

# “NONE OF THEM KNOWS ABOUT FLOODS OR ANYTHING ABOUT THE RIVERS”: MONSTROUS KINSHIPS AND AGENCY IN MICHAEL MCDOWELL’S *THE FLOOD AND THE LEVEE*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the disruption of the human/non-human binary in Michael McDowell’s *Blackwater* series, focusing on how the character of Elinor Dammert challenges traditional distinctions between humans and environment. Set in the Southern Gothic landscape of Lower Alabama, the analysis scrutinizes Elinor’s relationship with the region’s fluvial environment, emphasizing her role as a complex, shape-shifting gothic figure. Emerging mysteriously from the river after a flood, Elinor’s actions reflect a deep connection with both the human and non-human worlds, as she intervenes against anthropogenic alterations, particularly deforestation and proposed hydrogeological projects. By highlighting Elinor’s efforts to disrupt destructive human practices, the paper argues that her character can be seen as attempting to create kinship between humans and the landscape of Perdido, embodying an ecoGothic figure that transcends moral binaries. Elinor’s interventions will therefore reveal an alternative form of ecological agency that emphasizes kin-making rather than domination or revenge.

KEYWORDS: New Materialism, Kinship, Agency, Southern Gothic, Hybridity.

“NINGUNO DE ELLOS SABE SOBRE INUNDACIONES O SOBRE RÍOS”: PARENTESCOS MONSTRUOSOS Y AGENCIA EN *THE FLOOD AND THE LEVEE* DE MICHAEL MCDOWELL

## RESUMEN

Este artículo explora la interrupción de la oposición binaria humano/no humano en las series *Blackwater* de Michael McDowell, centrándose en cómo el personaje de Elinor Dammert se enfrenta a la distinción tradicional entre seres humanos y medio ambiente. Situado en el paisaje gótico sureño del Bajo Alabama, este análisis examina de cerca la relación de Elinor con el medio ambiente fluvial de la región, haciendo hincapié en su papel como figura gótica compleja con forma cambiante. Emergiendo del río de forma misteriosa tras una inundación, las acciones de Elinor reflejan una conexión profunda tanto con el mundo humano como con el no humano, mientras interviene contra alteraciones antropogénicas, en particular la deforestación y propuestas de proyectos hidrogeológicos. Subrayando los esfuerzos de Elinor de alterar prácticas humanas destructivas, este artículo argumenta que su personaje puede ser contemplado como un intento de crear parentesco entre humanos y el paisaje de Perdido, personificado en figura ecogótica que trasciende binarismos morales. Las intervenciones de Elinor revelarán por tanto una manera alternativa de agencia ecológica que enfatiza la creación de parentesco más que la dominación o la venganza.

PALABRAS CLAVE: nuevo materialismo, parentesco, agencia, gótico sureño, hibridación.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the introduction of the inaugural issue of the journal *Gothic Nature*, Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland assert that “[n]ature has always engendered fear, wonder, and fascination” (2019, 1). Going further, they observe how nature is “consistently constructed in our stories as Other, excessive, unpredictable, disruptive, chaotic, enticing, supernaturally powerful, and, perhaps most disturbingly, *alive*” (1; original emphasis). Through the Gothic lens, nature is perceived as unsettling, transgressive, and never merely a passive component in the ongoing relationship between the individual and the environment. EcoGothic narratives, therefore, appear to disrupt the “habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” (Bennett 2009, vii), thereby exposing a phenomenon identified by Simon C. Estok as ‘ecophobia’ –namely, “the contempt and fear we feel for the agency of the natural environment” (2009, 207). New materialist approaches, in some sense, embody a ‘gothic’ dimension in their advocacy for the dissolution of boundaries between the human and the non-human, as Timothy Morton reminds us by stating that “ecological awareness is also dark-uncanny” (2016, 5).

