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Ghosts of the plantation: sugar, narrative energetics and gothic ecologies in Fiji

Abstract: This article examines gothic representations of the sugarcane plantation in literature from Fiji. Focusing on Indo-Fijian texts, including Totaram Sanadhya’s ‘The Story of the Haunted Line’ (1922) and Subramani’s The Fantasy Eaters (1988), it shows how ghostly encounters and uncanny returns evoke not only the haunting memories of indenture, but also the violent rushes and energy-depleting crashes generated by sugar, as a ‘vampire crop’ which exacerbates the slow violence of food insecurity, the threat of mosquito-borne disease, the gendered exhaustion of fertility and the speculative organisation of life into sources of ‘cheap energy’. In imagining sugar’s gothic ecologies, the texts are seen to ground human subjects within the multispecies work/energy system of the plantation, anticipating the ‘ghosts’ of its social, economic and environmental legacies.

Key words: sugar, energy, gothic aesthetics, plantation writing, Fijian literature

In his discussion of the emergence of Anglophone literature in the Pacific islands, the Indo-Fijian writer Subramani notes how the process has been viewed as unspontaneous and ‘artificial’, rather than ‘a free flowering of culture’ (1995, 45). While he concedes that literature was ‘invented, planned, constructed’ amid Oceania’s diverse oral cultures, he suggests that this generated a self-consciously experimental, defamiliarising aesthetics and ‘stylistic variety’, of the kind observed in writers such as Albert Wendt, Sia Figiel and Epeli Hau’ofa (45; 49). Subramani’s own stories, collected in The Fantasy Eaters (1988) and more recently in Wild Flowers (2017), confront realist descriptions of everyday life in Fiji’s sugar diaspora with strange and dreamlike narrative events, from people appearing to rise from the dead to incursions of myth, fantasy, spirits and nightmares. As part of a wave of creativity that swept the Pacific islands during the era of decolonization from the 1970s, Subramani’s fiction has been associated with a growing textual attention to the roles of fantasy, myth and memory that unsettled claims to realist transparency and narrative linearity in Oceanic literature (see V.
Mishra 1979; Long 2018; S. Mishra 2019a). While scholars have tied these formal innovations in the region to the ruptures of its postcolonial history, highlighting for example the repeating traumas of indenture in Subramani’s work, there has been less of a focus on the narrative effects of ecological transformation within the plantation system that much of this work describes. It is worth noting, however, the numerous botanical images that appear in Subramani’s comments on realism, as they evoke the plantation’s own substitution of the ‘flowering’ of local crops for the planned importation and cultivation of monoculture crops such as sugarcane – a crop that, from the nineteenth into the early twentieth century in the Pacific, relied on the ‘planting’ of enslaved, coerced and indentured labourers from India, China and the Melanesian Pacific Islands. The son of an indentured worker, Subramani reimagines the uprooting and dislocation of people, crops, species, commodities and texts across many of his stories, presenting the sugarcane plantation as a gothic backdrop to their textual reconfigurations of the natural, the organic and the ‘real’. Given the significant impact of the colonial plantation system, with its extreme, nature-defying disruptions to local ecologies across the Pacific islands, to what extent might this context offer the grounds for a materialist reading not only of Indo-Fijian literary innovations, but also of Oceanic modernism more broadly?

