

**Radical Aesthetics:  
Arundhati Roy's Ecology of Style**  
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In “The End of the Imagination” Arundhati Roy frames her protest against globalization as a defence of aesthetics. She contrasts global development and nuclear proliferation with an alternative—beauty. “There is beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours,” she writes. “Hidden, fierce, immense. Beauty that is uniquely ours and beauty that we have received with race from others, enhanced, reinvented, and made our own. We have to seek it out, nurture it, love it” (*Cost* 123). Roy uses affective terms, portraying those who resist technocracy as protectively maternal, rather than as critically distanced. And although she depicts resistance as a collective enterprise—this is “our own beauty”—her description evokes the intersubjective but private encounter between mother and child, not the publicity of protest. Roy invokes an embodied, affective experience only to refute its political efficacy. But while her own stance straddles the two positions, she depicts them as separate modes of thought—politics and aesthetics. Because her political claims depend on an assertion of aesthetics as a separate sphere, Roy’s work offers an opportunity to evaluate the relevance of aesthetics to the overtly political intersection of postcolonial, anti-globalization, and environmentalist writing.

Advocacy of aesthetic autonomy raises immediate concerns in a postcolonial context. For one, if the aesthetic has primarily affective, subjective resonance, does it imply nostalgia for “pre-theoretical innocence” (Armstrong 2) or initiate a retreat from political discourse? (Roy’s preference for protesting “empire” rather than “globalization” might suggest that she rejects the evolution of the discourse, at the very least.<sup>1</sup>) Does the concept of aesthetic pleasure invoke naïve subjectivism and ignore the cultural and discursive forces that shape subjectivity? Such privileging of subjective experience might permit the renewal of cultural essen-

tialism and self-exoticization (Massumi 2), which postcolonial studies long worked to critique. Moreover, separating aesthetics and politics might reinforce “binarized, highly moralistic allegories of the subversive versus the hegemonic, resistance versus power” (Sedgwick 100) that valorize experiences associated with powerlessness without posing solutions.<sup>2</sup> But finally, if the purpose of positioning aesthetics as in dialogue with and yet fundamentally separate from political discourse is to find a source of affective solidarity among the oppressed, it is worth examining whether the re-emergence of aesthetics can usefully alter the terms of political engagement.

In Roy’s case, “beauty” provides the basis for a politicized humanism that contests the critiques of cultural compromise and assertions of unapproachable otherness typical of both postcolonial and ecocritical discourse. Nonetheless, she maintains a tension between aesthetic autonomy and political engagement rather than integrating them. Roy locates the search for beauty in private encounters between marginalized individuals and the environment. Thus, she foregrounds not the perceiver’s power or demand for political recognition, but her embeddedness in a living but largely non-human world—her ecological solidarity.<sup>3</sup> In *The God of Small Things*, Roy offers the aesthetic as an alternative politics, but also an alternative to cultural politics because she portrays the sensory pleasures her fragile characters and narrator share as negating socio-historical agency.<sup>4</sup> Since the novel’s resistance to agency operates by representing characters already excluded from political participation (for reasons of age, caste and gender), the private experience of finding beauty in the world might seem elegiac or merely consolatory.<sup>5</sup> In order to secure this exclusion, the novel enacts a division between imaginative and critical energies, as when the narrator describes how “[n]ow that he’d been re-Returned, Estha walked . . . along the banks of the river that smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans” (14). Though the narrator is close to Estha’s perspective at the beginning of the sentence, Estha is emotionally arrested at age seven and not equipped with the political awareness needed to perform this critique of the World Bank. As far as both Estha and Rahel are concerned, the riverbank is their world. Here and elsewhere the novel differentiates

between two modes: a public narrator who decries pollution and sardonically comments that “a five-star hotel chain had bought the Heart of Darkness” (109), and a private narrator who harmonizes with her characters to make beauty a still vibrant possibility. This tension runs throughout Roy's writings.

The novel's aesthetic and political commitments have been misunderstood for two reasons. First, Roy is interpreted as advocating a form of hybrid cosmopolitan subjectivity rather than a universal, humanistic conception of subjectivity. Second, *The God of Small Things* is often not read in the context of her political writing, which retains the novel's investments while leaving behind its dead ends. As I will argue, *The God of Small Things* valorizes embodied intersubjectivity, generating what Isobel Armstrong terms a “radical aesthetic.” Despite her stress on aesthetic experience, then, Roy's interests are also political, since the story of the twins' tragic movement from childhood to adulthood is contextualized by protest. Most critics argue that it is unclear how the novel's social realism and its aestheticism relate, but acknowledge that Roy's political career after writing the novel makes the question of the relation between aesthetics and politics particularly salient.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, I argue, Roy's body of work insists that the primacy of subjective experience is a limit that politics must face as well as a limit that divides Roy's own public life. The tension Roy maintains between aesthetic autonomy and political agency is especially crucial to anti-globalization protest because globalization so threatens the kinds of experience a radical aesthetic values most.

