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Zambian Futurism and Decolonial Entanglements: History, Ecology, and Technology in *The Old Drift*

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Abstract

This article explores the critical framework of tropical futurisms as presented in Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019), a novel that intertwines Zambia's colonial past, postcolonial realities, and speculative futures. Serpell's narrative challenges dominant, Eurocentric historical perspectives and reclaims Zambia's agency through the themes of decoloniality, ecological resilience, and technological entanglements. By juxtaposing colonial infrastructure projects like the Kariba Dam with speculative innovations such as microdrones and bioengineering, Serpell critiques the exploitation of African resources and people while imagining alternative, empowered futures for the region. The novel's emphasis on multispecies ecologies, particularly through the symbolic role of mosquitoes and the environment, underscores the interdependence of human and more-than-human futures. Additionally, Serpell engages with Zambia's space program as a symbol of decolonial ambition, exploring how the nation's historical figures like Ba Nkoloso represent a break from colonial limitations. By blending magical realism, historical fiction, and science fiction, *The Old Drift* presents a multidimensional narrative that positions Zambia at the centre of global technological and ecological conversations, offering a compelling vision of a decolonised and interconnected future, which this article examines as an essential contribution to the discourse on tropical futurisms and decolonial thought.

Keywords: Tropical Futurisms, Decoloniality, Multispecies Ecologies, Technological Futures, Zambia, Namwali Serpell, African literature

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Introduction: Embracing Tropical Futurisms

Tropical futurisms challenge colonial perceptions of the tropics, historically depicted as dangerous, backward, and ecologically fragile, and instead reclaim these regions as sites of resilience, agency, and innovation. This framework reframes the tropics in light of global issues like climate change and technological exploitation, offering a vision of futures shaped by these forces. Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019) exemplifies this approach by intertwining Zambia's colonial history, postcolonial struggles, and speculative futures. The novel engages with themes of decoloniality, ecological resilience, and the entanglement of technology with human and non-human actors. Through its multi-layered narrative, *The Old Drift* rejects a singular, reductive view of the African tropics, instead embracing the complexity and interdependence of human and non-human relationships, ecological systems, and technological futures. By weaving together these elements, Serpell reveals the intricate connections between colonial histories, environmental dynamics, and the potential for decolonial and multispecies futures. Serpell's portrayal of Zambia's past and future critiques colonial legacies while also reimagining them. In doing so, Serpell envisions a vibrant, decolonised, and technologically engaged future for the tropics, positioning African agency and innovation at the forefront of global ecological and technological conversations.

Serpell, a Zambian-American author, masterfully blends genres ranging from magical realism to science fiction, addressing history, technology, identity, and postcolonialism. Born in Lusaka, Zambia, and raised in Zambia and the United States, Serpell's dual-cultural background deeply informs her writing. Over the years, tropical creative writers, like Namwali Serpell, have constructed imaginative worlds that critically deconstruct colonial legacies, offering new perspectives on human relationships. These perspectives challenge entrenched inequalities and envision alternative frameworks for understanding and liberation (Samal & Samantaray, 2024, p. 40; Lundberg et al., 2023a, p. 14). Serpell engages deeply with African, particularly Zambian, histories and realities, skilfully weaving them into broader global contexts to challenge and reframe traditional narratives. Central to this exploration is the critique of colonialism's exploitative environmental and human resource practices, an approach aligned with postcolonial and decolonial methodologies. As Baishya (2022) points out, this critique underscores the necessity of understanding environmental degradation through the lens of colonial history (pp. 41-47). Her debut novel, *The Old Drift*, published in 2019, exemplifies this unique narrative style. The novel spans generations and blends various narrative voices to explore Zambia's colonial past, postcolonial present, and speculative future. Central to the story is Serpell's engagement with the concept of tropical futurisms. This framework combines futuristic

and speculative themes with the ecological, historical, and cultural realities of the Global South, particularly tropical regions. In *The Old Drift*, Serpell reimagines Zambia's future through a lens that incorporates technological advancements, multispecies ecologies, and local and global tensions.

The novel's title, *The Old Drift*, refers to a narrow stretch of the Zambezi River that historically functioned as an entry point into North-Western Rhodesia, now Zambia. Known first as Sekute's Drift, then Clarke's Drift, "no one knows when it became *The Old Drift*" (Serpell, 2019, p. 4). The Zambezi River, frequently in flood, resists colonial attempts at control and reflects the novel's engagement with the tropics as dynamic, untamable spaces. Serpell's novel, characterised as a "theory of everything," reflects these themes through two pivotal strands—the Kariba Dam, representing the conquest of water, and Edward (Ba) Nkoloso's Zambian National Academy of Science, Space Research and Philosophy, which symbolises the attempted conquest of space through Afronauts (Serpell, 2019, p. 486). The Afronaut figure, in particular, has gained renewed cultural relevance through various artistic interventions, where it is not only emblematic of Zambia's bold space ambitions but also tied to the growing global interest in speculative fiction from the African continent (Wilson, 2019, p. 139). This renewed focus sits alongside debates on Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism, underscoring how such narratives challenge Western-dominated futurist discourses by foregrounding African perspectives on technology, space, and decolonial futures. Serpell also engages with the decolonisation of ecological narratives, an approach advocated by Rajiv (2024), who highlights the disproportionate effects of environmental degradation on marginalised communities (pp. 245-250). In *The Old Drift*, the characters navigate a landscape shaped by colonial history, grappling with its legacies while simultaneously envisioning a future rooted in cultural heritage and ecological realities. This narrative arc reflects the process of healing through reconnection with ecological and cultural roots, illustrating the potential for resilience and agency in the face of historical injustices (Visser, 2015, pp. 250-265). Serpell's portrayal of these intertwined ecological and cultural narratives enriches the novel's exploration of tropical futurisms, positioning decolonial ecologies as central to envisioning alternative futures beyond the legacies of colonial exploitation.