Anthropological studies both in and outside the Pacific have noted the prevalence of magical, spiritual and supernatural tropes in cultural responses to environmental disruption. A recent edited collection on the ‘ghosts of the Anthropocene’ (Anna Tsing et al. 2017), for example, explores the supernatural themes characterizing imaginaries of human-induced climate events, from the haunted geologies of mining-induced volcanoes to the ‘monsters’ of radioactive clouds. Similarly, literary scholars have identified the use of genres and styles such as magical realism and the gothic to represent anthropocenic disruptions, linking the recurrence of irrealist forms – a term that Michael Löwy associates with an aesthetics ‘founded on a logic of the imagination, of the marvelous, of the mystery or the dream’ (2007, 194) – to the extreme ways in which environmental change is felt in postcolonial locations. Working on literature from Oceania, literary scholars have explored indigenous poetic critiques of nuclear toxicity and the expansion of army bases for military testing (DeLoughrey 2019; Santos Perez 2019); mythical responses to water disruptions in the sugar plantations of Hawai‘i (Shewry 2015); and multispecies assemblages in indigenous myths and legends (S. Mishra 2019b). While the gothic elements of earlier ‘South Seas’ fiction by writers such as Herman Melville, R. L. Stevenson and Somerset Maugham might be linked to the earlier changes generated by maritime extraction and plantation agriculture, the classic Oceanic texts written during the period of decolonization are exemplary in their ability to weave together indigenous knowledges, spirits, cosmologies and elements of traditional orature with historical accounts of the ruptures caused by colonial, capitalist and militaristic activity in the islands – as can be seen in texts such as Vincent Eri’s *The Crocodile* (1970), Albert Wendt’s *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (1979), Patricia Grace’s *Potiki* (1987), or Epeli Hau‘ofa’s *Tales of the Tikongs* (1983), among others. Whether relaying struggles against neo-colonial extractivism, exploring the bizarre value conversions involved in turning coconuts into copra, or imagining the spiritual upheavals caused by real estate development on indigenous land, such texts reveal the history of socio-ecological disruption in the region to be bound to – rather than temporally removed from – the attribution of agency to magic, ghosts or the spirits of ancestors within pre-existing belief systems.
Read in an ecocritical context, the incursion of ghosts and spirits, as remnants of the past that intrude on the present, coincides with a socio-ecological disruption to the self-generating metabolic interaction between humans and their environments. Focusing on the disruptions generated by the sugar plantation, this paper links the uses of haunting and narrative circularity within Indo-Fijian representations of sugar to the commodity’s own transformation of life-cycles into death-spirals driven by violent rushes and energy-depleting crashes. Drawing on energetic materialist criticism, I show how texts including Totaram Sanadhya’s ‘The Story of the Haunted Line’ (1991 [c. 1922]), and Subramani’s The Fantasy Eaters (1988), evoke not just the haunting memories of indenture, but also the ‘slow violence’ of food insecurity, the vampiric threat of mosquito-borne disease, the gendered exhaustion of fertility, and the managed organization of life into sources of ‘cheap energy’ through the speculative rearrangements of the contract and the task system. In imagining sugar’s gothic ecologies, the texts are seen to ground human subjects in the multispecies work/energy system of the plantation, anticipating the ‘ghosts’ of its social, economic and environmental legacies.

‘Saccharine irrealism’ in Fiji

The idea of Fiji as a plantation society has been a point of scholarly debate, with some critics highlighting the large indigenous population that remained outside the sugar plantations, and others insisting that this population was greatly affected by plantation enterprise, given that sugarcane was the mainstay of Fiji’s economy for over a century (Moynagh 1981, 11). Although the tropical grass traditionally grew throughout areas of the South Pacific and was used for thatching bure houses, its commercial cultivation became a priority following the cession of Fiji to Britain in 1874. In the 1880s, the Melbourne-based Colonial Sugar Refining Company opened mills in Fiji and indentured workers were brought from East India to work in the estates and refineries, joining Melanesian Pacific Islanders who had been forcibly removed from locations such as Vanuatu. Workers faced extreme physical deprivation, violence, malnutrition and overwork. As the Fiji historian Robert Nicole notes, the plantation was a ‘total institution’, whose racial hierarchy was spatialized in its panoptical architectural structure, and whose ‘organisational structure, division of labour, physical boundaries, regulation of movement, housing arrangements, and timetabling, was designed to maximise discipline, control, and production’ (2018, 104).

As in the plantations of the United States, this imperative of productivity extended to ecological ‘resources’, which were adapted to suit the needs of plantation owners, who introduced measures of biological control to increase efficiency. These measures included the removal from villages of local pigs, which were deemed unclean because they threatened productivity by eating crops, even though they had previously served to facilitate cleanliness by eliminating waste in island villages (a situation captured in Eri’s The Crocodile). Similarly, the introduction of non-native bird species benefited planters while threatening those who depended on local crops such as plantain. One of the most enduring effects of the plantation’s reorganisation of the natural environment was the proliferation of mosquitos, a phenomenon common across sugar plantation regions due to their sizeable irrigation systems, necessary
proximity to rivers and oceans for trade, and the attractiveness of sucrose and vats of cane juice. As in other locations across Europe’s ‘mosquito empires’ (McNeill 2010), devastating consequences resulted from outbreaks of mosquito-borne diseases such as malarial and typhoid fever. While corporate narratives have tended to emphasise the naturalness of sugarcane and its indigeneity to the South Pacific, the introduction of plantation monocultures significantly disrupted local ecologies by undermining the regenerative capacities of indigenous plants, soils and wildlife, just as the workers ‘planted’ by slavery and indenture were subjected to the depleting effects of exhaustion, malnutrition and disease (Lal 2000).

