ariel: a review of international english literature
Vol. 50 No. 2–3 Pages 81–104
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Toxic Imperialism: Memory, Erasure, and Environmental Injustice in David Chariandy's *Soucouyant*

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Abstract: Critical literature on David Chariandy's *Soucouyant* has explored the dementia suffered by the protagonist's mother, Adele, as a metaphor for the erasure of Black experience from cultural memory and dominant historical narratives and as a response to the traumatic effects of imperialism. This essay builds on these critical insights using a postcolonial ecocritical lens to argue that in Chariandy's novel, dementia is both an effect and symptom of the multiple sites of chemical exposure that disproportionately impact low-income communities of color. From Adele's and her husband Roger's origins in Trinidad to their home and work environments in Canada, the family's multiple encounters with byproducts of industrial production are inseparably linked to legacies of colonialism and racism. This reading traces the roots of Adele's trauma to environmental and cultural disruptions wrought by the United States' military occupation of Trinidad during World War II. We also examine *Soucouyant's* critique of Canada's discourse of neoliberal multiculturalism as well as the novel's relevance to Indigenous-Black solidarity movements against racism, white supremacy, and injustices in Canada. In its attention to epistemologies of memory and the multigenerational effects of (neo)colonialism, *Soucouyant* is a literary intervention in support of local and global decolonization struggles for social, environmental, and ecological justice.

Keywords: David Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, toxic imperialism, memory, dementia, environmental justice

David Chariandy asserts that one critical task a writer must undertake, "particularly a 'minority' writer, is to be a custodian of cultural memory" ("Spirits" 812). Chariandy's call to writers of color to assume custodianship of narratives that are missing from written records and official archives emphasizes a practice of storytelling and history-making that is inspired by, and generated from, personal and communal experiences and memories. For Indigenous as well as several minoritized populations, the process of remembering through cultural custodians is key to uncovering the plurality of their past and to contesting lingering imperial legacies and histories. Australian Aboriginal writer Alexis Wright, for example, credits her grandmother, a custodian and transmitter of cultural memory, for helping her to recover her Indigenous roots: "She had stories to explain everything—who we are, who each of us were, and the place on our traditional country that was very deep and special to her. She was our memory. She was what not forgetting was all about. It was through her that I learnt to imagine. Imagine what had been stolen from us" ("Politics" 10). In the absence of such a custodian, Chariandy's Caribbean-Canadian unnamed narrator in *Soucouyant* (2007) becomes the unofficial historiographer who pieces together snippets of events that Adele, his mother, could not and would rather not remember. Adele's dementia and her name, which means "invisible," both pointedly reflect the eviscerating effects of colonialism and the displacement of minoritized immigrants. As the narrator struggles to make sense of Adele's fragmented memories, the novel moves back and forth between sites of toxic exposure in Carenage, Trinidad, where Adele lived as a child during World War II, and Port Junction in Scarborough, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Toronto, where she immigrates and the narrator is born and raised in the 1980s.

As several scholars note, Adele's dementia is inextricably linked in the novel with the erasure of Black experience from cultural memory and dominant historical narratives;[2] bridging these discussions with ecocritical concerns, we examine how Adele's debilitating dementia is also an effect and symptom of the multiple sites of chemical contamination to which exploited black and brown bodies are routinely exposed. From Adele's and her husband Roger's origins in Trinidad to the factory

and home in Scarborough, Ontario, the family's multiple encounters with byproducts of industrial production are inseparably linked to the legacy of colonialism, slavery, and racism. Our essay calls attention to the devastating social and environmental effects of toxic imperialist and capitalist enterprises while underscoring their disproportionate impact on communities of color and low-income populations. Informed by and adding to the work of Indigenous and postcolonial scholars, writers, and activists who engage with global environmental and social injustices, we read Chariandy's *Soucouyant* as an intervention in global and local anti-colonial environmental justice struggles.

While ecocriticism as a subfield has been late to recognize the entanglement of ecological devastation with colonialism, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, in their examination of texts by Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Jamaica Kincaid, Chinua Achebe, Vandana Shiva, Gayatri Spivak, and Martin Carter, among others, note that the "postcolonial imaginary" (5) has long represented violence against the colonized as inextricably linked to violence against the land and non-human communities. As they suggest, Guyanese author Wilson Harris' oft-quoted observation that the Caribbean is "a landscape saturated by traumas of conquest" (qtd. in DeLoughrey and Handley 5) might as easily apply to any number of sites of imperial violence globally. More recently, Rob Nixon coined the term "slow violence" to describe the toxic "incremental and accretive" ecological, climate, and human health impacts of contemporary neoliberal policies and industrial capitalism (2).