One of *The Old Drift's* key contributions to tropical futurisms is its exploration of multispecies ecologies. The relationship between humans and mosquitoes, traditionally seen as pestilential, is reimagined in the novel as a symbol of both resistance and technological innovation. Serpell's portrayal aligns with the broader ecological dimensions of tropical histories, as explored by Ríos-Touma et al. (2011), who emphasise the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors in ecological processes such as

migration and adaptation (pp. 233-246). The mosquito, often considered a dangerous pest in both colonial and postcolonial contexts, is reimagined in the novel as a symbol of resistance and a site of technological innovation. This highlights the complex ecological entanglements in the tropics, where human and non-human actors coexist in a dynamic and interdependent relationship. In the context of tropical futurisms, this multispecies interaction is key to envisioning a future where human survival is intertwined with the resilience and agency of non-human species.

In addition to multispecies ecologies, Serpell speculates on technological futures, exploring how innovations such as genetic modification and nanotechnology shape Zambia's future. These advancements, however, are portrayed ambivalently, with the potential to both liberate and oppress. Serpell's depiction of microdrones and mosquito genetic modification, for example, reflects this duality: "Are we truly man's enemy, Anopheles gambiae, or the microdrones Jacob designed?" (Serpell, 2019, p. 562). This blurs the lines between nature and technology, highlighting the interdependence of biological and technological futures. Serpell's speculative exploration of technology is embodied through the character of Jacob, the grandson of Sibilla. As Ashcroft (2020) notes, speculative postcolonial literature often presents alternative futures that diverge from linear, Eurocentric narratives, unlocking possibilities for social and political transformation (pp. 43-67). Jacob, who becomes obsessed with the legacy of his grandmother's involvement in the Zambian Space Program—an audacious yet underfunded initiative from the 1960s—represents a bridge between past and future, personal history and technological ambition. Through Jacob's story, the novel situates technological ambition within both private and national histories, reflecting the continued legacy of technological aspirations in Zambian culture: "Ever since he [Jacob] had learned about the Zambian Space Programme, about how brilliant a cadet his gogo had been, he had become obsessed. Who knew technology was a family tradition—in his very blood!" (Serpell, 2019, p. 444).

The novel's portrayal of Zambia's landscape and its technological advancements also raises critical questions about environmental governance and the need for equitable approaches. Robin & Broto (2020) argue that a more inclusive understanding of climate urbanism is essential, one that recognises the diverse experiences of marginalised communities (pp. 869-878). *The Old Drift* echoes this call by critiquing the imbalances in environmental governance and imagining a future where technologies like the "Beads" voting system reshape political and social dynamics (Serpell, 2019, p. 563). Furthermore, Lundberg et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of addressing how climate change is transforming tropical regions, both climatically and culturally, through neo-colonial

practices. In this context, they advocate for listening to the cosmological worldviews of Indigenous peoples and communities historically impacted by colonialism (p. 22). Serpell's novel reflects this need for a tropical imaginary that resists colonial legacies and embraces local agency in responding to the contemporary climate crisis. The narrative structure of *The Old Drift* relies on a hybrid aesthetic that blends genres such as realist fiction, science fiction, historical novels, and Afrofuturism. Courtois (2023) highlights how Serpell's deconstruction of official colonial histories challenges traditional narrative forms, allowing for a pluralistic and interconnected vision of Zambia's past and future (p. 512). This hybridisation is crucial to the novel's alignment with tropical futurisms, which reject singular narratives and instead embrace the complexities of postcolonial societies.

Thus, through its decolonial critique, multispecies ecologies, and speculative exploration of technological futures, *The Old Drift* offers a powerful vision of tropical futures. The novel's multi-layered narrative challenges colonial representations of the tropics, emphasising local agency, ecological resilience, and the potential for technological innovation. By positioning Zambia at the centre of global technological and ecological discourses, Serpell reimagines the future of the African tropics, and beyond, in a way that resists colonial legacies and embraces decolonised and interconnected futures.

