

## Textuality, Empire, and the Catastrophic Assemblage: Sir Stamford Raffles and the Tambora Eruption

**Abstract** This chapter focuses on the English-language account of the Tambora eruption produced under the auspices of the British Governor of Java, Sir Stamford Raffles. Scholars have treated this text as a straightforward account of the eruption and its effects, but it is in fact a complex heteroglossic and collaborative production in which different perspectives and knowledges intertwine and compete. ‘Tambora’, the chapter argues, is usefully understood as a material-discursive assemblage in which the natural and the political are thoroughly imbricated. These imbrications are addressed through a close analysis of Raffles’s narrative in its three different contexts of publication over a fifteen-year period. The chapter shows, in particular, how the document supplants a mythic understanding of catastrophe with an imperialistic, ‘scientific’ epistemology.

**Keywords** Material ecocriticism • New materialism • British imperialism • Sir Stamford Raffles • Tambora

### INTRODUCTION

Due to the short interregnum from 1811 to 1816 during which Britain wrested control of Java from Holland—which in 1811 was part of the French empire—the principal source for eyewitness accounts of the Tambora eruption and its aftermath is an English-language document

collected together under the auspices of Sir Stamford Raffles, the island's governor during this period, and published in the *Transactions of the Batavian Society* in 1816.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have tended to treat this text as a straightforward source of information about the eruption and its effects. However, it is in fact a heteroglossic and collaborative production in which different forms of knowledges intertwine.<sup>2</sup> Raffles's desire to mediate and control representations of the eruption within a single centralising document was connected to his role as a colonial administrator: throughout his time in Java he was gathering information to use in the governance of the archipelago and to make a case for a permanent British colonial presence there, as he does in the *History of Java* (1817). There is a tension between the imperialistic and bureaucratic metanarrative provided by Raffles and his colonial functionaries, and the text's more localised accounts of the catastrophe. Although the report emphasises the sublime power of the eruption, it also presents itself as a repository of objective environmental knowledge that will support imperial power and control. In contrast, the individual accounts that it also contains are more often shown to invoke confusion, legend, and ignorance. The document therefore can be seen as marking a shift from a religious-mythic understanding of disaster in which 'morality and materiality, social relations and natural phenomena, were understood to be interrelated' to a more 'modern understanding [...] according to which the merely material realm of nature followed its own mechanistic principles that were entirely separate from human morality and social relations.'<sup>3</sup> It reveals a nascent and uneven distinction between a 'fact-making,' supposedly objective and scientific worldview embodied by the colonial metanarrator and the more embedded 'meaning-making' individual narratives within it.<sup>4</sup>

It is fitting that the key source of information about the Tambora eruption is a collection of different perspectives. The catastrophe itself, after all, was not a single event. To use Jane Bennett's term, it was an 'assemblage': a grouping 'of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts.'<sup>5</sup> The word 'Tambora' can stand simply for the volcano itself, but it can also be used to refer to this assemblage of energy and matter, which includes the initial explosions, the Plinian eruption, the lava flow, the pyroclastic currents that destroyed villages, the ash fallout, the darkness that covered a large area, the fall of pumice from the sky, the tsunami, and even the subsequent global climate change caused by the release of sulphur into the stratosphere. Bennett argues that the elements that make up an assemblage can include 'humans and their (social, legal,

linguistic) constructions,' as is made evident by her case study of the electrical power grid.<sup>6</sup> An assemblage, too, can have a form of agency due to 'the vitality of the materials that constitute it.'<sup>7</sup> Bennett's work and that of other new materialist thinkers thereby problematizes the dichotomy by which human beings are seen either as shapers of nonhuman nature or victims of its whims by focusing instead on 'a material-semiotic network of human and nonhuman agents incessantly generating the world's embodiments and events.'<sup>8</sup> An uncomfortable question raised by a phenomenon like Tambora is the extent to which humans and animals participate within it rather than simply being acted upon by it. To make such a suggestion in the face of the immense suffering that accompanies an environmental catastrophe on such a scale may seem like a kind of obscenity. I write this paragraph ten days after an earthquake devastated towns and villages in central Italy, killing nearly 300 people and injuring many more. It is unlikely that any of those people or their loved ones thought of themselves as participants in an assemblage. And yet an earthquake does not in itself kill anyone. What we understand as an environmental catastrophe is a set of interactions between earth systems, organic beings, and their discursive-material constructions.

Bennett's emphasis on the vitality of matter, and the potential inclusion of human beings within assemblages, is why I have leant towards her terminology in this chapter rather than Timothy Morton's more distancing concept of the 'hyperobject': a thing that is 'massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.'<sup>9</sup> However, 'Tambora' certainly manifests the nonlocality, viscosity, and interobjectivity that Morton sees as among the key properties of such objects. In any case, both concepts address the potentially asymmetrical entanglements of human beings and powerful natural forces that the Tambora narrative documents. It also shows how individual human experience of a large assemblage or hyperobject is inevitably partial and mediated, as evidenced by the silent darkness that descends across a large area after the eruption: an experience that is simultaneously revealing and obscuring. The document's metanarrative attempts to overcome individual partiality by bringing together different perspectives, and correcting them when necessary, but itself inevitably offers a partial view. Most importantly, as a document of empire in the language of the invading country it tends to obscure indigenous voices, and indigenous people bore the brunt of the volcano's effects. The few indigenous perspectives that we do encounter are mediated by being reported within the accounts of European

witnesses and within the document's metanarrative. Whereas we might expect a fictionalised account of such an event to attempt to evoke empathy with the suffering of affected people, perhaps through depictions of interiority, the narrative is mainly concerned with the observations of colonising subjects, made from a position of relative safety, whether they are of unusual natural phenomena, or of the destruction that these phenomena wreak. The apparently objective and empiricist mode of the document is no doubt why it has been so useful for scholars trying to uncover the history of the eruption, and a basic reading can tell us a great deal about the different physical phenomena that made up the Tambora assemblage. But a more sophisticated analysis needs to recognise that there is also much that it does not tell us, particularly about the human costs of the eruption. The document offers, via its metanarrative, a particular perspective that encodes a kind of cultural politics. Therefore I approach the narrative not so much as an external account of Tambora, but as a discursive construction that is itself an insertion into the assemblage, and I pay considerable attention to the different contexts in which it was published.

