BONNIE ETHERINGTON

A Tidepool Blenny's Visions of Modernity in John Waromi's West Papua

In the mid-2000s, I swam as a teenager off the northern coast of West Papua near a bay called Tanah Merah. As a child, and as a Pākehā person from Aotearoa New Zealand who lived in West Papua for many years, I was aware of the violence of colonialism in Papua, but not necessarily aware of the multiple intersecting layers of empire at work. For one, I did not know that, decades before, Allied and Japanese forces had clashed in that same bay. Each year the reefs diminished. Fishermen submerged dynamite, attached primarily to old United States World War Two munitions, then blew up the corals before collecting the bodies of fish that floated upwards. There is a shift now in Papua towards more sustainable fishing methods that will not destroy the reefs, comprising some of the most robust practices across what is known as Indonesia. However, the leftover munitions are also integral to the ecological story of how West Papua takes part in, responds to, and is traumatized by the extensive physical and temporal theatre of World War Two.[1]

John Waromi, an Ambai author, journalist, and playwright from Papua, delineates this story in his novel *Anggadi Tupa: Harvesting the Storm* (2014, trans. 2019). This novel is West Papua's first to receive an English translation. As Waromi explains in his glossary, the phrase *anggadi tupa*, in the Ambai language, refers to ripe coconuts that float to the shore, often after storms.[2] People harvest these coconuts—they eat many, and plant the rest so that more coconuts grow. However, in Waromi's novel, other objects also wash up or are unearthed long after another kind of "storm": the Pacific War. Waromi describes the objects in an article,

[1] West Papua has had many names, including Irian Jaya and West New Guinea. In 2003 Indonesia divided the region into two provinces, Papua and Papua Barat, and in 2022 Indonesia divided it further, but I refer to the whole region as West Papua (Papua Barat), as that is the preferred Papuan term.

[2] John Waromi, *Anggadi Tupa: Harvesting the Storm*, trans. Sarita Newsom (Leicester: Monsoon Books, 2019), 210. Hereafter abbreviated *AT* and cited parenthetically.

"Kampong Vietnam and its Historical Background," that he includes at the end of his novel (*AT* 205).[3] Waromi writes of a site on the northern coast of Papua referred to as "Vietnam Village" due to its intensive relationships with leftover munitions (*AT* 199). "Papua," Waromi asserts, "was the headquarters of the United States Army in the Southwest Pacific" (*AT* 201). Consequently, people in Papua built their lives on and abused United States munitions waste. Despite the extensive prominence of war waste in Papua—where children playing might easily find a leftover cartridge in the dirt, and where the crashed bodies of planes are scattered throughout the forest and shipwrecks cluster at the coasts—media and narrative discourses within the United States do not often articulate the pollution caused by the United States military.

In this article I first contextualise the novel's form, setting out how this form compels attention to representational challenges associated with making visible environmental change. Amitav Ghosh, of course, articulates some of these challenges in fiction about climate change, describing a lack of imagination beyond certain generic forms, such as dystopia, when trying to give language to environmental disaster or "derangement" happening now.[4] Our inability to express such "derangement" contributes to and is deeply entangled with the real-world impacts of climate change. More specifically, Joshua Trey Barnett, in his analysis of the rhetoric of environmental grief, argues that rhetoric is a "world-making practice" and, as such, rhetorics of grief, or the lack of these rhetorics, determine how "our relationships with human and more-than-human others in the present are significantly shaped by whether we see these others as worthy of our grief and, thus, of our concern and our care."[5] Waromi's novel, subtitled in English as "A Fable from the Shores of West Papua" but actually weaving together multiple genres, sets out a rhetoric of care for and with the more-than-human that expresses such grief and does so within precarious environmental contexts that

[3] The essay was first published in the Papuan newspaper *Tabloid Jubi* in 2009.

[4] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[5] Joshua Trey Barnett, *Mourning in the Anthropocene: Ecological Grief and Earthly Coexistence* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2022).

make visible broader global and colonial structures at work in West Papua and in wider Oceania.

I then situate the novel within the history of munitions dumping in the Pacific, describing how such dumping is a quintessential example of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence," or "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."[6] While a munitions explosion may seem at odds with "slow violence," in Waromi's novel it draws readers' attention to what Nixon describes as the "long dyings" resulting from a violence that is "incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales." Nixon's discussion also demands that we focus on representational challenges associated with making slow violence visible. I argue that Waromi's "fable," told primarily from a tidepool blenny's perspective, disrupts anthropocentric histories of modernity and war in the Pacific as it navigates questions of how to live well today in such traumatized land- and seascapes.