In her influential essay "Aambe! Maajaadaa! (What #IdleNoMore Means to Me)," Canadian First Nations, Mississauga Nishnaabeg writer and Idle No More activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson identifies deforestation, mining, pipelines, and the Alberta tar sands as among the environmental threats that Indigenous Canadians confront. "I stand up anytime our nation's land base is threatened," Simpson states, "because everything we have of meaning comes from the land—our political systems, our intellectual systems, our health care, food security, language and our spiritual sustenance and our moral fortitude." Simpson's reminder that it is crucial to recognize that present-day conflicts in Canada started with colonization is reiterated by Ruthann Lee, Zainab Amadahy, and Bonita

Lawrence. Settler colonialism, with its legacies of white supremacy and racism, is a history of dispossession, displacement, disenfranchisement, and replacement; as such, Lee, Amadahy, and Lawrence argue that to confront racism and to decolonize Canada, scholars as well as activists who engage with anti-racist and anti-imperial struggles must develop a vision and discourse that is "framed around, . . . [and] inclusive of, Indigenous struggles" (Amadahy and Lawrence 127).

The integrative and intersectional approach that scholars of Indigenous studies call for is the organizing model of the Canadian coalition of Indigenous communities, Idle No More (INM), and the Toronto chapter of Black Lives Matter (BLM); this organizing model, Indigenous rights activist with the INM Erica Violet Lee notes, emerges from the recognition "that we're on stolen indigenous land" (qtd. in Goodman). The movements make it clear that Indigenous-Black solidarity is vital to address racism and injustices in Canada. The state violence and oppression that Black communities face, observes LeRoi Newbold, a steering committee member of Black Lives Matter Toronto, "parallel issues that indigenous communities face" (qtd. in Goodman). The United States witnessed a similar convergence of movements at Standing Rock when activists working on related issues stood alongside Indigenous peoples to oppose the Dakota Access Pipeline. Such alliances between movements are imperative, Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson points out, "to stay alive in a settler state that has targeted us differently for life and for death" (qtd. in Jegroo). For Chariandy, as for other Indigenous and Black activists and writers, the ongoing work of resistance necessarily involves adopting decolonizing and decolonial practices to confront collective cultural memories of the long history of colonial violence and their legacy in the form of toxic neocolonial practices and policies that relegate humans—along with the non-human communities on which they depend—to the status of disposable commodities.

Excavating and documenting lived experiences, memories, and literary and cultural histories of immigrant Blacks in Canada are integral aspects of Chariandy's work as a scholar, creative writer, and as one of three founders of Commodore Books, Canada's first and only Black-owned press. His first novel, *Soucouyant*, is loosely based on Chariandy's

own family history. His great-aunt suffered from dementia and his protagonist's parents, like his own, are Trinidadian immigrants of African- and South Asian-Caribbean descent. Chariandy's experiences as a second-generation Caribbean-Canadian are closely connected to his fictional narrator's struggles with diasporic identity and culture, history and memory, and displacement and trauma.

Moving back and forth in time (past and present) and space (north and south), *Soucouyant*'s narrator draws on personal recollections as well as official documents to create what Toni Morrison calls a "site of memory" (83), a site that engages with erased, silenced, and untold histories of minoritized communities. While the central focus of the novel is on the experiences of Black and South Asian immigrants in Canada, Ruthann Lee argues that *Soucouyant* also engages, albeit more subtly, with the oppression of Canadian First Nations and reminds readers "of the interlinked but uneven colonial traumas experienced by black diasporic and Indigenous subjects in Canada" (89). The Afro-Caribbean stories about a monstrous, feminized vampiric figure that the title evokes, would, Chariandy notes, be "intimately familiar" to "residents and first generational immigrants from specific Caribbean islands like Trinidad" ("Spirits" 810). For the second-generation Caribbean-Canadian narrator, the soucouyant and its integral role in his mother's fragmentary and disorienting stories of her childhood serve to retrieve cultural memories of traumatic colonial histories that continue to haunt the present (811). The history that the narrator unearths provides a counterpoint to authorized versions of US imperial history and the allied presence in Trinidad during WWII.

By the time Edmund Burke first used the term "colonization" in 1770 (Domínguez et al. 168), Trinidad had already been under Spanish colonial rule for almost three hundred years and its Indigenous Amerindian population nearly wiped out or enslaved. The island was later invaded by the French and English. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Trinidad became a British colony, and in 1889, the Crown combined Tobago and Trinidad into a single administrative unit. Under different colonial regimes, the twin islands became home to enslaved Africans and indentured laborers from India, China, and

West Asia brought to work on sugar and cocoa plantations and oil fields (Randall and Mount 17–18, 23, 48). German scholar and economist Mortiz Julius Bonn, credited with coining the term "decolonization," surmises that the world wars initiated the end of colonial empires (Domínguez et al. 168). However, WWII marked the beginning of a new wave of colonization in Trinidad, which became a US military territory following a 1941 land-lease agreement between Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt (Neptune 1). Thus, decades before the influx of Trinidadian immigrants to North American countries in the 1960s, 25,000 US troops (Neptune 9) along with Canadian service personnel (Randall and Mount 81) descended upon occupied Trinidad. Official records indicate that the US deployed its military to protect the colony from the Germans. However, Trinidad served as an invaluable oil resource for the British Empire; Chaguaramas, which lies in close proximity to oil fields in Trinidad and Venezuela (Randall and Mount 81), also served as a strategic asset for the US. Only in 1962 did Trinidad and Tobago gain political independence from Britain.

