captivity” (Brand 2023, p. 31). This specter takes the form of an embodied memory; it is as if, writes Brand,

those leaping bodies, those prostrate bodies, those bodies made to dance and then to work, those bodies curdling under the singing of whips, those bodies cursed, those bodies valued, those bodies remain curved in these attitudes. They remain fixed in the ether of history. They leap onto the backs of the contemporary—they cleave not only to the collective and acquired memories of their descendants but also to the collective and acquired memories of the other. (2023, p. 37)

Throughout *Here Comes the Sun*, Brand's "spectre of captivity" cleaves to Margot's body, from her performance of servility at the hotel's front desk to her final isolation in her villa. Indeed, the spectral image of Margot on which the novel concludes emphasizes how the existential threats now confronting the Caribbean have their roots in the ongoing catastrophe of slavery, the Middle Passage, and the plantation system.

Something similar might be said in relation to the representation of Thandi: here, the specter of captivity seems to etch itself into her flesh in the form of a discoloration caused by the bleaching treatments she subjects herself to:

With one hand Delores rips the flimsy nightgown off Thandi to bare her chest so that she can see her bleached body in its entirety—everywhere as light as the cedar planks that Clover uses to patch holes in the shack. Gone is Thandi's once-mahogany cocoa skin. Delores jumps back, her hands flying to her mouth as if a ghost—a duppy—snatched her breath, her eyes watering. (p. 232)

Thandi's efforts to bleach her skin to avoid, as she puts it, the "ugliness of being black and poor" (p. 229) turn her into the embodiment of the haunting history of slavery's branding of the flesh. Her body becomes the site of everyday apocalypse, not only manifesting the ongoing impact of colonialism's racist hierarchies but also—insofar as Thandi is toxifying her skin with the application of the bleaching chemicals—gesturing to the general toxification of the environment, from coral bleaching to polluted waterways, that is the effect of mass tourism in the Caribbean.

Nonetheless, Thandi is perhaps the novel's one vehicle of hope or promise in an otherwise bleak narrative. Crucially, her body, even in all its disfigurement, remains tangible; its corporeality is returned to in the novel time and again as a kind of stubborn fact. What I mean by this—and its significance for understanding the faint Utopian promise contained in the depiction of Thandi—is best illustrated with reference to Sayak Valencia's concept of "gore capitalism". Gore capitalism, writes Valencia, refers to "the undisguised and unjustified bloodshed that is the price the Third World pays for adhering to the increasingly demanding logic of capitalism" (Valencia 2018, p. 12). In particular, it highlights the "many instances of dismembering and disembowelment, often tied up with organized crime, gender and the predatory uses of bodies", which are now central to value accumulation (Valencia 2018, p. 12). Valencia contends that "one of the fundamental characteristics for the development and propagation of this type of capitalism has been its own spectralization" (Valencia 2018, p. 59). By this, she means the degree to which capitalism since the 1970s has shifted its attention, relatively speaking, from investment in productive activities to investment in financial speculation—from making tangible commodities to betting on the abstractions of finance capital (of which trading in debt, of course, is a significant part). However, by spectralization, Valencia also means the increasing mediatization and derealization of daily life, that is, the saturation of everyday existence by mass media images that shape perceptions of the world in ways that desensitize individuals to the violence of gore capitalism: "The media function as over-expositors of violence, which they naturalize for viewers through a constant bombardment of images to the point where they turn violence itself into a kind of *manifest destiny*, to which we can only think to resign ourselves" (Valencia 2018, pp. 146–47). Such spectralization includes the proliferation of media tropes and discourses about "peripheral and impoverished spaces" that function as "a way of

othering, foreignizing” those spaces and their inhabitants—a process of “derealization” that “retains colonialist stripes” and serves to render such locations vulnerable to exploitation or organized abandonment (Valencia 2018, p. 156). Amongst these derealizing tropes and discourses, we could, of course, include those generated about the Caribbean by the tourism industry, in which the realities of the region are obscured by exoticizing fantasies of a sun-drenched paradise and, as Walcott puts it, the “high-pitched repetition of the same images of service that cannot distinguish one island from the other” (Walcott 1998, p. 81).

The violence of gore capitalism’s spectralization of peripheralized locations and the people that inhabit them is captured in the spectralization of Margot’s body in *Here Comes the Sun*. As we have seen, Margot is, in Valencia’s terms, “derealized” by her role in the plantation-hotel complex, from her donning of the mask of servitude at the front desk to the conflation of her body with the mediatized tropes of the tourist brochure when she is servicing her clients (her appearance as a “a palm tree in a cool breeze” when astride Horace, for instance). In these moments, the reality of her corporeality is displaced by the exoticized image she must project. Accordingly, it is perhaps no surprise that by the end of the novel, when Margot has achieved her aim of becoming a hotel manager, she is left discorporate, as it were, reduced to that spectral, “grainy figure” reflected in the pool water. Significantly, too, the “derealization” of Margot re-emphasizes the connection between tourism in the Caribbean and the other meaning of spectralization discussed by Valencia: that of the increasing power of finance capital, here in the form of the impact of debt colonialism on Jamaica. Margot’s final spectral presence underscores her allegorical (dis)embodiment of the island’s debt burden and the violence of immaterial capital.