Through Waromi's "fisheye" lens, the novel brings storytelling and Papua's history into conversation with processes of waste disposal, fisheries science, military strategy, and the effects of sea extraction, providing a long view of the traumas of munitions dumping. Simultaneously, it relates Ambai stories of place and those who live in those places, in ways that prioritize multi-being relations. The blenny's world, which is also being developed for mineral extraction, delineates how the Pacific War's legacies remain present at scales as small as a tidepool and as large as the weather. I argue that, through the blenny's testimonial of greed and devastation, the novel shows that we cannot understand and address the costs of these legacies if we do not also account for the non-human costs of war, military oppression, resource exploitation, and other forms of environmental slow violence. More specifically, the novel asserts that one cannot theorize how to clean up pollution and tackle war's aftereffects, sustainably fish and harvest from the ocean, and also uphold Indigenous land and sea rights without accounting for a long view of human relations with more-than-human beings—relations that

[6] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2.

are not necessarily defined by the demands and discourses of "progressive" modernity and territoriality.

A Fishy Fable: The Novel's Form

When reading in English, we bring generic expectations to a story labelled as a "fable." Anglophone readers might, for example, expect a moralistic story featuring animals as protagonists. Anglophone readers also sometimes label stories as fables when they originate from so-called traditional or ancestral storytelling settings. Waromi's *Anggadi Tupa* certainly fits some of these definitions, as it describes a world filled with different beings impacted by leftover munitions. Yet it also challenges generic expectations set up by the English subtitle, upending fable's representational possibilities. In this sense, Waromi's original subtitle for the book in Bahasa Indonesia, "cerita alam tanah Papua," translated as "a nature story from the land of Papua," better represents Waromi's intention.

This article, though, approaches this text primarily through the lens of its English translation. Firstly, there are more limited opportunities for the Bahasa Indonesia version to circulate, partly as a consequence of Indonesia's occupation of Papua. Secondly, this novel, as the first novel from West Papua to be published in English, indicates its publisher's recognition of how it highlights Papua's imbrication in wider geopolitical, transoceanic, and environmental networks. Reading the novel in translation allows me to situate the novel within critical Oceanic and literary conversations with impacts that link its stories to others well beyond West Papua.[7]

The word *fable* in this story's subtitle directs readers in English to approach the book through a particular lens. However, Waromi's novel, with its weaving of what we might call fable, other forms of fiction, poem/song, playwriting, and even

[7] This does not mean ignoring the limits and politics of translation, but instead demands greater attention to those limits and politics. To cite numerous Indigenous Studies scholars, including Hokulani Aikau (Kanaka Maoli) and Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez, translations are never neutral, are always political and potentially violent, and can only be read as "provisional interpretations of texts" (11). Given that the Bahasa Indonesia version also is a provisional interpretation of Waromi's Ambai language, the layers of translation at work in this text, expressed through two different colonial languages, are a key node for understanding the layers of empire in Papua, too.

news article, resists being reduced to one genre. It confronts the limits of forms of expression when it comes to documenting environmental devastation, but also the limits of categorising genres that fall outside of Angolophone canonical and archival norms.

Reflecting Waromi's affinity for playwriting, the book first begins with a list of the novel's main characters, all of whom are sea creatures. However, the Prologue that comes next, before those characters enter the story, is not told from their perspective. Neither is the Epilogue. Both sections involve a family harvesting coconuts, and the Epilogue offers a moralistic story told by a grandfather (this section conforms most closely to the fable genre). But, within the main body of the novel, we have the story of Andevavait, the tidepool blenny, and this story reads like fiction beyond fable, woven with poems and songs. Interspersed throughout this story are other snapshots of human lives, told as though from a distance—tales of history, but also of different people living in the fish's contemporary moment and of their various trials. This structure reflects how stories are often told across West Papua, reaffirmed by the inclusion of an original Ambai song (*AT* 161–62, 206). After the Epilogue, the book also includes Waromi's article, a translation of that Ambai song, a glossary of Ambai words, and, finally, a list of people killed or harmed by munitions explosions. Altogether, these complex set pieces move the story away from the genre of a fable.

The term *fable* does indicate the ways that the novel can be read as an allegory of colonialism. Humans are greedy in the novel—both humans who are Indigenous to the lands of Papua and humans who colonize. Fish, too, act out smaller expressions of greed. Violence and greed, as the grandfather points out, beget violence and greed. However, reading the novel solely as an allegory seems too simplistic when analysing its very explicit examples of colonial and environmental devastation.

The book zeroes in most closely on United States legacies of war and imperialism in Papua. This focus does not minimise the impacts of past and contemporary Indonesian coloniality in Papua, but gestures towards wider patterns of coloniality and imperialism that repeat across time and space. A poem included in the novel, "Magic of the Morning Star," while not spelling out an explicit call for Papuan sovereignty, indicates how repeated devastation impedes hope rising (*AT* 79-80).