At the same time, Smith and Hughes seem to be aware that “the Gothic’s representation of ‘evil’ can be used for radical or reactionary ends” (2013, 2). In other words, they acknowledge that the ecoGothic might serve as a framework through which non-human actants, ideally, might be charged with ideological perspectives and specific political orientations. Violent and destructive acts such as heat waves, torrential rainfalls, and flooding can be, therefore, interpreted as nature’s means of ‘fighting back’ and responding to human intervention, particularly within the context of the climate change discourse developed over the last decades. In some ecoGothic narratives, moreover, the binary setting between the human and non-human is further questioned by the presence of specific actants who dissolve the boundaries between species and kin, who are “chthonic” (Haraway 2016, 2) and yet agentic, and ultimately turn into advocates for the environmental protection of an entangled ecosystem. All this happens in Michael McDowell’s Southern Gothic saga *Blackwater*, a six-volume series published in 1983 where a small town in the southern regions of Alabama, Perdido, serves as the central stage for a story of hauntings and reflections on the way human activities inevitably alter the landscape. The first two volumes of the saga, *The Flood* and *The Levee*, particularly focus on the planning and subsequent construction of a dam. In the plans of a local engineer, Early Haskew, this project is intended to shield the town of Perdido from occasional river floods in the surrounding area; however, the construction of the levee faces opposition from the enigmatic Elinor Dammert, a schoolteacher mysteriously appearing after a flood of the Perdido and Blackwater rivers (the two streams surrounding the town) who vehemently opposes the anthropogenic resolutions of the town. Her relationship with the swampy Alabama landscape is explained early in the narrative, as Elinor is revealed to be a gothic shapeshifting creature that emerged from the riverbed after the flood with the purpose of marrying into the Caskey clan, the wealthiest family in town and owner of the local sawmill. Settling into the town of Perdido, she begins a process of dissolving intraspecies boundaries that will culminate in the creation



of a new kin that is both human and non-human, thus restructuring the hierarchy that conventionally places humans above other species. While doing so, her hybrid position will allow her to act as an ecological defender of the area's ecosystem, giving significance and representation to the landscape destroyed by anthropic interventions and resorting to violence when necessary.

This article will analyse exemplary sections of Michael McDowell's *The Flood* (1983) and *The Levee* (1983), especially focusing on the hybrid figure of Elinor Dammert and her political crusade against the anthropogenic altering of the landscape of Lower Alabama perpetrated by the citizens of Perdido. I will argue that focusing on Elinor's in-betweenness and monstrosity, using ecoGothic as a framework of reference, can be useful in structuring an argument that reduces the hierarchical power of humans over other vital and non-vital elements of the environment while, at the same time, giving significance and agency to 'dull' matter—in this case, the rivers surrounding the town. To effectively examine the interactions between ecoGothic and agency in the *Blackwater* saga, the article will be divided into two complementary chapters. The first section, departing from an analysis of the Southern Gothic setting of Michael McDowell's texts, will focus on the monstrous figure of Elinor Dammert, a gothic shapeshifting being who reframes the relationships between humans and non-humans and advocates for alternative ways of interactions with the river ecosystem. The second section will instead focus on Elinor's reactionary efforts against the project of deforestation and hydrogeological intervention in Perdido, while also exploring the ways in which ecoGothic literature can articulate environmental agency.

## 2. SOUTHERN GOTHIC ENTANGLEMENTS AND MONSTROUS KINSHIPS

In a 1985 interview with Douglas E. Winter, Michael McDowell, reminiscing his childhood, immediately draws a connection between the landscape of Alabama, its people, and the Gothic genre: "I grew up in a relatively poor, rural area of the country. I saw a lot of poverty, the likes of which you don't see anymore. And southerners *are* Gothic—there's no other word for it. They're warped in an interesting way" (178; original emphasis). As Teresa Goddu explains in her *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*, the Southern states have consistently been subjected to othering throughout their history—particularly in correlation with their Northern neighbours—coming to be represented through Gothic imagery of degradation, transgression, and excess and ultimately "becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wishes to dissociate itself" (1997, 4). As a consequence, Southern narratives have often represented the South as "a dark and dangerous place in a perpetual state of collapse" (Horsley 2022, 14), where boundaries might be easily crossed and representations of authority interrogated.

Transgression stands out as one of the most predominant characteristics of the Gothic. David Punter observes that the genre has served as a framework for authors over the centuries, introducing a multi-layered perspective that challenges the traditional binary notions of good and evil and fosters the exploration of



situations that linger “at the boundary of what is and what is not acceptable, what is to be allowed to come to the warm hearth of society and what is to be consigned to the outer wilderness” (2000, 145). Binary oppositions in Gothic stories are initially reinforced only to be blurred at the opportune moment. Life and death frequently collide into the realm of the uncanny; sanity and madness blend into an intermediate state of uncertainty and vagueness. In these narratives, the threshold between opposing pairs is always a precarious space, whether physical or figurative. Instead of suggesting stability within traditional hierarchical structures, the Gothic evokes a sense of disconcerting uncertainty, anxiety, and a fear of contamination, emphasised by Sugars and Turcotte in their own definition of the characteristics of the genre:

The Gothic, as a mode, is preoccupied with the fringes, the unspoken, the peripheral, and the cast aside. It is populated with monsters and outcasts, villains and victims, specters and the living dead. The Gothic is often located in a realm of unknown dangers and negotiates both internal and external disquiet. It is a literature of excess and imagination. (2009, xv)

Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland, examining Gothic under an ecocritical lens, observe that “[t]he very foundations of the Gothic lie in the traversal of boundaries: between good and evil, between black and white, between living and dead, and between *the human and nonhuman*” (2019, 2, original emphasis). The disruption of the last binary pair is a fundamental staple of New Materialism, which, as a matter of fact, is frequently spruced with gothic undertones; Morton’s *Dark Ecology*, for example, makes frequent use of the word ‘uncanny’ to describe the realisation that “[t]hings influence one another such that they become entangled and smear together” (2016, 150) at a point where it is no longer possible to separate the human from the non-human.

Southern Gothic texts like McDowell’s *The Flood* and *The Levee* question anthropocentric views about human superiority over the non-human components of the landscape. Maybe unsurprisingly, the dominating settings of these works are the swamps in Alabama: surrounding the town of Perdido, these places are usually described, in Southern Gothic narratives, as “dangerous, messy, and resistant to the attempts of humans to impose order upon them” (Crow 2017, 145). These marshy areas, in McDowell’s saga, are also periodically expanding due to the combined impact of deforestation and water precipitation in the region. The initial image presented to the reader of Perdido is a flood tinged with Gothic implications, as Perdido is rendered as a ghost town wholly submerged in mud and water:

At dawn on Easter Sunday morning, 1919, the cloudless sky over Perdido, Alabama, was a pale translucent pink not reflected in the black waters that for the past week had entirely flooded the town. The sun, immense and reddish-orange, had risen just above the pine forest on the far side of what had been Baptist Bottom [...]. Now it was only a murky swirl of planks and tree limbs and bloated dead animals. Of downtown Perdido no more was to be seen than the town hall, with its four-faced tower clock, and the second floor of the Osceola Hotel. Only memory might



tell where the courses of the Perdido and Blackwater rivers had lain scarcely a week before. All twelve hundred inhabitants of Perdido had fled to higher ground. The town rotted beneath a wide sheet of stinking, still black water, which only now was beginning to recede. (*TF* 9)<sup>1</sup>

A reader potentially investigating the causes of this flood might easily find an answer in the activities of the three wealthiest families of Perdido, namely the Caskeys, the Turks, and the DeBordenaves, who own all the sawmills and lumberyards of the area. At a certain point, the text explicitly asserts that “lumber comprised the entirety of Perdido’s industry” (21), promptly presenting the looming threat of deforestation as the primary catalyst for the abrupt flooding of the rivers surrounding the town. This hypothesis of a direct correlation between urbanisation, deforestation rates, and the escalation of natural phenomena such as minor flooding events has been examined by many scientific studies (Noori et al. 2016; Boggs and Sun 2011; Bradshaw *et al.* 2007). At the same time, if the Gothic signals “the disturbing return of pasts upon presents” (Botting 1996, 1), Keetley and Sivils have noted that the ecoGothic might regard time not only as “familial, social, cultural, and political but [also] *evolutionary*” (2017, 5, original emphasis). Therefore, the rising flood might be perceived as a haunting force that regresses landmasses to a prehistorical age, not only before civilisation but also before the very existence of biological life on dry land. Moreover, water in McDowell’s texts is uncanny, as the power of the flood in the *Blackwater* saga resides not only in its destructive force but in the ability to haunt the citizens of Perdido even after the water has been completely drained from the town (*TF* 47-48). Not only has the human presence in Perdido been affected by the rising waters, but also the natural environment: “Flowers, shrubs, and trees had perished by the thousands, and the whole town had to be replanted” (53). The flood, therefore, emerges as a totalising event, a “hyper-object” (Morton 2013) that wreaked havoc on humans, animals, and vegetation, disturbing and crossing boundaries between the human and the non-human in its uncanny and disruptive force. The rising waters of the Blackwater and Perdido rivers, moreover, will also complicate the relationship between biotic and abiotic forces in the story through the introduction of Elinor Dammert, a monstrous figure who decides to leave her home in the riverbed to inhabit human society.