As with other ‘sugar islands’, the rapidity with which the plantation system altered local demographics and ecosystems had a profound impact on everyday experience, and, correspondingly, on modes of representing everyday life. In her essay ‘Novel and History, Plot and Plantation’, the Jamaican writer Sylvia Wynter suggests that sugar brought about a representational crisis which effectively destabilized realism in plantation societies. According to Wynter, the arrival of cane as a single crop commodity ‘marked a change of such world historical magnitude, that we [in the Caribbean] are all, without exception still “enchanted”, imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in its bewitched reality’ (1971, 95). By subjecting local and indigenous foodways to the fluctuating values of the world market, the sugar regime created an imbalance in which the accumulation of vast quantities of wealth occurred alongside the proliferation of malnourished, exhausted bodies and dehydrated land. Wynter suggests that the arrival of sucre-modernity in the Caribbean led to a ‘collision’ between two systems: those of ‘plot’ and ‘plantation’ – the first of which accepts that [crops] should be sown only as food, while the second ‘sows it as business, burning down forests of precious trees, impoverishing the earth’ (citing Asturias, 96). If sugar destabilizes the ‘plot’ (of land) by turning it into a source of capital and subjecting it to the ‘bewitching’ animations of the value form, it also destabilises the literary ‘plot’ by confronting Caribbean writers with a set of world-historical forces so complex, externalised and intangible that conventional realism becomes inadequate to their representation. As Michael Niblett explains, because the ‘bewitched’ qualities of sugar were ‘compounded by its volatility, the result of dependency on an uncertain world market and of the biophysical instabilities of plantation monocultures’, systemic changes in the sugar economy have tended to correspond to upswings in gothic and supernatural tropes, which he terms ‘saccharine irrealism’ (2015, 277). One example is the Haitian zombie folktale, whose monstrous resurrections have historically spoken to anxieties about enslavement and ecocide among cane-cutters, as Kerstin Oloff (2012) shows. In this way, the experiential shocks triggered by the cane economy inform the incursion of spirits, monsters, zombies or ghosts within saccharine irrealism. While the gothic in particular has long been linked to representations of sugar – from Jane Eyre to the cannibalistic themes of abolition poetry – the genre of ‘imperial Gothic’ has been connected more specifically to food crises in colonial settings. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee for example links the ghosts and skeletons of colonial stories such as Kipling’s ‘The Phantom Rickshaw’ to the famines and ecological catastrophes exacerbated by British colonial policies, describing imperial gothic as a ‘disaster style’ adequate to the ‘disaster environments’ of the British empire (2013, 24).

To what extent might the ghostly themes in Indo-Fijian writing be similarly viewed as a ‘disaster-style’ adequate to the ‘disaster-environment’ of the sugarcane plantation? While ghosts have long haunted plantation settings in Fiji according to oral legend, the figure of the ghost also
appears in writing from the post-indenture period. The apparition in Satendra Nandan’s ‘The Ghost’ (1979), for example – whose disembodied voice echoes those of the Indian girmitiyas who drowned on arrival to Fiji aboard the Syria in 1884 – recalls the disastrous relocations of the sugar regime rather than a ‘natural’ disaster per se, while imagery of insurrectionary skeletons in Sudesh Mishra’s fiction evokes the physical exhaustion produced by over-tasking, highlighting the grotesque gap between sweetness and starvation, or the promises and experiences of indenture (2006, 176). Although the temporal disjunction initiated by the ghost foregrounds the difficulties of recovering the voices of ancestors in these texts, ghosts also appear in writing from the indenture period. The written accounts provided by Totaram Sanadhya, for example, who came to Fiji as a labourer in 1893 and returned to India in 1914, are filled with nightmares, death, sorcery and spirits.2 ‘The Story of the Haunted Line’ (‘Bhut Len Ki Katha’) tells the tale of a man who arrives in Fiji and is forced to live in isolation from the rest of the indentured workers in ‘lines’ (a long row of cubicles) which are haunted by the spirits of eight indigenous Fijians who previously died there. On arrival, the narrator is informed by the overseer that if he shares his food rations or leaves the plantation before the end of his five-year contract, he will be imprisoned. Despite this, he shares his rations, learning afterwards that he will receive no more for the rest of the week. Forced to work in the fields and denied even cane juice at the mill, he begins to hallucinate from hunger, experiencing dream visions of his village at home and seeing ‘many shows of sorcery’ (121). Tormented by ghosts, he tries to hang himself but is disturbed by a rat biting him. Nearing death, he is rescued by a group of indigenous Fijians, who feed him yams and sweet potatoes. The story is explicitly framed as a ‘battle between two ghosts’: the narrator claims that ‘When the ghosts of the line come, I will face them. They are the ghosts of the line, I am the ghost of the company…. I know well how to fight with ghosts’ (117). As is made clear throughout the story, the ghosts he battles are not those of the indigenous Fijians, but rather the abstract forces of death, disease and starvation haunting the plantation itself, which is a life-denying system insofar as it controls workers by withholding food (tellingly, the sardar is called the ‘food-giver’ [118]). The narrative is resolved only when forms of hospitality, established through lines of Indian-Fijian friendship, work to overcome this denial, replacing the deathly and depleting sugar regime with sustaining crops from the earth. Notably, for Wynter, the plot – as a space where the enslaved cultivated their own food – was a site of resistance to the plantation economy. Although the British required indigenous Fijians to work in communal ‘tax gardens’ (Nicole 2018, 98-99), the food grown in Sanadhya’s story becomes crucial to the narrator’s battle with the ghosts of the plantation.