References to the Morning Star in a West Papuan context usually refer to Papuan sovereignty (literally represented by the star on the Papuan independence flag), and in this poem the star's rising and the ocean's tide are "swept away too soon" (*AT* 80). The poem is placed right after Andevavait describes the death of his family from a munitions explosion, and is followed by two short sections where he cares for an injured octopus who cannot move past his fears. Andevavait's description of his family's death also comes soon after a chapter on Dutch coloniality. There are multiple examples of exploitation in this novel, and to ignore, in particular, the dire ramifications of United States imperialism in Papua, which caused the sea creatures' injuries, would be an act of erasure itself. As Andevavait repeatedly reminds other fish, exploitation causes legacies of ongoing harm, and these legacies compound each other. Justice in this novel means attending to the linked histories of these exploitations. Via a fish's perspective, expressed via a conglomeration of generic forms, we are offered language to express these stories.

United States Munitions as Territoriality in West Papua

The United States's successes across New Guinea in 1944, especially in the area around Lake Sentani and extending to Hollandia (now Jayapura, West Papua's capital), led to the retreat of Japanese forces at critical points in the Pacific War. This area, which forms the primary site for Waromi's novel, was a hub for United States war operations in New Guinea, thanks to its nearby airports and sea access. As such, it became a central area for United States munitions dumping.

In the article appended to his novel, Waromi describes several "Vietnam" villages ("Kampong Vietnam") that have proliferated around Lake Sentani and that extend to the nearby seacoast. But Vietnam, Waromi writes, is much more present in the imagination of the United States than is West Papua. Waromi equates the trauma caused by munitions in Kampong Vietnam with the trauma of United States unexploded ordinances (UXOs) in Vietnam itself, acknowledging that people in Vietnam "are still reaping the effects of leftover landmines" (*AT* 199). While some international treaties, such as the Mine Ban Treaty (1997), seek to ban the continued use of certain weapons, Waromi writes that in Papua "the non-proliferation treaty—and other similar treaties regarding leftover landmines and

sea mines or even warheads—has no meaning."[8] But despite this history, Papua in particular and Melanesia more broadly tend to be invisible in the United States's contemporary cultural imaginary.

I-Kiribati scholar Teresia K. Teaiwa points out that in the Pacific the United States manages its foreign interactions both by exoticizing Indigenous peoples, other beings, and landscapes, and by imagining those peoples and bodies as invisible.[9] These imaginary and discursive practices allow the United States to make use of Indigenous spaces and lives in ways that benefit it, particularly in mutually constitutive military and tourist contexts.[10] While Teaiwa's article focuses on the Marshall Islands, a nation in a compact of "free association" with the United States, this analysis is relevant in Papua's context as well.

Papua has been a key part of Portuguese and Dutch webs of imperialism, was key to the imperial war strategies of Japan and the United States, and Australia and New Zealand supported the United States in its war efforts in Papua. Today, multiple nations uphold the Indonesian colonization of West Papua because it also ensures part of their own security efforts in the Pacific.[11] But Waromi's attention specifically to United States war munitions highlights part of the conversation that is often ignored. When discussing United States relations in the Pacific and "the notion of the Pacific as a particular locus of American development as a global power," David Palumbo-Liu argues that United States narratives and actions about the region might be labeled as attempts at "managing the modern."[12] That is, they

---

[8] The United States did not sign such a treaty. Indonesia did, belatedly, in 2007.

[9] Teresia Teaiwa, "bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans," *Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 87.

[10] See, also, Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez, *Securing Paradise: Tourism and Militarism in Hawai'i and the Philippines* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 5: "Militarism and tourism, and the ways they serve each other, illustrate the sometimes brutal and sometimes supple work of U.S. domination in the region: they demonstrate the manifold and overlapping circuits and modes of administrative control, ideological frameworks, and territorial occupations that are part of an American project of domination."

[11] See, for example, Bonnie Etherington, "One Salt Water: The Storied Work of Trans-Indigenous Decolonial Imagining with West Papua," *Contemporary Pacific,* 31, no. 1 (2022): 1-29.

[12] David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1999), 8, 17.

help construct which Pacific peoples and lands are perceived as "modern" and which are not, and they determine how United States actions in the region are discursively linked to notions of progressive modernity. His discussion goes well beyond the United States's internationally recognized territories. These narratives sanctify United States military, anthropological, and economic efforts in the Pacific, and have violent impacts today.

In the case of New Guinea, of the island as a whole, United States discourses treat Papuans as pre-modern, while simultaneously erasing the role they and their environment played in the Pacific War. Judith A. Bennett writes that "in the preconceptions of the [United States and Japanese] invaders, the [Pacific Islander] natives were at best primitive and at worst savage, but always strange, always 'other'."[13] By discursively constructing Melanesia as "primitive," the United States military depicts itself as having an essential role in occupying its landscapes, while simultaneously representing those landscapes as fearful. In other words, discourses of primitivism, including the labelling of Papuans as "stone age," trap Melanesia in a static cycle of reiterative time. Thus, the United States manages modernity in places such as New Guinea by keeping it out of the realm of what people in the United States conceive of as modernity, despite New Guinea being such an important hinge for power in the twentieth century.