At the beginning of *The Flood*, Elinor is discovered by Oscar Caskey (the man she will eventually marry) and his attendant Bray in a room on the second floor of the Osceola Hotel. She is believed by everyone to have “waited and waited” (*TF* 14) for someone to rescue her, but the first inconsistencies in her story are immediately pointed out by Bray, who questions the plausibility of Elinor surviving the flood without access to water, food, or a proper shelter against the flood’s fury (18-20). Her connection with the water of the area is also emphasized by her physical appearance: it

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<sup>1</sup> The initials *TF* refer to the first volume of Michael McDowell’s Blackwater saga, *The Flood* (1983), while the letters *TL* will be used later in the article to denote the second volume, *The Levee* (1983).



is mentioned that her hair is a “kind of muddy red, thick, and wound in a loose coil” (14), and the matriarch of the Caskey clan, Mary-Love, comments on it by stating that it “looks like she had it dyed in the Perdido” (33). From the very first moment of her appearance in town, Elinor Dammert revisits the trope of the “foreign stranger in the South” (Yousaf 2016, 122), representing, as perceived by characters like Mary-Love Caskey, a threat to the stability of Southern cultural norms in Alabama. Her association with the colour of the riverbed of the Perdido highlights the ambiguity of her character, who, through her strong connection with water, reinterprets the stereotype of the Southern belle with a gothic twist, associating femininity “with fear, excess and the non-normative” (Donovan-Condron 2016, 340). However, it is soon clear that Elinor is a threat not only to Southern cultural norms but to the notion of humanity itself; in an early scene immediately following the recovery of Elinor from the Osceola Hotel, her monstrous features are briefly glimpsed through the perspective of the minister of the church of Perdido, Annie Bell Driver:

Though the water was clear and only deep enough to cover the body, it had worked a kind of visual transformation: Miss Elinor’s skin seen through that rapidly running water seemed leathery, greenish, tough ... Moreover, even as the preacher stared, a distorting transformation seemed to come over the features of the other woman’s submerged face. While before it had been handsome and narrow and fine-featured, now it seemed wide and flat and coarse. The mouth stretched to such an extent that the lips seemed to disappear altogether. The eyes beneath their closed lids grew into large, circular domes. The lids themselves became almost transparent, and the dark slit was set directly across the bulging eyeball like a pen-drawn Equator on a child’s globe.

She wasn’t dead.

The thin, stretched lids over those protuberant domes drew slowly apart and two immense eyes –the size of hen’s eggs, Miz Driver thought wildly– stared up through the water and met the gaze of the Hard-Shell preacher. (*TF* 35)

Despite the minister passing out from the shock and eventually concluding that she must have hallucinated, the narrative establishes, through this uncanny turn of events, the fact that Elinor can easily cross the human/non-human binary and turn into a monstrous Gothic creature, *de facto* questioning and queering the alleged hierarchical supremacy of the human over the other elements of the environment. Elinor, the non-human actant stemming from the riverbed, will not settle for staying in the shadows: she will slowly construct a social role in the community and will eventually marry Oscar Caskey, the young heir to the Caskey lumber business, who promptly falls in love with her and, despite the objections of his mother, Mary Love, eventually becomes her husband.

As just mentioned, Elinor immediately questions the alleged supremacy of humans over other constituents of the environment. Due to her non-human upbringing, she possesses a certain degree of local knowledge which defies anthropocentric views. In another scene of *The Flood*, Oscar Caskey sees her walking by the river banks, planting acorns, looking particularly confident in the fact they will very soon grow into big and sturdy oaks:



"I've got acorns," she said.

"You planting them?" Oscar asked incredulously. "Nobody plants acorns. Where'd you get 'em?"

"River washed 'em down," Elinor replied with a smile. "Mr. Oscar, you want to help me?"

"Acorns aren't gone do anything here, Miss Elinor. Look at this yard. What do you see here? Do you see sand, sand, and no grass? That's what I see. I think you are wasting your time planting acorns." (48)

It is interesting to note Oscar's pragmatic stance when discussing trees, as he dismisses any suggestion that Elinor might have more knowledge than he does about the riverbanks. However, the citizens of Perdido are eventually astounded by the "daily growth" (63) of the oaks, reaching "twenty feet high and a foot around" (114) in less than a year. Of course, such rapid growth defies natural processes, yet it aligns with Elinor's uncanny nature, which is specular to Oscar's pragmatism. While Oscar, being the possessor of one of the three major sawmills of the area, believes in his own knowledge of the Perdido ecosystem –displaying an anthropocentric view that sees humans as having direct control over the swamp's ecosystem– Elinor shows him that some entanglements between the environment and its forms of life are, in fact, unpredictable.

In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway suggests introducing the term 'Chthulucene' as an alternative to the more well-known and prominent Anthropocene and Capitalocene. Haraway explains that she prefers this term because "unlike the dominant dramas of Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse, human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene" and that "the order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story" (2016, 55). Chthulucene is a "needed third story ... for staying with the trouble" (55), which, for Haraway, means acknowledging the entanglements and interconnections that the "chthonic ones" experience on planet Earth without the constraints of hierarchical structures or predefined orders. For this reason, Haraway advocates that we "make kin, not babies" (103) to explore the mechanisms of entanglement that bind all biotic and abiotic entities within the environment.