Soucouyant's engagement with Trinidad's extensive history of racism and imperialism complicates notions of cultural memory, specifically cultural or collective memory that is primarily conceived as shared cultural practices, customs, symbols, and stories. Elucidating the function that memory serves in the work of Black authors, Sam Durrant makes "a necessary distinction between a cultural memory that comprises the verbal—both written and oral, official and unofficial—accounts of a community's history, and a racial memory that remains nonverbalized yet somehow passes itself on from generation to generation, as if it were secretly encrypted" (80). In contrast to cultural knowledge, which includes celebratory and commemorative histories, Durrant explains that inherited racial histories awaken painful memories of "violence inflicted on . . . racially marked bod[ies]" (80). Durrant's distinction illuminates the problematics of historical recordings of racial memory "that is also *bodily memory*, a memory that takes on a bodily form precisely because it exceeds both the individual's and the community's capacity for verbalization and mourning" (80; emphasis in original). Throughout the novel, Chariandy addresses the long-lasting

psychological and physiological trauma caused by colonial and racial violence, an untranslatable trauma, which, as Durrant observes, is "an inherited [racial] memory of collective negation" (80) that is transmitted from one generation to another.

Much has been written about Trinidad's colonial history, and the US occupation of Trinidad during WWII has been a particularly contentious topic for historians. Chariandy's novel is attentive to the contingent nature of historical accounts of the period, with the narrator pointing out that historical perspectives vary depending on interpretations of records (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 178). Historian Harvey Neptune posits that the US soldiers' encounters with Trinidadian women "prohibit straightforward invocations of 'sexual imperialism'" (177) because these exchanges involved "romance" and "negotiations" (176), and "bespoke genuine commitment" (177). In sharp contrast to Neptune's reading of relations between Caribbean women and uniformed men, Adele's painful memories of "mother[s] and daughter[s] working for the Yankee dollar" (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 179) underscore the toxic effects of racist and exploitative imperialist encounters and their long-term or intergenerational impacts on Trinidadians. In its unofficial rendition of Trinidad during WWII, *Soucouyant* historicizes racial and violent colonial legacies that have marked the bodies of poor Trinidadians "trapped in the aftermath of slavery and colonialism" (179). The narrator's story about "a girl named Adele" (180), a story that bridges and builds on "nonverbalized" racial memories and documented histories, is as much for audiences as it is for the storyteller. When he reaches the end of his story, the narrator recognizes the impossibility of fully recounting or grasping the trauma that his mother experienced and sadly admits that he does not "really understand it all" (195).

In his novel, Chariandy specifically uses the specter of the soucouyant to explore the experiences of women whose status as single or unmarried renders them particularly suspect, threatening, and disposable. In fact, as Meredith Gadsby notes, "the mythological soucouyant, . . . as a symbol of female sexual identity and independence, is constantly punished (via the poisoning of her skin with salt or pepper) for challenging patriarchal control of women's bodies" (66). In Chariandy's rendering, the soucouy-

ant is a scapegoat. As the narrator observes, to identify the soucouyant, "you'll only need to look for an old woman in the village who appears to have been beaten" (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 135). "A deeply neurotic creature," the soucouyant is recognizable by her bruises, which mark her as "[c]learly the one to blame" (135). The vampiric spirit also epitomizes the dehumanization and othering of traditional women healers, whom the novel represents as carriers of repressed knowledge of African culture and cultural memory more broadly. Finally, we argue that the soucouyant is also identified with the toxic and disfiguring effects of colonial and neocolonial violence and exploitation of colonized bodies, lands, and ecosystems.

The soucouyant as healer is embodied most conspicuously in the figure of the "old woman," who, along with Adele and her mother, is displaced by the construction of the base at Chaguaramas and moved to the village of Carenage. Carenage, as Adele recounts to her son, is "[n]amed after the Spanish ships that anchored there long ago to get careen" (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 23). The "clean[ing] up from barnacles" and the "smooth[ing]" and the "free[ing] up" of the ships "after the trip from Africa" are associated with the erasure of African culture, memories of the Middle Passage, and colonial violence and displacement—erasure that the old woman, with her "long memory" and her knowledge of the "proper names of things" implicitly contests (23).[3] Adele's own fragmentary knowledge of the healing properties of cobwebs, "kashat," and "a tea of shado beni and other bush" (23) is indebted to the old woman, who is identified with a devalued feminized natural world under siege by the toxic and technocratic colonial regime the US military imposes on Trinidad during WWII. Addressing the vampiric nature of colonialism, Giselle Liza Anatol argues that the US and Great Britain are the real vampires; like the mythical creature, these colonial powers have no boundaries and eviscerate communities for their own benefit (*The Things that Fly* 197). While a few displaced Trinidadians received some compensation, Chariandy emphasizes that Adele's mother and the old woman were not "eligible for any compensation since they appeared unattached to any adult man" (*Soucouyant* 181). But no level of compensation could be a viable option, Anatol