The invisibility of West Papua in the United States's cultural imaginary fed into how the United States supported Indonesia's moves to violently incorporate West Papua in the 1960s, after Indonesia had gained independence from the Dutch. The Kennedy administration sought to recruit Indonesia into its efforts to resist communism in the Asia-Pacific, and so turned a blind eye towards West Papua's efforts to remain free from Indonesia. In this way the United States used West Papua's subjugation to extend their territorial influence in the Pacific during and after the war, albeit often quietly. As David Vine demonstrates, these actions form

[13] Judith A. Bennett, *Natives and Exotics: World War II and Environment in the Southern Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 253.

a large part of how the United States exercises its influence and its military strategy beyond its recognized territories.[14]

Peoples throughout the Pacific, and within the borders of the United States settler state, can confirm that forms of environmental damage caused by the United States military-industrial complex are diverse and ongoing.[15] After the war was declared over, the United States military buried trucks and other machinery, land mines, bullets, and more throughout Western Melanesia, including West Papua.[16] The extent of this munitions dumping, also referred to as Explosive Remnants of War (ERW), has now affected these regions for decades. Of course, this does not mean that other Allied forces and the Japanese did not also leave traces in Papua. However, Bennett points out that it was the United States military who predominantly—and at a vast scale—dumped objects after they were assured victory, forming an "unwelcome inheritance" for Pacific peoples.[17]

The United States, Australia, and other nations have participated in clean-up efforts in the Pacific. However, the United States's efforts to locate UXOs concentrate on Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam,[18] as Waromi points out in his article, and Australian efforts tend to overlook West Papua as part of Indonesia. Journalists also often conflate West Papua with Papua New Guinea, instead of

---

[14] David Vine, *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2015), 3.

[15] Describing pollution caused by exploded and unexploded munitions, destruction of water, forest, and agricultural resources, and the spread of various contaminants (deliberate and accidental), Jon Mitchell summarizes the United States's impacts in the Pacific as "both genocide and ecocide." Jon Mitchell, *Poisoning the Pacific: The US Military's Secret Dumping of Plutonium, Chemical Weapons, and Agent Orange* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 56.

[16] In 2020, bombs killed two Norwegian disposal experts in the Solomon Islands. James Massola, "Why are there unexploded bombs in the Pacific Islands?", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 September 2020, https://www.smh.com.au/world/oceania/why-are-there-unexploded-bombs-in-the-pacific-islands-20200922-p55xzl.html. See, also, Gemima Harvey, "Explosive Remnants of War in the Pacific," *Diplomat*, 18 July 2013, https://thediplomat.com/2013/07/explosive-remnants-of-war-in-the-pacific/; and Gorethy Kenneth, "Papua New Guinea is sitting on a weapons time bomb with wartime leftovers in Bougainville," *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*, 21 August 2009, 8.

[17] Bennett, *Natives and Exotics*, 203.

[18] Massola, "Why are there unexploded bombs in the Pacific Islands?"

acknowledging that the whole island is affected. The tale of munitions dumping and clean-up in Papua, then, remains obscured.

The great polluting and spatial power of the United States's munitions dumping in the Pacific acts as an extension of the United States's territoriality and of United States conceptions of progressive modernity. As Craig Santos Perez (CHamoru) argues extending Patrick Wolfe's definition of territoriality in settler colonial contexts, the United States's imperialistic territoriality "signifies a behavioral, social, cultural, historical, political, and economic phenomenon" that drives the United States's extensive influence throughout the Pacific.[19] While Perez highlights the situation of Guåhan (Guam), an "unincorporated territory" of the United States, his definition of the territoriality of settler colonialism also compels a focus on the influence of the United States empire on places, such as West Papua, that are not on United States maps but are greatly affected by its actions. It is strategically and militarily useful for the United States to ignore or encourage Indonesian coloniality, and to obscure its own role in that coloniality. Furthermore, the prominent presence of United States missionaries in Papua, United States extractivism via the Grasberg mine and other mining activities, and United States political relations with Indonesia as both nations cautiously watch China, speak to Papua's still critical role in United States foreign policy.

When the United States left Papua and other Pacific nations, the disposed waste of war and the rhetoric that enabled the waste, its disposal, and the war itself, displaced Indigenous peoples. Nixon writes that the

> Casualties of slow violence—human and environmental—are the casualties most likely not to be seen, not to be counted. Casualties of slow violence become light-weight, disposable casualties, with dire consequences for the ways wars are remembered, which in turn has dire consequences for the projected casualties from future wars.[20]

[19] Craig Santos Perez, "Transterritorial Currents and the Imperial Terripelago," *American Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (September 2015): 620.