## I.

Understanding Roy's work as a project in aesthetics may seem to ignore the critical debate about whether the novel should be understood as advocating the kind of authentic conception of experience discredited by postcolonial criticism. Numerous critics have worried that the novel's style gets in the way of acknowledging the compromises that globalization has imposed upon cultural and personal authenticity.<sup>7</sup> Addressing these doubts, Alex Tickell argues that *The God of Small Things* is a cosmopolitan text drawing stylistically on what Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, terms “hybridity.” As a source of destabilization and

dissent in narratives of cultural difference, stylistic and thematic hybridity enables critique of cultural authenticity and celebration of decentred multiplicity (Tickell 82). In *The God of Small Things*, Tickell explains, Roy cultivates a deliberately unstable conception of personal and cultural identity: she “draws the reader into a text ‘woven with little fragments of ordinary language contrasted and folded unexpectedly against each other’ that ‘begin to sing in our ears as they gather, with each repetition, the whole emotional charge of the narrative’; in these instances Roy depends on a brilliant ‘over-written layering of tone and detail, as much as she does on ironic narrative effect’” (81; quoting Ahmad, 103).<sup>8</sup> Certainly “ironic narrative effect” and the accretion of emotional power fuse in Roy’s hyperactive layering of narrative modes. But how does layered narrative produce emotional power?

The novel in fact depends on authenticity—on connections between childhood subjectivity, emotional power, and narrative affect that rely on a conception of childhood that renders cosmopolitanism an unsatisfactory explanation for the novel’s politics. From a cosmopolitan perspective, the figure of the child seems to be a troublesome bastion of essentialism. The novel grants the status of what I would term a phenomenology to the playful way of seeing the world associated in the novel with childhood. The narrator’s adoption of this phenomenology, however, does not show it directly contesting the political issues the novel raises (caste conflict, cultural sexism, local Marxist politics, the World Bank’s environmental projects). Instead, it becomes a way to cultivate solidarity with the powerless, affective and visionary but would not necessarily imply more concrete political agency.

Missing from a cosmopolitan interpretation, then, is an investigation of the novel’s aesthetic commitments. Not only does the novel’s phenomenology counteract postcolonial theory’s valorization of the hybrid subject, but Roy’s work also builds an environmentalist, anti-globalization politics out of this phenomenology while retaining its always personal resonance. Though it depicts cultural cross-pollination, *The God of Small Things* is not fundamentally invested in hybrid cultural identity, but in hybridity as ecological multiplicity. Thus the narrative is interested less in postcolonial political agency than in partaking of childlike

subjectivity's necessary but often futile struggle to escape oppression primarily through recourse to beauty discovered in the environment, and only secondarily through culture or ideology. The novel perpetuates the authenticity of childhood subjectivity that attaches value to the contemplation of beautiful "things"—other living beings in the world.<sup>9</sup>

The narrator speaks in the third rather than first person, yet incorporates thoughts and images attributed indiscriminately to Rahel and Estha. Taking up the children's mental language, the narrator recapitulates the doubleness of the twins' shared subjectivity, which emphasizes the interactive responsiveness of play. For instance, the children's quarrel before going to the airport—he calls her "stick insect," she calls him "Elvis the Pelvis"—takes on a narrative life of its own, intermingled with the adults' insistence that they act as "ambassadors": "Ambassador E. Pelvis whispered in Ambassador S. Insect's ear. Ambassador Rahel's giggle escaped in a bluegreen bubble (the color of a jackfruit fly) and burst in the hot airport air. *Pffff!* was the sound it made" (138). The negative feelings affiliated with being dubbed "ambassadors," combined with their mutual infuriation at mocking nicknames, are at least partially transformed thanks to the secretive fun of code names that enable a joyful synesthetic moment which bonds a giggling sound to a fly-coloured shape, and back to another sound. The shift from "S. Insect" to "Rahel" complicates this moment by suggesting that a different perspective has emerged, though it is unclear whether the code names "belong" to the narrator's voice and real names to the children or vice versa. At the same time that the novel indicates a boundary shift between character and narrator, it shares a hyper-sensual moment across that boundary. The novel's formal emphasis, its changing repetitions and paratactic rhythms, gradually initiate the narrative's affirmative relation to the kinds of delight—somatic pleasures and linguistic resonances—affiliated with constraint. Without insisting on the boundaries of narratological categories like character and narrator, or even the category of individual consciousness, the novel elevates the texture of subjectivity to the status of an aesthetic principle.

