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“Entering life”

Literary De-Extinction and the Archives of Life in Mahasweta Devi’s *Pterodactyl*, *Puran*

Sahay, and Pirtha

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INTRODUCTION: ENTERING LIFE

In recent years, critics and novelists alike have questioned literature’s potential to represent, register, and challenge environmental disaster. Perhaps the most-discussed interventions into this debate are Amitav Ghosh’s lectures on literature and climate change, published as *The Great Derangement* in 2016, in which Ghosh posits that contemporary novels are failing to come to terms with the “unthinkable” phenomena of climate change, the Anthropocene, and extinction. In this essay, I wish to deepen and complicate Ghosh’s arguments by turning to another Indian writer, Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016), whose works not only represent the increasing anthropogenic extinctions of human and nonhuman life, but who in doing so calls into question the very archival drives of literature which Ghosh’s lectures implicitly privilege. In her short novel *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha* (1989; hereafter *Pterodactyl*), originally written in Bengali but translated into the Anglophone postcolonial canon via Gayatri Spivak’s 1995 publication of *Imaginary Maps*,¹ Mahasweta narrates a story in which a dispassionate journalist, Puran Sahay, travels to a famine-stricken tribal village in central India.² There, he encounters two kinds of vulnerability which confound his narrow idea of life: an impoverished adivasi (literally, original inhabitant) community who faces continual dispossession by national development projects, and a prehistoric pterodactyl, suffering from a broken wing. *Pterodactyl* stages Puran’s encounter with the incommensurable figure of the pterodactyl, an encounter which reveals how his humanitarianism is complicit with the slow anthropogenic violence of adivasi genocide and

nonhuman ecocide. *Pterodactyl* thus opens out onto a plurality of human and nonhuman temporalities which trouble Puran's narrow anthropocentrism.

What often goes unexplored in the criticism on *Pterodactyl* is how its plot hinges on a creative engagement with extinction, what I will call here *literary de-extinction*. If de-extinction names a bio-technical regeneration of previously extinct species—think of charismatic megafauna such as woolly mammoths and thylacines, brought back from the dead via frozen DNA samples—then I introduce the term literary de-extinction in order to outline a mode of writing which reanimates extinct life forms within a given text's diegetic present. By lifting the extinct figure of the pterodactyl out of the archives of the fossil record and into the world of this short novel, Mahasweta dramatizes how Puran becomes touched by the *dactyl*, or finger, of an entire nonhuman history which at the same time remains other to him. Although actually existing de-extinction projects are, as I show later on, driven by both a melancholic attachment to the lost object and a bio-capitalist desire to techno-fix anthropogenic extinctions, I contend that Mahasweta's literary de-extinction undermines the anthropocentric logic of these pursuits by warning against both a material and a discursive control over nonhuman life. Just as in the text's plot Puran rescinds his claims to archiving the nonhuman, so too does Mahasweta surrender her own claims to narrate or write the pterodactyl. *Pterodactyl* is thus a story which guards against the kinds of "archive fever" that have, in the wake of Jacques Derrida's path-breaking theorizations, emerged as a key feature of contemporary life. By refusing an archival desire to catalogue and commodify life, Mahasweta's short novel re-imagines de-extinction as a model for opening literary form to the nonhuman and returning us to the present as a site of political and ecological resistance. In this respect, I see *Pterodactyl* as both a challenge to contemporary biotechnological conservation projects and a marker of how postcolonial literature can offer a multispecies intervention into the sixth extinction.

ARCHIVING LIFE: THE NOVEL FORM AND THE SUPPRESSION OF THE NONHUMAN

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh posits that contemporary novels are struggling to represent the “peculiarly resistant” reality of climate change (10). Ghosh’s provocation does not rest on the claim that the scale of environmental disaster inherently resists linguistic description. Rather, he implies that this crisis of representation is institutionalized within the cultural memory of the literary world-system, from journals, book reviews, and publishing houses all the way down to the established aesthetic forms that writers have available to them. Ghosh argues that the “mansion of serious fiction” discourages novelists from writing about climate catastrophe (66). There is, he suggests, little literary capital to be accumulated by writing novels about the Anthropocene, and those authors who do are routinely “banished” to the outhouses of genre fiction, “the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house” such as science fiction, horror, and fantasy (24).

At the same time, Ghosh observes that there is something *within* the “grid of literary forms and conventions” that ultimately obstructs a literary encounter with the “unthinkable” (7). Here, Ghosh follows Franco Moretti’s work on how the modern novel develops generic tropes and forms which mimetically register the predictability and “regularity of bourgeois life” (Ghosh 19). If novels are wedded to and formed out of these conventions, then the contemporary novel, faced with the slowness of melting ice caps or the rapidity of wildfires, finds itself unequipped to continue its work of capturing contemporary life. Ghosh therefore makes the case that the “contemporary literary novel”—by which he means the novel in its most dominant, celebrated, and consecrated forms, as what is “regarded as serious fiction”—is both structurally discouraged and formally obstructed from grappling with the urgency of a warming planet (27, 9).