Through this theme of food, Sanadhya’s story also explores the dynamics of energy consumption within the plantation system. Tellingly, what the narrator encounters when entering the lines is not ghosts but a multispecies community of vampiric creatures: the numerous rats attempting to gnaw at his skin, as well as the mosquitoes that try to feast on the rats before vampirically descending on the narrator (‘hungry from several days, [they] clung to my body in hordes’, 116). As human, rats and insects chase each other around the room, the spectacle shows how the multispecies effects of starvation have incited a kind of cannibalistic feasting on the life-energies of others, a cannibalism connected not to Fijian customs but, more pertinently, to the pestilent ecologies of the plantation. Insofar as the narrator’s ‘battle with ghosts’ is a struggle against the plantation and, more immediately, starvation, it is a battle precisely against a vampiric energy regime predicated on exhaustion. In fact, the threat of exhaustion is crucial to
the form of the narrative. Unfolding over a seven-day period as the narrator waits for his next food rations, the time of waiting echoes that of the indenture experience more generally (waiting for the end of the five-year contract), yet it is also paced according to the time of energy-crisis. As the narrator’s body begins to run out of energy, his hallucinations and dream visions cause remembered and imagined events to blur together, leading him to conflate his past in India with his present in Fiji and to mistake the indigenous Fijians at his door for ghosts. Given how the physical draining of energy from the narrator’s body sparks his ghostly visions, the story’s descent into the gothic, its ‘saccharine irrealism’, is fueled by a ‘real’ process of exhaustion. Not only does ‘The Story of the Haunted Line’ thus speak to the depletive forces of the sugar plantation as a ‘disaster-environment’ generative of ghosts, but it also harnesses energy as a narrative force.

Narrative energetics in The Fantasy Eaters

Viewed as an energy-commodity, sugar can be seen to mediate the effect of energy on narrative time – what might be termed narrative energetics (Macdonald 2013) – in plantation fiction. As a commodity, sugar is a calorific fuel yet it also ‘naturalizes necessity’, in Niblett’s terms, ‘shaping bodies, tastes, habits, and even emotional geographies (sugar “highs” and “lows”)’ (2015, 268). The historical process of cultivating the taste for sugar, as is shown in Sidney Mintz’s seminal study, Sweetness and Power (1985), altered the tempo of modern life by establishing disciplinary productivity in the cane fields and determining the hours of factory time in industrial Europe, forcing working-class women to substitute farmed foods for the short-term bursts of energy provided by the sugary cup of tea. By converting energy from enslaved bodies in the fields and women’s bodies in the kitchens into surges of cheap energy for factory workers, sugar produced a short-term ‘rush’ followed by an energy-depleting ‘crash’ not only at the individual level through glucose spikes in the blood, but also at the collective level, through the exhaustion of the millions of bodies needed to produce it. Its effect on ecological rhythms has been understood as similarly exhausting. As the environmental theorist and historian Jason Moore notes in his study of the sugar islands of the Atlantic world, the colonising, ‘thirsty’ force of sugarcane has historically worked to ‘devour’ the forests, ‘exhaust’ the soils and ‘kill’ other crops and species, generating effects that have ultimately ‘undermined the sugar regime’s capacity to reproduce itself’ (2009, 376). Imagined in this way, sugar appears as a ‘vampire crop’ that multiplies death instead of life, turning lifecycles into death-spirals of rapid accumulation and exhaustion.