The style affiliated with childhood subjectivity posits play as a form of cultural agency—Rahel and Estha love to speak English forwards,

backwards, and in new combinations.<sup>10</sup> Powerlessness and vulnerability make an early appearance in *The God of Small Things* when the twins are introduced as “[t]hin-armed children, flat-chested, wormridden and Elvis Presley-puffed” (4). If this representation of childhood seems essentialist (though not idealized), then essence and authenticity as such are not, for Roy, problems. Roy’s disinterest in critiquing the authenticity of a childlike perspective suggests her investment in the universality of childhood, and the novel’s valorization of this perspective works to reconnect us to our own receptivity.<sup>11</sup> This is not a politically motivated deconstruction of authenticity slipping up on its representation of childhood; rather, a shared phenomenology based on childhood sensitivity drives the novel’s anti-politics.

## II.

Before describing the novel’s phenomenological aesthetic in more detail, I will first discuss the theoretical basis for reading the novel as engaged in aesthetics, a field that has not traditionally included sensually, personally-invested contemplation of natural phenomena within its scope. But the shift from the contemplation of art to the contemplation of nature is less fraught than might be expected. The prominence of the seemingly reifying term “things” for natural phenomena opens the novel to an aesthetic discourse that stresses embedded, embodied, and desiring spectatorship and retains the traditional notion of the noninstrumental object of contemplation. As Leela Gandhi argues, the scene of traditional Kantian aesthetics is one of disinterested spectatorship, but such an encounter between subject and object can be appropriated for an understanding of aesthetics that emphasizes the desire to bond with what remains outside the self. For Gandhi, this affective approach recoups the aesthetic as an experience of “interested autonomy” (160) that opens a range of possibilities for relationality, rendering the aesthetic amenable to anti-colonial politics, and, I would add, to ecological concerns. Similarly, Isobel Armstrong’s *The Radical Aesthetic* is suited to a discussion of Roy’s work because she conceives of “the components of aesthetic life . . . [as] already embedded in the processes and practices of consciousness—playing and dreaming, thinking and feel-

ing.” Childhood experience provides the basis for aesthetic experience: “Interactive, sensuous, epistemologically charged, play has to do with both the cognitive and the cultural” (2–3).<sup>12</sup> Inherent in play is a learning process by which the child mediates his relationship to his environment and thus engenders knowledge. Art extends play, engaging the subject and environment, so aesthetic experience should be understood not as isolated perception, but as an elaboration of our earliest, richest energies. Like Gandhi, who argues that Roy’s approach generates an “immature politics” (188), Armstrong leaves the political impact of aesthetic autonomy open-endedly relevant to “struggle” of all kinds (101, 224).<sup>13</sup> She argues that this is a democratic and feminist approach—democratic in the sense that it takes into account somatic experience “available to the disempowered,” and feminist because it understands the “palpable materiality of the body” (15, 236)—because it reintegrates the disempowered, gendered body into aesthetic theory. These attempts to reclaim somatic experience resonate with Roy’s phenomenological account of powerlessness, which centres upon the palpable materiality of the shared thoughts and dreams of twinned bodies.

From this perspective, Roy’s fusion of wonder with beauty does not merely offer collective sensory consolation for a lack of agency.<sup>14</sup> Rather, the novel posits this affective experience as an alternative form of knowledge that complements critique but accomplishes something experiential, and thus is more accessible as a form of protection against the traumas of social and cultural life. The narrator’s closeness to the characters supports the aesthetic centrality of affect, because “affects cross categories, experienced in consciousness and registered by the body” (108). Responding to the novel’s attempt to recapture a sensual world already lost, Deepika Bahri suggests that it can be described as working out, but in an elegiac mode, the Marxist concept of the emancipatory potential of sensory experience: “tension between the aesthetic and the political . . . reveals the contributions of the former in the face of the dominative logic of the latter, even as it underscores the importance of understanding their separation and isolation from each other” (17). For Bahri, the novel exacerbates this tension by depicting sensuous plenitude as an experience of the past, as when the narrator comments that Rahel views

the experience of sharing thoughts and dreams with Estha as so removed from the present as to constitute a different form of identity—Rahel “thinks of Estha and Rahel as *Them*, because, separately, the two of them are no longer what *They* were” (5). However, because the third-person narrator shares and expands the experiences of characters, mourning the gap between the too-vivid past and unthinkable present cannot be the novel’s ultimate aim.