Decolonial Narratives, Ecological Resistance, and Postcolonial Futures

Serpell's *The Old Drift* interlaces a narrative that reflects the lingering impacts of colonialism, the ongoing decolonial process, and the reimagining of history in postcolonial Zambia. With its blend of magical realism, historical fiction, and science fiction, the novel examines how historical narratives have shaped Zambia's national identity, critiques the structures of power that sustain colonialism, and envisions alternative futures for the nation. Serpell's work not only reclaims Zambia's history from colonial distortions but also engages with the broader project of decoloniality by challenging dominant historical frameworks and highlighting the significance of local agency and resistance. Furthermore, Serpell engages with ecological aspects of colonial history, intertwining environmental and colonial exploitation in a decolonial turn. The tropical landscape thus becomes a space of resistance: "when the whites first swooned to the tropics, they saw that the blacks never fell: the raging calenture that gripped the bazungu passed over the huts of the bantu. This place was The White Man's Grave.... It was us, and a matter of time" (Serpell, 2019, p. 486). This demonstrates how the natural environment often resisted colonial domination, serving as a metaphor for the broader resistance to imperial conquest. Such an interplay between humans and the environment underscores how colonialism was not only a social and political project but also an ecological one,

reshaping landscapes, people, and other species in pursuit of imperial agendas (Sidaway et al., 2014, p. 5).

From the outset of *The Old Drift*, Serpell illustrates the irony inherent in colonial histories, beginning with a European figure: "This is a story of a nation—not a kingdom or a people—so it begins, of course, with a white man. Once upon a time, a goodly Scottish doctor caught a notion to find the heart of this dark continent and thus found himself as its beating heart instead" (Serpell, 2019, p. 1). Here Serpell's sardonic commentary underscores the Eurocentric perspectives that have long shaped African historical accounts. By commencing Zambia's story with David Livingstone, the Scottish missionary and explorer, Serpell mirrors the colonial habit of placing European figures at the forefront of African histories, sidelining the Indigenous populations deeply affected by colonisation. Livingstone's expeditions, driven by a blend of missionary zeal and scientific curiosity, were central to the European "Scramble for Africa," which ultimately led to the colonisation of vast swathes of the continent (Serpell, 2019, p. 518). The portrayal of Livingstone as the 'beating heart' of Africa critiques the colonial mindset that saw Europeans as the central protagonists, marginalising African agency. Serpell's mimicry subtly undermines this narrative, revealing its artificiality and absurdity. This technique aligns with the decolonial endeavour, which seeks to dismantle colonial histories that obscure Indigenous perspectives and experiences, reclaiming local histories that often precede destructive European interventions (Lugones, 2007, pp. 186–209).

The novel also critiques colonialism through its depiction of historical events and interrogates the very concept of history itself. Ronald represents a generation shaped by both the colonial legacy and Zambia's postcolonial struggles. As the son of Sibilla, an Italian woman whose story intertwines with Zambia's colonial past, Ronald grapples with questions of identity and belonging throughout his life. Educated in England, he returns to Zambia with a complex perspective, embodying the privileged distance of European education and the lived reality of Zambia's postcolonial condition. But when Ronald reflects on what he learnt at university, his thoughts reveal the tension between Western knowledge systems and the local realities he now faces: "'History' was the word the English used for the record of every time a white man encountered something he had never seen and promptly claimed it as his own, often renaming it for good measure. History, in short, was the annals of the bully on the playground" (Serpell, 2019, p. 97). This reflection encapsulates the colonial practice of domination and renaming, where European colonisers seized lands, resources, and even people, erasing or distorting existing histories. Such a framing of history as an oppressive force aligns with the decolonial goal of recovering Indigenous histories marginalised by colonial powers. So,

Serpell emphasises the importance of situating local experiences at the centre of historical narratives, in contrast to the European tendency to dominate and overwrite them (Chang & King, 2011, pp. 283-300).

Joseph represents the younger generation in *The Old Drift*, grappling with Zambia's postcolonial reality. Raised in a country still marked by its colonial past, Joseph navigates his education with an acute awareness of the disparities that persist in both racial and class dimensions. His experiences at university highlight broader struggles to decolonise knowledge and reclaim African intellectual traditions—which resonate with real-world movements for educational reform, such as the 'Fees Must Fall' protests in South Africa. The novel captures this intersection of race and class: "By the time Joseph received his A-level results...the protests had mutated into 'Fees Must Fall!' Cape Town students built a shanty town.... Joseph's mind wandered to the legacy of Cecil Rhodes, a British imperialist who founded two African countries in his own name.... 'Decolonising education is not just about race,' Gran said...'It's about class, too'" (Serpell, 2019, p. 400). This underscores how figures like Cecil Rhodes symbolise the enduring colonial structures in African institutions, reinforcing inequalities in both race and class (Mignolo, 2011a). In turn, the critique aligns with the broader framework of decolonial ecologies, which challenge dominant Western epistemologies and advocate for the recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems that have long been marginalised. As Brissett (2018) argues, education systems in postcolonial contexts should serve as incubators for social transformation, fostering critical reflection and imaginative possibilities that lead to meaningful change (p. 197). This notion resonates with the themes in *The Old Drift*, where characters like Joseph navigate their identities and relationships against the backdrop of Zambia's colonial past and its ecological and social implications.