As I discussed in the introduction, this approach builds on recent work in 'material ecocriticism,' which emphasises the 'constitutive engagement of human discursive systems with the material world.'<sup>10</sup> I draw not only on Bennett's idea of the assemblage, but also (selectively) on its rather different conceptualisation by Deleuze and Guattari, who are more sensitive to the processual nature of assemblages.<sup>11</sup> They understand an assemblage as 'simultaneously and inseparably a machinic assemblage and an assemblage of enunciation'; that is, material and discursive.<sup>12</sup> An assemblage inevitably marks out a territory but is also 'constituted by *lines of deterritorialization* that cut across it and carry it away.'<sup>13</sup> The Tambora assemblage, therefore, can be understood not only as a physical process but also as a discursive one in which a mythic understanding of environmental catastrophe, which might include European as well as indigenous epistemologies, is to some extent sup-  
planted (deterritorialized and then reterritorialized) by an imperialist, 'fact-making' epistemology. To take this approach is not to downplay the terrible human effects of 'Tambora'; quite the contrary. Focusing on its discursive as well as physical aspects offers a way of thinking about how environmental catastrophes imbricate the natural and the political.

The first part of this chapter reveals the constructed nature of Raffles's narrative by analysing it as a composite text and paying close attention to

its status as the production both of an imperial bureaucracy and of the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences. Part two analyses what the document reveals about the eruption's 'nonlocality' in relation to the aspirations of British imperialism, before analysing the most direct account that we have of the eruption and its devastating local effects, in Owen Phillips's report that appears at the end of the narrative. In parts three and four, I consider the Tambora assemblage as a continuing process of imperialistic reterritorialization after the initial 1816 publication of the narrative. I focus particularly on its appearance in the form of a lengthy footnote to an early chapter of Raffles's *History of Java* (1817) and in his wife's posthumous *Memoir* of 1830.<sup>14</sup> An analysis of these later publications reveals some important political resonances in Raffles's account, and I focus particularly on the relationship between Tambora and the catastrophic defeat of Napoleon in the context of British imperialism after Waterloo. If material ecocriticism requires close attention to 'the intra-action of human creativity and the narrative agency of matter,' a crucial locus for such attention is the materiality of the text itself and the changing history of that materiality.<sup>15</sup> The Tambora narrative's manifestation in different publishing contexts sheds light on the ways in which elemental phenomena and the discourses and practices of imperial and indigenous cultures came together to create Tambora.<sup>16</sup>

### THE ORIGINAL NARRATIVE: CONTEXT AND COMPOSITION

The original document on the Tambora catastrophe is around 4500 words in length and entitled 'Narrative of the Effects of the Eruption from the Tomboro Mountain, in the Island of Sumbawa, On the 11th and 12th of April 1815.' It is dated 28 September 1815, and was first published in the eighth volume (1816) of the Anglo-Dutch *Transactions of the Batavian Society, of Arts and Sciences*.<sup>17</sup> The narrative is unsigned but is introduced as '*communicated by the [Society's] President.*' Introducing the version that appears in the *History of Java*, Raffles notes that it was 'drawn up by Mr. [Charles] Assey' from the responses to Raffles's circular requiring information about the eruption. Assey was at the time the Secretary to the British Government in Java.<sup>18</sup> The narrative is sometimes cited as authored by J.T. Ross, although I am not aware that any scholar has discussed the attribution.<sup>19</sup> The *Java Half-Yearly Almanac and Directory for 1815* lists the Rev. Professor J.T. Ross as minister of the Protestant Church and connected to the government

administration in Batavia.<sup>20</sup> The eighth volume of the *Transactions of the Batavian Society* also lists him as the Society's President—he had previously been its Secretary—as Raffles had stepped down at some point after learning in September 1815 that the East India Company was dismissing him from his post and that he would be leaving Java. (The volume begins with an expression of gratitude to Raffles from the Society's post holders, followed by Raffles's response.) Whoever first cited the narrative as by Ross seems to have assumed that '*communicated by the President*' indicates that he was the author. However, given the date of the document, which is well before Raffles left Java on 25 March 1816, it seems much more likely that the reference is to the Society's outgoing president rather than its incoming one.<sup>21</sup> And, even if it does refer to Ross, '*communicated*' is likely to mean no more than it was delivered by him at a Society meeting. There is absolutely no reason to think that Ross had anything to do with its composition or to doubt Raffles's later claim that it was put together by Assey. Previous scholars have not troubled themselves about what may seem a pedantic point.<sup>22</sup> However, the ambiguity about the document's authorship tells us something about its collaborative nature and its bureaucratic stance: a text that is 'drawn up' rather than composed or created.<sup>23</sup> Even as it draws on subjective accounts, this impersonality supports the narrative's claim to authoritative and supposedly objective 'fact-making.'

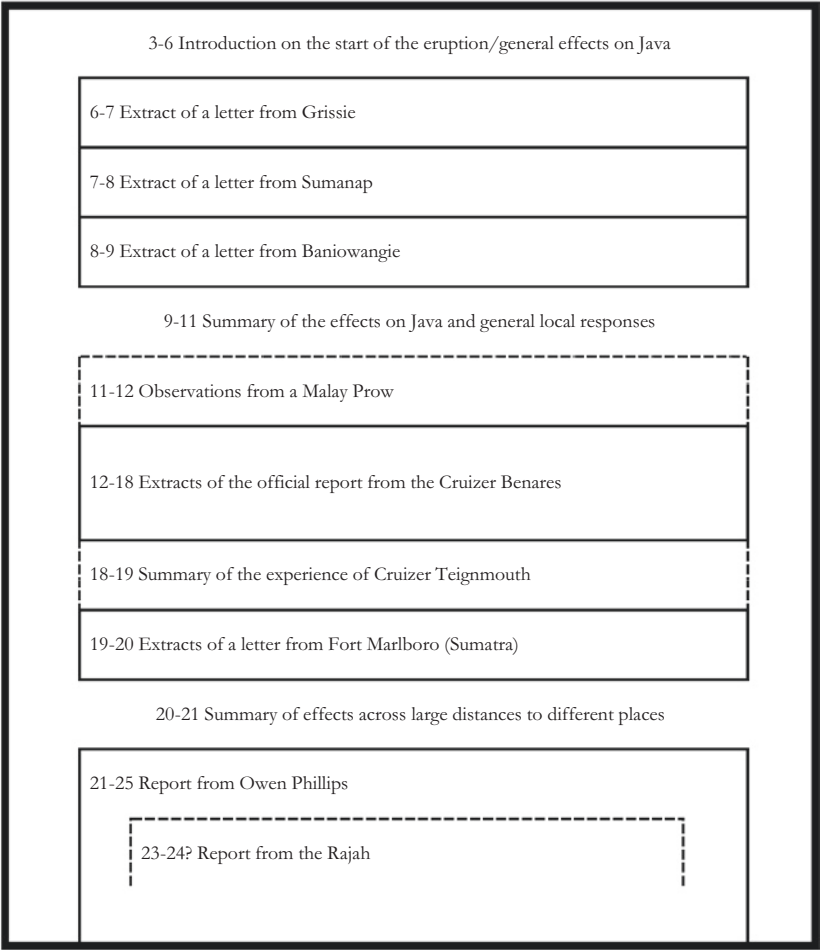
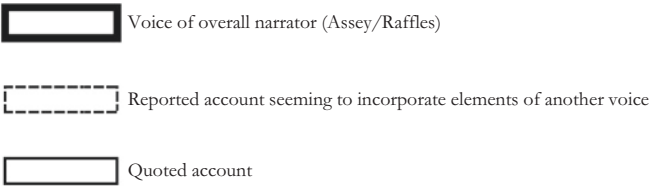
To understand the document fully, it is useful to know something about the Society. With his customary energy, Raffles sought to find out as much as possible about Java once he had become Lieutenant-Governor in late 1811. As well as travelling the island himself, he commissioned researchers such as the natural historian Thomas Horsfield. He also sought to revive the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences, which had been founded by the Dutch in 1778, but had become moribund due to the indolence and in-fighting of its members.<sup>24</sup> New by-laws were passed in November 1812 and Raffles was elected President in April 1813. Like its Dutch forebear, this new version of the Society had as its principal objective the pursuit of knowledge for the 'public benefit' and, although obviously a part of the colonising process, was not designed to undertake business for the government or the East India Company.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, Raffles held the Society's meetings at his government residence and printed its *Transactions* freely using the administration's press, so it had at least a semi-official imprimatur and noted in its new regulations that it was 'under the special patronage of the British