points out, when families and networks are broken, livelihoods destroyed, and skills are rendered useless (*The Things That Fly* 197–98). The women's displaced and economically marginalized status accounts, at least in part, for Adele's mother's descent into prostitution. The "knowledge [the old woman] possessed, [and] the skill she exhibited in healing a boy who had become ill during the journey" (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 181), render her a threat to the colonial patriarchal order and a source of anxiety for other villagers. Adele and her mother, however, benefit from their association with her; they are "offered a temporary place to sleep only out of respect and fear for the old woman" (181), who ultimately nurses the two back to health after the disfiguring injuries that both suffer in a traumatic incident that the narrator excavates over the course of the novel.

The novel progressively peels back the layers of the traumatic memories that haunt Adele, finally unveiling their roots in the environmental and cultural disruptions wrought by the US military occupation of Trinidad. The narrator represents Carenage as a toxic landscape, a place of "waste and hard edges. A place where the city dumped its garbage, piles of it along the shore" (174). The proximity of the village to Chacachacare, once the site of a "leper colony" (174), reinforces the villagers' marginalized status; the proximity to "villages celebrating Hosay and Diwali and Phagwa" (174) establishes the peninsula as home to the descendants of both enslaved Africans and indentured East Indians. The perils of "pitch lake," where bodies might be "steeped in tar and half preserved," are echoed in the environmental contaminants of "the oilfields and the rigs with their fires burning through the night" (174). The allusions to accidents that might befall bodies are immediately followed by the specter of the "fighter plane crash[ing] into the sea . . . only a kilometre away" from "the military base at Chaguaramas" (174–75). The passage implicitly links the plane crash with the transformation of the soucouyant into a fiery ball. The flames of the soucouyant, like the toxic landscape of Carenage, are rooted, the passage suggests, in the exigencies of war, with all its attending calamities. "Time is short and accidents can only be expected. The world is at war," pronounces the narrator (175).

The US military occupation of Trinidad during WWII resulted in long-term social, environmental, and health impacts for Trinidadians in particular; this period also marks the beginning of the neocolonial phase of imperialism with colonial powers bartering countries for their own benefit. Under the defense that Germany posed an enormous threat to the Western Hemisphere, Britain negotiated with the US to lease its territories in Newfoundland and the Caribbean in return for fifty obsolete destroyers. The US occupation of Trinidad followed the 1940 Destroyers for Bases Agreement, which permitted the US to secure a ninety-nine-year lease on Trinidad (Baptiste 51, 107).[4] With the establishment of US naval and air force bases at Chaguaramas and Wallerfield, Bridget Brereton notes, Trinidad turned into "the convoy assembly point for the dispatch of tankers from the Caribbean across the Atlantic to North Africa and Europe . . . [and] the Gulf of Paria was used by U.S. carriers and airplanes for final exercises before going to the Pacific battleground via the Panama Canal" (191). Carenage became the site of a transfer station for bauxite, a constituent element in the production of aluminum. Carenage's Tembladora Bay was integral to the war effort as a key element in the production of airplanes, ships, and motor vehicles (Balroop). The strategic importance of Trinidad to the Allied forces, Samuel Eliot Morison points out, made it a target for German submarine attacks (145). Accounts that either valorize the US' role in WWII or argue that US presence allowed Trinidad to break free from British colonial rule and emerge as a modern state minimize or ignore the devastating effects of imperialism.

As an epicenter for oil and bauxite resources, military operations, and aerial and naval bombardments during WWII, Trinidad, *Soucouyant*'s narrator suggests, bore the burden of various forms of environmental—and by implication human—experimentation:

> Metal and fire rained from the sky, and not always as planned. Those were the early days of petro-chemical technology, and the newly concocted fuels and lubricants had unanticipated effects and strengths. Once a pilot in training crashed his plane into the Chaguaramas harbor and the explosion lit into an oth-

> erwise thin and innocent-looking oil slick. The fire burned for two full days, the flames and billowing smoke observed carefully by locals miles away. (Chariandy 177–78)

The economic and environmental exploitation of black and brown Trinidadian bodies in an increasingly toxic and perilous landscape echoes the colonization of the island in the fifteenth century and the experiences of "a people who had been scattered by exploding weapons, [and] by sicknesses that burst in postules upon their skin" (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 181). Wartime agreements and military uses, Mimi Sheller notes, set the stage for the US to emerge as the new imperial power, and for US corporations such as Alcoa to expand their bauxite and aluminum mining operations in the Caribbean (171). By the late 1940s, the Carenage transfer station came under the management of Alcoa, and decades later, longstanding concerns about dust pollution from the transfer station would culminate in a lawsuit filed by the "Carenage Protection Committee" against Alcoa. The lawsuit is just one of numerous environmental suits against the company by community groups worldwide (Balroop).