One useful way of considering the destabilising effects of sugar on narrative energetics is through the notion of ‘social metabolism’ elaborated by Marx. In Capital, Marx suggests that the process by which energy is taken from the soil to produce food and metabolised by humans as calories, before being returned to the earth through traditional practices such as depositing night-soils at the outskirts of medieval towns, is no longer possible in modern capitalist society. As the modern city drains more energy than it returns, a ‘metabolic rift’ separates it from those rural hinterlands from which energy is siphoned off, rendering society an unsustainable organism. In Marx’s words: capitalism ‘disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the
earth... All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress toward ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility.\(^3\) The exhaustion of soil fertility leads to an expansionist drive in search of more nutrients – notably through the European colonisation of ‘guano islands’ for fertilizer – which in turn fuels a global plantation complex whose expansion rests on the extraction of cheap energy from enslaved people, indentured workers and women, as well as from non-human animals, soils, rivers and oceans. While energy transfer is a normal part of life insofar as organisms consume other organisms, an imbalance occurs when people are transported thousands of miles to sustain monocrop regimes characterised by widescale depletion. Importantly, the metabolic rift entails not just a growing spatial distance between metropole and colony but also a temporal shift caused by the accelerated use of finite sources of fertility by metropolitan societies. As Marx’s analysis indicates, the mode of production instantiated in the plantation system outstrips the regenerative capacities of nature even as it continues to demand acceleration for profit. As centuries of accumulated guano deposits from bats are reduced to the minutes taken to drink a sugary cup of tea, capital’s accelerative tendencies launch an assault on time itself, which speeds towards annihilation like a car accelerating into a wall. Yet the effects of this crisis – observed in disasters such as floods when these occur several years or even decades after deforestation has taken place – are externalized as ‘natural’ disasters although they in fact are social ones. Importantly, this is not simply because humans have externalized nature, but because the spatial and temporal effects of the metabolic rift render their social origins invisible – the result being that they take on supernatural qualities, resembling monstrous returns and instances of nature’s ‘revenge’.

This disruption to the metabolic interaction between humans and their environments is evident in plantation fiction from Fiji, and the stories collected in Subramani’s *The Fantasy Eaters*, with their techniques of narrative circularity and uncanny returns, offer illuminating examples. As the collection’s title implies, the stories are concerned with the fantasies, myths and spiritual consolations embraced by indentured workers and their descendants, particularly as these clash with everyday experiences in Fiji, a place described as *narak* (hell) by the Indians who arrive there. While memories and desires shape how Fiji is perceived in the minds of migrants brought to the islands, Subramani shows how these desires – particularly for growth, prosperity, fertility and renewal – clash with the plantation’s depletive socio-ecological effects. Sugarcane is frequently connected to the spirits, ghosts and demons of Hindu and Fijian mythology in the stories. ‘Tell Me Where the Train Goes’, for example, depicts the ‘nightmarish world’ of the plantation as one threatened by both spirits and sardars, its residents fearing each other (the protagonist suffers flashbacks of mutilated corpses among the cane leaves) as well as cannibalistic ‘earth-bound spirits’ such as *Tevoro* (*kana tevoro*), a Fijian night demon that eats bodies (11). The sugarcane resembles ‘Karkotaka, one of the main serpents of the underworld’: just as the Hindu demon Karkotaka is known for deforming and immobilising his victims, so too is the sugarcane imagined as a force that stunts and disfigures the bodies of its cultivators, curving their spines, crushing their limbs in mill machinery and leaving their faces and hands ‘gnarled and weather-beaten’ (13-14). In the story ‘Sautu’ (a word that ironically means ‘prosperous’ or ‘well-being’ in Fijian), the cane growers are described as ‘cracked and creased like the earth outside’, while the protagonist’s mental exhaustion is mirrored by the
parched, dehydrated land, just as the arson that destroys his house is reflected in the burning cane-fields outside (3). Surrounded by imported mynah birds, the excrement of imported dogs and rats, the ‘monotonous hum’ of sugar-hungry mosquitoes and the disasters of fire and drought, Subramani’s nightmarish portrait of indenture in Fiji is bound up with the sugar plantation’s exhausting and violent effects in socio-ecological terms.

If ‘Sautu’ maps the protagonist’s depression onto the exhausted plantation setting, ‘Tell Me Where the Train Goes’ contrasts the extreme and violent dynamism of the sugar train – whose arrival and departure book-end the narrative – with the abandonment experienced by producers of the energy-commodity. The train’s engines are imbued in the story with gothic agency: groaning and hissing like a wild animal, the train produces ‘much collision and clanging of chains and metal’, throwing out sparks like an ‘angry monster’ (11;18). The protagonist tries to outrun the train but is electrocuted, leading the narrator to conclude that he was ‘shipwrecked in the barracks’ (18). If the ending shows how freedom requires the economic and political opportunities of citizenship and ownership denied to Indian migrants (without which escape would amount to social and economic abandonment), the cyclical structure of the story reinforces this sense of entrapment. The title question, which enquires fruitlessly into the destination of the train, evokes the limited perspective of the producer, who sees only the cane arriving and departing. The destination of the sugar train escapes the protagonist, who would often ‘wonder where the train went’ (14), serving as the emblem of a consumer modernity whose arrival is deferred due to its colonial, export-oriented function in Fiji. In this way, both the narrative circularity and open question of the title convey a sense of suro-modernity’s paralysing division between the producers and the consumers of energy, building the metabolic rift into the very structure of the narrative.