Government.’<sup>26</sup> Raffles clearly felt that a greater understanding of the natural history of Java and surrounding islands, and of the indigenous languages, would help to develop Java as a productive colony to the benefit of colonisers and colonised:

As every untrodden path affords some new incitement to the inquisitive mind, so we may look for much in the various branches of Natural History;—to the philosophic mind a wide and interesting field is opened, and while we contemplate in a political point of view the advantages which must result from bringing forth and directing in a proper course the latent energies and resources of so large a portion of the habitable globe, it must be a pleasing reflection to the Philanthropist that so many of our fellow creatures are thus gradually retrieved from ignorance, barbarism, and self destruction.<sup>27</sup>

There could hardly be a clearer articulation of the imperial ideal of a beneficial relationship between scientific knowledge, political power, colonial development, and moral improvement. It assumes, however, that the area’s ‘latent energies’ are capable of being properly directed; one wonders if the Tambora eruption gave Raffles pause for thought about the potential recalcitrance of the Indonesian environment and its peoples to colonial ‘improvement.’

Two volumes of the Society’s transactions were published during the period of British rule. Volume VII appeared in 1814, the first for twenty-two years, and Volume VIII in 1816. A handful of the articles were in Dutch but the majority were in English: mostly on natural history or philology. The Tambora narrative therefore fitted in very well with the journal and with the Society’s mission of increasing Western knowledge of the archipelago. However, unlike the other articles, it was also an official government document. Figure 2.1 gives a visual representation of the text’s structure. It comprises an introduction, and then extracts from letters by the Residents (East India Company officials) at Grissie, Sumanap, Baniowangie, and Bima, an unnamed person based at Fort Malboro on Sumatra, and from a Lieutenant Owen Phillips, the Assistant Resident at Macassar, whom Raffles dispatched to Sumbawa on a relief mission. It also contains accounts from ‘the Noquedah [Captain] of a Malay Prow’ (mediated in the third person) passing near Tambora on 11 April, the commander of ‘the Honorable Company’s Cruizer Benares’ (first person), and the ‘Honorable Company’s Cruizer



**Fig. 2.1** Diagram of the ‘Narrative of the Effects of the Eruption from the Tomboro Mountain’



Teignmouth' (third person). Within these narratives are general comments on indigenous responses as well as a 'direct' eyewitness account of the eruption by the Rajah of Saugar that is incorporated within Phillips's narrative. On the one hand, this elaborate structure might suggest the impossibility of offering a single true rendering of any catastrophe. On the other, the implication is that, through its distanced perspective, the imperial centre has the capacity to harness these different local accounts and therefore to produce authentic and stable knowledge. This centralising, territorializing impetus works against the nonlocality of the Tambora assemblage: its tendency to disperse outwards from the site of the eruption. Colonial fact-making is also built on a vast lacuna, which the Rajah's brief and heavily mediated account cannot fill: the meaning-making stories of the indigenous inhabitants of Sumbawa and other islands who experienced the eruption not as a sublime curiosity, but as an immediate threat to life and livelihood.

The opening of the narrative is brisk and functional, and establishes the document's status as the collaborative product of an imperial bureaucracy rather than of an individual observer:

To preserve an authentic account of the violent and extraordinary Eruption of the Tomboro Mountain on Sumbawa in April last, the Honorable the Lieutenant Governor required from the several Residents of districts on the Island, a statement of the circumstances that occurred within their knowledge, and from their replies the following Narrative is collected. (3)

The 'extraordinary' violence of the eruption is brought into the control of the machinery of colonial government; the word 'required' emphasises that this is knowledge produced by centralised power. The passive voice at the end of the quotation ('is collected') suggests the impersonality of this process. As a result, the narrative is able to offer an overview of the eruption and its effects that supposedly transcends the limitations of the peripheral and localised knowledge offered by the Residents: it can therefore claim to be 'an authentic account.'<sup>28</sup> The entirely ordinary administrative action displayed by the Governor's directions, the obedient responses of the Residents, and the production and publication of the narrative is produced by the very extraordinariness of the events described. The only way to deal with the catastrophic, the document implies, is to be as measured and orderly as possible.