The novel's concern with the transformation of Carenage into a toxic site capable of inflicting chemical injury on marginalized and disposable villagers is figured most literally in the traumatic injuries that Adele suffers as a child and unwittingly inflicts upon her mother. Chemical contaminants figure centrally in the primal scene that haunts Adele's memories. Her childhood encounter with the soucouyant foregrounds the haphazard treatments of the byproducts of the petro-chemical technologies spawned in and around the naval base. On an "out-of-the-way path" just outside Carenage, Adele stumbles upon a figure who, surrounded by toxic waste, is putting on gloves, which the child interprets as skin (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 136). Adele's disorientation when she stumbles upon the scene is explainable not simply in terms of her prior lack of familiarity with hazmat gear—including the gas mask with its strange "rolling eyes" (136, 173)—but also potentially as an effect of exposure to airborne chemical contaminants on the site.

In 2001, Trinidad was one of twenty-four countries to ratify the Basel Convention Amendment, which sought to restrict international trade

and movements of hazardous waste (Clapp 90). The Convention and subsequent regulations emerged out of growing awareness and concerns about the Global South being routinely at risk of exposure to toxic waste and industrial disasters. Beginning in about 2005, Trinidad became the site of a heated battle to stop the siting of an Alcoa aluminum smelting plant near the village of Cedros (Richards). As a leading aluminum producer, Alcoa's operational reach encompasses forty-three countries worldwide (Jeremiah and Szczepanski 191). The US industrial corporation insists that aluminum smelting is "environmentally friendly," but evidence points to "a trail of destruction everywhere they [Alcoa] go," says Anston Barclay, president of the environmentalist group Cedros Peninsula United (CPU) (qtd. in Richards). Urging Trinidadians to join in the struggle to stop Alcoa, Barclay argues that the monetary compensation that Trinidadians would receive from their jobs at Alcoa would primarily go toward medical expenses (qtd. in Richards). CPU's warning that the smelter plant could "cause catastrophic damage to the local environment and community health" (qtd. in Richards) is seconded by studies that link continual exposure to environmentally toxic contaminants "such as aluminum and lead . . . to numerous neurodegenerative diseases," including Alzheimer's (Manivannan et al. 117).

In its attention to the displacement, environmental contamination, and cultural disruption associated with the US military presence in Trinidad, and with the transformation of Carenage into a toxic transit point for aluminum production of military weaponry during WWII, Chariandy's novel can be read as a literary contribution to movements that resist plants like Alcoa and other toxic industries in Trinidad. *Soucouyant* can also be read in light of Nixon's concept of "slow 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" (2). The toxicity of imperialism—both psychological and material—is endemic, and it slowly seeps into the minds and bodies of Chariandy's characters.

Forced into prostitution to support herself and her daughter following their displacement from Chaguaramas to Carenage, Adele's mother is progressively relegated to the status of a dehumanized and disposable

commodity. "Prostitution," Kamala Kempadoo notes, "was institutionalized in Caribbean societies" under the auspices of colonial occupation and the slave trade and subsequently as an economic survival strategy (55). As Kempadoo observes, little historical attention has been devoted to "prostitution around military bases in the Caribbean" (59). Chariandy's novel vividly depicts Adele's mother as the victim of an exploitative, violent, racist, and patriarchal sexual economy that echoes Rhoda Reddock's accounts of the "harsh, physically damaging violence" that served as an "indispensable weapon" to control the labor and bodies of enslaved women in the Caribbean plantation economy (73).

From Adele's perspective, her mother, desperate and disoriented, beaten and bruised by johns from the neighboring base, begins to increasingly resemble the soucouyant. Meanwhile, the seven-year-old Adele is being groomed for prostitution by a soldier from the base, who plies her with "[t]reasures from afar," including a "package of chewing gum," a "thin bar of milk chocolate," and signifiers of cultural imperialism that include a postcard of Lake Superior in the US and images of Hollywood stars (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 188). But "[m]ost startling of all" is an apple the soldier offers Adele. "[W]rinkled and bruised," the apple, which seven-year-old Adele views as a "promise that something else is possible," foreshadows the decline that awaits her if she follows her mother's path into prostitution (188). When neighbors get inklings of the girl being groomed by soldiers, their demonization of Adele's mother only intensifies. "You training her good, yes, you old whore? You teaching her all you tricks with the soldiers," proclaims one (189). Her mother's attempts to warn Adele—"You are never, ever, to talk with those people or accept anything they offer you"—escalates into a confrontation in which a cooking pot is upended, sending the "thin porridge spill[ing] out upon the floor" (189). Desperately scrabbling to "shovel back in what she can" (189), Adele's mother is further aligned with the soucouyant. One way to recognize the soucouyant, the narrator notes, is by "scattering some rice where you think she'll pass by after her raids at night," as the "soucouyant will halt and feel compelled to count every single grain" (135). The scene with the porridge implicitly represents the soucouyant as the scapegoat for imperialism and global

capitalism, which destroy Indigenous economies, displacing entire communities and forcing children and adults alike into prostitution.[5]