The Chthulucene is a kind of Gothic concept, as the chthonic ones inhabiting it are described as "replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair" (2); it is therefore suitable to describe the character of Elinor, whose monstrosity is often highlighted by the text. However, it is also possible to note that the motivations driving Elinor to leave the riverbank next to Perdido are in fact dictated by her desire to advocate for both people and the environment, seeking to establish connections between the people of Perdido and the nature surrounding them. Furthermore, alongside this cosmic motivation, there is a much more intimate and personal one; Elinor herself is searching for kin and wants to establish a connection with the people of Perdido, "making kin as oddkin" (2) and troubling the human genealogy of the Caskey family with an interspecies union. "All my family are dead" (*TF* 105), Elinor explains as Mary-Love, Oscar's mother, at



first refuses to be involved in their upcoming wedding; while it is possible to assume that Elinor refers to once-living relatives, it is equally plausible to consider that she is referring to the abiotic components that make up the ecosystem of the river swamp. Indeed, when Elinor gives birth to her second daughter, Frances, in a chapter titled “The Baptism,” she ventures alone with the newborn in her arms into the mists of Perdido, prepared to ‘baptise’ her daughter in the waters of the river. A servant, Zeddie, noticing her from the window, promptly follows her at the river’s banks:

Zaddie caught the child –or at least thought she caught it. Reaching down into the water, she had scooped up something. It felt very little like a baby! It was so slippery and unsoft, yet rubbery –a fishlike thing– that she very nearly let it go again. Zaddie shuddered with repulsion for whatever it was that she held in her hands, but she raised it up above the surface. She saw that she had caught hold of something black and vile, with a neckless head attached directly to a thick body. A stubby tail that was almost as thick as the body twitched convulsively, and the thing was covered with river slime. In the air it struggled to get away, to return to its element. But Zaddie held it tight, closing her fingers into its disgusting flesh. From its fishy mouth emerged a stream of foamy water, and the thrashing tail smacked against Zaddie’s forearms; dull, bulging eyes shone up into her face.

Elinor’s hand closed over Zaddie’s shoulder.

The girl stiffened, and looked around.

“You see,” said Elinor, “my baby’s fine.”

In Zaddie’s arms lay Frances Caskey, naked and limp, with Perdido river water dripping slowly from her elbows and feet. (TL 26)

The infant is thus baptized in the river, which Elinor treats as “vibrant matter,” a member of her kin who could therefore never “hurt [her] little girl” (25). Therefore, the dual nature of Elinor’s daughter, Frances, is established by the narrative, as the new member of the Caskey family is, in fact, the result of an intraspecies entanglement that complicates the idea of ‘human species’ and enriches it with Gothic undertones. Frances will, as an adult, exhibit an almost morbid attachment to the Perdido River, leading her to choose to leave the Caskeys and live in the river from which her mother emerged years earlier. Frances thus embraces the monstrosity within her by rejecting the anthropocentric implications that her position within the Caskey clan would require. By choosing to live in the river, she demonstrates her readiness for «making oddkin» and becoming a creature of the Chthulucene.

### 3. ECOPHOBIA AND AGENCY IN THE CHTHULUCENE

In the introduction of *EcoGothic*, Smith and Hughes observe that the Gothic has consistently been preoccupied with “radical or reactionary ends” (2013, 2), particularly in terms of political orientations. This aligns with its polarising nature and transgressive tendency to challenge boundaries, as noted by Catherine Lanone, who rightly states that ecoGothic narratives often employ radical strategies “in order to shock capitalist logic into changing while there may still be time” (2013, 28).





EcoGothic, therefore, seems to give equal agency to biotic and abiotic, human and non-human components of the environment alike. While Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter*, has observed that “[t]he political goal of a vital materialism is not the perfect equality of actants, but a polity with more channels of communication between members” (2010, 104), Blazan states that “[h]aunting can also be understood as an expression of the agency and vibrancy of Nature” (4), making a convincing argument that explores the role of the ecoGothic in shaping the agentic qualities of the environment:

Given their planetary staging, the forces of the Anthropocene are seldom directly perceptible on a human scale, an intangibility expressed in such neologisms and new theories as hyperobjects, heliotrope, planetarity, Gaia, or Great Acceleration versus Slow Violence, to name only a few. These new concepts seek to do justice to a globalized world that advances with –or possibly without– the human in transformative ways that resist representation. As a mode that has traditionally sought to express what cannot be rationalized, the gothic mode and the related horror genre are uniquely positioned to address such unfathomable forces. (3)

