



ARTICLES:

Christina Civantos. "The Pliable Page: Turn-of-the-21st-Century Reworkings of Villaverde's <i>Cecilia Valdés</i> ."	2
Guadalupe Gerardi. "Interrogating Monstrosity and the Grotesque in Griselda Gambaro's <i>Nada que ver</i> and <i>Nada que ver con otra historia</i> ."	13
Rodrigo Viqueira. "La escritura fonografía de Rodolfo Walsh: La grabadora y la disputa por la voz obrera en <i>¿Quién mató a Rosendo?</i> ."	21
Daniel Arbino. "'Together We're Strong': Cross-Cultural Solidarity in Angie Cruz's <i>Dominicana</i> ."	30
Marisela Fleites-Lear. "Miamiando: Performing Cubanness in the Time of Elián in Jennine Capó Cruzet's <i>Make Your Home Among Strangers</i> ."	40
Teddy Duncan, Jr. "Politics of Dismissal and Death: <i>Tentacle</i> , Necropolitics, and the Political Subject."	49
Cynthia Martínez. "The Ghost and the Double: Identity, Migration, and Storytelling in Francisco Goldman's <i>The Long Night of White Chickens</i> ."	54

CREATIVE:

Lucía E. Orellana Damacela. "Blues."	65
Esteban Córdoba. Two short stories: "Espera" and "Risco."	69
Paul Evaristo García. "Darkest Before Dawn."	71
Ana Duclaud. "Alto Oleaje."	76
Alexander Ramirez. "The Decay of the Angel."	79
Shane Blackman. Three Sonnets: "Listen to Irene Cara", "Octavio Paz and the Nobel", "The Goals of Diego Maradona."	83
Allen Zegarra Acevedo. "Los de arriba."	85
Elliott Turner. "El Cautiverio."	87
Erika Said Izaguirre. "Del north al south."	95
Thomas Glave. "But Who Could Have Known? (Grief, Gratitude)."	104
Óscar Gabriel Chaidez. "Yuma."	111

REVIEWS:

<i>Nuevos fantasmas recorren México. Lo espectral en la literatura mexicana del siglo XXI.</i> Por Carolyn Wolfenzon. Madrid-Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana -Vervuert, 2020. 338 páginas. Reviewed by: Roberto Cruz-Arzabal.	115
<i>Le Maya Q'atzij/Our Maya Word: Poetics of Resistance in Guatemala.</i> By Emil Keme'. University of Minnesota Press, 2021. 258 pages. Reviewed by: Ignacio Carvajal.	117
<i>Centenary Subjects: Race, Reason, & Rupture in the Americas.</i> By Shawn McDaniel. Vanderbilt University Press, 2021. 282 pages. Reviewed by: Anibal González Pérez	119
<i>Falso subalterno. Testimonio y ficción en la narrativa chilena de postdictadura.</i> By José Salomon Gebhard. Santiago: Piso Diez Ediciones, 2021. 196 pages. Reviewed by: Ana Traverso Münnich	121

Politics of Dismissal and Death: *Tentacle*, Necropolitics, and the Political Subject

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ABSTRACT: In Rita Indiana's novel, *Tentacle*, the future of the Dominican Republic is postulated as bleak and dystopian: a nuclear ecological disaster has nearly ruined the ocean, colorism and racism are pervasive, Haitians are indiscriminately executed due to an unnamed "virus" (Indiana 3), and historical class divisions, as well as wealth inequalities, are maintained. The various issues that Indiana's future-oriented Dominican Republic is facing emerge from political contingencies: they are the result of clear choices facilitated by the political leaders of the Dominican Republic. Yet, while the text renders historical reality as contingent and liable to change, it also explicitly points out the limits of individual agency and action. *Tentacle* demonstrates the politico-ontological dismissal of subjects that is enacted through necropolitics. The text also recognizes the contingent nature of political formation and necropolitics, and by doing so, implicitly contests the essentialization of formerly colonized countries such as the Dominican Republic. Ultimately, I argue that the precarity of the political subject and the material-political-reality are not depicted in *Tentacle* as necessary or inevitable parts of some dialectic process of progression, but rather as potentially preventable or intervenable processes that evade individual agency.