A notable feature of the document is its listing of different local explanations for the noise of the eruption and for the eruption itself. It is clear not just from the narrative, but from other accounts printed in periodicals, that the immediate assumption of anyone hearing the explosions without experiencing any of the other phenomena such as the ash fall and darkness was that guns were being fired. As Raffles's document states, on Java 'the noise was in the first instance almost universally attributed to distant cannon; so much so that a Detachment of Troops were marched from Djocjokarta, in the expectation that a neighbouring Post was attacked, and along the Coast boats were in two instances dispatched in quest of a supposed ship in distress' (3–4). Cannon-like sounds were also heard in many other places, including Macasser on South Sulawesi: 'towards sun-set the reports seem to have approached much nearer and sounded like heavy guns with occasional slight reports in between' (12–13). Assuming pirate activity, 'a Detachment of Troops was embarked on board the Honorable Company's Cruizers Benares and sent in search of them' (13). (These accounts are a reminder that the British operation in Indonesia was very much on a military basis and that its troops were constantly on the alert for pirates, as well as a Dutch invasion.) Even when the fall of ash reveals that a volcano is the source of the noises, the document emphasises that nobody realises that the eruption is as far away as Sumbawa: 'it was attributed to an Eruption from the Marapi, the Gunung Klood or the Gunung Bromo' (4).

These colonial misunderstandings of the source of the noise are reported alongside indigenous readings of the eruption. The Resident at Grissie (in East Java) relates the following response to the darkness and ash fall:

I am universally told that no one remembers, nor does their tradition record, so tremendous an Eruption—some look upon it as typical of a change, of the re-establishment of the former Government; others account for it in an easy way by reference to the superstitious notions of their legendary tales, and say that the celebrated Nyai Lorok Kidul has been marrying one of her children, on which occasion she has been firing salutes from her supernatural Artillery. They call the ashes the dregs of her Ammunition. (7)

These readings of the eruption as symbolising political or supernatural events contrast strongly with the scrupulously empirical account by the

Resident himself (discussed below). The phrase ‘superstitious notions’ suggests his dismissive attitude to such narratives. A little later in the document, the metanarrator reports more neutrally that ‘the Balinese attributed the event to a recent dispute between the two Rajahs of Bali B’liling, which terminated in the death of the younger Raja by order of his Brother’ (9–10). At this point in the document, before the eruption has been discussed in any detail, the indigenous interpretations do not seem any more or less valid than the more rationalistic reports that also misunderstand the eruption’s source. The implication of the Raffles account is that the true story of the catastrophe can only emerge from this *post-facto*, totalising, and disinterested narrative which has the capacity to contain a variety of responses and accounts.

Many cultures have interpreted unusual natural events such as volcanic eruptions as presaging or reflecting a likely political or social change. In the case of Tambora, the inhabitants of east Java were in fact correct that the ‘former Government’ would shortly be re-established. Given that the narrative is dated 28 September 1815, we might reasonably assume that it was composed during that month. During 1814 and 1815, the Raffles administration existed in an unstable geopolitical context. Java had been returned to the Dutch by the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of August 1814. A year later, news arrived there of Napoleon’s escape and resurgence, which potentially voided the Treaty and excited Raffles with the possibility of a longer British presence on the island. And yet in September he received the devastating news that he was likely to be dismissed from office. That this sense of political instability may have informed the Tambora narrative is apparent in its description of the weather on Java following the initial explosions:

From the 6<sup>th</sup>, the sun became observed: it had every where the appearance of being enveloped in fog, the weather was sultry and the atmosphere close and still; the sun seemed shorn of its rays, and the general stillness and pressure of the atmosphere foreboded an Earthquake. (4)

This description alludes, rather gracefully, to the famous passage in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost* describing Satan as a ‘ruin’d’ archangel after his fall:

As when the Sun new-ris’n  
Looks through the Horizontal misty Air  
Shorn of his Beams, or from behind the Moon

In dim Eclipse disastrous twilight sheds  
 On half the Nations, and with fear of change  
 Perplexes Monarchs.<sup>29</sup>

Allusions to Milton were conventional in descriptions of the sublime in the period.<sup>30</sup> But this is a particularly apt one. It connects the mist-covered sun to a catastrophic overturning of the normal state of things—as indeed it was—and, more specifically, it connects meteorological phenomena to political ones.<sup>31</sup> While emphasising the status of the document as a production of elite Western culture, the allusion also connects the imperialistic metanarrative to the more localised indigenous accounts that read sudden environmental change as signalling some change in the state of human affairs. It also draws attention to the complex mediations that inform the narrative. Individual experiences of the eruption are shown to be mediated through distance, fog, and darkness; eyewitness accounts are mediated through the metanarrator; the metanarrator's perspective is here mediated through the Miltonic sublime; and the narrative is itself mediated through Assey, Raffles, and the different contexts of its publication.<sup>32</sup> The narrative's claims to exert discursive authority from a distanced perspective are to some extent contradicted by its heteroglossic mode, and a complex entanglement of stories that are all shown to be part of the Tambora assemblage, rather than external to it.

### THE ORIGINAL NARRATIVE: PLACING TAMBORA

The narrative shows that the Tambora catastrophe occurs not just in the immediate area of the eruption, but across the archipelago. An analysis of the eyewitness accounts from different locations reveals its '*distributive* agency,' as well as the process of ordering and territorialization through which its discursive and material aspects come together.<sup>33</sup> But Tambora is not simply multilocal; it is also nonlocal in the sense that it challenges the distinction between different places.<sup>34</sup> After the main eruption on the evening of 10 April, a remarkable and terrifying darkness covered a very large area. It is described with particular precision by the Resident at Grissie:

I woke in the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup>, after what seemed to be a very long night, and taking my watch to the lamp found it to be half past eight o'clock, I immediately went out and found a cloud of ash descending; at

9 o'clock no day light—the layer of ashes on the terrace before my door at the Kradenan measures one line in thickness; ten A. M.—a faint glimmering of light can now be perceived overhead: half past 10—can distinguish objects 50 yards distant: 11 A. M.—Breakfasted by Candle-light, the birds began to chirrup as at the approach of day: half past 11—can discover the situation of the sun through a thick cloud of ashes; 1 P. M. found the layer of ashes one line and a half thick, and measured in several places with the same results; 3 P. M. the ashes have increased one eighth of a line more; 5 P. M. it is now lighter, but still I can neither read nor write without Candles. (6–7)

Crucial to this passage is the precise and minute demarcation of time and space: the sort of precision that you would find in a sea captain's log. In the absence of the usual temporal markers of day and night—the disruption of normalcy—imperial clock-time becomes a vital way of making sense of what is happening and finding order in disorder.<sup>35</sup> A 'line' is an old British measurement, usually reckoned at one twelfth of an inch. (It was not included in the Weights and Measures Act of 1824.) The measuring of the depth of the layer of ashes can therefore be understood as particularly precise, as the length increases from around 2 mm to 2.5 mm to 2.75 mm. As one would expect of a sensible colonial official, the writer does not panic, but proceeds to make orderly observations of the unusual phenomenon. The colonising subject, therefore, is shown to have the knowledge and technology to comprehend even the strangest and most confusing local conditions, to bring a little light into the darkness. And yet this comprehension only becomes meaningful within an assemblage of other partial accounts mediated by a central intellect.