The *Blackwater Saga* employs the imagery of the flood in order to cast a haunting presence over the anthropogenic project of landscape modification carried out by the three wealthiest families of Perdido through deforestation and the construction of a levee. As the central element characterising the stereotypical Southern setting of the swamp (or *bayou*), water becomes, in the two examined texts, a component of a threatening landscape imbued with connotations of danger and ambiguity, able to retaliate violently with totalising events like floods but also pretty circumscribed occurrences like occasional drownings. Water itself, in *Blackwater*, is a Gothic element: the citizens of Perdido fear the river and look at the flood as an impending threat that could manifest itself at any moment. Dreading the agency of the marshy landscape of the area, they come to manifest that feeling of “ecophobia” that, according to Simon C. Estok, is

a uniquely human psychological condition that prompts antipathy toward nature. [...] This antagonism, in which humans sometimes view nature as an opponent, can be expressed toward natural physical geographies (mountains, windswept plains), animals (snakes, spiders, bears), extreme meteorological events (Shakespearean tempests, hurricanes in New Orleans, typhoons), bodily processes and products (microbes, bodily odors, menstruation, defecation), and biotic land-, air-, and seascapes (every creeping thing that creepeth, every swarming thing that swarms, partings of –and beasts from– the sea). The ecophobic condition exists on a spectrum and can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) toward the natural environment. (2018, 1)

Citizens of Perdido also observe rainfall with apprehension. Although no other floods threaten the town’s stability until the end of the last volume of the saga, it is said that heavy rain is a persistent meteorological phenomenon characterising the early months of the year in the area and occasionally causing damage to properties and vegetation. Water, therefore, keeps a violent and ambiguous connotation throughout the six volumes of the saga, often connected to a dimension of ecohorror that seems



to hint at the possibility that nature is effectively fighting back against humans and their anthropogenic intervention in the transformation of the landscape. Much of this fear for the agency of water is, moreover, vehiculated through the character of Elinor. Similar to how the flood ravaged the town, beginning with Baptist Bottom—the poorest neighbourhood mainly inhabited by black residents—Elinor’s aquatic form reveals her agency through the murder of those accustomed to living on the margins of the town and, figurately speaking, of society. In this specific instance, the first victim of the Perdido waters after the 1919 flood is Buster, one of the children from Baptist Bottom who one night follows Elinor and, once discovered, is first drawn into the water and then devoured by the woman:

The thing ... grabbed him. Buster’s arms were pinned to his sides with such force that the bones splintered inside them. His breath was squeezed out until none was left, and he braced for the coarse black tongue that would lick out his eyeballs. Unable to refrain, he opened his eyes, but so far beneath the surface he could see nothing at all. Then he felt a thick heavy coarseness press over his nose and mouth. As it licked up toward his eyes, Buster Sapp slipped into a blackness that was deeper and darker and more merciful than the cold Perdido. (*TF* 66)

As a resident of Baptist Bottom, the most exposed area of the town, Buster serves as a symbolic representation of the fact that natural disasters resulting from human interventions always tend to affect the most helpless segments of the population first. Water, and by implication Elinor, functions therefore in the *Blackwater* Saga as an ecoGothic uncanny force that manifests “the fear we feel for the agency of the natural environment” (Estok 2009, 207).

While the citizens of Perdido regard water with fear and, for the same reason they express their appreciation for the levee project, finding in the technological advancement a sense of protection against the unpredictability of nature. When Early Haskeew arrives in town, aiming at modifying the landscape of Perdido with the construction of the levee, everyone seems favourable to the initiative, and Mary-Love Caskey, in her ongoing conflict with Elinor Dammert, decides to host the engineer for his entire stay in town, publicly affirming the Caskeys’ favourable stance towards the project. This decision is particularly opposed by Elinor, who demonstrates her disagreement with the massive project in numerous conversations with her husband Oscar and her housemaid Zaddie:

“You know what that man wants to do? He wants to dam up the rivers. He wants to build levees all around this town to keep the rivers from flooding.”

“Miss El’nor, we don’t want no more floods,” said Zaddie cautiously. “Do we?”

“There aren’t going to be any more floods,” said Elinor emphatically. [...] “None of them knows about floods or anything about the rivers, Zaddie. You’d think they’d have learned something, wouldn’t you, living so long around here, where every time they look out the window they see the Perdido flowing by, where every time they go to work or go to the store they have to cross a bridge and see the water flowing under it, where they catch their fish for supper on Saturday night, where their oldest children get baptized, and where their youngest children drown. You’d think they’d know something by now, wouldn’t you, Zaddie?”