[20] Nixon, *Slow Violence,* 13.

Waromi, writing that the story of munitions "shows no sign of ending," recognizes the ongoing trauma represented by munitions and the difficulty of escaping that trauma, which is now compounded by Indonesian coloniality (*AT* 199). In Waromi's description, war waste appears not simply to be an aftereffect of territoriality but to facilitate territoriality itself. Waromi's story indicates how United States imperialism is entwined in Papua's Indonesian occupation, and that both have caused environmental impacts. Acknowledging these links and this complicity across colonial networks does not erase Indonesia's role but is an important part of articulating how exploitative networks uphold one another. Waromi draws upon this context to track the persistent violence and territoriality of war through his novel, as a testimonial to munitions dumping.

Anggadi Tupa*: A War Waste Testimonial*

Against the backdrop of environmental violation, the view of a tidepool blenny, the primary perspective of *Anggadi Tupa*, may seem fragile and irrelevant. Yet, Waromi uses this perspective to offer a window into more-than-human *and* human experiences of environmental trauma. A blenny is an intertidal fish, that can move over land and breathe air as well as breathe underwater. Papua's waters are part of what scientists often call the "coral triangle," which is where the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean meet, facilitating incredible biodiversity, including multiple forms of blenny. The prologue of Waromi's novel opens with a vision of this biodiversity. As a child runs towards the beach he yells, "*anggadi tupa*, the coconuts are coming!" (*AT* 15). His family meets him and they harvest and plant coconuts along the shore, fulfilling their obligation to their future selves, relatives, and other coastal beings as they make sure that the coconuts will keep coming. The family then teaches the child the names of the creatures that live in their area: "One by one the names of the fishes are called out loud, and they are imprinted upon the child's memory. One by one the father calls out the [land and sea] plant names, and the boy commits them to memory." He learns about the lively agency of these creatures, who "have a voice, and they talk, whisper and sing" (*AT* 16). But the Prologue also states that, while the boy remembers these names, he forgets about how the coconut floats. This omission suggests that, while the child is cognizant of his world's diversity, he forgets about his responsibilities to it: to

remember, to respect, and responsibly to manage what the sea bears, so that future beings are likewise sustained.[21]

Meanwhile, Andevavait, the tidepool blenny, does remember the significance of the coconuts and teaches Bohurai, the toadfish, how to harvest and enjoy them. He says, "to eat a coconut, my friend, first you must be able to hold your breath and put up with hunger" (*AT* 19). He explains that holding their breath allows fish to see the full beauty of their world both below and above the water. He also teaches Bohurai that hunger allows him to enjoy the coconuts when they are ready, but that he should not consume them all, as that would leave nothing for other creatures, including the person who planted the tree. Unfortunately, Bohurai does not learn this lesson and eats an enormous quantity of coconuts, upsetting Andevavait.

This small example of greed is quickly followed by stories of reef devastation in the fishes' coastal community, caused by humans' greater greed. The fish do not always realize what is killing or maiming them, but they know its consequences. Andevavait says that "the fish that were near the blast had died immediately, their backbones instantly shattered" (*AT* 25). Other fish took longer to die, but as they did "the radius of the pile of carcasses spread even wider," dominating everything (*AT* 26). Andevavait, along with Anggerai (a crab), survived at the top of a coconut palm, but "how ferocious had been the shockwaves of the explosion of sulphur and gunpowder! He remembered the poisonous smoke and black froth clotted over the water's surface" (*AT* 67). As the blenny remembers survival, he also recalls how he and others shared this information with friends to warn and protect them whenever they saw people being destructive.

The chaos the blenny sees includes a devastating initial spectacle (the blast) but also long-term suffering: the fear of escaping future blasts, the need for extreme caution in various parts of the land and sea, the destruction of food and medicine resources, and so on. In other words, the perspective of the blenny requires that, in the words of Nixon, we "give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal

[21] Waromi's glossary of Ambai terms also reflects biodiversity, stating that "this tribe has not only a glossary of words for various underwater species, but it also maintains references to the relationships between those species, depicting their mutual symbiosis" (*AT* 209).

repercussions are dispersed across space and time."[22] Graphic accounts of death and survival from fish perspectives show that munitions cause widespread trauma for coastal animals, but by connecting the animals' trauma with the human obituaries and the article at the end of the book, the novel also asserts that this trauma, driven by small and large acts of greed, devastates the world for humans, too, at multiple spatial and temporal scales.