KEYWORDS: Necropolitics, Subject, Dominican Republic, *Tentacle*, Contingency

Nation-states are distinct geographical areas of autonomous power—they are ostensibly the largest unit of recognized government power and authority. There are, of course, smaller sub-units of power contained within nation-states (local municipals, individual states, and other divisible forms of localized authority) as well as larger apparatuses that function under the guise of global power (United Nations, NATO). But ultimately, these larger organizations have no real legal jurisdiction over the autonomous power of nation-states. And the inviolable power of nation-states emerges from their capacity to produce the recognized citizen-subject as well as their power to dismiss the unrecognized (or denied) non-citizen-subject. Rita Indiana's 2015 book, *Tentacle*, exhibits the citizens of Dominican Republic (DR) that are vulnerable to the hierarchal authority of the nation-state and explores the landscape of choice and agency presented to the individual subject.

Tentacle is a trans-historical text set in the DR that spans different times of national significance. Indiana's text examines the immediate subjected subject—the population residing in a given nation-state formed by and exposed to the political authority of that state. By representing this site of power, *Tentacle* illustrates not only the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics which is defined as the use of politics to actively produce and form the living subject but also the concept propagated in response to Foucault's ideas: Necropolitics. J.A. Mbembé took Foucault's concept of biopolitics and extended it by looking at sovereignty in nation-states and the way power deploys itself through death, dying, and denial of politico-judicial subject status. Mbembé called this kind of political

formation "necropolitics," which is when a government is imbued with "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (15). By introducing the term and concept of necropolitics, Mbembé effectively supplied a necessary inversion to biopolitics: If some subjects are produced by political power, other subjects are also both indirectly and directly killed by politics. Jacques Lacan noted something similar in his essay "Excommunication": "It is a well known fact that politics is a matter of trading—wholesale, in lots, in this context—the same subjects, who are now called citizens, in hundreds of thousands" (5). Necropolitics is a recognition of this mode of political "trading": some lives are traded, "wholesale," for other lives. Without returning to the pre-Foucauldian notion of sovereignty simply acting through brutal authority and power, Mbembé is pointing out that power doesn't just kill; it also decides who is put at risk of death and through this same mechanism forms the living subject.

In *Tentacle*, the future of the Dominican Republic is postulated as bleak and dystopian: A nuclear ecological disaster has nearly ruined the ocean, colorism and racism are pervasive, Haitians are indiscriminately executed due to an unnamed "virus" (Indiana, 3), and historical class divisions, as well as wealth inequalities, are maintained. The various issues that Indiana's future-oriented Dominican Republic is facing emerge from political contingencies: They are the result of clear choices facilitated by the political leaders of the Dominican Republic. Yet, while the text renders historical reality as contingent and liable to change, it also explicitly points out the limits of individual agency and action. *Tentacle* demonstrates the

politico-ontological dismissal of subjects that is enacted through necropolitics. The text also recognizes the contingent nature of political formation and necropolitics and, by doing so, implicitly contests the essentialization of formerly colonized countries, such as the DR. Ultimately, the precarity of the political subject and the material-political-reality are not depicted in *Tentacle* as necessary or inevitable parts of some dialectic process of progression, but rather as potentially preventable or intervenable processes that evade individual agency.

In his 1982 essay "Subject and Power," Foucault defined the subject in two distinct yet interrelated ways: "There are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (779). I will be employing these two semantic expressions of "subject" in my analysis of *Tentacle*—looking at the subject as both a self-reflective individual with agency and as vulnerable to hierarchal authority or political power. The first form of subject is the individual political agent and the latter is the subjected subject—the subject that is subjected to, and produced by, some mode of external political authority.

Contingency and the Limited Agency of Political Subjects

The entirety of *Tentacle* is predicated on the concept of contingency, which is exemplified in time travel and limited agency. Contingency is the incidental or "uncertain" (Ferrari 2); for something to be contingent, it needs to emerge from the *possible* while remaining independent of the *necessary*. When the protagonist of the text, Acilde, travels back in time, her mission is effectively to reverse the contingencies enacted by the politicians of DR. Political choice, as shown in the text, acts in direct opposition to political determinism and essentialization. The text does not posit that these dystopic outcomes are inevitable or pre-determined; instead, they are represented as dependent on a particular formation and utilization of power. Guillermina De Ferrari notes the anti-deterministic elements of the text in her article: "Reality—what is—did not become the way it is out of necessity. Rather, it could have been otherwise...Time travel relies on the fact that fate has alternatives and therefore is not inevitable. [*Tentacle*] is an exploration of possible futures" (2). De Ferrari's fundamental insight is that *Tentacle's* narrative structure of time-traveling and trans-historicity both demonstrate the uncertainty of events and supply a (fictional) mode of intervention.