The soucoyant is closely linked to Adele's exposure to and encounters with neocolonialism, racism, alienation, and poverty. Her lived experiences, as Elena Machado Sáez observes, have been shaped by "the Caribbean economy of neocolonialism. That economy drives the exploitation of the Caribbean female body" (77). The scene in which both Adele and her mother are permanently scarred and disfigured represents the soucouyant as the end product of the US military's transformation of Carenage into a toxic petrochemical resource colony. As the conflict escalates, Adele's mother chases after her, following her to the base, where Adele seeks refuge from the soldier. The child no longer recognizes her mother as human; her mother is reduced in her gaze to a mere textile, a "chiffon gown," a "garment without a body" (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 191). As "[t]he dress wheels to face the soldiers," turning the logic of soucouyant on its head, "[i]t shouts and lays accusations" at the soldiers who encircle mother and child and are "milling about to take in the sport. It calls men by name and shames them and charges them with stupidity and cruelty. It shouts out their unfaithfulness, the helplessness of their bodies, the lies of their manhood. . . . 'You lies,' she screams. 'You lives of comforting lies'" (192). As the men are metonymically reduced in the mother's rage to mere laughter, and subsequently "an uneasiness growing into malice," one of the soldiers, "[g]iggling like an idiot," tosses a bucket of "water filled with oil and tar and solvents," that hits her mother, "splash[ing] on Adele" (192). In an attempt to escape "from this creature" (192), her mother, Adele is weaponized. Using the lighter gifted to her by the soldier and would-be john, "in a miraculous achievement of agility and determination" (192), she sets the dress-mother alight, transforming the two of them into a ball of fire, the distinctive mark of the soucouyant. The scene is punctuated by a question posed by one of the soldiers—"What's wrong with these people?" (193)—that only reinforces the mother's critique of the soldiers' "lives of comforting lies" and the status of the soucouyant as a scapegoat for capitalism and colonial violence and exploitation.

If Toronto is ostensibly a land of new opportunities for Adele, who immigrates as a young adult in the wake of the 1976 Canadian Immigration Act, it nonetheless offers new pathways for exposure to a variety of toxins that have been linked with dementia and a host of other health problems. The novel calls attention to Canada's patterns of "discrimination, racialization, and social exclusion" identified by Roger Keil et al. (71), who argue that it is no coincidence that "high proportions of visible minority populations, recent immigrant populations, and low median income populations are located in close proximity to high-emission facilities in Toronto" (69).[6] As several critics have observed, Canada's discourse of multiculturalism and its accompanying policies, which are fully compatible with white supremacy, erase Indigenous presence, marginalize communities of color, and conceal structures of inequality.[7] In its critique of multiculturalism, *Soucouyant* suggests that the alienation its characters experience is precisely because they are multicultural. In their quest for rental housing, Adele and Roger repeatedly encounter racial discrimination, and Roger's experiences of employment discrimination limit their prospects for purchasing a home. They finally settle in a "lonely cul-de-sac" in Toronto's Port Junction neighborhood in the Scarborough district (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 59).

By the 1990s, "the historic" (59) Port Junction became the site of environmental justice organizing to address health problems stemming from its long history of industrial contamination. The neighborhood was the site of "many high-polluting factories. In the past, plastics factories have dumped chemicals into the sewage system, leading to health problems in residents, including migraines, fatigue, dizziness, and vomiting. In addition, many complaints were made about the smell of chemicals, glues and paint" (Keil et al. 69). The name "Port Junction" derives from the neighborhood's location at the juncture of rail lines. *Soucouyant* represents the trains as "monsters" that "strike" unexpectedly, prompting the gulls to rise "up in panic," and that are forever shaking loose the dust, which "fall[s] from the ceiling screws" (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 33). Volatile hydrocarbons contained in the diesel exhaust of trains—as well as buses and trucks—are known neurotoxins that have been linked to brain inflammation and "histopathologic changes similar to those seen

in patients with Alzheimer's" and to "memory loss," "visual field defects," and "balance impairment" (Krivoshoto et al. 59). A more recent study conducted by Ontario scientists concludes that "living close to heavy traffic [is] associated with a higher incidence of dementia" (Chen et al. 718).

The family's ramshackle house itself is a site of multiple pathways of chemical and environmental exposures. As Adele and Roger prepare for the birth of their first child, the narrator's older brother, they go to work overhauling the old house with "its dilapidated and rotting frame, its peeling eggshell paint, its windows cloudy with cataracts or roughly boarded up, all blasted with the sound of passing trains" (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 58–59). As Adele spends time in the garden, her "stained and odorous glove" (59) shows evidence of toxins lurking in the soil, linking her once again to the soucouyant. While Adele gardens, Roger "spends long days repairing damaged walls and laying down new pipes, and wiring and repainting and insulating every room including the attic with fibreglass, though paying for this activity with a week of nights when every inch of his naked flesh seethed with fearful itchiness" (59). The passage emphasizes his skin irritation resulting from exposure to fiberglass. One can also conclude, however, that Roger's installation of the new fiberglass insulation—in the absence of protective clothing—follows his removal of the original asbestos, with the accompanying implications of such exposure. The novel represents lead and asbestos as likely culprits contributing to Adele's declining health and cognition. When the narrator returns home after a period of absence to care for Adele, who is in the late stages of dementia, he unwittingly confronts clues into the environmental catalysts for her illness. When Adele unexpectedly defecates on herself, her son's description of her feces renders it unnatural, an "odour that shouldn't ever emanate from a human body" (84). The smell—"an evil metallic assault"(84)—once again links the toxic transformations effected by industrial contaminants with the soucouyant. Memory loss, mood disorders, and problems concentrating are well-documented symptoms of lead poisoning in adults.