Ghosh's lectures have been called into question for eliding numerous novelistic forms and traditions which would complicate his argument. In early critical responses to *The Great Derangement*, McKenzie Wark and Ursula K. Heise persuasively underline how Ghosh elides other kinds of novel-writing, such as science fiction and proletarian fiction, that have long been attuned to the scalar implications of the Anthropocene. Heise's own work has already made considerable progress in articulating how literature shapes the cultural meanings of extinction. In *Imagining Extinction* especially, which I will return to later on in this essay, Heise details how writers mobilize realist and science fiction modes of storytelling in order to represent species extinction. Yet Ghosh's lectures remain useful to think about not least because they provocatively cast contemporary literature's supposed failure to reckon with climate collapse as being symptomatic of a "broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis" (8). Moreover, Ghosh's arguments rest on the implicit assumption that literature performs an archival function, in that it records and produces our cultural responses to climate collapse. Throughout his lectures, Ghosh identifies a deep grammar of anthropocentric inclusion and exclusion immanent within the novel form. Ghosh suggests that the novel is an aesthetic form which archives a narrow human experience of the planet and, in doing so, suppresses a "recognition" of the nonhuman (5). Like all archives, then, modern literature is deemed to rely as much on exclusion as on codification: "It was in exactly the period in which human activity was changing the earth's atmosphere," Ghosh writes, "that the literary imagination became radically centered on the human" (66). By invoking the Weberian thesis of modernity's disenchantment of the world, Ghosh argues that the formal development of the novel is coterminous with the rationalization of life, in which all that is enchanted—all that is nonhuman—becomes disenchanted: "Thus was the novel midwifed into existence around the world, through the banishing of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday" (17). But while the novel is a form which banishes the nonhuman,

it is also a form which masters it. As Thomas Richards argues in *The Imperial Archive*, at the very moment in which geography's maps mastered distance and geology's fossil record mastered time, the novel utilized the rhetoric of the "imperial sciences" in order to discursively master the unknown (6).

"What is the place of the nonhuman in the modern novel?," Ghosh asks (66). He argues that the novel suppresses the nonhuman and expresses an exclusive vision of the human. Building on this, we can contend that the novel functions as a crucial cogwheel in what Giorgio Agamben calls the "modern anthropological machine" (35). The anthropological machine is an apparatus which divides up forms of life into politically included humans and politically excluded others, whether human or nonhuman, under the sign of animality. The anthropological machine is "not an event that has been completed once and for all," Agamben writes, but is "an occurrence that is always under way, that every time and in each individual decides between the human and animal" (79). The anthropological machine thus "decides upon and recomposes the conflict between man and animal" (75), producing the contours of what is counted as human through the "suspension and capture of animal life" (80). Although Agamben's critique focuses on the production of animality as the abject other to the human, his work also helps us make sense of how the human is defined against the nonhuman. Reading Ghosh and Agamben together, the novel form appears as a cog in the operations of anthropocentrism; novels continually perform the archival work of recording *and* producing the modern human subject. The novel is, in this dominant form, an *archive of the human*, insofar as it follows the feverish twofold logic that Jacques Derrida identifies in *Archive Fever*. Like the archive, the novel "produces as much as it records the event" of the human (17). It is a machine rather than a repository, producing the human it pretends to only describe.³

Ghosh argues that a contemporary literature more suited to register the Anthropocene must no longer suppress or “banish” the nonhuman (24), but must actively “recognize” the nonhuman and engender a “renewed reckoning” with it (5). In short, the novel must now write “the urgent proximity of nonhuman presences” (Ghosh 5). I turn to Mahasweta’s *Pterodactyl* because it not only proposes innovative ways of textually reckoning with the nonhuman, but also because it complicates some of the anthropocentric archival tendencies of the novel form itself. In the first half of this essay, I demonstrate how Mahasweta plots out a story in which a journalist decides *not* to archive the nonhuman. In the second half, I contend that *Pterodactyl* itself gives up its own desire to revivify and rearticulate its nonhuman figurehead. By letting go of the pterodactyl, Mahasweta ultimately interrupts the archive fever of both “modern man” and the novel form.

PTERODACTYL AND THE RHETORICS OF EXTINCTION

Set during the fortieth anniversary-year of India’s independence, *Pterodactyl* follows the third-person focalized narration of a well-meaning but naïve journalist, Puran Sahay, who travels from an unnamed cosmopolitan city to a famine-ravaged village located in the heart of *Madhya Bharat*, or Middle India. Puran journeys to Pirtha to report on how the postcolonial state systemically ignores and polices Pirtha, a village racked by starvation, enteric fever, corruption, and police violence. More than this, Puran also arrives with a humanitarian and journalistic ambition: by investigating the rumored sightings and wall-engravings of a peculiar winged creature, drawn by an adivasi child, Bikhia, Puran wants to write a captivating story that will put Pirtha “on the *map*” of national attention (emphasis original, 137). Upon arriving in Pirtha with his camera and notepad, eager to document this “unearthly terror” first-hand, Puran is met by a mundane yet more shocking reality: the hostility, hunger, and desperation of an impoverished indigenous community sounding their emergency drums

(195). Described in Mahasweta's compound-accumulating *dvandva* style as the "skeleton men-women-boys-girls," the people of Pirtha are depicted as being in a state of panic (136). While Puran has assumed that the pterodactyl's arrival will eventually lead to Pirtha's rescue, for the adivasis themselves the pterodactyl is said to connote the looming "extinction of their ethnic being" (193); it is an embodiment of their communal ancestral spirit, risen from the dead in profound anger as they acquiesce to government initiatives to build "broad arrogant roads" over their burial grounds (109). By the end of the novel, Puran will realize that there are thousands of communities across India whose lives have been similarly abandoned and destroyed by the onward march of colonial and postcolonial modernity: "we have slowly destroyed a continent in the name of civilization," Mahasweta writes in free indirect speech (195).