### III.

At this point, the phenomenology Roy’s characters and narrator share needs further exploration. The perspective affiliated with the children is biologically oriented, on one hand, and animistic, on the other. It implies—though never makes explicit—the authenticity of biological interconnectedness as surpassing the claims of ideology.<sup>15</sup> The twins’ imaginary version of what their uncle calls the History House has little to do with the anti-commodification critique of “Ayemenem’s own Heart of Darkness” offered by the narrator. As the twins imagine the History House together as if by an unspoken consensus, biology encroaches upon the relics of past life:

Very few people had seen it. But the twins could picture it.

The History House.

With cool stone floors and dim walls and billowing ship-shaped shadows. Plump, translucent lizards lived behind old pictures, and waxy, crumbling ancestors with tough toe-nails and breath that smelled of yellow maps gossiped in sibilant, papery whispers. (51–52)

Although Lawrence Buell’s suggestion for ecocriticism that “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in a natural history” (7) is relevant here, the concept of history is itself overrun by living multiplicity. Before contextualizing the juxtaposition of animals and history firmly within the imaginative world of the children, the novel keys this scenario of overlapping registers to its rejection of



boundaries that delimit identity, including the individual identities of twin children.

The novel's phenomenology is not limited to the characters and the narrator; by providing a sort of tutorial through two early scenes of perceptual framing, the novel initiates readers into what Gandhi calls the desiring aesthetic gaze (160). First, describing the death of the adult Estha's dog, Roy glosses the moment from Estha's point of view:

As Khubchand lay dying on the cushion, Estha could see the bedroom window reflected in his smooth, purple balls. And the sky beyond. And once a bird that flew across. To Estha—steeped in the smell of old roses, blooded on memories of a broken man—the fact that something so fragile, so unbearably tender had survived, had been *allowed* to exist, was a miracle. A bird in flight reflected in an old dog's balls. It made him smile out loud. (14)

This passage introduces Estha's sensibility: overlapping sense impressions give the temporary and precarious appearance of overlapping bodies—it is an image, not properly a “thing” at all, that blends the discourse of ecology with that of art. It is not the potential symbolism of the bird in flight that interests Estha, but the dissonant framing of the image within another image. A special way of looking brings these beings together into one unfused experience that exemplifies Gandhi's description of the aesthetic as interested autonomy: while the human gaze desires, organizes, values, and participates in the construction of the aesthetic object when the object is the living world, the world still retains its inhumanity.

A comparable moment occurs not much later, but at a fantasmatic remove that bridges real, remembered, and imagined perception. The narrator, here loosely affiliated with Rahel, describes the imagined view through the stretched piercings in her long-dead great-grandmother's ears: “Through the holes in her ears you could see the hot river and the dark trees that bent into it. And the fishermen in their boats. And the fish” (30). The narrator provides no commentary on the preciousness of the imaginary glimpse of fish bodies experientially consecrated by

being framed in a dead woman's imagined ears. These moments resist symbolic interpretation—they are simply living things, brought briefly together by a fusion of perception with imagination. This has ecological implications: the environment is not so “other” as to be closed off to the human observer, but the conjunction of “things” appears valuable as such. Seeing this way is intuitively and implicitly a way of participating in both historical inheritance and biological interconnection; writing this way offers an ecology of style that makes nature an artwork.

Roy does not appear to worry that the human construction of nature trespasses on nature's otherness or essentializes it. Rather, she works to place the human viewer within rather than outside the environment. Unlike the static model of traditional aesthetics, this mode of perceptual imagination does not render the perceiver passive, or isolate the object in an aesthetic void. According to Armstrong's theory of the aesthetic, objects of play mediate between the self and the world:

If we refuse to seal the artwork off into an aesthetic terrain, and regard the *artwork*, not the ‘I’ who supposedly made it, as a form of mediation, a transitive, interactive form, new possibilities emerge. For one thing, this will not allow the one-sided, privileged term, self or ‘I’, to dominate what is a process of relating, a constant negotiation of in-betweenness. (159–60)

Because for Roy objects of perception tend to be configurations of plants and animals existing at the margins of an increasingly scarred natural world, the narrative intimates that these perceptions heighten the perceiver's awareness of in her place in a world conceived ecologically as well as socially but without ever going so far beyond a child-like perspective as to theorize this stance explicitly.