The extract from Grissie emphasises observations of measurable phenomena rather than aesthetics or emotional affect. To some extent, this approach is true of the document as a whole, but a more excited account is provided by the commander of the Benares:

The morning of the 12th was extremely dark and lowering [...] At 8 A. M. it was apparent that some extraordinary occurrence had taken place; the face of the heavens to the Southward and Westward had assumed a dark aspect, and it was much darker than before the sun rose; as it came nearer it assumed a dusky red appearance, and spread fast over every part of the heavens; by 10 it was so dark that a ship could hardly be seen a mile distant; by 11 the whole of the heavens were obscured, except a small space near the horizon to the Eastward, the quarter from which the wind came. The ashes now began to fall in showers, and the appearance was

altogether truly awful and alarming. By noon the light that had remained in the Eastern part of the horizon disappeared, and complete darkness covered the face of day. This continued so profound during the remainder of the day, that I never saw any thing equal to it in the darkest night—it was impossible to see your hand when held up close to your eyes.(13-14)

‘Face of the heavens’ is a reasonably common phrase in the period, although the particular context in this passage may suggest an allusion to a Biblical passage in which Jesus addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees: ‘When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowring. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?’ (Matthew 16.3). The commander observes a ‘red and lowring’ dawn, which does indeed presage the foulest of weather. And ‘the dark aspect’ suggests something threatening and sinister. Unlike the apparently emotionless response of the Resident at Grissie, this witness relays his sense of terror. The emphasis on the ‘awful and alarming’ conditions, along with the possible Biblical allusion, is perhaps the closest that the narrative gets to any sort of apocalypticism.<sup>36</sup> Again, the epistemological stability provided by imperial clock-time becomes of vital importance in an environment that can no longer be comprehended or even seen.

By bringing together accounts such as these, the narrative attempts to overcome local differences. Its synchronic approach also seeks to overcome the central problem of imperial management in the early nineteenth century: the mediated flow of information. Until the invention of the telegraph, the distance between the centre and the peripheries was not only spatial but temporal. This was a particular problem for colonial policy in the East Indies because it was largely dependent on events happening within Europe. In Raffles’s document, the speed of the eruption’s effects provides a sort of illusion of contiguity so that it seems simultaneously present in ‘every quarter’ (1). It becomes a metaphor for what imperialism can only dream of being: an assemblage that transcends the local and is simultaneously present everywhere. Writing in 1834, Thomas De Quincey vividly articulated this fantasy:

The national voice was lost in the distance, and could not collect itself through the time and space rapidly enough to connect itself immediately with the evanescent measure of the moment. But as the system of

intercourse is gradually expanding, these bars of space and time are in the same degree contracting, until finally we may expect them altogether to vanish: and then the whole empire, in every part, will react upon the whole through the central forces, with the power, life, and effects of immediate conference amongst parties brought face to face. Then first will be seen a political system truly *organic* – *i.e.* in which each acts upon all, and all react upon each: and a new earth will arise from the indirect agency of this merely physical revolution.<sup>37</sup>

In this remarkable anticipation of globalisation, De Quincey imagines a political system that is also an organic phenomenon: a global body politic in which agency is perfectly distributed. The result is an assemblage of different parts that are instantaneously connected and reactive. From the perspective of Raffles's narrative, Tambora, too, is a phenomenon that is simultaneously present across the archipelago:

On the night of the 11<sup>th</sup> the explosions [the Resident of Bima] represents to have been most terrific, and compares them to the report of a heavy mortar close to his ear. (16–17)

The sound appeared to be so close that in each district it seemed near at hand; it was attributed to an Eruption from the Marapi, the Gunung Klotot or the Gunung Bromo. (4)

These are not simply misunderstandings, but reflect the capacity of the Tambora assemblage to transcend locality: to communicate and impact on a speed and scale far beyond the capacity of nineteenth-century imperialism. The narrative seeks not only to represent this nonlocality but to achieve it, by taking what is apparently a disinterested overview of the different localised accounts.

To maintain the illusion of disinterestedness, it is not until nearly halfway through the narrative that we get any sense of the human cost of the eruption. The text starts on Java, the centre of colonial government, and then moves towards Sumbawa, where the effects were much worse. The narrative's emphasis in its early pages is therefore focused on the sublime natural phenomena experienced across several islands rather than the more local effects on Tambora. The terrible human disaster is not even mentioned in the preamble. Instead, the narrative builds up gradually, creating some suspense as the reader gets closer to the centre of the catastrophe. Six pages into the eighteen-page document, there is a

rather sanguine reference to the effects on Javanese agriculture, although the damage to crops and livestock in some areas is acknowledged. After eleven pages, an account by ‘the Noquedah of a Malay Prow’ who reports landing on Sumbawa and finding ‘many of the Inhabitants dead from famine’ (11), but this is merely a passing phrase that is easily lost in the grand theatre of natural phenomena that surround it. It is only in the last four pages of the narrative, in Lieutenant Phillips’s account from Sumbawa, that readers are given a fuller sense of the eruption’s more direct effects on the local population. Phillips was apparently ‘well versed in the Malayan language,’ and his is the only colonial account to include anything like a proper engagement with an indigenous perspective on the eruption.<sup>38</sup> Each paragraph of his account is in inverted commas, which is clearly meant to suggest that his words are reproduced verbatim. Sent by Raffles to manage the delivery of ‘a supply of rice to their relief’ and to discover the ‘local effects,’ Phillips notes that

The extreme misery to which the inhabitants have been reduced is shocking to behold—there were still on the road side the remains of several corpses and the marks of where many others had been interred—the Villages almost entirely deserted—and the houses fallen down—the surviving inhabitants having dispersed in search of food. (21–22)

In a narrative so lacking in emotion, ‘extreme’ and ‘shocking’ have a powerful charge. This sense of total societal collapse continues as Phillips notes that ‘a violent Diarrhoea [...] has carried off a great number of people’ (22).<sup>39</sup> The severity of the famine is further emphasised by the report of the Rajah of Saugar (the kingdom next to Tambora) that ‘one of his own daughters died from hunger.’ The Rajah’s voice is in the third person and is so far removed from the narrative itself, mediated through Phillips (and through Assey and Raffles), that there is little sense of him as a character to be sympathised with. Phillips notes that the Rajah ‘was himself a spectator of the late Eruption’ and therefore that his account ‘is perhaps more to be depended upon than any other I can possibly obtain’ (23). The three paragraphs that follow give the only known eyewitness account of the initial eruption itself. For two of them, which focus on description, we might assume that we are getting a sort of composite of Phillips’s and the Rajah’s voices. The return to Phillips’s colonial perspective is apparent towards the end of the third paragraph, which notes that ‘the Natives are apprehensive of another Eruption during the ensuing rainy season’ (24).