At one level, *Pterodactyl* can be read as adhering to the narrative motifs of the *bildungsroman* as the quintessential modern form. As a third-person narrated, ostensibly humanist novel of development, broadly conforming to the genre's double focus on psychological depth and a broad social panorama, *Pterodactyl* reads like a story of development. By experiencing a "place of perennial starvation" (104), Puran must give up his insistence on being a "self-reliant" and dispassionate journalist (140), "untroubled by the maelstrom of political moves in Bihar or the pre-historic warfare of casteism" (97), and learn to appreciate his responsibility to others. At the beginning of the novel, Puran is characterized as being "half-human at forty-five," "merely floating in the everyday world" (97). He "gives money to all political parties" and treats the intractability of caste politics as a business opportunity: "The newspaper is a business to him. If reporting caste war keeps his paper going, so be it. Nothing will touch him" (97). Yet after witnessing the impacts of India's agro-industrial development initiatives, Puran commences his own kind of political development towards the perspective of those who are, as Mahasweta writes elsewhere,

systematically “deprived of a dignified life, and persecuted in the most inhuman manner even after half a century of independence” (The Denotified and Nomadic Tribes of India 593).

Yet readers of Mahasweta’s work will know that her explicit political commitments to adivasi organization are inseparable from ecological questions which challenge the entire notion of development. Up until her death in 2016, Mahasweta remained committed to an emancipatory political project for subaltern autonomy, land sovereignty, and ecological survival across the Indian subcontinent. As an investigative journalist, a commissioning editor, and a political organizer, Mahasweta worked with and for India’s historically marginalized and displaced classes, devoting much of her efforts to the struggle for adivasi justice against government-sponsored development programs. Adivasi, which translates as “earliest resident” or “original inhabitant,” is a self-designated collective noun and functioning political identity, first coined by activists in the early twentieth century in order to express their claim to being the indigenous peoples of India.⁴ Adivasi is a term which therefore mobilizes the concept of indigeneity in order to draw into coalition those heterogeneous social groups who are officially designated “Scheduled Tribes” by the post-independence constitution. Mahasweta’s activism sided with these systematically ignored communities who, according to the 2011 census, total around 8.6% (some 100 million people) of the national population. According to historian Ramachandra Guha, adivasis are those who “have gained least and lost most from sixty years of political independence” (insert source here, looks like no page #). Virginius Xaxa, a leading adivasi scholar and Oraon community member, writes that “what seems to be critical to the shaping of this identity is the aspect of experience of domination through colonization,” as well as adivasis’ “extreme marginalization in the economic, political, social, and cultural domains” of the postcolonial nation (49, 51). Mahasweta became “an extremely active facilitator of tribal unity,” developing political campaigns for *Jal-Jungle-Jameen*, or “water, forest, land” (Burns

et al. 82). And much like many adivasi groups' own political demands, Mahasweta conceived of the fight for adivasi recognition and redistribution as inextricable from a fight to arrest what Rob Nixon has theorized as the "slow violence" of development, which severs adivasis' relationships with their surrounding environment and ancestral lands, enforces unwanted migration and resettlement, produces developmental refugees, and proletarianizes whole communities into an informal work force (Nixon 3, 156).⁵

Mahasweta's literary project is codetermined by these activist commitments. As Madhurima Chakraborty notes, Mahasweta is "understood in leftist communities in India, as well as in global literary circles, as one of the few writers whose literary and political endeavours are coterminous" (282). In interviews, Mahasweta frames her fiction as a tribunal in which "this India, a hydra-headed monster, [appears] before a people's court" (*Bitter Soil* x). The "India" referred to here is the post-Nehruvian India, an India marked by uneven developmental and several intertwined political and ecological crises, including the failures of the Green Revolution, Indira Gandhi's authoritarian turn, the resultant State of Emergency period, the inadequacy of the subsequent twenty-point development and redistribution program, the 1984 Union Carbide gas disaster in Bhopal, and later the consolidation of globalization. Underlying these crises is India's sovereign development as a "modernizing" economic power. As Mahasweta puts it, "India makes progress, produces steel, the tribals give up their land and receive nothing" (Mahasweta, *Imaginary Maps* xi). Now "that the forests are gone, the tribals are in dire distress," she notes, and "[d]ecolonization has not reached the poor" (x, xx).

Against this backdrop of political and ecological struggle, Mahasweta's *Pterodactyl* mobilizes the rhetorics of extinction in order to create a deep link between the human and the nonhuman which interrupts the trajectory of the novel's *Bildung*. *Pterodactyl* has been described as a long short story, a novella, and a short novel (*uponyash* in Bengali). This

generic indeterminacy works in the story's favor, as Mahasweta appropriates and subverts some of the narrative motifs of the third-person narrated, ostensibly humanist novel which negotiates between private autonomy and social responsibility. While Puran begins the novel as a character who cannot be touched, Mahasweta plots out *Pterodactyl* in such a way that Puran finds himself completely "invaded" (182) by the realities of Pirtha as an "endangered" village (156). This invasion is never reconciled or incorporated into the stable bounds of Puran's political humanity as a "modern man" (158). *Pterodactyl* is not, to return to Amitav Ghosh, preoccupied with the "individualizing imaginary in which we are trapped" (135), nor is it, to paraphrase Agamben, a kind of fictional anthropological machine which produces the human by sacrificing the nonhuman. While Puran begins the novel as "a half-man, a rootless weed," his time in Pirtha village does not provide him with the missing half of his humanity (160). Instead, Mahasweta's narrative deconstructs, bewilders, and denudes Puran as he encounters forms of life which he cannot easily identify with.