Waromi's novel does include examples of fishing that are not driven by greed, that represent humans as participants in a diverse social ecosystem. The novel describes how "when fishing in the ocean, there are a number of ways for men to fish as a group, and each method serves to strengthen the emotional bonds of that group" (*AT* 42). These methods include fishing with small nets and line fishing, and they focus heavily on boys communicating with men and on learning, much as the child in the book's opening does: "They learn about human nature and characteristics that are described in a similar way to those of fish and other animals" (*AT* 44). While this example is gender-specific, Waromi provides other examples of fishing that are valued as part of maintaining Ambai community—examples that show how the Ambai community is in dialogue with its surrounding environment. Later, the blenny explains how fishing that rejects greed is an integral part of the ecosystem and of fish lives, saying that "there are only two duties in this life: survival—to be sacrificed in the end by fellow fish in their own sea world; or even more noble: sacrifice—when a life ends in dedication to the survival of mankind" (*AT* 172). Andevavait recognizes that dying and being eaten, including by humans, is a natural part of a fish's lifecycle. But he continually rejects "humans acting with no concern for the world" by bombing reefs to pieces.

One of the men who fishes respectfully also reflects Ambai modes of knowing and perceiving in the novel, which gives an insight into how greed grew in the man's village and into his resistance to it. The man tells of a karani (administrator/clerk) who came to his village at the end of World War Two. The karani was recruiting men to work in Sorong and Hollandia. Two of the man's brothers went. Some of the recruits worked in government offices, while "most of them took jobs in a [Dutch] petroleum company" (*AT* 63). Here, the man directly connects the end of the war with a time of increased extractivism in Papua. He also connects it with

[22] Nixon, *Slow Violence,* 10.

the loss of family ties. The karani said, as he recruited workers, that "this is our chance, children of the moon. If we are afraid of the high tide, we shouldn't build our homes by the sea" (*AT* 64). That is, the karani stated that if one lives by the ocean then one must go where it flows, one must be scattered, much like coconuts scatter—yet people's family ties, and the ways they sustain future relatives, collapse when they sever ties with their community, and so the karani's metaphor breaks down. He misses the core responsibilities and knowledge that govern relationships between coconuts and humans. The man was supposed to leave the village with the karani, but the "night before their departure, the spirit of his late father came to him and invited him to accompany him by canoe into the jungle" (*AT* 60-61). The man followed and continued to gain knowledge about his ecosystem.

Later, as an old man, he instructed relatives about their ecosystem's balance. He told them about how

> every plant, tree, or bit of scrub had the right to live and had its own guardian. There were also sacred and magical values to consider. They had links and dependencies and mutually beneficial relationships with each other […] He would repeat the names of the places, the mountains and the coastal promontories. One by one he would count the plants that lined the beach. (*AT* 93-94)

The man recited these names as part of his lineage, his ancestry and history. He described how stealing is wrong, whatever the situation, and that such dishonesty, without respecting someone's life and livelihood, prevents people from understanding nature's "secrets" (*AT* 93). These secrets include understanding the relationships and accountabilities shared between different beings in the ecosystem. For example, when "the high tide reaches the neck of the river and the mangrove dwellers return to rest, it is a sign that the mountain breeze will soon pass by, fulfilling his faithful promise to the ocean" (*AT* 131). Waromi sketches out the dynamics of a reliable relationship between mountain and ocean. The high tide always rises and the breeze accompanies it, working to balance their ecosystem.

Waromi foregrounds two major spirits who also maintain their ecosystem's equilibrium: Worri, of the sea, and Viami, of the land. The spirits are twins, and the violence of munitions waste has upended their harmony. Both twins vehemently respond to "the scars left behind by evil things done by people to their own kind, but also from bad things done to any living creature" (*AT* 141). These "evil things" include cutting down trees arbitrarily, or "disturb[ing] the peace along the river." If the wind or the water becomes "polluted," then "the peace will be disturbed" (*AT* 142). Waromi is specific about the kind of pollution that upsets Viami and Worri, saying that it is "that kind of pollution that results from the actions of those who behave indiscriminately towards their fellow creatures." In other words, Worri and Viami's view of pollution is much vaster than that of humans, and goes beyond the inconveniences of waste that we can see. Worri and Viami sense the insatiability and self-indulgence behind polluting acts, seeing how such acts harm others and disrupt relationships. Both the old man and Andevavait show that humans in the novel are losing knowledge about these spirits, which hastens polluting acts. However, "Worri and Viami will never expire; their powers will never end […] The only thing certain is that in the end everything must return to balance, as in the past" (*AT* 143). In other words, Waromi shows that if polluting acts continue, the upheaval which Worri and Viami cause in response will become more extreme. This cycle of upheaval, especially the greed that drives using munitions for fishing, thus begets further violence on the Ambai ecosystem of Waromi's novel.