The Rajah's account is the most dramatic section of the narrative and gives a sense of the extreme power of an elemental assemblage beyond human control:

The fire and columns of flame continued to rage with unabated fury [...]. Stones at this time fell very thick at Saugar—some of them as large as two fists, but generally not larger than walnuts; between 9 and 10 P. M ashes began to fall and soon after a violent whirlwind ensued, which blew down nearly every house in the village of Saugar, carrying the tops and light parts away with it. In the part of Saugur adjoining Tomboro, its effects were much more violent, tearing up by the roots the highest trees, and carrying them into the air together with men, houses, cattle and whatever else came within its influence (this will account for the large number of floating trees seen at sea). The sea rose nearly 12 feet higher than it had ever been known to be before, and completely spoiled the only small spots of rice lands in Saugur—sweeping away houses and every thing within its reach. (23–24)

The passage emphasises human vulnerability to elemental forces, moving through fire, earth, air, and water. The idea of the fire 'raging' and in 'fury' is closer to anthropomorphism than the narrative usually gets and suggests an agency behind this conflagration. It might be linked to the more celebratory personification earlier in the document where it is reported that the eruption is caused by the deity 'Nyai Loroh Kidul' marking the marriage of one of her children. As in other parts of the narrative, the description of abnormal phenomena is an attempt to exert representational control through the demarcation of time and other measurements (the size of the stones and the height of the sea), as well as grammatical and syntactical ordering, but here it can only seem futile in the context of elemental violence and mortal danger. The destruction of human dwellings and means of sustenance, often so important to representations of catastrophe, is emphasised when the narrative shifts back to Phillips's overview, as he notes that only one of the villages in Tomboro is remaining and that 'in Precate, no vestige of a house is left' (24). He estimates there were 'certainly not fewer than 12,000 individuals in Tomboro and Precate at the time of the Eruption' (24–25); the implication is that the majority of them have perished. However, this suggestion is not developed and is in any case a vast underestimate of the catastrophe's local death toll. Phillips goes on to state that a 'high point' near the eruption avoided the complete destruction of 'trees

and herbage' along the 'North and West sides of the Peninsula' and that three people were saved from there on the night of the eruption, although he has not been able to find them (25). This 'search' for the three survivors inevitably exists in an ironic contrast with the 12,000 people mentioned in the previous paragraph and who Phillips believes have been destroyed.

After depicting such devastation, the narrative attempts to end on a hopeful note. In response to the report from a messenger to Sumbawa that 'an immense number of people have been starved,' Phillips notes, in the document's final sentence, that 'the distress has, however, I trust, been alleviated by this time, as the brig with 63 coyangs of Rice from Java arrived there the day he was leaving it' (25). As Wood points out, this amount of aid would only have lasted a few days, although to be fair on Raffles and Phillips they probably had little idea of the scale of the devastation.<sup>40</sup> (The awkward parenthetical caveats 'however, I trust' may suggest Phillips's lack of certainty on this score.) Earlier in the document, the metanarrator notes that the Lieutenant Governor had 'dispatched a supply of rice' for the inhabitants' relief, under Phillips's command (11). The narrative ends, therefore, with a reminder of the supervening intelligence and care of the British administration, which observes unusual phenomena disinterestedly and dispassionately, but also exercises its duty to the indigenous peoples within its sphere of influence. The first publication of the Narrative within the journal of a Society dedicated to producing knowledge that would support colonial development is therefore entirely fitting, and suggests that it does much more than simply provide a neutral account of the eruption, despite the uses to which it has generally been put by scholars. Its heteroglossic form, rather, marks it out as part of the discursive-material Tambora assemblage: an imbrication of living beings, cultural constructions, energy flows, and objects. That is, the narrative is not merely a commentary on a political-ecological catastrophe, but an intervention within it.

### TAMBORA AND *THE HISTORY OF JAVA*

Given the relative obscurity of the *Batavian Transactions*, British readers are most likely to have encountered the Tambora narrative in volume one of Raffles's *History of Java* (1817), where an edited version appears as an extended footnote to a discussion of mineralogy and volcanism in the first chapter (which focuses on Java's geography, ecology, and

climate).<sup>41</sup> As Wood notes, ‘the implicit political purpose’ of the *History* ‘was to argue the case for continued British administration in Java.’<sup>42</sup> Raffles envisages that, following British land reforms, the island would become ‘the metropolis, the granary, and the centre of civilisation to the vast regions between the coast of China and the Bay of Bengal.’<sup>43</sup> He emphasises Java’s economic potential, the good qualities of its indigenous population and, importantly, its generally excellent climate, noting that the ‘general inference’ drawn from the experience of the British occupation was that ‘with the exception of the town of Batavia, and some parts of the northern coast, the island of Java stands on a level, in point of salubrity, with the healthiest parts of British India, or of any tropical country in the world.’<sup>44</sup> For Raffles, the island’s lack of productivity was due to the colonial mismanagement of the Dutch, rather than any intrinsic problems, and its varied climate and rich soil gave it great agricultural potential for cash crops: ‘the productions of every region in the world may find a congenial spot somewhere in the island.’<sup>45</sup> Java’s volcanism was a double-edged sword. Raffles acknowledges the ‘violent convulsions’ that it and other nearby islands ‘have so often suffered,’ but also notes that the remarkable depth and richness of its soil was ‘probably owing to the exclusively volcanic constitution of the country.’<sup>46</sup> Wood notes that the placing of the account of the eruption within a footnote to the *History* may suggest Raffles’s uneasiness with an account of unpredictable volcanic activity in the region that potentially worked against his emphasis on Java’s potential as a productive British colony:

To have explored in detail the regional impact of ecological destruction, crop failure, famine, disease, death, homelessness, and enslavement within the British colonial domain that were a direct consequence of Tambora would have been to concede the vulnerability of this tropico-georgic paradise to volcanic disaster, and of the Southeast Asian economy to drastic short-term climate change.<sup>47</sup>

However, Wood’s suggestion that Raffles seeks to ‘wilfully deny’ Tambora’s impact is exaggerated.<sup>48</sup> The footnote takes up such a large proportion of the three pages that it covers that it is actually rather prominent: it fills around half the first page, and then almost the entirety of the second and third pages. Given that he was writing a history of Java, rather than of the archipelago in general, Raffles did not need to include the Tambora narrative. And a footnote is actually the natural

place for the account, as the book itself is not a history in the narrative sense, but a geographical, economic, and anthropological overview of Java. Raffles does not seek to downplay the force or magnitude of the eruption when introducing the account or in his editorial changes, and the fact that he has relatively little to say about its human impacts may be as much due to ignorance as contrivance. Like the original narrative, the footnote is an imperialistic reterritorialization of the Tambora assemblage: an attempt to bring a heterogeneous set of experiences, some personal and some cultural-mythical, into a unified, fact-making whole.