Mahasweta foregrounds this most dramatically when Puran is confronted by the pterodactyl on his first night in Pirtha. With its quivering body "half claw scratching, half floating" across his room, Puran is invaded by the "touch of our times" (140–41). But this "touch," while belonging to "our" time, must also be a touch which is entirely out of time. It is contemporaneous to the present "now," as well as a transhistorical touch across time:

From the other side of millions of years the soul of the ancestors of Shankar's people looks at Puran, and the glance is so prehistoric that Puran's brain cells, spreading a hundred antennae, understand nothing of that glance. ...

The creature is breathing, its body is trembling. Puran backs off with measured steps. (141)

Puran is fundamentally shaken by the pterodactyl's prehistoric gaze and its silent, trembling body. He consults dinosaur encyclopedias and reads about the "pterosauria class from the

Mesozoic era” in the hope of gleaning more information about how to care for the pterodactyl (154). But Puran begins questioning whether the creature he is hiding is in fact a pterodactyl at all: “Their earlier editions, e.g. the Rhamphorhynchus, still had the long tail of a reptile and innumerable teeth. [This creature has no teeth. It does not have a long tail, Puran is certain, for he has taken a good look in the half-light]” (154–55). Rendered here within square brackets which emphasize the “half-light” of his knowledge, Puran’s reflections trouble the reader’s understanding of the nonhuman figure and resist easy categorization.

The pterodactyl remains inaccessible to Puran, and he soon gives up his desire to report it to the national press. As tears “stream from his eyes” (142), Puran proleptically imagines the consequences if he were to report this “explosive discovery”: “Newspapers and scientists from the world over are pouring into Pirtha, extinguishing the tribals altogether” (142–43). He adds later that “all the counties of the world will conduct investigations ... into the last forest, the last cave, to see where the prehistoric time and creature are still hidden. That invasion will be inevitable” (162). Against this anticipated “invasion” of adivasi forest lands, which would turn Pirtha into a paleontological digging site for neo-colonial contractors, Puran decides to conceal the pterodactyl, to omit it from his final report, and to no longer archive the pterodactyl within the national imaginary. Because adivasi forest lands have already been “invaded and devastated” (161), Puran realizes that it is he who must shoulder the “intolerable burden” of the discovery (143). Put differently, Puran must be “invaded” in order to avert further adivasi dispossession: “You are now invaded,” Mahasweta’s omniscient narrator tells him (182). Against the archival imperative to catalogue life, Puran abandons his original goal to put Pirtha “on the *map*” (137). He recognizes the need to keep the pterodactyl’s secret, and to resist its inclusion in the archives of modern life and science: “I won’t go near, I won’t touch you, I will not take your picture with the flash bulb of my

camera” (155). Puran thus learns how to be touched by the nonhuman without himself mastering it:

I do not wish to touch you, you are outside my wisdom, reason, and feelings, who can place his hand on the axial moment of the end of the third phase of the Mesozoic and the beginnings of the Cenozoic geological ages? That is a story of seventy-five million years. ... Have you left the pages of some picture book, taken shape so that you can give some urgent news to today’s humans, have you come here because Pirtha is also endangered, its existence under attack for other kinds of reasons? ... There is no communication between eyes. (156–57)

There are dangers attendant with Mahasweta’s rhetoric of extinction. Her emphasis on the “extinction of [the adivasis’] ethnic being” alongside the extinction of the pterodactyl risks associating adivasis with a pre-modern or prehistoric way of life and dejecting them as “natural” beings rather than human citizens, as tribals who—like the pterodactyl—live outside of the present. Under this reading, the pterodactyl would serve as a metaphor for adivasi life as ancient, static, and endangered, thereby recapitulating a fetishized, nostalgic, even paternalistic view of adivasis. But critics such as Parama Roy have long understood that “animal extinction, ecological violence, and human genocide are hard to hold apart in Mahasweta’s prose: all are connected, and none can be reduced to being only an allegorical vehicle for another” (144). Thus rather than capitulating to a kind of “ecological romanticism,” as Archana Prasad calls it, in which adivasis are wrongly construed as innocent savages, Mahasweta utilizes the figure of the pterodactyl in order to construct a shared vulnerability and interrelatedness between the human and the nonhuman. The pterodactyl is thus not a metaphor for adivasis, but simply a pterodactyl that is at risk in its own right, and therefore a textual presence that, if anything, reveals the specificity of adivasi

justice. As Puran reflects, “both your existences are greatly endangered” (156). And the effect of this is that Puran, at the end of the novel, “cannot remain a distant spectator anywhere in life” (196). This notion of life has something to do with a life beyond the confines of “modern man” (158). For as Mahasweta writes, “the human being, modern man[,] is afraid to know life by entering life” (158). Mahasweta inculcates Puran to transform his narrow conception of life, and to dwell in the fear of knowing life by entering life, reconfiguring the anthropological machine towards a multispecies horizon. At the same time, though, to “know” life is not to understand, lay claim to, or master it. Mahasweta plots the story so that Puran must accept his non-identification with the pterodactyl: “One has to leave finally without knowing many things” (180). And the pterodactyl soon dies.