The narrative energetics of sugar also underlie the story ‘Gamalian’s Woman’, which begins with the protagonist’s apparent death and resurrection. The opening states ambiguously that ‘Mrs. Gamalian died in her dream’ (55), before showing how she awoke at her funeral service and stunned those in attendance by sitting up in her coffin. Mrs. Gamalian goes on to capitalise on this apparent death by telling fantastic stories of the afterlife, for which she receives gifts and money that she buries underground. Her stories are interspersed with the memories, desires and disappointments of her past life: the waves lapping at the river to the underworld, for example, mirror those of the seas that she crossed as an indentured worker (girmitiya) and into which she fell during her quarantine off the coast of Fiji, while her image of heaven recalls the fantasies of paradise generated by recruiters in India: ‘Dreams which originated in the arkathis’ lies blossomed in her seasick mind’ (58). As Mrs. Gamalian’s memory fades, her listeners begin to question her reliability, and she is left with nothing but the ‘dregs of her dreams’ and images ‘faded like leaves in a compost’ (60). One day she digs up her money and, emptying the fragments onto a sugar bag, finds that the notes have crumbled to dust. She cooks and eats the ashes, yet, like a planted crop that has failed to grow, they offer no sustenance and she dies shortly afterwards, with the last line of the story directly echoing the first: ‘One morning the old woman died in her shack, leaving Bamboo a bawling, bewildered orphan’ (61). Her adopted son, Bamboo – a name that evokes the dried stems of cane – is an infant at both the beginning and end of the narrative, offering a second example of something that has failed to grow. As a symbol of the future generation, he finds that his care-giver’s sugar-coated stories, when consumed as ‘bits of paper’, serve merely to mask unpleasant realities.
In one sense, this hints at Subramani’s own refusal to make the history of indenture palatable, speaking to the ‘critical irrealist’ method by which he combines fantastic stories with material deprivation, spiritual nourishment with malnutrition. Read in the context of the plantation, however, the story’s images of things failing to grow contribute to a more specific theme of infertility, evoking the subject of social-reproductive crisis. Feminist proponents of social reproduction theory have noted how the costs of social reproduction are often carried by unwaged labourers including women, and that female labour is frequently appropriated as part of nature’s ‘free gifts’, mirroring the exploitation of nutrients and energy from forests, oceans or soils. Silvia Federici (2012) for example refuses to separate social reproduction from ‘productive’ waged labour, suggesting that the latter is structurally dependent on the free appropriation of devalued labour from women and non-white workers. Critics have highlighted the ‘housewifization’ of labour in the world’s bedrooms, kitchens and gardens as a process crucial to the production of energy-commodities in the postwar period, as it served to reproduce, feed, clothe and care for the workforce (Deckard 2018). Mintz’s (1985) analysis of female domestic labour and slavery in the sugar industry reveals the long historical trajectory of this process. Yet, despite this crucial role of unwaged labour, Nancy Fraser identifies a social-reproductive ‘crisis tendency’ within capitalist societies, according to which the ‘orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies’ (2016, 100). In the sugar plantations of Fiji, as historians have shown, indentured women awoke in the early hours of the morning to cook roti before completing up to ten hours of labour in the fields and returning to cook once again, while the requirement ‘to work in the fields for at least the first seven months of their pregnancy’ (Gill 1970, 38) led to high rates of miscarriage, infant mortality and suicide. Because of this exhausting work regime, accounts describing indentured women in Fiji often have drawn on gothic language: Sanadhya, for example, notes that ‘When women return from work, there is a corpse-like shading to their faces’ (1991, 61), citing the Australian missionary Hannah Dudley’s observation that ‘life on the plantations alters [women’s] demeanour and even their very faces... The look on those women’s faces haunts me’ (cited 71). In Subramani’s story, a tension emerges between Mrs. Gamalian’s dreams of regeneration and eternal life, as well as of fertility and marriage in Fiji – fantasies planted by recruiters who tell her she is ‘certain to marry a merchant prince on the islands’ (58) – and her memories of gendered exploitation at the hands of brutal foremen and overseers, the extortions of abusive, thieving and gambling husbands, and the chronic worry that cyclones and floods might damage the cane harvest and prevent her from feeding her family. If these memories reveal how the plantation functions through gendered violence and the devaluing of domestic, care-giving and reproductive work, the corpse-like body of Mrs Gamalian, which undergoes a ghostly resurrection, performatively enacts the deathly ‘crisis tendencies’ at work in a system predicated on the unrestrained extraction of women’s energy.