Joseph's pursuit of education is also framed within the broader narrative of resilience central to postcolonial literature. His efforts to understand his father's scientific work through his studies—"Joseph's first and only term at the University of Zambia was a torture to his ego. He enrolled in classes on ecology and microbiology. He couldn't stop thinking about his father's research...hoping learning about these topics would help him make sense of it" (Serpell, 2019, p. 402)—illustrates how education becomes a tool for reclaiming the intellectual space that was often denied to African individuals during colonial rule. This pursuit reflects a proactive engagement with the future, where marginalised communities, rather than merely reacting to oppression, forge new paths that honour their heritage while addressing contemporary challenges (Rajiv, 2024, pp. 245-250).

In a similar vein, Naila, the granddaughter of Matha, represents the intersection of personal and political struggles as she grapples with her identity in postcolonial Zambia. As a young Zambian woman with complex familial ties to the country's colonial past, Naila's perspective is shaped by both generational trauma and her experiences of navigating a world still marked by the legacies of colonial rule and its modern remnants. Her reflection on British 'efficiency' reveals the brutal realities of colonial rule, exposing the violent underpinnings of a system often celebrated for its supposed orderliness: "what ruined this country was efficiency—the British worship of efficiency...they grabbed what they could get for the sake of it. Robbery plus violence, aggravated murder on a big scale.... The conquest of Africa, which meant stealing it from those with a darker complexion and flatter noses, is an ugly thing...it's even worse when you realize the belief behind it—something they set up and sacrificed us to'" (Serpell, 2019, p. 548). Here, Naila deconstructs the British colonial narrative of 'efficiency,' revealing it as a guise for exploitation and systemic racial oppression (McFarlane, 2004, p. 175). Colonial powers often justified their rule by promoting ideals of order, progress, and efficiency, suggesting they brought civilisation and effective governance to colonised regions. However, as Naila's critique highlights, this so-called efficiency was largely achieved through the violent subjugation of local populations, the extraction of resources, and the imposition of foreign administrative systems that prioritised European interests. Naila's reflection underscores the need to dismantle these enduring myths of colonial benevolence and recognise the lasting impact of such oppressive structures on contemporary African societies.

The Old Drift thus presents a multifaceted narrative that confronts colonial legacies, reclaims histories, and imagines decolonial futures. Serpell deftly weaves together the personal and political, the historical and the speculative, to reveal the enduring impact of colonialism on Zambia's ecological, intellectual, and social landscapes. Through its exploration of the colonial and postcolonial eras, the novel challenges how African histories have been written, centring Indigenous experiences while critiquing the ongoing exploitation of land and people. The novel's emphasis on decolonial ecologies aligns with the work of DeLoughrey and Handley (2011), who emphasise the need to reclaim environmental narratives from colonial frameworks that prioritise capitalist extraction and degradation. Serpell's nuanced handling of social and intellectual legacies, such as the decolonisation of knowledge, echoes the work of Mbembe (2016), who advocates for the decolonisation of African universities as part of a larger global movement toward epistemic justice (p. 32). The novel's engagement with the 'Fees Must Fall' movement exemplifies how these struggles for intellectual decolonisation are deeply intertwined with broader social and economic inequalities, reinforcing the importance of rethinking both

race and class in postcolonial contexts. Ultimately, the novel's convergence of speculative fiction and historical realism positions it as a vital work within the broader landscape of African literature and global debates on decoloniality and futurity.

Multispecies Ecologies and Tropical Entanglements

Building on decolonial narratives and ecological resistance, *The Old Drift* further explores the intricate relationships between humans, more-than-human organisms, and the tropical ecologies of Zambia, highlighting how these connections shape the nation's history and future. The novel blends elements of magical realism, speculative fiction, and historical storytelling to question dominant human-centric narratives, focusing instead on the interconnectedness between species. This approach aligns with broader critical perspectives that highlight how marginalised communities, including Indigenous peoples, have long recognised these interdependencies between humans and the beyond-human world, even as they bear the disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation (Chao, 2021b, pp. 245-264). Serpell challenges the notion of human superiority over nature, emphasising how attempts to dominate ecological systems, especially in the tropics, often fail in the face of resistant natural forces. However, as Shotwell (2016) and Giraud (2019) argue, no entanglement is ever entirely reciprocal or just. And the novel pushes readers to grapple with the intraspecies asymmetries that characterise these relationships. To envision the future otherwise, as Serpell does, is to stay with these troubling asymmetries while working creatively toward a more equitable sharing of suffering and survival across species lines. Through these speculative scenarios, Serpell challenges readers to reconsider the limits of anthropocentrism and imagine a future where the flourishing of multispecies ecologies takes precedence over human dominance.