After Acilde's friend, Morla, inadvertently kills the President's spiritual advisor in an attempt to steal a rare sea anemone, the trans-historical mission is imposed upon her. Acilde is biologically reconfigured into a male body by the doctor, Eric; this is why she initially wanted to steal the sea anemone, to sell it in order to get the gender-sex converting Rainbow Bright drug. After her corporeal-gender transformation, she is told through a hologram by the woman that she killed, Esther Escudero, that she needs to "use

the powers you have begun to discover for the good of humanity" (Indiana 18). Esther specifically tells her that she needs to "save the sea" (Indiana 18) and Acilde quickly ascertains this means she needs to use her duplicity of historical selves to prevent President Said's deals with Venezuela. Acilde is sent to stop President Said from accepting nuclear missiles from Venezuela that eventually spill into the ocean and cause ecocatastrophe. Notably, this means that President Said's political decisions did not arise from historical necessity, rather they emerged from contingency and are thus preventable. The entire premise of Acilde's mission and *Tentacle's* narrative informs us there are possibilities which lie outside of what is. The dystopic future reality in which Acilde finds herself in the beginning of the text is nothing more than the result of a series of decisions; the procedure of historical development is rendered as an intervenable and accidental process.

The issue with time-travel as a mode of intervention is twofold: first, because the time-travel plot places the means for widespread eco-political change entirely within the individual subject's range of action. Secondly, time-travel is not among the viable extra-textual options to change the real world. The text itself recognizes the first shortcoming and the second can be inferred by the reader. In the end, Acilde—now Giorgio—repudiates his mission. Giorgio effectively facilitates the dystopic future we are introduced to in the beginning of the novel through inaction. We see, yet again, how history and reality itself is a result of circumstantial incidents: Historical events are represented as amorphous blank entries. When Giorgio encounters the younger pre-presidential Said, he refuses to confront him. The text directly states that he does this to maintain his current life: "He could sacrifice everything except this life, Giorgio Menicucci's life, his wife's company, the gallery, the lab" (Indiana 190). The ending exhibits the failure of individual political agency: Not only are individual actors unreliable due to potential complacency, but individual action is never really enough. And, as De Ferrari writes, "Giorgio truly becomes human only when he faces the choice. The problem with a choice is that, by definition, it implies the possibility of refusal" (5). *Tentacle* thus deploys the time-traveling trope in a self-aware manner. The text knows that the impetus for change cannot be placed on a single person—not only because the individual is incapable of truly addressing these global issues, but because *choice presupposes refusal*. Furthermore, in the real-world material conditions of the DR, there is no time machine that can miraculously enable a 'hero' to undo all the events that leads to its dystopic future-reality. *Tentacle* is explicitly responding to the common fatalist subjunctive phrase, "If only we had a time machine." The text replies: "Even that is not enough—even with a time machine this will take more than individual action."

These two ideas compounded—the contingency of history and the limited agency of the political subject—means that although history is radically open and malleable, there is a necessary sequence of concerted and cooperative effort for large historical events to occur. Therefore, any single person is unable to ameliorate

or prevent these large historical events. While there may be some events where individual political subjects can deploy their own agency for substantive change, the type of outcomes which appear in *Tentacle* (namely, ecological disaster and necropolitics) transcend the bounds of any individual's range of action. For example, the election of President Said (which enabled the ecocatastrophe central to the text) is represented as something that relies on broad democratic support. As is depicted in the text, "[Said] had captured the country's will for fifteen years and his charisma had the same effect on Acilde as on the masses he had seduced via YouTube videos in which he criticized the government and used Dominican street Spanish" (Indiana 19). Beyond this, the type of activity that led to DR holding biological weapons is a trans-national effort since Said also "sign[ed] a bunch of treaties with the Latin American Bolivarian Alliance which was pursuing its dream of a Great Colombia in each of its totalitarian member states" (Indiana 19). This alliance means that multiple countries needed to coordinate themselves in order to pursue a mutual cause—and this trans-national cause results in ecocatastrophe. As we can see, even the actions of President Said relies on other contingencies from other places. Without Venezuela manufacturing biological weapons, there would be no weapons for President Said to accept on behalf of the DR. The events that the text focuses on are contingent on much more than President Said's acceptance or refusal of biological weapons. Simply, the events that led to ecological disaster were not perpetrated by a single person, and the actions needed to foreclose that same ecological disaster cannot be executed by a single person.