“Yes, ma’am,” said Zaddie quietly, but Miss Elinor did not even turn around to look at the black girl.

“They don’t though,” said Elinor bitterly. “They don’t know anything. They’re going to hire *that man* to build levees, they’re going to pretend that the rivers aren’t there anymore.” (TL 20-21, original emphasis)

It is, therefore, revealed that Elinor harbours a fear of her own, namely the possibility that the citizens of Perdido might start overlooking the presence of the rivers as well as their vital role in the local ecosystem. Moreover, she emphasises a seemingly evident fact from her perspective: human beings remain oblivious to the causes of the flood that ravaged Perdido because they fail to recognise any causality between their landscape-altering activities, such as deforestation, and nature’s retaliatory response. If Elinor demonstrates an understanding of the entanglements and multiple connections between living beings and the environment, she simultaneously critiques the inability of humans to relinquish anthropocentric hierarchies when conceptualising their surroundings. She reproaches this form of blindness to her now husband, Oscar, in a conversation regarding his approval of the Haskew’s project on the construction of the levee:

“But, Elinor, I have got to say...”

“Say what?”

“That I am gone be supporting Mr. Haskew in his work. I think there’s gone be another flood sooner or later, and I think the levees are gone have to be built. I know you don’t like it, but I have got to do all I can to protect this town and the mills.”

“All right, Oscar,” said Elinor with surprising calmness. “You have started to see some things correctly, but you don’t see everything right yet. The time will come when you will learn the error of your ways...” (TL 26-27)

Her words promise a vengeful take on the town of Perdido, represented in this case by Oscar and its inability to observe the interconnection between the construction of the levee and the alteration of the natural landscape of Lower Alabama. Revenge, after all, is a Gothic thing: when asked about the recurring motif of revenge in his works, Michael McDowell explained that “in books, you can make revenge work, because you can focus life to the extent that somebody can formulate and carry out revenge” (1985, 183). This observation finds resonance in the actions of Elinor Dammert throughout *The Flood* and *The Levee*, where her motivations appear rooted in a sentiment of ecological kinship that remains constant throughout the entire story. When Genevieve, the wife of one of the Caskeys, proposes the idea that “was to alter the entire future and aspect of Perdido” (TF 109) –namely, the construction of the levee to protect the town from future floods– Elinor expresses her disapproval, considering the downsides of separating the life of the town from that of the river. However, it is only when Genevieve beats her own daughter, Grace, one of the Caskey children who has connected with Elinor the most, that Elinor decides the woman needs to disappear. In an uncanny scene set on the road to leave Perdido, the car on which the woman is driving is reached by a single cloud evoked by Elinor that starts “suddenly to pour out rain, as if it were a sponge and God had wrung it” (124). The effect of the torrential rainwater hits the car with appalling violence:



The Packard itself had now driven into the cloud's stormy venue. Never had the passengers of the car seen so great a downpour in so small an area. The water beat against the roof so loudly that they were deafened. Rain gushed through the windows in sheets and instantly soaked Bray and Zaddie and Genevieve to the skin. It poured so heavily against the windscreen that their vision of the road ahead was completely obscured. In an instant all their senses had been occluded by rain: they saw, heard, tasted, felt, and smelled nothing else. (124)

The heavy rain, making it impossible to see the street, leads to an incident involving a truck transporting long pines from the sawmills of Perdido. As one of the pines shatters the windshield, it tragically causes the death of Genevieve, piercing "through her right eye and out the back of her skull" (125). In this way, water is depicted as aligning with the ecohorror trope of "nature's revenge" (Dang *et al.* 2022, 116) by haunting and ultimately causing the death of the woman responsible for suggesting the construction of a levee in Perdido. However, it is also relevant to note that Elinor acts in defence of her kin, which is represented equally by the river's ecosystem and the Caskey family. Her hybridity is therefore here further highlighted, as well as her transgressive and in-between role which defies anthropocentric human/nature binaries.