The novel ends on this note, with Mahasweta reaffirming how Puran’s nascent sense of political responsibility towards life exceeds the borders of the human subject:

Only love, a tremendous, excruciating, explosive love can still dedicate us to this work when the century’s sun is in the western sky ...

Love, excruciating love, let that be the first step. Now Puran’s amazed heart discovers what love for Pirtha there is in his heart, perhaps he cannot remain a distant spectator anywhere in life.

Pterodactyl’s eyes.

Bikhia’s eyes. ...

A truck comes by.

Puran raises his hand, steps up. (196)

Character development (or *Bildung*) is typically considered to be most visible in crescendos of plotted anagnorisis, in which a protagonist is hailed into humanity as they negotiate self-enclosed autonomy and community-bound citizenship. Yet Puran’s “stepping up” denotes less his entrance into full humanity and more of a way of being in the world that is

irrevocably marked by the nonhuman. *Pterodactyl* thus echoes Jed Esty's and Joseph Slaughter's postcolonial critiques of the *bildungsroman*. For Slaughter in particular, "postcolonial Bildungsromane" uncover how "the atomistic, self-sufficient individual is a hyperbole ... an effect of fiction and its figurative technologies" (215). *Pterodactyl* can thus be counted as a novel of "disillusionment, in which the promises of developmentalism and self-determination are revealed to be empty" (Slaughter 215). This is intensified by the story's generic indeterminacy. At one hundred pages in length, *Pterodactyl* cannot be fully described as a long short story or as a short novel, despite me doing so throughout this essay. While Mahasweta combines the short story form's generic compression and fatefulness with the novel's longer-form development, what emerges at the end is futurity: *Pterodactyl* ends by looking towards a political horizon for both adivasis and the planet. Puran "steps up" with his gaze turned towards the human and the nonhuman: "Pterodactyl's eyes. Bikhia's eyes" (196). When Mahasweta's invokes "love," here, she does so without a naïve sentimental attachment to the other. For the intensity of those three adjectives—"tremendous, excruciating, explosive"—instead depict this love as a barbed feeling, as an affect which rips and scratches away Puran's humanistic solipsism. This is not a love which is confined to "modern man." These affective attachments begin in opposition to the destruction of "the primordial forest, water, living beings, the human" (196). The "first step" to combating the colonization of life is to generate an excruciating love.

LITERARY DE-EXTINCTION AND THE WRITING OF THE NONHUMAN

Why is it that, in a short novel about Indian postcolonial governmentality's abandonment of adivasi life, Mahasweta decides to not just incorporate but structurally hinge her plot on a nonhuman figure? Why is it that this nonhuman figure is imagined as an extinct Mesozoic reptilian which pre-dates humanity by around one hundred and fifty million years, and is

written into the text as a paradoxically corporeal spirit? And what does this tell us about literature, the archive, and extinction?

The prevailing scholarship on *Pterodactyl* tends to formulate one of two antinomial readings of its prehistoric figurehead: one optimistic, the other pessimistic. For some, the pterodactyl's radical alterity—a sort of alterity-beyond-alterity, beyond the otherness of the animal—makes an impossible demand of hospitality which Puran must still answer to. For Parama Roy, the pterodactyl's impossibility as an extinct-yet-living being intensifies “questions about the character of responsibility” (148). For Ranjanna Khanna the pterodactyl is a “nonhuman stranger” that invokes the possibility of a “nonidentificatory” community (52). For Spivak it is a figure of singularity with “the peculiar corporeality of a specter” that beckons Puran into responsibility (210). The pterodactyl encourages a form of “postcolonial custodianship” from its guardians (Menozzi 62), but it is also a “gift-provocation” which demonstrates humanity's “indebtedness” to a damaged planet (Farrier 464).

For other critics, however, Puran's commitment to this pterosaur exposes a fetishistic obsession with nonhuman alterity over and above adivasi dispossession. As Neil Lazarus notes, “it is presumably easier for the ‘modern’ consciousness to rest with the absurd suggestion that the creature is an extant pterodactyl than with the idea—diegetically framed as true—that it is the embodied form of the soul of the ancestors of the inhabitants of Pirtha” (250 fn. 67). Read this way, *Pterodactyl* ironizes its protagonist; it suggests that it is easier for Puran to cathect to this late-Jurassic alterity-beyond-alterity, this lost object, rather than the “mere” alterity of adivasi communities. In much the same way, Lazarus is suggesting that Mahasweta's Anglophone readers fixate on the pterodactyl and thus forget the adivasis. As a figure, the pterodactyl has consequently been read as a call to an ethics of alterity and hospitality, and as an ironic indictment of this ethics.

But I want to suggest that we can deepen our reading if we pay attention to *how* these divergent readings are made possible. To do this we need to ask: why a pterodactyl, and how is it written into the text? When critics do ask this question, they usually conclude that the pterodactyl functions as something like what Fredric Jameson would call a “vanishing mediator,” that is, a catalytic agent which “disappears from the historical scene” after it facilitates an “exchange of energies between two otherwise mutually exclusive terms” (78). This is Spivak’s understanding of the text’s denouement: the pterodactyl’s “impossible death” is, for her, “no more than an occasion for ‘responsibility’ between members of two groups that would otherwise be joined by the abstract collectivity of Indian citizenship: the Hindu and the aboriginal” (Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 80). Because the pterodactyl perishes after it has brought Puran and Bikhia together, Lawrence Buell concludes that Mahasweta actually brackets the question of an ethics beyond the human (234). Against these lines of argument, which conceive of Mahasweta’s pterodactyl as a mere triangulator of human concerns, I will spend the remaining part of this essay arguing that it is precisely *through* Mahasweta’s literary de-extinction of the pterodactyl that her text opens up literary form to a mode of non-anthropocentric thought.