Despite the slow violence of pollution, the novel features examples of multiple beings continually working with each other to live through, navigate, and avoid the pollution that Worri and Viami loathe. These kinds of multi-being relations resemble the condition which Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing describes, when she writes that "staying alive—for every species—requires liveable collaborations. Collaboration means working across difference […] Without collaborations, we all die."[23] Tsing is interested in "*disturbance-based ecologies in which many species sometimes live together without either harmony or conquest*," precisely the kind of relationships that Waromi's novel foregrounds.[24] As Waromi's novel

[23] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 28.

[24] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 5.

suggests, living through disaster means attending to *responsibilities* within such assemblages or collaborations. The novel establishes that if each lively being, whether spirit or plant or weather system, furred or fish, human or not, "fulfils his responsibility as expected," there will be "peace" (*AT* 142). This kind of generous responsibility represents working with and for multiple beings in ways that enable collaborative life—ways that humans thwart through munitions dumping and bombing.

One of the most explicit collaborative relationships in the novel leads to collective expressions of music among many human and nonhuman beings, music in which everyone has a different, but essential, role. Andevavait describes how when a crested lizard reaches the end of their life, a tifa, or Vikainotu drum-maker (human) asks for permission through ceremony to kill him and turn it, with a selected tree, into a drum. *Tifa* is the common name for such drums across Papua, and these drums are used to make music but also as a clear communicative force. As West Papuan musician and human rights activist Ronny Kareni writes, "the voice of the tifa sends messages of connection and togetherness between village societies. Each ancestral group creates music specific to its culture and values, which also chimes with the shared cultural traditions (or *kastom*) of our peoples and of contemporary life."[25] Kareni incorporates the drums into his own music, in which he advocates for Papuan freedom from Indonesia, affirming how this music creates unity, but also using it to acknowledge the diversity of Papuan drumming traditions.

The creation of the tifa drum and the way it brings together other creatures to make sound form a crescendo at the climax of the novel—one that literally depicts what Tsing might call a "polyphonic assemblage," or "the gathering of these rhythms [of lifeways], as they result from world-making projects, human and non-human."[26] Reflecting the multivocal aspect of such assemblages, Waromi writes that, when the drum-maker arrives at the village with his drum, the elders greet him not "as an individual. Instead, they speak to him in a plural form, as if he has

[25] Ronny Kareni, "The Drumbeat of Resistance," *New Internationalist* (May 2017): 20. Further indicating the communicative power of tifa, there used to be two popular Papuan newspapers, *Tifa Irian* (1993-1997) and *Tifa Papua* (2000-2004).

[26] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 24.

come home to the village with a crowd of followers" (*AT* 133). Animals and plants of the earth are expected to join with the drum-maker's music, or what Waromi calls a "collaboration between animal, plant and human to create one meaningful sound" grounded in Mandohi, or "the breath of life" (*AT* 134). Specifically, the multi-being relations established in Waromi's novel are grounded in and prioritize Ambai understandings of the world and of how different elements of the world operate to sustain life, even in a world marked by munitions dumping.

Waromi describes Mandohi in spatial terms. When the drum "first reverberates, as he [the drum] is initiated in the *Mandohi* celebration, all the creatures that walk and all the plants that stir join in arousing the life force incorporated within the *Mandohi*" (*AT* 135). That is, "the breath of life" becomes a space in which a multitude of creatures, including spirit beings later on, share their voices. More specifically, Mandohi becomes a space for imparting stories, shoring up the older man's statement earlier in the novel that if one respects one's ecosystem then one will gain more knowledge about the different creatures which will help sustain all. Waromi writes that the different beings "have attended, persisted and contributed new stories to the elders of the village […] A transcendent communication has taken form right there within the *Mandohi*" (*AT* 137).

Amidst the raucous voices and tifa drumming, however, there are two creatures who do not participate with sound. They are Anggereai, the crab, and Andevavait, the blenny. Their responsibility to the breath of life is "witnessing and recording" the sounds and stories they hear (*AT* 135). Thus, it is perhaps no surprise that Andevavait is the primary perspective of the novel, as he witnesses the deaths caused by munitions and records the devastation, but also the resistance, he sees.

The novel ends, though, by emphasizing the ongoing threat of greed in Papua. Imperial territoriality, as a form of greed, dispossesses and displaces many different Papuan beings. In the final scenes of the novel, the old man explains greed to his great-grandson while they plant coconuts:

> the essence of feeling full, having eaten enough, is often related to the coconut tree. The stomach feels it has had enough and the brain orders the mouth to stop. When the stomach is not used to feeling replete, it will beg to be filled again and again, so there will never be a feeling of fullness or

> of having had enough. When there is never any feeling of satisfaction then greed grows greater. (*AT* 197).