Precarity of the Subjected Subject and an Anti-Essentialist Necropolitics

Now that we have discovered the contingency of political formation and the limited agency of the political subject as depicted within *Tentacle*, we can examine how these two concepts inform necropolitics. Other scholars, such as De Ferrari, have noted how contingency implicitly informs *Tentacle* and the ways Giorgio's complacency is a form of individual failure. Yet, De Ferrari does not connect these ideas to the politics of death and to anti-essentialism. She also interprets Giorgio's wrong choice of not preventing ecocatastrophe as an individual act rather than indicative of the failure of individual action itself—which is what I argue. In order to clearly delineate the ways that political choices can result in both direct and indirect death and dying through necropolitics, it is imperative to examine the precarity intrinsic to life. In her book, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Judith Butler explicates how precariousness is constitutive of our very notion of life: "To say that a life is injurable, for instance, or that it can be lost, destroyed, or systematically neglected to the point of death, is to underscore not only the finitude of a life (that death is certain) but also its precariousness (that life requires various social and economic conditions to be met in order to be sustained as a life)" (13). For Butler, life is defined by its finitude and the

inherent looming exposure to death; life is that which is radically vulnerable.

Butler further explains that "Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know" (14). The preconditional precarity of life which lands us "in the hands of the other" is the exact reason necropolitics exists: There are certain "social and economic conditions" that are needed to sustain life, and in the absence of these conditions one is either left to die or is killed. And, as Lacan writes, the essential kernel of politics is a "wholesale" (5) trading: "Each of us at any moment and at any level may be traded off—without the notion of exchange we can have no insight into the social structure" (5). This means that necropolitics is effectively the trade-off between the actualized precarity of some lives (the properly recognized citizen-subject whose life is sustained) and the neglected precarity of other lives (the non-recognized subjected subject).

From the very first page of the text, necropolitics as a rejection of precarity materialized in its most explicit and severe form. As Acilde cleans Esther's window she watches the following scene: "Recognizing the virus in the black man, the security mechanism in the tower releases a lethal gas ... The machine picks [a Haitian woman] up with its mechanized arm and deposits her in its main container" (Indiana 3). These Haitians are killed because of a 'virus' that they ostensibly have—they are killed to protect the citizen-subject of the DR. This mode of political killing gives us insight into the function of necropolitics: The precarity of some lives are dismissed (the non-citizen Haitian subject) so that other lives can be actualized and protected. Citizen-subjects are formed by this very dismissal of the non-citizen-subject. As Mbembé states, this is the way necropolitics operates: "sovereignty consists of the will and the capacity to kill in order to live" (18). To Mbembé, there is a "social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (40). And this conferred status of "living dead" is actually a politico-ontological privation: a certain subject status is stripped from those subjected to necropolitics. This removal of a proper politico-ontological status is not only a political disenfranchisement but a non-recognition of an ontological standing.

Acilde herself is indicative of the politico-ontological denial inherent to necropolitics. As a poor girl in the Dominican Republic, she is forced to prostitute herself in order to sustain her life. Since she has to engage in sex acts to survive, she is subjected to rape and is barely able to afford food. The text clearly notes this, stating, "Her rounds up at El Mirador had barely paid for food and data, without which she couldn't live" (Indiana 9). Acilde's life is not sustained by the state: she is a citizen, but a negligible one that is left to die. Because of her subject-position as a poor pre-operation transgender man, she does not gain proper social ontological recognition necessary for her life to be protected from death. Beyond the work she must engage in and the lack of resources to sustain her life, Acilde

experiences another kind of ontological privation: gender-based non-recognition. Again, due to her subject-status as a poor woman, she is denied access to the cost-prohibitive Rainbow Brite drug that could properly align her gender, sex, and body. This is a different kind of subject-dismissal, and while it does not result in death, it is regardless a refusal of proper recognition for economic reasons. Acilde and the Haitians exhibit the spectrum of death enacted by necropolitics in that there is direct political murder (such as the Haitians that are executed) and a dismissal of life that can potentially result in death (such as Acilde experiences). Both are forms of dismissed life: these textual examples are necropolitics manifested in its corporeal expressions.