The novel opens with the story of the Kariba Dam, a massive colonial infrastructure project that sought to control the Zambezi River. Serpell captures the tension between the colonial desire for control and the Indigenous knowledge systems that recognise nature's autonomy. Azzali et al. (2020) argue that colonial legacies shape contemporary urban development's cultural, environmental, and economic structures, often perpetuating inequalities and ecological imbalances (pp. 1-24). The Tonga people, an Indigenous group native to the Zambezi River Valley in Zambia and Zimbabwe, hold a deep spiritual connection with the river and its natural environment. For centuries, they have revered 'Nyami Nyami', the river god who is believed to control the waters of the Zambezi. Their warnings against interfering with the river resonate with the belief that

"You can't trap a river, much less the mighty Zambezi, which is ruled by a god with the head of a fish and the tail of a snake. Nyami Nyami will undo your work" (Serpell, 2019, p. 78). The belief reflects the broader tension between colonialism and Indigenous cosmologies, where more-than-human entities, such as rivers and deities, are seen as possessing power and agency. The forced displacement of 57,000 Tonga people during the construction of the Kariba Dam further underscores the colonial exploitation of both human and ecological communities, a tragedy that historians have labelled one of the most significant dam resettlement disasters in Africa (Nixon, 2011). Similarly, Zeleza et al. (1995) also highlight how colonial interventions in Africa frequently disrupted the relationships between local communities and their environments, replacing sustainable practices with exploitative models of resource extraction (pp. 404-406).

As the novel progresses, the theme of ecological resistance becomes even more prominent in the depiction of the eventual collapse of the Kariba Dam: "The bodies of water spilled their banks within days and soon the whole country was drowned.... The Dam would become a waterfall" (Serpell, 2019, pp. 559-563). This apocalyptic vision highlights the failure of human attempts to control the natural world, as the river reclaims its course. The materiality of tropical ecologies, in their overabundant hostility and beauty, becomes a central force in shaping human lives, further emphasising the dynamism and unpredictability of multispecies ecologies (Lundberg et al., 2023b, p. 4). This collapse also raises thorny questions about the capacity of human beings to fully apprehend or enter the perceptual lifeworld of non-human beings with whom we share the planet. Serpell challenges us to move beyond a purely human-centred understanding of ecology by suggesting that not only other life forms, such as animals, but also elemental bodies—rivers, mountains, and oceans—are equally animate and sentient, a perspective held by many Indigenous peoples (Country et al., 2015, pp. 455-475; Argyrou & Hummels, 2019, pp. 452-468). The collapse of the dam thus serves as a critique of colonial hubris and technological interventions that disrupt ecological balances, showing that nature's forces, embodied by the river, cannot be permanently subdued or controlled.

Serpell further deepens the novel's exploration of multispecies ecologies through the portrayal of mosquitoes, not only as critical actors in Zambia's tropical environment but also as omniscient narrators. The mosquitoes represent more than just more-than-human life in the ecosystem; they serve as storytellers, providing a unique lens on human and ecological entanglements. They reflect on their ancient relationship with humans, stating, "Oldest friends, ancient enemies, neighbourhood frenemy foes. We're perfectly matched, Mankind and Moz. We're both useless, ubiquitous species.... We've been around here as long as you have" (Serpell, 2019, p. 545). This dual role of the mosquitoes—both

narrators and ecological agents—reinforces the interconnectedness of life forms in Zambia's tropical landscapes, a central theme of the novel. In their anthropomorphised voice, the mosquitoes also state, "We meet you wherever there's standing water...you're cupping an amniotic crib for us" (Serpell, 2019, p. 78). This depiction challenges the conventional view of mosquitoes as mere pests, instead highlighting their vital role within the ecological web. Their reliance on human-created environments, such as dams, further illustrates the complex interdependence of human and beyond-human lives in tropical ecosystems. This interdependence reflects the concept of eco-evolutionary dynamics, where multispecies interactions shape both community structures and evolutionary trajectories (Fussmann et al., 2007, pp. 465-477). By foregrounding the mosquito's perspective, Serpell compels us to acknowledge how human activities influence ecological dynamics that, in turn, affect multiple species across generations. Through this narrative device, the novel emphasises the centrality of non-human actors in shaping tropical environments, aligning with broader themes of tropical futurisms where human and non-human futures are inextricably linked.

Serpell also asks, "Can mosquitoes and humans live peacefully together, can we forge an uneasy truce?" (2019, p. 486). This inquiry reflects the novel's broader theme of multispecies coexistence, suggesting the possibility of a delicate balance between human activities and the natural world. By raising this question, Serpell advocates for the interdependence of species within Zambia's tropical environment, emphasising how even creatures often perceived as nuisances play a vital role in the ecosystem. The notion of an 'uneasy truce' speaks to the broader theme of multispecies entanglement, where species are not isolated but exist in webs of interdependencies, reflecting what Donna Haraway terms a "companion species" relationship, where humans must consider their existence concerning the multiplicity of lives as they share the planet (Haraway, 2008). Furthermore, Serpell's engagement with the historical and ecological significance of mosquitoes also serves as a form of resistance against colonial narratives. As Naila reflects, "the lowliest creature, the tiny udzudzu, is what kept the imperialists at bay!" (Serpell, 2019, p. 486). This alludes to the role of mosquitoes in spreading diseases like malaria, which hindered the expansion of European imperialism in Africa. The mosquito, typically regarded as insignificant, becomes a symbol of ecological resistance, challenging human attempts to control the environment. This subversion of the traditional colonial narrative mirrors the complexities of multispecies ecologies, where even the smallest creatures exert influence over human history. The entanglement between humans and mosquitoes illustrates how species are enmeshed in ways that complicate ideas of dominance and control (see Benitez & Lundberg, 2022).