#### IV.

The subjectivity shared by Rahel and Estha, which pervades the novel even when the narrative dwells in the thoughts of other characters, is nonetheless not associated with transformative agency. As with the novel's rejection of boundaries at the outset, Estha's retreat into silence indicates that the processes of maturation and secondarily of enculturation

involve deeply traumatic encounters between childhood pliancy and the aggression of the adult world.<sup>16</sup> Childhood subjectivity does not necessarily disappear fully when one grows up, as the description of the “truly, terrifyingly adult” policemen implies. They are “men whom childhood had abandoned without a trace. Men without curiosity. Without doubt. . . . They looked out at the world and never wondered how it worked, because they knew. *They* worked it. They were mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine” (248). It seems no accident that one of these policemen has casual access to Ammu’s body, tapping her breasts with his baton: these abuses result from subjectivity conceived of as a mechanical force, rather than as an opportunity for sensitive experience.

Ammu herself seems to regress toward a perspective more like that of her children. Although at times she describes the world of childhood jealousy, from the outside, her perspective seems susceptible to invasion by playful tropes that are explicitly linked to Rahel’s consciousness.<sup>17</sup> When she and her lover Velutha play with a spider at the novel’s end, her childlike qualities are clearest:

[T]he minute spider . . . lived in a crack in the wall of the back verandah of the History House and camouflaged himself by covering his body with bits of rubbish—a sliver of wasp wing. Part of a cobweb. Dust. Leaf rot. The empty thorax of a dead bee. *Chappu Thamburan*, Velutha called him. Lord Rubbish. One night they contributed to his wardrobe—a flake of garlic skin—and were deeply offended when he rejected it along with the rest of his armor from which he emerged—disgruntled, naked, snot-colored. (320)

The rhythm and cadence feel familiar at this point, as if the poetics of Rahel and Estha’s voices have fully pervaded their mother’s experiences. Moreover, the multiple layers protecting this ugly spider’s life embody the phenomenal multiplicity that Ammu and Velutha value by noticing him. Their attention to the specifics of the spider’s life suggests that they are engaged in a playful, aesthetic act that levels human and insect importance. Almost the last moment of the novel, this passage, with its emphasis on play, seems more final but also more hopeless than the

sexually explicit description of their coupling a few pages earlier. While Ammu and Velutha delight in the spider's dirtiness and their own ability to attend to it, the scene contains a hint of destruction appropriate to the fact that, thanks to the novel's nonlinear temporality, these characters have already lost their membership in society. In their retreat, Velutha and Ammu are certainly not effective agents of political change. Nor are they aware of the contingency of their attachments, as a cosmopolitan reading might have it.

Even if her adult characters can retreat to their unsophisticated childhood notion of beauty at their most tender moments, Roy does not engage the concept of hybrid identity, the domain of postcolonial cosmopolitanism, but a more straightforward theory of development. Hybridity remains in play only as living multiplicity—only in the sense that Roy's polyvocal strategy for evoking childhood wonder ends up celebrating ecology. Her multilayered voice reflects the diversity of experience available to the right kind of subject. But Roy resists giving the characters enough critical consciousness to let them theorize their stance explicitly. As far as the characters are concerned, the sensual experience itself is most important. Roy scripts this inadequate political agency by embodying aesthetic receptivity in characters whose anger remains personal. The introduction of the Big God and Small God emphasizes that worship of framed private experience results from trauma:

[P]ersonal despair could never be desperate enough. That something happened when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation. That Big God howled like a hot wind and demanded obeisance. Then Small God (cozy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing at his own temerity. (20)

While the structure of characterization suggests feminist critique, the shift away from Rahel's own anger produces an elevated account of gods that effaces cultural and sexual power. If Rahel takes offence, she offers no direct response. Politicization has disastrous effects, though the tragic valence of events upholds the rectitude of the politics (Khot 219). After

all, the God of Small Things is also a God of Loss: the rejection of the violence in grand narratives leaves behind a sensibility that does not directly map onto the capacity to effect social change.

V.