Notably, even the ecological disaster that the text is centered on is a particular configuration of necropolitics: albeit ecocatastrophe in a way indiscriminately affects everyone, these effects are unevenly applied. These uneven effects can be seen as a form of environmental racism or classism. The poor, such as Alcide, are disproportionately affected by the environmental issues facing the Dominican Republic. This is demonstrated by the limited access that the poor have to natural resources while, at the same time, the rich turn the natural environment into private property: "Nenuco was a real bastard, with more fish in his waters than he and his family could possibly eat or sell, and Willito had two little brothers and a sick grandfather. He supported them by selling whatever he could find on the coral reefs to the gift shops and restaurants in Sosúa" (Indiana 45). The poor Willito needs to gain access to the water out of necessity, while the wealthy Nenuco "owns" a segment of the ocean. This uneven differential in necessary access is exacerbated after the biological weapons fall into the sea. The resources become even more limited and restricted, which augments the suffering of those, like Willito who rely on the sea but are denied access.

The sea anemone, itself, even acts as a symbol inscribed with economic classism and necropolitics. Acilde tries to steal the sea anemone because it has become extremely rare and expensive after the ecocatastrophe—the only ones that have access to anemones (without committing larceny) are the wealthy, like Esther Escudero. Due to its rarity, the sea anemone is worth a large sum of money. Acilde's friend tells her that selling the sea anemone would be "Enough for your Rainbow Brite" (Indiana 12). According to this, the reader knows the sea anemone is worth at least "fifteen thousand dollars" (Indiana 10), since that is the price of the sex-changing injection. Ecological disaster renders the sea anemone as a commodity and places it in the arena of commerce. Thus, the sea anemone acts as a symbol for the dual ecological issues of the future oriented reality: Not only are most of the sea animals dead (such as the other sea anemone that presumably died in the ocean) and the environment nearly ruined, but what is left of the environment is privatized and "access" is rendered cost-prohibitive. There is still access to resources but there is a monetary-based differential in how those resources are distributed—this produces the subjected

subject of necropolitics; those that are unable to afford the rarified resources of the sea are left to die. Although Willito appears before the ecocatastrophe, the text is implicitly asking the reader what would happen to a poor figure such as Willito and his family (along with the thousands of people they represent) when sea-resources become so scarce that they are worth thousands of dollars. The supposedly indiscriminate event of ecological disaster, instead of having universalized effects, is actually contributing to even more economic inequities.

The differential effects of ecocatastrophe along racial and class lines, which are indicative of necropolitics, appear elsewhere in the text. Again, looking at the privatization of land and resources, we can examine who owns land and how ownership of this land enables them to act as an environmental activist. Linda and Giorgio are the ones who own Playa Bo which is the beach where the art gallery and environmental conservation lab is located. Linda is described as a "windsurfing champion...rich girl" (Indiana 21) whose parents were "Jewish refugees to whom Trujillo had given lands in 1939 in the town of Sosúa" (Indiana 21). With this land, Linda intends to save the sea and the coral reefs. Linda and her environmental efforts exist at a special intersection of race, class, and necropolitics. Although it is made clear that Linda's father "made his fortune from scratch" (Indiana 22) it is also notable that he was given land from Trujillo, a former dictator of the DR that was anti-black and who sought to "whiten" the DR. The real-world Trujillo even went so far as to powder his face in order to appear whiter. It is never specified how much land her father was given, and it was ethically correct to give them some sort of property since they were a Jewish family escaping the Nazi's. Yet at the same time Trujillo was giving land to Jewish refugees, he was massacring Haitian's and dark-skinned Dominicans. Again, we arrive at the most explicit mode of necropolitics and the Lacanian "trading" intrinsic to it: The precarity of certain lives were protected from vulnerability (the Jewish immigrants) while others were exposed to conditions that undermines their precarity (the Haitians or dark-skinned Dominicans). And this clearly operates according to racial boundaries. Those with dark skin were killed while those with light skin were welcomed. Here we can also see the racializing of capital accumulation—although Linda's Jewish family "started from scratch," they were given an opportunity due to the color of their skin, and this opportunity was denied to others.