The various uncanny images of male authority in ‘Gamalian’s Woman’ also highlight the disciplinary patriarchal mechanisms of the plantation system. The title, ‘Gamalian’s Woman’, marks the protagonist as the property of her late husband, whose face bears an uncanny resemblance to the gatekeeper she claims to have seen in heaven, while his list of names recalls the contracts signed previously with other husbands, as well as with the recruiters that locked girmitiya into a system of impossible quotas and further contract extensions. As Sudesh Mishra notes, the word girmit – defined as an ‘agreement’ but embodying the identity of
indentured workers in Fiji – evokes a time of ‘non-agreement’, for ‘[t]here was little correlation between the virtual world of the contract and its material enactment as work in colonial plantations’ (2005, 16). *Girimit* operated through projected visions of a future that would never materialise, reconfiguring the lives of those who signed it according to ghostly speculations on their future productivity. In ‘Gamalian’s Woman’, the extreme futurity of *girimit* is combined with that of the marriage contract, which lures and binds women to domestic labour, and this double-bind is captured at the formal level through the technique of narrative prolepsis. Just as the spectral futurity of marriage and indenture prescribe the life of the *girimitiya* according to race and gender, so the narrative encloses its protagonist by anticipating her death in the opening lines.

Importantly, ‘Gamalian’s Woman’ ends with a final death, which suggests a real limit and ultimate exhaustion. Despite Mrs. Gamalian’s hopes for prosperity and marriage, and her later fantasies of eternal life and regenerated youth, readers are confronted with the finality of her death, and this finality is reinforced by the frozen temporality of the narrative itself: the broken clock, the refusal of her child to age, the ghostly resurrections of the past that haunt the narrative. The effects of this contrast a projected time of growth with that of crisis, staging a conflict that is central to the sugar plantation’s own combination of both speculative expropriation and ecological depletion, of futurity and annihilation. The narrative *telos* of the death-spiral is preempted through the disruption to ecological time caused by the burning of the cane-fields: the narrative *begins* by telling us that ‘the cane harvesting came to an end. The night sky was lit up with the burning fields for the last time’ (55). Unlike the seasonal rhythms of the pastoral harvest, this practice confirms a destructive tendency within plantation agriculture to maximise short-term productivity, offering a brief resurgence of soil fertility at the expense of the land’s future. Situated in the context of a system predicated on exhausting the conditions necessary to its own reproduction, Subramani’s story of life after death can be seen to confront narratives of regeneration with experiences of exhaustion. Read along ecocritical lines, the nightmarish unsettling of narrative chronology, here and across *The Fantasy Eaters*, connects the lived experience of those in the plantations to the depletive, non-regenerating ecologies of sugar.

**A battle with ghosts**

If there is an ecogothic tendency at work in representations of sugarcane in Fiji, both in plantation literature and in the ghost stories that continue to haunt plantation regions, it is worth considering how this tendency speaks to the plantation’s social, economic and environmental legacies. Following decades of decline in the sugar industry, a number of the plantations no longer used for commercial purposes have been converted into resorts or locations for holiday cottages, whose owners, often the grandchildren of original planters, can spend significant periods of time abroad. The combined atmosphere of shabby abandonment and the rigid, symmetrical ordering of plants creates an uncanny atmosphere for the visitors who wander through these spaces. Yet the ghostliness of the plantation also highlights the living legacies of sugar in economic and political terms. For Sylvia Wynter, the political economy of the plantation
structure would continue to haunt the postcolonial Caribbean, where changes ‘in the superstructure of the plantation, a new Constitution, even Independence, were changes which left the basic system untouched; and which only prolonged the inevitable and inbuilt confrontation between the plantation and the plot’ (1971, 102). Linking the lack of economic diversity of societies oriented towards exporting cash-crops to the threat of political instability, Wynter suggests that the influence of the fluctuations in world market prices in the sugar colony gave events such as political coups the appearance of ‘fiction’: ‘History, then, these things that happen, is, in the plantation context, itself, fiction; a fiction written, dominated, controlled, by forces external to itself’ (95). While restoring ‘fact’ for Wynter comes only with an organised political resistance to – and reconfiguration of – the plantation structure, she does not make a naïve distinction between fact and fiction so much as associate fictionality with the disembodied, fantastic and gothic agency of the world market as external cause. This is precisely the strangeness observed in times of food crisis, when local crops wither and die as cash crops continue to be exported; the sense of fiction here arises from the ‘bewitching’ agency of capital as it transforms the metabolic interaction between humans and the local environments on which they depend. Interestingly, Subramani uses similar language when describing the way that plantation legacies have disturbed the ‘plot’ in Fiji. Commenting on the military coup of 1987, which was sparked by racial tensions between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians, he claims that this brought about a ‘restructuring of reality’ and required a ‘suspension of disbelief’, causing the ‘problem of the plot running out of control’ (1995, 47). As with Wynter, the ethno-political fractures that create a heightened sense of fiction and disrupt the ‘plot’ of national modernity in Fiji are connected to the legacies of the plantation system and its disruptive effects on the ‘plot’ (of land), given that the coastal regions used for growing cane, now some of the most lucrative spaces for tourism and real estate, remain key sites of economic and political contestation. In Fiji, the tension between the ‘plot’ and ‘plantation’ has its counterpart in the ongoing conflict between definitions of the land as a source of capital and a source of sustenance and subsistence, characterised in Fijian, often in ethno-racial terms, as ‘the way of money’ versus the ‘way of the land’ (vakavanua) (Jolly 1992).