The opening of the footnote manifests a sublime hyperbole that seeks to reassure readers about the capacity of the educated imperialist to make sense of powerful elemental forces, but also reflects the resistance of those forces to a centralising epistemology:

In order to give the reader some idea of the tremendous violence with which nature sometimes distinguishes the operations of the volcano in these regions and enable him to form some conjecture, from the occurrences of recent experience, of the effects they may have produced in past ages, a short account of the extraordinary and widespread phenomena that accompanied the eruption of the Tomboro mountain, in the island of Sumbawa, in April 1815, may not be uninteresting. Almost everyone is acquainted with the intermitting convulsions of Etna and Vesuvius, as they appear in the descriptions of the poet and the authentic accounts of the naturalist, but the most extraordinary of them can bear no comparison, in point of duration or force, with that of Tomboro. This eruption extended perceptible evidences of its existence over the whole of the Molucca Islands, over Java, a considerable portion of Celebes, Sumatra, and Borneo, to a circumference of a thousand statute miles from its centre, by tremulous motions, and the report of explosions; while within the range of its more immediate activity, embracing a space of three hundred miles around it, it produced the most astonishing effects, and excited the most alarming apprehensions. On Java, at the distance of three hundred miles, it seemed to be awfully present. The sky was overcast at noon-day with clouds of ashes, the sun was enveloped in an atmosphere, whose "palpable" density he was unable to penetrate; showers of ashes covered the houses, the streets, and the fields, to the depth of several inches; and amid this darkness explosions were heard at intervals, like the report of artillery or the noise of distant thunder. So fully did the resemblance of the noises to the report of cannon impress the minds of some officers, that from an apprehension of pirates on the coast vessels were dispatched to afford relief. Superstition, on the other hand, on the minds of the natives,

was busily at work, and attributed the reports to an artillery of a different description to that of pirates. All conceived that the effects experienced might be caused by eruptions of some of the numerous volcanos on the island; but no one could have conjectured that the showers of ashes which darkened the air, and covered the ground of the eastern districts of Java, could have proceeded from a mountain in Sumbawa, at the distance of several hundred miles. Conceiving that it might be interesting and curious to preserve an authentic and detailed account of the information that could be gained of this wonderful phenomenon, while the event was still recent and full remembered, I directed a circular to the different residents, requiring them to transmit to the Government a statement of the facts and circumstances connected to it, which occurred within their own knowledge. From their replies, the narrative drawn up by Mr. Assey, and printed in the ninth volume of the *Batavian Transactions*, was collected; the following is an extract of that paper.<sup>49</sup>

The first two sentences move interestingly between what might be termed ‘continuous’ and ‘catastrophic’ readings of Tambora. On the one hand, Raffles encourages the reader to place the recent eruption within the context of the history of previous volcanic activity, both within the region and within Europe. This tempers its disastrous nature and suggests the power of a European elite to make sense of it through historical analogy and by placing it within a familiar discourse of volcanism (as well as, more broadly, within a scholarly survey of the region). Thus, the audience is assumed to be familiar with Virgil’s description of the eruption of Etna in the *Aeneid*, and Pliny the Younger’s letters describing the eruption of Vesuvius. (It is possible that ‘the naturalist’ also refers to the celebrated eighteenth-century vulcanologist Sir William Hamilton, author of *Observations on Mount Vesuvius, Mount Etna, and Other Volcanos* (1772)). However, on the other hand, the appeal to familiar knowledge is undercut by the assertion that Tambora is ‘extraordinary’ and that its power and scale dwarfs that of the most notorious European volcanos. The superlatives continue with the claims that the eruption produced the ‘most astonishing effects’ and ‘most alarming apprehensions.’ Its nonlocality is emphasised by the claim that it is ‘awfully present’ in Java, three hundred miles away. Its awfulness (that is, its capacity to create terror) is not only due to the force of the eruption, but its ability to penetrate space, apparently instantaneously.

Raffles goes on to describe the disruption of normality that is the key trope of catastrophe narratives. Not only is the sky dark at noon, but

this is a peculiarly ‘palpable’ darkness: one that that you can almost grab hold of. This is consonant with the accounts of light loss that we find in the original narrative but which are not reprinted in the *History*. By putting ‘palpable’ in quotation marks, Raffles makes an overt allusion to the scene in Book II of *Paradise Lost* in which the devils in Pandaemonium are debating the best course of action. Beezlebub, Satan’s mouthpiece, suggests taking vengeance on God by corrupting the world that he has created,

But first whom shall we send  
In search of this new world, whom shall we find  
Sufficient? who shall tempt with wand’ring feet  
The dark unbottom’d infinite Abyss  
And through the palpable obscure find out  
His uncouth way, or spread his airy flight  
Upborne with indefatigable wings  
Over the vast abrupt, ere he arrive  
The happy Isle.<sup>50</sup>

As previously noted, it was common in the period to refer to Milton when representing the sublime, but the specifics of Raffles’s allusion are worth considering. ‘The happy Isle’ is of course Earth, the ‘new world’ created by God with his favoured creatures in it. Penetrating the dark abyss—‘the palpable obscure’—between Pandaemonium and Earth will lead Satan into Eden. Similarly, the reader has to see through the dark veil of Tambora—an epistemological as well as a sensory phenomenon—if they are to arrive at an understanding of the potential of the ‘happy Isle’ of Java. The volcano threatens the abyssal and destructive, but it can also be transcended and controlled by a ‘sufficient’ and ‘indefatigable’ hero.