The trajectory of Roy's career grafts a future onto the novel's community, offering an opportunity to assess the futurism common to discussions of the aesthetic.<sup>18</sup> Recent work in aesthetics tends to have a futurist emphasis derived from Giorgio Agamben's concept of potentiality—both Leela Gandhi's "immature" "politics of relationality" (188) and Thomas Docherty's "passion of the possible" avoid projecting the political future of aesthetics. These writers derive their caution from drawing on Agamben's interest in Walter Benjamin's critique of the fascist uses of aestheticized politics. As Docherty argues, political forecasts risk judgments that may too sharply define the objects of experience and impose authenticity from outside: "Our response, in our face-to-face encounter with such alterity, must be passionate, a 'passion of the possible.' It would be an error to assume a knowledge of this Other, for any such knowledge would be a resolution of the ambiguity that she presents into a closed and univocal meaning. . . . The ethical requires 'negative capability'" (87). Because Roy is less concerned about preserving the authenticity of otherness, however, she gestures to the openness in aesthetic experience without forestalling judgment or deferring engagement. To some extent, she would agree with Docherty that we need "a turn to ecology" in which "[t]he key term would thus not be 'participation, but rather inhabiting,' in . . . its ecological sense, as defining an intimacy with a public space or public sphere" (135).<sup>19</sup> However, Roy's active engagement rather than residence in a zone of potentiality means that while intimacy reaches cautiously toward the public sphere, "ecology" never loses its specific, environmental purchase. Thus, she neither critiques the cultural construction of nature, nor affirms the unapproachable otherness of the environment, but works within the perceiver's desiring relationship to its beauty.

While active in protest, then, Roy depicts herself as motivated primarily by the novel's vision of "beauty" and its environmentalist im-

plications. *The God of Small Things* is not autobiography—it seems impossible to imagine a future for Rahel—but the work has a nonliteral autobiographical element that comes into the foreground of Roy’s subsequent political activism. The small living things that draw consistent attention in *The God of Small Things* recur in Roy’s political work, suggesting that the phenomenology developed in the novel should be understood as signifying her characters’ incapacity for political action, but also as a fundamental source of imaginative value Roy shares with her characters and narrator, and which she brings to political projects that maintain explicitly literary qualities. If her protest writing insists that human lives are no more important than and dependent on other kinds of lives, her continued aesthetic emphasis attempts to make this recognition possible. “The End of the Imagination,” Roy’s first foray into political engagement, is dedicated to “*Marmots and voles and everything else on earth that is threatened and terrorized by the human race*” (Cost 92). Following much the same logic as the phenomenological tutorial in *The God of Small Things*, marmots reappear in her polemic against the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, “War Is Peace.” Roy follows a discussion of collective resistance with unrestrained animal imagery: “[H]ave we forfeited our right to dream? Will we ever be able to reimagine beauty? Will it be possible ever again to watch the slow, amazed blink of a new-born gecko in the sun, or whisper back to the marmot who has just whispered in your ear—without thinking of the World Trade Center . . .?” (Cost 192).<sup>20</sup> This too-precious image clearly does not represent political agency gained, but a post-traumatic conception of subjective “freedom from” cooptation. Roy’s use of “small things” in her description of what her political project seeks to preserve idealizes a separation between an anti-political perspective that can be conveyed by animal imagery and one that actively engages with politics and has little interest in rodents.

In Roy’s turn from writing fiction to political activism, she has frequently juxtaposed these as two separate ways of life, highlighting her reluctance to hypothesize a politically active future for art as such. In some of her earliest political writing, she depicts herself as an artist wrenched out of a world bounded by the aims of art, pulled away from reading highbrow authors invested in literary aesthetics. “Instinct,” she

writes, “led me to set aside Joyce and Nabokov, . . . and substitute for it reports on drainage and irrigation, with journals and books and documentary films about dams and why they’re built and what they do” (*Cost* 9). Roy portrays herself as a literary person, caught up in an instinctive and physical rather than rational sacrifice to boring but ethically all-too-urgent debates. In “Come September” she writes, “fiction dances out of me. Nonfiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning” (*War Talk* 45). Pointedly literary is the way Roy stages her political outrage autobiographically (Huggan, “Greening,” 709), coupling dissent to the personal act of turning away from art, and nostalgically imagining what it would be like to return after this long, painful separation.

Most dramatically in “The Greater Common Good,” Roy stages a breakout from the mould of an empirically-minded protester. Telling the story of the villagers whose precarious but viable existence on the riverbanks of the Narmada Valley was destroyed by construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam, she explains,

Suddenly they can't trust their river any more. It's like a loved one who has developed symptoms of psychosis. Anyone who has loved a river can tell you that the loss of a river is a terrible, aching thing. But I'll be rapped on the knuckles if I continue in this vein. When we're discussing the Greater Common Good there's no place for sentiment. One must stick to facts. Forgive me for letting my heart wander. (*Cost* 50)

No longer concerned with data, Roy depicts herself as an erring child, to be disciplined for her impassioned sympathy by schoolmarmish protesters who fear that to show personal emotion is to retreat from the supposedly empirical world in which developers function. The implication of this moment, of course, is that far from frowning at her emotional outburst, her reader will realize the validity of her lament and embrace “the seeming inappropriateness of aesthetics in the context of waste and rupture” (De Loughrey, Gosson, Handley, 23). This passage emphasizes that Roy conceives the essay in the literary terms of a project that should not bracket individual experience for the sake of a debate over water use.<sup>21</sup>