Earlier in this essay I introduced Ursula Heise’s *Imagining Extinction* as an important text that thinks through the cultural meanings of extinction. Indeed, when I ended the previous section of this essay, in which I suggested that *Pterodactyl* looks forward to an eco-political horizon, I had in mind *Imagining Extinction*’s concluding call for literary works which register the “connections and disjunctures between violence against disenfranchised communities and against endangered species” (194). *Pterodactyl* can be counted as one of these “multispecies fictions for the Anthropocene,” as Heise has it, because Mahasweta compellingly and complicatedly bridges adivasi genocide and nonhuman ecocide (192). But as I hope to show below, an analysis of Mahasweta’s writing of the pterodactyl can also

develop our understanding of what these multispecies fictions might look like. By turning towards the specific literary methods with which Mahasweta navigates extinction, we can further make sense of contemporary literature's role in contesting the sixth extinction.

De-extinction is the name for a divisive bio-technical process of archive fever in which previously extinct species are genetically regenerated into the present. De-extinction is a kind of resurrection biology which aims to de- and re-code the preserved DNA of lost species, recovered from the archives of museum storehouses and frozen zoos. Over the past decade, de-extinction has begun to capture the popular imagination. But it has also come under scrutiny. "Will such experiments ever lead to the creation of populations big enough to be released back into the wild?," Heise asks (210): "What ecological consequences would ensue, given that, even in the case of the relatively recent extinction of the passenger pigeon, a century has gone by without it and its ecological niche has been occupied by other species? Would this in fact turn the de-extincted species into an introduced, possibly even invasive one?" (210). Ashley Dawson also cautions against falling into the nostalgic and capitalist trap of de-extinction's promise to "wind evolutionary time backwards" (75) For Dawson, de-extinction's promise amounts to little more than a "seductive but dangerously deluding techno-fix for an environmental crisis generated by the systemic contradictions of capitalism" and "takes the extinction crisis as an opportunity to ratchet up the commodification of life itself" (*Extinction*, 79, 82). De-extinction is, Dawson adds elsewhere, "a new round of accumulation," ushering in a patenting and commodification of life, a further privatization and colonization of the commons ("Biocapitalism" 176).

De-extinction is also pervaded by an elegiac impulse fixated on the sublimity of charismatic megafauna, and a melancholic attachment to the lost object. This produces an archive fever: a returning to the past so as to salvage the present. De-extinction's fascination with the spectacular bigness and pastness of extinct creatures is what structures a particular

kind of modern obsession with dinosaurs, crystallized today by the *Jurassic Park* franchise, which in recent years has found itself brought back from the dead in cinematic sequels. Over half a century ago, Theodor W. Adorno diagnosed this melancholic attachment to the extinct as indicating a bourgeois death-drive and desire for fascism. Reflecting on the frenzy of interest surrounding a “preserved dinosaur in the state of Utah,” Adorno writes that “the desire for the presence of the most ancient is a hope that animal creation might survive the wrong that man has done it, if not man himself, and give rise to a better species, one that finally makes a success of life” (115–116). More recently, W. J. T. Mitchell argues that the dinosaur-sign is so integral to the Americanized global imaginary that it has become the “totem animal of modernity” (5). The dinosaur “epitomizes a modern time sense—both the geological ‘deep time’ of paleontology and the temporal cycles of innovation and obsolescence endemic to modern capitalism” (77); it is a “rare, exotic, and extinct animal that has to be ‘brought back to life’ in representations” (79).

What is clear, though, is that Mahasweta’s literary de-extinction refuses to follow the melancholic cathexis and biocapitalist archive fever of de-extinction. Thought of in broad terms, literary de-extinction can name any creative attempt to reimagine extinct species within the here and now of a text’s narrative time. Some works, such as *Jurassic Park*, stage de-extinction as a sublime and cautionary narrative against bio-capitalist technology. But what remains crucial about *Pterodactyl* is that Mahasweta “brings back to life” the pterodactyl in such a way that her text disobeys the prevailing tendencies of the dinosaur-sign. Although in the novel’s opening pages the pterodactyl is portended as a “monstrous shadow” with a “gaping mouth” (102–103), and although Puran, when visiting Bikhia’s stone engraving, observes how the outline depicts the pterodactyl as having wings that are “webbed like a bat’s, the body like a gigantic iguana, four clawed feet, no teeth in the yawning terrible mouth” (128), it turns out that these prefigurations hyperbolically betray rather than portray

the pterodactyl. When the pterodactyl finally arrives in the text, it does so as little more than a “quivering” body with “faded eyes” (143). Thus rather than effortlessly gliding through the sky, Mahasweta’s pterodactyl is fatigued and grounded, a homeless “unknown tired bird” that soon passes away (193).