It is in contrast to Margot’s derealization and all that it signifies that I want to read Thandi’s corporeality in the novel. Despite all the pressures exerted on her and despite her own attempts to efface her flesh through skin bleaching, Thandi’s body ultimately resists spectralization. Throughout the novel, she repeatedly confronts the material reality and tangible intensities of her corporeal self. This is particularly true in those scenes where she is with Charles, the working-class son of a fisherman with whom she falls in love:

There is something urgent building inside her. She doesn’t know where it rises from—this occasional burst of fire inside her chest. She goes over to where Charles sits and stoops before him. Charles remains silent as though he knows her mission and has agreed to be her accomplice. To leap into the fire. She brings her face to his and their lips touch.

She unbuttons her shirt for him. One by one the buttons slide from the holes. The bleached turpentine hue of her chest, smooth with the elevated roundness of her breasts, which are small and full, tapering off at nipples the shade of tamarind pods. Charles stares at her breasts wrapped like HTB Easter Buns in the Saran Wrap plastic. He regards them for what seems like a long time, as though trying to convince himself of something. [...] She waits for him to do something, anything. To rip the plastic off so that she can finally breathe, to put his mouth to the small opening in her nipples where she hopes milk will flow someday for a child. All she needs is release. But it’s his silence that grows, shaming her. He contemplates her with the compassion of a priest. She feels herself shrinking under his assessment of her. “Put yuh clothes back on”, he says. “Why?” “Jus’ put it back on”. [...] Thandi buttons her blouse, her back to Charles; and the flame glows inside her still. (pp. 186–87)

This scene is, of course, freighted with tragic pathos, as Charles confronts Thandi’s alienation from her body and the impact of racist hierarchies on her self-perception. Yet, Thandi’s body remains a tangible presence here; it refuses spectralization, straining to burst through the Saran Wrap that encases it as part of the bleaching process (with the Wrap manifesting

yet another specter of captivity insofar as Thandi resembles a shrink-wrapped commodity in a supermarket). Thandi's desire for physical connection with Charles resonates with Valencia's call to "re-ontologize the body" in resistance to the practices and discourses that derealize it or, to put it another way, condemn it to social death. Despite how this scene concludes, the "flame glows inside her still", and by the novel's end, Thandi has begun to overcome her self-alienation.

In this regard, it is equally significant that Thandi has a passion for art that sees her produce a series of drawings of local people that capture the realities of their bodily practice:

Thandi shifts uncomfortably as [Charles] studies each portrait she has painstakingly drawn for her project. He laughs when he recognizes the drawings: a drawing of Miss Gracie clutching her Bible; Mr. Melon walking his goat; [...] the women with the buckets on their heads on their way to the river; Miss Francis and Miss Louise combing their daughters' hair on the veranda; Mr. Levy locking up his shop; Margot hunched over stacks of envelopes on the dining table with her hands clasped and head bowed like she's praying. She blushes when he gets to a drawing of himself by the river. [...] [H]e says, 'Yuh is di real deal'.

'Yuh think so?'

'One hundred percent,' he says. 'I like di drawings of di people. Ah like how yuh mek dem look real'.

'They are real'.

'Yeah, but you give us more. I don't know if ah making any sense. What's di fancy word yuh use fah when yuh can see inside ah person an' know dem life story?' (p. 185)

Thandi's drawings are the antithesis of the mediatized images and derealizing tropes of the Caribbean promulgated by the tourism industry. Serving aesthetically to re-ontologize the body, they celebrate the textures and intensities of everyday life in Thandi's village. In a novel distinguished, as we have seen, by its registration of the reduction of experience to a stalled present, with cultural memory eroded and the future foreclosed, Thandi's portraits restore a sense of historicity, of agency—"dem life story"—to her subjects. Unsurprisingly, Thandi's artistic aspirations are dismissed by Delores and Margot, both of whom consider such work a waste of time and effort: from their instrumentalist perspective, anything that is not going to help Thandi ascend socially is valueless. That Thandi persists with her art as a source of pleasure, an end in itself, underscores her ultimate resistance to the dominant social logics that consign her sister to a lonely, disincorporate existence. *Here Comes the Sun*, then, offers an exemplary demonstration of a literary form of (everyday) apocalyptic thinking that, in Girvan's terms, effects a kind of strategic thinking capable of articulating the intersection of economic, social, political, and ecological crises in the Caribbean. At the same time—indeed, perhaps by doing so—it keeps alive the "flame" (to borrow the term used to describe Thandi's bodily desires) of resistance, the faint, glowing possibility that things might yet be otherwise.

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Notes

- ¹ On the idea of the apocalypse as something that illuminates the conditions of the present, see Junot Díaz (2011). Writing in the wake of the Haitian earthquake of 2010, in an article significantly titled “Apocalypse—What Disasters Reveal”, Díaz notes that “apocalypse comes to us from the Greek *apocalypsis*, meaning to uncover and unveil” (2011). Drawing on James Berger’s discussion of the three meanings of apocalypse, Díaz explains that it is, first, “the actual imagined end of the world”; second, it “comprises the catastrophes, personal or historical, that are said to resemble that imagined final ending”; and third, it “is a disruptive event that provokes revelation” (2011).
- ² For further discussion of the complex portrayal of sex work in the novel, see Donahue (2019) and Spear (2024).

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