Despite Elinor's efforts to prevent the construction of the levee, the project proposed by Early Haskew will be approved, and the construction will begin right near the Caskey house. Curiously, however, Elinor's attitude towards the levee will gradually change, especially after hearing the numerous pleas from those who fear the river's flooding. According to the woman, the levee is completely useless; however, she realizes that it provides a certain sense of security for the citizens of Perdido, allowing them to co-exist next to the river in harmony and freed from the constant fear of catastrophic flooding. In a sudden twist of events, Elinor therefore accepts the construction of the levee: this process of hydrogeological assessment might play a significant role in changing the citizens' perception of the river from a mortal enemy to a fellow actant in the environmental entanglement of Perdido. The banks of the Perdido River become therefore a liminal space where human and non-human forces interact and both sides demand a sacrifice to set off a gothic, queer alliance. But if the human side demands the construction of the levee, the abiotic and yet agentic side requests a sacrifice too, namely the atrocious slaughtering of a child with a mental disability, John Robert, perpetrated by Elinor in an act of *realpolitik* against the rival DeBordenave clan:

When John Robert stopped, instinctively knowing that he ought to go no farther, Miss Elinor's grip on his arms became suddenly tight and painful. He could no longer move either his arms or his body, so tight was Miss Elinor's hold. He twisted his head around and looked up at her in meek protest.

But it wasn't Miss Elinor's face that returned his gaze. He couldn't see much of it because the moon was hidden directly behind that head, but John Robert could see that it was very flat and very wide and that two large bulbous eyes, glimmering and greenish, protruded from it. It stank of rank water and rotted vegetation and Perdido mud. The hands on John Robert's arms were no longer Miss Elinor's hands. They were much larger, and hadn't fingers or skin at all...



The last thing that John Robert DeBordenave perceived was the slight whistle of wind in his ears and a light breath of wind across his face as all that was left of him, his trunk and head, were picked up and hurled through the air. He turned and twisted, and saw his own blood streaming from the holes in his body, gleaming in thousands of black droplets in the moonlight. (*TL* 125-126, 127)

Symbolically speaking, Elinor, the ‘Chthonic one,’ is negotiating the fragile future of the entire ecosystem of the zone through the construction of a dam. Making kin in the Chthulucene, as Haraway suggests, means accepting that ‘we are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman’ (2016, 55). As in the case of John Robert’s murder, whose body will be hidden beneath one of the cornerstones of the levee, literally decomposing and becoming one with the earth, Elinor restructures the hierarchical landscape so that the human and non-human can merge within the new configuration of Perdido’s landscape. Moreover, the political consequences of this gruesome murder will thus soon be explained in the narrative, as both the Turks and especially the DeBordenaves –plagued by the debts derived by 1919 in one case and the loss of the heir of the clan in the other– decide to sell their sawmills and acres of land to the Caskey clan. At the end of *The Levee*, consequently, Elinor expresses her satisfaction in noticing that Oscar “is going to own *all* the mills along the river” and “have a whole *shoebox* full of land deeds” (*TL* 137, original emphasis). While this might sound at first like a reinstatement of the hierarchical superiority of human beings over the environmental components of the landscape, things might not be more different, as a new system of maintenance of the forests will be from that moment onwards applied to the entire ecosystem of Lower Alabama –a system of “selective cutting and intensive replanting” with the ultimate goal of “plant[ing] more trees than [Oscar] cut down” (139).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how Elinor’s in-betweenness and monstrosity in Michael McDowell’s *The Flood* and *The Levee*, when analysed through the lens of ecoGothic, can help structure an argument that challenges the hierarchical dominance of humans over other vital and non-vital elements of the environment. Simultaneously, it has demonstrated how this ecoGothic approach grants significance and agency to ‘dull’ matter –in this case, water and the rivers surrounding the town. Using New Materialism and EcoGothic as a framework, it has been hypothesized that speculative fiction can help in restructuring traditional human/non-human and biotic/abiotic binary structures, fostering new models of intraspecies kinship while simultaneously acknowledging the ‘vibrant’ materiality of the environment. This hypothesis has indeed proven to be correct, effectively paving the way for further studies that can deepen the study of environmental and material agency in speculative fiction and particularly within the ecoGothic.

As a significant portion of this paper has focused on the disruption of traditional binary structures in the conceptualisation of the environment, the idea



that the *Blackwater* Saga might be a narrative of ecological revenge which relies on the conventional trope of the struggle between man and nature may seem somewhat oversimplified at this point. In particular, through the hybrid characterisation of the character of Elinor, it has been consistently shown that both *The Flood* and *The Levee* suggest a redefinition of hierarchies that aligns human beings to the other environmental constituents, establishing new forms of kinship defying the human/non-human structure. “Chthonic ones” like Elinor Dammert, according to Donna Haraway, “are monsters in the best sense; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters”, while “also demonstrat[ing] and perform[ing] consequences” (2019, 2). The Chthulucene becomes in McDowell’s saga, therefore, a scenario where biotic and abiotic matters alike act as agentic forces in the shaping of the environment and its characteristics, in a transgressive ecoGothic framework that complicates traditional understandings of interaction between life and matter.



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