The pterodactyl also remains peripherally formalized within the text itself. That is, the pterodactyl is rarely anthropomorphized, and it is depicted exclusively from Puran’s outsider focalization. The novel thus constantly evades straightforwardly representing the pterodactyl. And in those moments in which the pterodactyl is indeed figured in the text, it crumples and deteriorates in front of the readers’ eyes: “his body was quivering non-stop” (143). Against an Americanized aesthetic of the dinosaur, as analyzed by Mitchell, Mahasweta’s pterodactyl is attributed a kind of textual passivity and ambiguity. Even the pterodactyl’s death is described ambiguously, with Mahasweta enlisting the metaphor of “darkness opened its mouth” to denote a cave burial (181). Moreover, there is a sense in which Mahasweta’s literary methods for representing the pterodactyl preemptively rebuke the archival methods of contemporary de-extinction projects. When the Anglophone edition of *Imaginary Maps* was published in 1995, it arrived just two years on from the first *Jurassic Park* installment. With these temporal coincidences, it is as if the novella actually speaks back to Spielberg’s sublime cinematic de-extinctions.

At the very same time, Mahasweta utilizes the pterodactyl to admonish the patenting, privatization, and commodification of life itself. There is a strain of techno-pessimism which runs throughout the novel, most of which is directed at India’s so-called Green Revolution, that “techno-political” agricultural transformation which, according to Vandana Shiva, became “conflict-producing instead of conflict-reducing,” culminating in the 1984 declaration of a forest crisis (14–15). In quick, paratactic clauses, Mahasweta rallies against

“deadly DDT greens, / charnel-house vegetables, / uprooted astonished onions, radioactive potatoes” (157), before writing:

What does [the pterodactyl] want to tell? We are extinct by the inevitable natural geological evolution. You too are endangered. You too will become extinct in nuclear explosions, or in war, or in the aggressive advance of the strong as it obliterates the weak, which finally turns you naked, barbaric, primitive, think if you are going forward or back. Forests are extinct, and animal life is obliterated outside of zoos and protected forest sanctuaries.

What will finally grow in the soil, having murdered nature in the application of man-imposed substitutes? (157)

The pterodactyl’s “wordless message” conveys to Puran that he “is a newcomer in the history of the earth’s revolution” (155): “The human being is only a few million years old” (154). The pterodactyl thus conjures up a kind of memory of the planet which, by predating humanity, unsettles “modern man,” reminding him that he is not exempt from extinction.

Pterodactyl’s metaphors of extinction therefore creates space for Puran to see how his life is knotted together with adivasi life. This is a challenge to Puran’s anthropocentrism: the pterodactyl disabuses the ideology of the human as the pinnacle of evolution by opening up a plurality of other nonhuman worlds and times. As Puran confesses, mockingly, “if we acknowledge the pterodactyl, where will homo-sapiens-mapiens be?” (159).

Importantly, the pterodactyl’s apostrophic formulations directly *address* Puran, calling on him to “think,” to witness, and shoulder his participation in the “aggressive advance” of human history. The anaphoric repetition of “you too” insists that Puran is comparably vulnerable. Human history is contingent; it is as finite as the pterodactyl. Mahasweta thus bestows the pterodactyl with a kind of textual force which begins from its own vulnerability. To draw on the concepts of vulnerability, community, and ethics articulated across Jacques

Derrida's and Judith Butler's work, we might argue that Puran reads the fragile pterodactyl as a "radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life" (Derrida, *Animal* 28). The pterodactyl, as the "possibility of the impossible," derives its force from its "nonpower" (Derrida, 28). Consequently, the pterodactyl's death establishes a common corporeal vulnerability, a "shared condition" of life that, by contesting the "anthropocentric conceit" of the "monadic individual," hails Puran into a community beyond the confines of the human (Butler 13, 23).

Later, Mahasweta returns to these questions of vulnerability, extinction, and deep time by adopting a zoomed-out, planetary perspective to her writing:

Having seen history from beyond pre-history, continental drift, seasonal changes after much geological turbulence, the advent of the human race, primordial history, the history of the ancient lands, the Middle Ages, the present age, two World Wars, Hiroshima-Nagasaki, holding under its wing this entire history and the current planetary arms race and the terror of nuclear holocaust, it came to give some sharply urgent news. (180)

Jonathan Boulter has shown how the subjects and characters of contemporary fiction are regularly forced to shoulder a pervasive melancholic indebtedness towards history and the archive (17). Something similar is happening here, as Mahasweta turns the history of human "progress" into a catastrophic teleology of technological militarization which brings about its own extinction, destroying the archive with it. The pterodactyl's deep temporal perspective places an urgent demand on Puran and the reader. In a word, they must recalibrate their relationship with the planet. Puran thus asks of the pterodactyl, without a response: "Have you come up from the past to warn us, are you telling us that this man-made poverty and famine is a crime, this widespread thirst is a crime, it is a crime to take away the forest and make the forest-dwelling peoples naked and endangered?" (157). Mahasweta further rebukes

this “crime” against life when she writes that the “collective being of the ancient nations is crushed. Like nature, like the sustaining earth, their sustaining ancient cultures received no honor, they remained unknown, they were only destroyed, they are being destroyed” (157).