Thus, Serpell offers a profound meditation on the multispecies entanglements that define life in Zambia's tropical landscapes. By examining the interconnected fates of humans, mosquitoes, rivers, and ecological resistance, the novel critiques colonial and anthropocentric approaches to nature while celebrating the agency of more-than-human forces. Serpell's vision of tropical ecologies is one where human and beyond-human futures are deeply intertwined, and where the resilience of nature offers a powerful counter-narrative to colonial exploitation and environmental destruction. This aligns with the broader call to move beyond anthropocentrism and embrace multispecies future flourishing. As Chao & Enari (2021) argue, to neglect more-than-human becomings is to "strip the world of its wonder and enchantment—its ongoing and multiple forms of sympoietic creation, formation, and relation" (pp. 46-47). Serpell's novel resists such an ecological flattening by foregrounding the dynamic interplay between human and non-human actors, urging us to embrace the radical potential of multispecies symbiosis as a pathway towards a more just and sustainable future.

Navigating Technological Futures: Global and Local Tensions

The novel's engagement with technological futures and the friction between global and local influences seamlessly expands to themes of decolonial narratives, ecological resistance, multispecies entanglements, and the broader framework of tropical futurisms. By weaving these elements together, *The Old Drift* not only critiques the imposition of foreign technologies but also highlights the resilience and agency of local communities as they adapt, resist, and reshape these influences to align with their unique ecological and cultural landscapes. This dynamic interplay reinforces the novel's vision of an interconnected future for the tropics, where global and local forces remain in constant negotiation. Serpell uses examples like the construction of large-scale infrastructures such as the Kariba Dam, the development of microdrones, and surveillance technologies like the Beads and AFRINET to critique how global technological advances are often imposed on local environments and communities. These technological developments carry an extractive quality, empowering some while exploiting others, depending on who wields control over them. By setting these tensions in postcolonial Zambia, Serpell interrogates global technological ambitions that frequently overlook or disrupt local realities. Muthyala (2022) underscores this point, illustrating how *The Old Drift* dramatises the impact of digital technologies and international enterprises in reinforcing subalternity and perpetuating existing power structures (pp. 132-160).

These technological entanglements reflect the complexities of the Anthropocene, where technological phenomena—rooted in Western industrialisation and colonial exploitation—play a foundational role in shaping the modern world. As Hornborg (2015) argues,

"Western industrialization and (neo)colonial appropriation are fundamentally linked to technological phenomena," with colonialism promoting narratives of civilisational superiority and progress, despite its reliance on slavery, labour exploitation, and resource extraction from colonized territories (p. 60). This historical context deepens Serpell's speculative exploration of technology, linking it to the legacy of unequal power dynamics that continue to influence global interactions today. Moreover, Serpell's speculative vision extends to viewing technological innovations, like biological species, as part of complex webs of domination and resistance. This perspective aligns with new materialist theories that emphasise the interconnectedness of human and non-human matter, where technological systems become active participants in shaping ecological relationships (Alaimo, 2020, pp. 177-191). By blending these themes, *The Old Drift* illustrates how technology, ecology, and colonial history are intertwined, illuminating the enduring impact of these forces on the postcolonial tropics.

Serpell envisions a future where the boundaries between humans, non-human organisms, and technology blur. In this speculative future, drones, humans, and mosquitoes merge into a single entity: "We've joined up with the local mosquitoes.... Half insects, half drones" (Serpell, 2019, p. 562). This highlights the merging of organic life and technology, forming a unique perspective within the novel's narrative. The fusion of mosquitoes with drones reflects the novel's engagement with technological innovation, where global technological advances enter local ecologies and alter their dynamics. While the drones appear as technological instruments within the novel, their deeper narrative role evolves as they also serve as detached narrators, commenting on the unfolding events and actions of key characters. Although the drones' preface is devoid of classical invocations, it becomes progressively clear that their function is not to glorify the epic endeavours of characters like Lee, who works to eradicate HIV, Matha's involvement in Ba Nkoloso's space resistance, or the younger generation's attempts to free Zambia from technological domination. Rather, the drones remain omniscient narrators, observing and occasionally remarking on the story's pivotal moments (Mondo, 2024, p. 9). The 'half insects, half drones' notion illustrates how foreign technologies, introduced in postcolonial Zambia, blur the lines between natural and artificial, human and more-than-human. Mosquitoes, which traditionally represent the resilience of nature in the novel, become both symbols and agents of surveillance and control, suggesting how technologies originally conceived for one purpose can be repurposed—or weaponised—in ways that impact local communities.