## VI.

It might seem that Roy's aesthetic has an infantilizing effect and undesirably political implications. For one, it associates the victims of globalization with children, which risks repeating the offences of imperial paternalism. Furthermore, its comfort with the concept of the natural also risks both essentialism and the casual assumption of human privilege. Finally, its gestures of universalism seem to efface ongoing cultural and political debate. Instead, however, we might see it as avowing a tension, implying that political discourse will always involve psychological elisions that make the representation of fervent emotional energies seem merely infantile or sentimental when they have the potential to unite the oppressed.<sup>22</sup> But if Roy's work constantly appears to flee its own commitments, it remains reluctantly engaged rather than escapist. In other words, although Roy's writings, from *The God of Small Things* to the present, consistently divide the aesthetic and the political as the public from the private, her essays belie this division. By positioning her own politics as emerging from this phenomenology, which is not only anti-political but seems to negate political agency, Roy radicalizes her aesthetic. When writing concerns the relations between perception and identity, involving affect, gender, and species, it cannot but intersect with political—public—concerns. Her work's autobiographical register, though, insists that political engagement cannot forget the intensity of individual experience, cannot allow this form of consciousness to lapse into the past.

Perhaps, as Armstrong implies, affective aesthetics may only amount to a release from ideological blindness that has obscured the extent to which oppressed bodies are denied discursive presence; this new conception of aesthetic experience offers the most inclusive paradigm, if not for achieving social justice than for understanding what political agency risks leaving behind, and thus it has feminist, environmentalist, and anti-globalization resonances. Roy cannot, then, permit the division between art and politics to delay engagement. She highlights her lingering suspicion of directing an inclusive aesthetics toward political ends, but does so nonetheless. The need to bring aesthetics autonomy into political debate is, she suggests, at once to risk missing the point of



beauty and to fight to keep the experience of beauty available and uncompromised. In other words, by engaging in protest, her political and especially ecological commitments retain their specificity, which might otherwise be lost by deferring political action to a potential future. She constantly foregrounds a sense of unreadiness, but some things, she implies, cannot wait.

## Notes

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- 1 A number of writers of what Kumar terms "World Bank literature" (xii) prefer to retain the word "empire," perhaps for its associations with extreme power differential and long histories of exploitation. See "Confronting Empire" where Roy argues, "[o]ur strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. . . . With out art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness—and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe" (*War Talk* 112).
- 2 While Sedgwick is discussing not aesthetics but Michel Foucault's reification of the categories he critiques, her context is relevant here in that I will argue for the limited productivity of applying poststructuralist approaches to an aestheticist novel.
- 3 In Mortenson's reading of Roy, "[t]here is no escape back to pristine nature, but at the same time there is no denying the ecological networks in which human beings are imbricated" (189). In this essay I build on the idea that Roy's ultimate commitment is ecological rather than cultural by connecting this idea to Roy's narrative strategies in a more detailed way than Mortenson.
- 4 Roy links "the unrelenting accretion of human suffering and its cauterization of human sensibility" (Bahri 222). Roy's emphasis on a shared-yet-private perceptual framework echoes Chakrabarty's projections about postcolonial nations which have not had access to dominant models of nationhood, citizenship, or subjectivity, which will "write over the given and privileged narratives of citizenship other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of 'tradition' that 'modernity' creates" (46).
- 5 For Singh, "[I]f the children grow up, they remain mere shadows of their former childhood selves and make rather unconvincing adults. The memory that is sustained is of a sacred world of lost innocence and childhood" (14). Singh goes on