But despite this catastrophic tone, which risks tipping over into a resigned melancholia for a disappearing world, Mahasweta ultimately refuses to let the novel slip into the despondency and dangerous futurity of anthropocentric de-extinction projects. Rather than searching for a “better species,” as Adorno warns against, *Pterodactyl* resolutely holds onto the present as the site of resistance for multispecies justice. Mahasweta knows that the clock cannot be wound backwards. “Listen, man, I can’t turn the clock back by five hundred years,” Pirtha’s Block Development Officer, Harisharan, says to Puran (120). And just as the story suggests that the only way for Puran to generatively “enter life” again would be to give up his intention to archive the pterodactyl, so too does Mahasweta’s writing perform this very injunction. Her literary de-extinction is soon eclipsed by a re-extinction:

The body seemed slowly to sink down, a body crumbling on its four feet, the head on the floor, in front of their eyes the body suddenly begins to tremble steadily. It trembles and trembles, and suddenly the wings open, and they go back in repose, this pain is intolerable to the eye.

About an hour later Puran says, “Gone.” (180)

The fragile pterosaur is not thought of as a lost object that must be preserved. Instead, Mahasweta *lets it be*, which is to say, *lets it die*, so that “the human being” can “enter life” again (158). Puran learns to give up the pterodactyl so that he can reshape his politics in the service of human and nonhuman life, against developmental modernity. And Mahasweta’s text itself, by rendering the pterodactyl as small and minor, and by ultimately giving it up completely, similarly reconciles itself to letting go of the sublime aesthetics of the dinosaur-sign. By rendering the nonhuman in such a way, Mahasweta ensures that the pterodactyl

remains unincorporated into the orbit of human understanding. Both Puran and the reader must relinquish the pterodactyl. By doing this, Mahasweta activates a kind of history which is no longer anchored to the human subject, and a kind of postcolonial writing which interrupts the anthropocentric logics of the novel.

CONCLUSION: ARCHIVING LIFE, AGAIN

When Amitav Ghosh speaks of contemporary literature's need to recognize the "urgent proximity of nonhuman presences," he does so while arguing that novels are formally incapable of undoing their own historical suppression of the nonhuman (5). Against Ghosh's pessimism, I have proposed that Mahasweta Devi's *Pterodactyl* foregrounds the nonhuman in order to arrest the novel form's own drives to banish, capture or archive life. Mahasweta's literary de-extinction contextualizes the postcolonial nation's protracted destruction of adivasi life as part of a wider colonization of life propagated under the aegis of development, progress, and history. This colonization results in human genocides, and it also risks destroying life itself—of which the human is emphatically a part: "the primordial forest, water, living beings, the human" (196). When Puran is touched by the *dactyl* of a history which is not anchored to the human subject, Mahasweta demonstrates how his eventual letting-go of the nonhuman engenders an eco-politics. This eco-politics is not derived from an inculcated empathy with the other. Puran does not know or understand the pterodactyl, and he remains only obliquely connected to Bikhia and the adivasis at Pirtha at the end of the book. But while Puran and Bikhia "belong to two different worlds," as Mahasweta puts it, they nevertheless share a planet (182). Ultimately, this gestures to a non-identificatory but interrelated community committed to one another through a "tremendous, excruciating, explosive love" (196). Thus although *Pterodactyl* takes place in a world in which "life has not been linked to life," the novel's literary de-extinction reveals a deep connection between

the human and the nonhuman (182). As *Pterodactyl* ends with Puran “stepping up,” it does so in order to imagine a kind of political futurity which holds in its memory a history that predates the human species, but also holds out for the possibility of future reconciliation.

Against the commodification and murdering of nature by deforestation and chemical technologies, and against the displacement, pauperization, and cleansing of adivasi communities, Mahasweta compels Puran to conceive of a planetary justice which would not seek its politics in biocapitalist “development,” nor in a straightforward return to the human subject of “modern man,” nor still in a melancholic and backwards-looking attachment to the archives of the past. Against these anthropological machines which decide between the human and the nonhuman, Mahasweta suspends the reorganization of ecological life and demands a future-oriented horizon of eco-political justice.

NOTES

¹ A brief word on translation: Mahasweta’s texts have gained a foothold in the postcolonial canon primarily because of Spivak’s translations, framings, and critical readings. Although Mahasweta herself spoke positively of Spivak’s involvement in the publication of her work (Collu 143), a number of critics ask us to keep in mind that Spivak deliberately translates Mahasweta’s texts into the discursive register of her own postcolonial theory. Most notably, Minoli Salgado’s even-handed comparisons of different English translations of Mahasweta’s work concludes that her texts are often “molded to fit competing theoretical discourses within literary and cultural studies” (Salgado 143). I therefore approach the English-language translation of *Pterodactyl* as an ambiguously co-authored text, and my analysis makes no claims to speak to *Pterodactyl* in its Bengali original. For more on the question of translation in Mahasweta’s work, see Lazarus (250 fn. 66), Wenzel (230), and Gopal (3).

² Owing to the fact that “Devi” (literally, “goddess”) is a common Hindu matrilineal honorific, Mahasweta Devi – born Mahasweta Ghatak – is referred to across scholarship by her personal name, Mahasweta. I retain this denomination here.

³ For further research on the novel’s function as an archive, see Boulter, Keen, Saunders, and Slaughter.

⁴ Although Mahasweta often used the word “tribal” rather than adivasi throughout her writing, I follow the work of adivasi scholars by only invoking “Tribe” as a politico-administrative category, or when quoting Mahasweta herself. For foundational research on these concepts and their genealogies, see Guha, Hardiman, and Skaria (277–81).

⁵ For more recent work on adivasi assertion and land struggles, see Nilsen and Radhakrishna.

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