The novel further engages with decolonial and technological futures through characters like Ba Nkoloso, who embodies Zambia's historical fight for independence and its

imaginative leap into the future. Ba Nkoloso's vision, rooted in Zambia's space program, exemplifies the fusion of history and futuristic aspiration when Jacob says, "Ba Nkoloso taught us about history, politics, technology" (Serpell, 2019, p. 437). Ba Nkoloso's dream of launching Zambia into space represents more than an audacious ambition; it symbolises a reimagining of history and a rejection of colonial limitations. By positioning space exploration as a metaphor for breaking free from colonial constraints, Serpell illustrates the transformative power of rethinking the past to empower future generations. Ba Nkoloso's space program serves as a potent symbol of decolonial hope—an assertion of African agency in a global narrative often dominated by Western technological progress. This narrative arc challenges the traditional boundaries of science fiction and technological innovation, as Serpell brings African history and futuristic imagination into dialogue. Ba Nkoloso's role in the novel is not just about imagining a technological future but also about reclaiming Zambian sovereignty by aligning it with space exploration, an arena often seen as the ultimate frontier of modernity (Nuttall, p.2021, 326). Serpell's speculative narrative arcs—particularly through the Zambian Space Program and innovations in bioengineering—underscore the global-local tensions that arise in Zambia's encounter with modernity. While Ba Nkoloso's program was an ambitious attempt to launch Zambia into the space race, despite limited resources, Afrofuturism expands on such legacies to explore themes of technological mastery, cultural reclamation, and cosmic belonging for African societies. Serpell's vision of Zambia's future aligns with the Afrofuturist perspective, illustrating how African narratives have the potential to influence and reshape global futures. Eshun (2003) further supports this viewpoint, arguing that Afrofuturist literature centres African experiences within the landscape of technological innovation, pushing back against the marginalisation of Africa in global technological narratives (pp. 291-293).

As the novel unfolds, Serpell also introduces new technologies that capture the dual nature of innovation in a globalised world. Jacob's invention of the microdrone serves as a notable example. As he proudly declares, "Microdrone. I am the inventor" (Serpell, 2019, p. 506). The microdrone, a small yet multifaceted technological tool, embodies both the opportunities and threats posed by technological advancement. While it has the potential to empower individuals by enabling communication and action independent of state or corporate oversight, it can also be weaponised for surveillance and control. This duality reflects broader issues of power, agency, and technological imposition, especially in postcolonial contexts where technology often serves as a new frontier for domination and resistance. The tension between these possibilities is encapsulated in a conversation between Naila and Jacob, "'So what are these for anyway?' Naila pointed at the drones over the pool. 'Security,' he said. 'Surveillance, you mean?'" (Serpell, 2019, p. 508). This

moment highlights how global technologies, ostensibly developed for progress or security, often transform into mechanisms of control over marginalised communities, echoing Chao & Enari's (2021) critique of how colonial violence persists through contemporary infrastructures and practices, undermining Indigenous sovereignties (p. 47). Jacob's microdrone thus serves as a symbol of the ambivalent role of technology in postcolonial societies, where promises of empowerment often mask deeper intentions of oversight and control. The introduction of such devices illustrates how the remnants of colonial power dynamics are embedded within technological infrastructure, as control is often exercised under the guise of security or innovation.

The ideological dimension of technological progress forms a critical theme in *The Old Drift*. This is captured when Naila remarks, "Progress is just the word we use to disguise power doing its thing" (Serpell, 2019, p. 506), highlighting the contrast between those who view technological advancements as inherently positive and those who recognise them as tools of control. Technological developments such as AFRINET and the Beads, framed as symbols of progress, frequently reinforce existing power structures. AFRINET, for instance, operates as an extensive surveillance network intended to monitor and control the population, revealing the darker side of technological advancement. Similarly, the Beads—an electro-nerve technology distributed freely to Zambians—expose how "free products" often mask hidden agendas, turning local populations into test subjects. Jacob articulates this exploitation: "'These foreigners take out more than they put in,' said Jacob. 'Exactly!' She raised a finger. 'They only gave us free Beads because electro-nerve technology uses melanin. Again, they were testing them on us. If the product is free, you're the product'" (Serpell, 2019, pp. 507). This critique aligns with Castro-Koshy & Le Roux (2020), who explore Indigenous communities' struggles to balance ecosystem preservation with economic demands under global capitalist pressures (p. 10).