Soucouyant implicitly critiques the belatedness and inadequacy of Canadian regulations surrounding both lead and asbestos. Canada began instituting restrictions on lead paint only in 1976, but even at that time, its new guidelines allowed for eight times the lead allowable under the guidelines instituted in the US in 1978 (O'Grady and Perron S177). The basement of the family house, in particular, is represented as a primary site of toxic exposure. Toward the close of the novel, as the narrator prepares to sell his parents' home, a real estate agent specifically asks him "whether the basement collects moisture or . . . if there's any leaded paint or asbestos insulation" (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 144). The narrator answers, "I don't think so. I think it was built before all that" (144). The agent's response—"'Heritage,' she says, smiling slyly. 'Gotcha'" (144)—suggests that she is quite willing to collaborate in what she understands to be a lie. Her response also foregrounds the fact that, at every turn, the narrator's cultural heritage is inseparable from multiple sites of toxic exposure. Well-heeled home owners who purchase "heritage" homes can pay others to do the work of remediation, externalizing the toxic burden onto low-wage workers, but the narrator, like his father before him, has no choice but to suffer exposure.

The references to both lead and asbestos contamination in the exchange with the realtor provide an explanatory framework for the sickness and fatigue the narrator experiences in the days that he spends working in the basement, preparing the house for sale. While Meera, Adele's caregiver and the narrator's lover, "appears comfortable when working in the basement," the narrator complains that "the dampness has started to eat through my clothes and skin" (154). One can infer from his acknowledgement of the moisture in the basement that lead, asbestos, and other household toxins are also present, accounting for his fatigue and apparent confusion. In the same passage, the narrator notes, "I don't have the energy to sort things through. I don't have the will" and he reports a host of symptoms linked to their work in the basement: "I've been feeling tight in my chest and dizzy when standing up too quickly. I lie awake at night in my sleeping bag on my bedroom floor, alternating between nausea and vertigo (154). The fact that the narrator's response to the exposure is much more dramatic than Meera's

may well be an indication that he already has a higher body burden of exposure to heavy metals and toxins than she does.

The family's exposure to toxic environments is not limited to the house and neighborhood. Employment discrimination restricts Roger's prospects to working in a factory, where, despite the use of protective gear, he is nonetheless routinely exposed to a range of toxins that result in his physical decline into a soucouyant-like figure. Adele's disorienting childhood encounter is echoed in her son's visit to his father's factory workplace. The son is unable to definitively recognize his father, "his face hidden behind a battered gas mask, glaring portholes for eyes," and the son, like the mother, suffers momentary chemical exposure: "I was anxious to get out, for I had started to taste the airborne chemicals as if someone had daubed my tongue directly with paint" (80–81). The father's own progressive deterioration as a result of workplace exposure is easy to miss. His diagnosis—and access to treatment—is thwarted by his wife's creeping dementia. At the furniture factory, "[t]he heated metal parts rip the skin from his hands"; in the evening he "either throws up his dinner or complains that the solvents and paints have made him too dizzy to eat" (75). The permanent job he finally secures is no less toxic; the daily exposure to chemicals transforms his body until he resembles the gloved soucouyant of Adele's childhood. His "hand [is] roughed to a glove, his calluses . . . traveling up arms and down his thighs," until they are like a "uniform he wore to bed" (78). Even his scalp, a "toughened helmet on his head" (78), mirrors Adele's burn marks.

Visiting his father at work, the narrator witnesses the perilous working conditions at the factory. When the son arrives, Roger is engaged in a "tightrope act," balanced over chemical tanks, a "serrated blade jutting up . . . between his ankles" (81). The scene harkens back to bicycle tricks that Roger performed in his youth; the passage makes visible the continual stress and toxic burden he is forced to endure in order to keep his family afloat. Adele's inability to fully recognize Roger is best read as an effect not merely of her advancing dementia or even the toll that her illness takes on him but of the daily toll of racism, which limits his work options to a handful of toxic occupations that progressively transform him. The healthy, flamboyant "South Asian Elvis" (114)

with whom Adele falls in love is replaced by a man who is "quiet and reserved" (78) and whose monstrous appearance—his "hacking cough" and "body stinking of chemicals and mapped with heat blisters and funguses" (78)—is a byproduct of a racist and toxic capitalist economy, a soucouyant writ large.