If the ghosts of the sugar plantation haunt Fiji’s economic and political present, they also haunt its consumer landscapes. On the drive from Nadi airport to Suva, almost every sign advertising a shop and many large billboards can be seen to bear the name Coca-Cola, due to the company’s provision of free ‘privilege signs’ to small businesses. The slow violence of ‘sugar in the blood’ meanwhile continues to pose one of the biggest threats to Fijian lives, forming part of a global health crisis exacerbated by the international divisions of the world food system. While responses often emphasise voluntarist solutions, Subramani has tended to present such consumption crises as structural issues framed by decades of deregulation under the influence of international corporations and financial institutions (1998). In this context, representing sugar as a force that unleashes colonial ‘ghosts’ suggests an agency beyond individual human cause or control, one imbricated in regimes of work/energy and ownership involving governments, global corporations, and financial and legal institutions. The colonial origins of this system are made visible through the history of indenture, yet because the colonial state functioned to support a system of white plantation capital that profited from divides between migrant and ‘native’ labour and affirmed cultural identities to this end, studying the legacies of the plantation requires sensitivity to the modes by which categories of subjectivity have historically been
utilised in the service of racialised capitalism and surplus accumulation. Subramani’s emphasis on the environments in which subjects find themselves, in this context, avoids naturalising these categories and allows for a critical evaluation of their historical formation. Moreover, while he has been critiqued for neglecting the role of ‘human agency’ in his emphasis on external forces, a more situated and decentred view of the subject avoids blaming individuals for failing to solve problems – the pressures to migrate, the challenges of climate action, the effects of substance abuse or obesity – whose eradication requires political reform, institutional regulation and collective agency.

Finally, as Elizabeth Abbott notes, ‘sugar diasporas’ refer ‘to a historical dispersal of plants as well as persons’ (2009, 114), and their representation reveals consequences – the legacies of importing foreign species such as cane toads or the long-term issues with hydraulic infrastructure – that affect far more than just humans. Indigenous epistemologies have long emphasised multispecies and ecocritical approaches to human history. The Fijian-Tongan writer Epeli Hau’ofa, for example, asserts the importance of ‘knowing our histories by reading our landscapes and seascapes’, showing how geographical markers and place names are crucial repositories of historical and ecological memory that encompass the undead as well as the living: ‘The past is alive in us, so in more than a metaphorical sense the dead are alive’ (2000, 460). Yet even as the spirits of ancestors in Oceanic culture provide lessons on how to situate human stories within multispecies assemblages, this is done in ways that remain attentive to the material transformations generated by the colonial Anthropocene, which, from early plantation monocultures to postwar nuclear testing, have radically altered the landscapes and lifeways of Pacific Island regions. Battling ghosts means battling the material legacies of these transformations and battling the symbolic knowledges necessary to the devaluation and free appropriation of ‘cheap natures’ or ‘cheap energies’, for example by rejecting colonial modes of stratification and speciesism. This essay has read the ghosts of the Fijian plantation as a testament to the entangled ways of viewing human and ecological history that are necessary to such a task.

References

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1 Jennifer Wenzel notes how ‘the relationship between realism and magic tends to be read as a binary opposition between the West and the rest, between a singular (European) modernity and multifarious worldviews variously described as pre-modern, pre-scientific, pre-Enlightenment, non-Western, traditional, or indigenous’. Her term ‘petro-magic-realism’ offers a useful corrective to the delocalizing association of ‘magic’ with non-Western ‘tradition’: ‘If petro-magic offers the illusion of wealth without work’, Nigerian writers such as Tutuola and Okri ground this ‘vision in a recognisably devastated, if also recognisably fantastic, landscape.’ (2006, 456). Pacific ghosts can of course be read outside of this ecocritical context, for example in plays by Vilisoni Hereniko and John Kneubuhl (see Heim 2018).

2 Sanadhya narrated his experiences to Banarasi Das Chaturvedi, a Hindi writer and anti-indenture campaigner, and his account was influenced by the latter’s thought (Kumar 2017, 163). ‘The Story of the Haunted Line’ was first published in the Benares-based Hindi journal *Maryada* around 1922 (Lal and Shineberg 1991, 107).

3 Marx was influenced by Justus von Liebig’s use of the term metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*).