Despite its critique of global technological dominance, *The Old Drift* also envisions possibilities for local communities to innovate and reclaim control over technology. This potential is evident when Joseph contemplates a way to bypass AFRINET's restrictions by linking drones to access Wi-Fi from neighbouring countries, circumventing Zambia's surveillance network. He reflects, "They could string a chain of communication from drone to drone to reach air towers outside the borders, and tap into Wi-Fi from one of the seven countries that surround Zambia" (Serpell, 2019, p. 550). This act of technological resistance underscores the broader theme of tropical futurisms, where local agency emerges in defiance of global power, offering the possibility of shaping the future on local terms. Such acts of defiance echo Wong & Chakrabarty's (2001) discussion of sustainable futures, wherein they argue that while Western thought is valuable, it is

insufficient to address the unique challenges of beyond-Western nations (pp. 1322-1323). Through this vision, Serpell suggests a path for reclaiming autonomy and redefining progress on African terms.

Thus, Serpell's narrative not only critiques colonial frameworks but also offers a vision of a future where Zambia plays an active role on the global stage, both ecologically and technologically. By combining speculative fiction with decolonial critique, Serpell imagines a world where Africa is no longer a passive recipient of external technologies but a key player in shaping the future. In doing so, the novel positions tropical Zambia as a dynamic and innovative force, reclaiming its history while boldly looking ahead to a future unbound by the legacies of colonialism.

Conclusion: Envisioning Decolonial Tropical Futures

Namwali Serpell's *The Old* Drift is a groundbreaking narrative that defies genre boundaries, blending historical realism, speculative fiction, and magical realism to explore the complex intersections of colonialism, ecology, and technology in Zambia. Throughout the novel, Serpell navigates the remnants of colonial legacies while envisioning futures unbound by the limitations imposed by imperial histories. This fusion of past, present, and future lies at the heart of the novel's engagement with tropical futurisms—a critical framework that reimagines the tropics as spaces of agency, resilience, and innovation rather than sites of exploitation and stagnation. In doing so, Serpell transforms the imagination from a "deadly battlefield to a flourishing future" (Chao & Enari, 2021, p. 47), prompting a collective reckoning with the ruinous legacy of imperial-capitalist projects.

One of the novel's most compelling aspects is its focus on multispecies ecologies, particularly the unique relationship between humans and mosquitoes. Traditionally portrayed as pests and symbols of disease, mosquitoes in *The Old Drift* are granted a narrative voice, positioning them as integral actors in Zambia's ecological and historical narrative. This shift in perspective stretches what J.M. Coetzee called "sympathetic imagination" to its limits (Coetzee, 2016, p. 35), transforming mosquitoes from mere disease vectors into agents of resistance against imperial control. By framing them as narrators, Serpell challenges anthropocentric views and emphasises how multispecies entanglements are central to both ecological processes and historical resilience, resisting colonial simplifications of the natural world.

Beyond ecological entanglements, *The Old Drift* critiques technological progress, particularly the imposition of foreign technologies on African landscapes and communities. The construction of the Kariba Dam stands as a powerful symbol of this

tension. Built during colonial rule, the dam represents the ambition to control and exploit Africa's natural resources, neglecting local knowledge and spiritual connections to the land. As Sinamai (2022) notes, "In Africa, the land owns the people, not the other way around" (p. 54). The eventual collapse of the dam in the novel, triggered by natural forces, embodies the failure of colonial hubris, underscoring how the land itself resists domination. The novel thereby critiques Western views of landscapes as objects to control, which, as Sinamai (2022) argues, fail to capture the African understanding of land as a "symbolic union of 'country' and humans" (p. 58).

Serpell's engagement with Zambia's space program and the character of Ba Nkoloso adds another dimension to these decolonial futures. Ba Nkoloso's audacious vision of launching Zambian Afronauts into space embodies a rejection of colonial constraints, reclaiming technological ambition for African purposes. Although the space program is underfunded and ridiculed, it becomes a metaphor for reimagining African agency within global technological discourse. Through this portrayal, Serpell challenges Eurocentric narratives that have historically marginalised African contributions to science and technology, instead positioning Zambia as a crucial player in the global future. Serpell's exploration of technology also extends to innovations like microdrones and genetic modification, portrayed with ambivalence throughout the novel. These technologies, while promising empowerment, are simultaneously tools of surveillance and control, embodying the tension between liberation and oppression. This ambivalence aligns with postcolonial critiques of the extractive and exploitative aspects of Western technological interventions in Africa, underscoring the novel's engagement with the complexities of technological influence.

Ultimately, *The Old Drift* resists easy categorisation, much like the hybrid and complex futures it envisions for Zambia. By blending historical and speculative elements, Serpell challenges dominant narratives about African history and future possibilities, positioning Zambia as a key player in both local and global discourses on technology, ecology, and decolonisation. The novel's contribution to tropical futurisms is significant, as it reframes African futures as deeply intertwined with the region's colonial past and ecological present. As Sinamai (2022) notes, "the rupture of ontological security caused by colonialism creates a need for new narratives" (p. 56), and Serpell offers just that—a vision of decolonial futures emphasising resilience, innovation, and local agency. In doing so, *The Old Drift* contributes to a broader discourse on African nations reclaiming their histories and asserting their agency in global technological and ecological debates, positioning it as an essential text in discussions of decoloniality and futurisms.

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