Another point that can be extrapolated from Linda and her conservation efforts is two-fold. First, it tells us who has the ability to engage in this work. Second, it demonstrates how engaging in that work perpetuates the structure of necropolitics. Linda's money, engendered through racial capital, enables her to buy the beach and become a conservationist. In a text that centers on ecological disaster, her position as an environmentalist with authentic care is presented as a necessary and noble one—yet the text is incessantly asserting that there are those who cannot engage in this conservationist ethics and are actually adversely affected because of those,

like Linda, that seek to heal the environment. For example, when Linda first tells her father that she wants to buy the entire beach in order to save it, he responds, "No, that it would mean risking the livelihoods of the local fishermen, who had families just like he did" (Indiana 22). Here, Linda's father recognizes the implicit trade-off of Linda's conservation efforts: In order for her to conserve nature, others are neglected or denied. Linda asserts and actualizes the precarity of nature while dismissing the lives of Dominicans that rely on those resources. Giorgio and Linda even explicitly state that they want to make the water "free of fishing and other pillaging" (Indiana 23), yet they do not consider what that means for the locals and do not intend to offset the damage done to them in any way. Even Linda's efforts to preempt ecological disaster, which is facilitated by her class-standing, perpetuates the exclusionary structure of necropolitics.

Although necropolitics seems ubiquitous in *Tentacle*, from the outright racist murder of Haitians to the dismissal of the poor to the classist differential apparent in post ecocatastrophe, the text makes it clear that necropolitics in the DR is a *contingent* formation of a particular social structure. Through the time-travel narrative, the text insists on the political-material reality of these issues while simultaneously asserting that reality could be otherwise. What this tells us is that the realities of the DR (as depicted in the text) are not historically determined. There always existed crucial moments and necessary choices that could have changed things. This also informs us that these things are not occurring because of some stage of development that the DR is in—since whatever "stage" the DR has ever been in, things could have been different. Yet, while political-material-reality consists of choices, these choices cannot be made or even un-made by individual political actors. The fundamental insight is the following: the material-reality does exist (necropolitics) and while it could have always been otherwise (contingency), this "otherwise" reality cannot be enacted by a single person (limited individual agency). The contingency of reality does not allow us to deny the Real (in the Lacanian sense of an undeniable kernel) which underlies that very reality.

Conclusion: Death and Nation-Development

Bringing together very different theorists enables us to see the ideas at the heart of this complex and nuanced novel. *Tentacle* is a reminder of human precarity and the "trading" implicit to all "social structures"; the text tells us that "sovereignty consists of the will and the capacity to kill in order to live" (Mbembé 18). This type of social-structure is exhibited by outright racialized murder, economic dismissal, and ecological rejection. Those that undergo these various modes of necropolitics form a kind of subject, the subjected subject. These subjects all share one thing in differing degrees: A politico-ontological privation. And the social structure which produces this politico-ontological privation is not unchangeable or historically determined; it is purely contingent.

The contingent nature of political formation renders necropolitics an anti-essentialist historical development. These different forms of violence enacted by the DR government are not some specific characteristics of Caribbean politics; rather, the appearance of necropolitics is conditional and relies on a particular, and non-deterministic, sequence of events. Necropolitics, and all of its manifest expressions, are not some essential attributes of political formation in the DR; instead, they are contingent and circumstantial. As we saw with Said's election, his decision to warehouse the biological weapons, and the eventual ecocatastrophe that resulted from those events, there were always possibilities of another material-political-reality. The text identifies the political reality of necropolitics as both pervasive and contingent—and thus intervenable—yet also provides a valuable insight that there is no single protagonist-hero that can conceivably resolve and alter this reality on their own. By doing this, the text contests the narrative of nation-development and dialectic inevitability. These things are not deterministically occurring in the DR because of some stage of development that they are in; events are happening due to circumstantial decisions being made. In other words, *Tentacle* informs us what reality is and can be for the DR and reminds us reality has not and will not emerge from historical necessity. Yet, the text concurrently informs us that individual agency is insufficient in changing these radically open realities.

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