In Papua, the greed of United States territoriality and that of other foreign powers, driven by the constant desire for more resources, continues to grow, stealing—as Nixon argues in his definition of displacement—the ground and resources from beneath Papuans' feet.[27] Until recently, the United States mining company Freeport-McMoRan owned the majority of the world's largest open-caste gold and copper mine in the middle of a Papuan national park; foreign investors continue to buy up land for palm oil plantations; and Elon Musk has had his eyes on the Papuan island of Biak for launching his satellites, due to its proximity to Papua's nickel reserves and its clear skies. Biak people resist this occupation, yet Musk has ignored them, much as the United States Department of State ignores Papuan deaths and injuries from munitions.

Furthermore, *Anggadi Tupa* describes another form of greed-as-extractivism in his novel, which it links to the greed that drove munitions dumping: mineral and natural-gas mining. Waromi tells of a place called Air Mendidih in Airing, near Papua's Bird's Head, where gas bubbles under water and where the Mangga-maraing tribe traditionally found plentiful fish, which they lured without bombs because "the ancestors treated this place with great respect and considered it to be sacred" (*AT* 154). Today, however,

> the Mangga-maraing people are facing a different challenge, because it turns out that Airing is a source of mineral gases […] technology has already reached outer space and is monitoring them as they fish at Air Mendidih […] The local people are allowed to watch over the surface of the water at Airing, but modern technology has the capacity to suck the source dry, from a place far away from their traditional territory. (*AT* 154)

The Mangga-maraing tribe no longer has jurisdiction over its waters. Much as munitions fishing displaces traditional fishing practices and disrupts oceanic ecologies, acting as an example of slow violence that continues to wreak ongoing havoc, mining in Air Mendidih emerges in the novel as a compounding violence

[27] Nixon, *Slow Violence,* 19.

that continues to disseminate greed. The Mangga-maraing people can survive these violences to an extent, but ultimately such wasteful practices lead to deaths. These practices erase living futures.

The proliferation of greed and its effects occurs because greed has the capacity to "bear flowers," as Waromi puts it (*AT* 197). It does not sustain life but *does* perpetuate itself. However, though the blenny suggests that it is possible for all beings to be greedy, he also suggests that it does not have to be this way—other modes of living are possible. Tsing writes that greed is entangled in United States and Eurocentric ideas of progress, in which "Progress is a forward march, drawing other kinds of time into its rhythms. Without that driving beat, we might notice other temporal patterns. Within a given species, too, there are multiple time-making projects, as organisms enlist each other and coordinate in making landscapes."[28] We see attention to these different rhythms in Waromi's novel, formally, as it brings together different genres and, in terms of content, as the blenny chooses to look "around rather than ahead" and as so many creatures have their own projects of working together to make life possible, including making music that literally leads to the intermingling of the breath of life (*AT* 22). Projects are possible that insist on multi-being collaboration and caretaking to continue life, and that reject greed and its aggressive temporal and territorial patterns.

Conclusion

Through the blenny's eye, the ocean, including the land with which it interacts, is shaped in many ways by the human history of war, and also by the creatures that dwell in it. Likewise, the waste the ocean bears, whether it is munitions or radiation, mining waste or other contamination, cannot help but impact the lives of the humans of the area, and beyond. By asking readers to see the environment through the blenny's eyes, Waromi shows that maintaining responsibility and accountability in our relationships with the ocean has the power to affect entire ecosystems. Waromi writes that "when Man understands himself as part of creation, then it's easy for him to be fair to other living things, and exist within the synergy of harmonious creation. It is the same with all life under the sea" (*AT* 193). This call to repair multi-being relations is not a call to return to a static imagined past, or a suggestion that people need to "get back to nature": instead, it

[28] Tsing, *The Mushroom,* 21.

insists that everyone must turn towards cultivating relations that attend to more-than-human lives, or ongoing dispossession and displacement will persist.

Everyone on earth, human and more-than-human, adapts to changes in our ecosystems, though privilege allows some to avoid significant impacts. In Papua, the contamination of munitions specifically wreaks pollution that enacts immediate, and now ongoing, violence. Waromi asks:

> how can we put the Papuan people and their problems into a coconut shell, while the ringing spirit of 'peace on earth' in this region has been echoing ever since General Douglas MacArthur way back on August 15, 1945, pledged peace in Hollandia? The context of declaring peace in Papua today is in no way narrow or local. (*AT* 205)

Waromi knows how United States imperial territoriality drives discourses of "peace" across the Pacific, discourses that consistently marginalize Papuans and their ecologies, including their resistance to Indonesian colonialism. Intervening in anthropocentric histories of war and modernity in Papua brings together the impacts of multiple forms of slow environmental violence, of which munitions dumping is but one example. Additionally, by prioritizing Ambai understandings of the world, Waromi asserts a rhetoric that centres Indigenous Papuan approaches to greed and contamination—a rhetoric that depicts and theorizes modes of collaboration that look for multi-being ways of living that do not conform to imperial structures of territoriality or modernity.