In *Soucouyant*, the toxic effects of racism and intergenerational trauma go hand in hand with the cumulative effects of exposure to multiple sites of toxic contamination. "At a crucial and early point in my life," the narrator observes, "something seeped into me. . . . Some mood or manner was transmitted, though my parents tried their utmost to prevent this from happening" (101). The narrator "couldn't always control the signals that [his] body gave off," and that lack of bodily control is linked with racism and cultural dislocation, with his sense of being unable to "produce the feelings that were expected of [him], or . . . [to] translate [his] thoughts into meaningful statements" (101). If this condition speaks to Chariandy's own anxiety about the reception of his work as a second-generation Canadian immigrant writer, it might also reflect his awareness of the contingent status of his own cognition, given a family history of dementia. The narrator's brother embodies the inchoate and aborted potential of young people of color exposed to the toxic bullet of lead and heavy metal contamination. As a child, the brother dreams of becoming a poet, but when the narrator finally opens his brother's "toolbox" (16–17), he comes face-to-face with evidence of his brother's cognitive impairment in notebooks filled with incoherent and obscene scrawl, which mirrors and echoes the racism that permeates the brother's experiences at school and in the community.

The history of colonial violence and racism that continues to place the entire family at risk goes unrecognized by the Canadian health professionals who examine Adele's illness. The well-meaning specialist in dementia whom the family consults is admittedly "puzzled by the many unusual features of [Adele's] case," including most notably perhaps "[h]ow early the symptoms had appeared and how slowly and unevenly they had developed" (37). However, the family's reluctance to submit Adele to a battery of tests forecloses any possibility of detecting environmental links. This passage is where the novel comes closest to specifi-

cally linking Adele's dementia with both environmental exposure and trauma. Adele's illness, her son notes, "might be due to any number of factors such as toxins or physical injuries or known illnesses or even less tangible factors such as depression and psychic trauma" (38). Adele's childhood burns, which are themselves chemical injuries, result in life-long physical and "psychic trauma," which is compounded by her subsequent exposure to a host of heavy metals and toxins. But the physician, for all his "good spirits and optimism" (37), which are themselves arguably markers of white privilege, is oblivious to the ways in which his clinic is laden with signifiers of the long history of medical participation and complicity in colonial violence.

Adele and Roger are well aware, however, of the cultural fault lines and power differentials that render them "suspicious about . . . diagnostic tests which always seemed to presume meaning and circumstances which were never wholly familiar to them in the first place" (41). The pamphlets they carry away and unceremoniously deposit in the garbage are laden with racist claims and assumptions. "*One must especially be cautious when dealing with the uneducated and/or ethnic minorities,*" reads one of them, since "*test[s] administered to these people*" will often result in false positives (41; emphasis in original). And while Roger and Adele routinely encounter racism in their daily lives in Toronto, as the narrator emphasizes, they are "especially suspicious about medical institutions and offices" (39). They scan the doctor's office for "[t]he scissors and hooks which certainly lurked in those antiseptic spaces" (39), and which are signifiers of the historic uses of black and brown bodies for medical experimentation and anatomical display.

The "Principles of Environmental Justice" that emerged from the 1991 "First People of Color Leadership Summit" in the US acknowledge the intersections of environmental justice issues and the history of medical and scientific experimentation on people of color. The document includes a call for the "strict enforcement of principles of informed consent, and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color" ("Principles"). In the wake of industrial capitalism, imperialism relegates black and brown bodies to unconsenting subjects of mass human experimentation, while

continuing to represent them as polluting the white body politic. Novels such as Chariandy's *Soucouyant*, Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006), Latife Tekin's *Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills* (2000), and Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1995) challenge sanitized narratives about imperialism and capitalism that erase memories of violence globally perpetrated against communities of color. The work of these writers as well as other Indigenous and postcolonial writers, as storytellers and custodians of cultural memories, provides an important foundation for confronting toxic capitalist imperialism. *Soucouyant* is an intervention, a literary act of resistance against the expanding global web of capital—and toxic contamination. Chariandy's novel serves as a critical reminder of the intergenerational stakes in ongoing social and environmental justice struggles from the Canadian tar sands to Standing Rock, the Ogoni lands in Nigeria, and the oil-slicked Indigenous ancestral lands of Ecuador's Amazonian rainforest.

Notes

1 Both authors contributed equally to this work.
2 See Alonso Alonso's "The Woman that Turned," Anatol's "From Granny's Knee," Brandel, Delisle, Lee, and Machado Sáez.
3 For an overview of the treatment of enslaved women in the Caribbean, see Reddock.
4 Other Caribbean countries impacted by this agreement include Bermuda, the Bahamas, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Antigua, and British Guiana (Baptiste 101).
5 On representations of Caribbean sex work in fiction and film, see Duvivier.
6 On environmental justice issues in Toronto, including in the Mid-Scarborough neighborhood, see also Teelucksingh and Ollevier and Tsang.
7 See Alonso Alonso's *Diasporic Marvellous Realism*, Amadahy and Lawrence, DeFalco, Delisle, Lee, Machado Sáez, and Mackey.

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