- to argue that the novel's "trenchant critiques of the nation-state remain circumscribed by refusing to let [the] children grow up to negotiate complex relationships with the histories that interpellate them" (17). This refusal, I argue, is part of Roy's ambivalence toward aesthetics in politics.
- 6 See, for example, Ahmad, 103–108.
  - 7 Huggan, concerned at India becoming "an object of conspicuous consumption," argues that Roy writes with awareness of her novel's position, using "strategic exoticism" to "reveal the link between the perceptual mechanism of the exotic and the metropolitan marketing of Indian culture" (83, 71). However, from this perspective Roy's self-awareness about such a mechanism does not redeem it from complicity, and damages the potency of its protests. Bacchilega also worries this idea from a feminist perspective (181).
  - 8 See Anderson for a discussion of tensions within cosmopolitanism: critical self-reflection that accompanies voluntary affiliation typifies cosmopolitanism, which manifests "discomfort with a too-explicit affirmation of the universalism that nonetheless prompts suspicions of 'overly relativized preciousness' or 'local authenticity'" (81). Roy, as I will argue, embraces both universalism *and* local authenticity, which clearly distinguishes her stance from cosmopolitanism.
  - 9 For Benoit, Roy's "deconstructionist tactics force the reader to fit the kaleidoscopic pieces together into some sort of coherent 'whole', and this act of imagination blurs the dividing line between author and reader" (106). See also Vogt-William, 393–404.
  - 10 They might derive their verbal cleverness from their native language, Malayalam (a palindrome). However, the narrative, instead of pinning down the cultural sources of play, instead stresses the universality of childhood. It is worth mentioning that the forms of phenomenological multiplicity Roy offers depend heavily on familiar, modernist versions of childhood, which include an associative, punning sensibility. While it might be possible to see this adoption of Western narrative techniques as another semi-subversive cosmopolitan adaptation of available means to deconstructive ends (as is often said of Rushdie, frequently mentioned in discussions of Roy's precursors), the novel's adoption of modes of awareness affiliated with childhood suggests otherwise.
  - 11 For an example of the deconstruction of childhood, see Morgado, 206.
  - 12 Armstrong also notes that "it is crucial that play continues into adulthood" (39).
  - 13 Armstrong emphasizes that her theory is particularly useful in explicitly antagonistic situations and selects the postcolonial experience as a paradigmatic example because if play alters categories and frees up language, "[i]n the context of post-colonial writing, resignification of cultural and sexual meaning is an arduous and agonistic process, a violent event in the sign system . . . , paralleled by political upheaval which is as much cause as effect of discursive change" (232).
  - 14 Nussbaum's discussion of wonder illuminates the sense in which Roy formulates experience collectively rather than individually: "The impulse of wonder and the

- ability to imagine another's pain work closely together, since wonder turns the child outside herself to involve her with lives she doesn't know" (213). However, Roy does not share Nussbaum's liberal confidence that wonder has an impact on ethical behavior—for Roy, the geopolitical world abuses the capacity for wonder rather than extending it.
- 15 Roy saves explaining biological interconnection for her political work, allowing it to play an aesthetic role in the novel. See Roy's "The Greater Common Good": "[Big Dams] represent the severing of the link, not just the link—the *understanding*—between human beings and the planet they live on. They scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hens, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life, and the earth to human existence" (*Cost* 81).
  - 16 Franz Fanon suggests that children's enculturation into racial identities may be traumatic (145–52). Natov's comment that Roy's "sharp insight into the intuitive nature of children revealing how innocence, unmarred by the infected systems of adult society and without full awareness, speaks truth to power" (196) responds to the text's tendency to posit the modes of childhood subjectivity as an alternative source of value, though without considering its aesthetic implications.
  - 17 As an example of the infiltration of Rahel's experience, while dreaming, Ammu asks, "Who was he, the one-armed man. Who *could* he have been? The God of Loss? The God of Small Things? The God of Goosebumps and Sudden Smiles? Of Sourmetal Smells—like steel bus rails and the smell of the bus conductor's hands from holding them?" (207). Bus smells intrude into Ammu's dream out of Rahel's perceptually hybrid experience in the first chapter: "Rahel could smell the sheaf of bus tickets and the sourness of the steel bus rails on the conductor's hands" (10), an experience that re-echoes in Rahel's consciousness before appearing in Ammu's.
  - 18 I am grateful for this point to a number of talks sponsored by the Johns Hopkins English Department throughout the past year, specifically Brennan and Anderson. They deem this reluctance to envision a viable politics an escapist, utopian impulse.
  - 19 For a similar use of the word "ecology," see Massumi, who advocates an "inclusive, non-judgmental approach to tending belonging-together in an intense, affectively engaged way is an *ethics*—as opposed to a morality. Political ecology is an amoral collective ethics. Ethics is a tending of coming-together, a *caring for* belonging as such" (255). See also Sedgwick, 118, 145–6.
  - 20 I must admit that I find the description of the marmot sentimental and not very compelling. See my brief discussion of Roy's infantilizing of political discourse in the conclusion.
  - 21 At the same time, Roy participates in a discourse of South Asian history that centres around ideologically fraught contests over water use. On the importance of water use in South Asian political history, see Arnold and Guha, 12–16.

22 Regardless of whether Roy appears aware of this logic, her writing makes sentimentality seem the result of oppressive anti-emotionalism.

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