Raffles is interestingly ambivalent about the purpose of including the account of Tambora in the *History*. The penultimate sentence suggests the kind of casual interest in recording ‘wonderful phenomena’ evident in many publications by gentleman naturalists in the period. But the second half of the sentence moves from amateurish enthusiasm to the control of information demanded by professional empire-builders: Raffles ‘directed’ and ‘required’ that knowledge be produced. Two other things are notable about this preamble. First, the eruption is predominantly understood aesthetically and scientifically: Raffles is concerned with it as a sublime natural wonder. There is no mention of the human

consequences, although more detail is given on these in the eyewitness account. The other thing is that Raffles steadfastly refuses to draw any religious conclusions from the catastrophe. He does not at any point mention the workings of Providence that were so often a feature of discussions of catastrophic phenomena in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The document is not concerned with causes, telluric or heavenly, but with experiential phenomena. To return to the distinctions made by Jasanoff and Rigby, it eschews ‘meaning-making’ moral-mythic interpretations in favour of a more scientific fact-making mode.

Following his preamble, Raffles includes most of the document’s metanarrative, presented as composed by Charles Assey, but cuts the extracts from the letters from Grissie, Sumanap, Baniowangie, Fort Marlboro and Bima, as well as the reports from the ‘Malay Prow’ and the ‘Cruizer Benares.’ The only direct eyewitness account included is Phillips’s account from Sumbawa itself (which contains within it the Rajah of Saugar’s eyewitness account of the eruption). The extract from Phillips’s letter is included more or less as it is in the original narrative, with some changes to the paragraphing, and with the last 140 words or so cut. The footnote narrative therefore differs from the original by placing less emphasis on the sublime effects of the eruption for those remote from it, and more on its direct effects on the inhabitants of Sumbawa. Phillips’s narrative of famine and destruction is much more strongly to the fore. Raffles includes Phillips’s devastating statement that ‘From the most particular inquiries I have been able to make, there were certainly not fewer than twelve thousand individuals in Tambora and Pekate at the time of the eruption.’ Crucially, unlike the original narrative, the footnote includes the second clause of this sentence: ‘of whom only five or six survive.’<sup>51</sup> Wood’s suggestion that Raffles ‘makes no specific acknowledgement of the devastating human impact of the Tambora eruption in his *History of Java*’ may be technically correct, but it gives a misleading impression of the acknowledgement that he does make by including Phillips’s narrative.<sup>52</sup> Raffles’s footnote, whatever the intention of the *History* as a whole, reflects the vulnerability of human populations in an area of unpredictable volcanic activity. Furthermore, by cutting the last few sentences, the footnote version ends with a vision of destruction, rather than the more uplifting vision of the ‘alleviation’ of the inhabitants’ distress through the provision of aid.<sup>53</sup> Wood’s suggestion, therefore, that ‘in the *History*, Raffles appends the narrative of the Tambora eruption as a “curiosity,” not the epochal human tragedy it truly was,’

does not seem quite fair.<sup>54</sup> The tragedy of Tambora is registered, although in a subdued way, and it seems likely Raffles himself did not have a sense of the full scale of the eruption's effects.

### RAFFLES'S *MEMOIR* AND THE POLITICS OF CATASTROPHE

It should be apparent by now that the Tambora narrative encodes a set of cultural-political assumptions that are inflected by the context of its publication. This inflection is also apparent in my final case study, which focuses on the 1830 reprint of the narrative in the eighth chapter of the rather hagiographic memoir—largely a collection of Raffles's letters—produced by his widow. An analysis of this textual manifestation brings out the relationship between the disaster and the Anglo-French struggle for global imperial ascendancy. Bar one minor cut and some typographical changes, the Narrative is repeated verbatim, and with only the following editorial commentary: 'Mr. Raffles gives the following account of the eruption of the Tomboro Mountain, in the Island of Sambawa, which took place at this time (the 11th and 12th of April, 1815,) one of the most violent and extraordinary of such explosions yet known.'<sup>55</sup> The implication is that the narrative stands as a sign of Raffles's wide intellectual interests, his efficacy as a colonial administrator, and his care for the indigenous population, as represented by the aid that he provides to the victims of the eruption. Later in the chapter, the editor describes 'the deep interest which Mr. Raffles took in the happiness of the Javanese' (261). What gives the narrative a different resonance in the context of the *Memoir*, as compared to the *Batavian Transactions* or the *History of Java*, is the fact it is followed, without any intervening commentary, by extracts from three private letters that show Raffles's concern with the future of the British empire in Indonesia in relation to global political events and particularly Napoleon's resurgence. Addressing the Orientalist scholar William Marsden (who had once served as First Secretary to the Admiralty) on 6 August 1815, he writes that 'the wonderful events in Europe still leave some hope that Java may remain permanently English' (250) and signs off by asking that Marsden 'advocate[s] the cause of Java, if there is a possibility of its remaining under British protection' (251). This is immediately followed by extracts from a letter to W.B. Ramsay, written the previous day, which gives a clearer sense of exactly what opportunity Raffles saw in the 'the wonderful and extraordinary change in the politics of Europe, [that] by the re-appearance of



Buonaparte, has, with all its horrors, shed one consoling ray on this sacred Isle; and Java may be yet permanently English' (251). The escape of Napoleon from Elba is a horrific catastrophe that—by voiding the Treaty of Paris—nonetheless creates opportunities for the British empire and the Javanese people who, for Raffles, would be much better off with the British than the Dutch (and their French imperial masters). Under such trying circumstances, Raffles hopes, the East India Company and the British government might see the value of having a permanent colonial presence in the area, rather than handing Java to their enemies. The metaphor of the 'consoling ray' seems to suggest that even though Napoleon's resurgence has brought darkness to Europe, it offers the possibility of enlightenment to Java. Raffles's fervent belief in Java's potential as part of the British Empire is apparent in his description of it as a 'sacred Isle': a probable allusion to the description of England as 'this sceptred isle [...] this other Eden' in *Richard II* (as well as, perhaps, the 'happy Isle' of Earth in *Paradise Lost*).<sup>56</sup>

Raffles notes to Ramsay that he has also 'addressed Lord Buckinghamshire, both officially and privately' (251). Robert Hobart, Lord Buckinghamshire, was President of the Board of Control in the Liverpool administration and Raffles's superior. (The Board oversaw the East India Company and Britain's affairs in India.) The *Memoir* reproduces a long letter from Raffles to Hobart that begins by noting that Napoleon's reappearance and the Declaration of the Congress of Vienna 'completely deranges every plan connected with the pacific arrangements about to have been concluded' (252). The letter is an attempt to assert the economic and strategic value of Java to Britain now that real peace seems to be a long way off: 'England must doubtless hold what now she has, and gain what more she can' (252). Raffles argues that his reforms have made the island a potentially lucrative possession and he suggests ways of developing the colonial infrastructure, including moving the seat of government from the unhealthy Batavia to Samarang. The letter also emphasises that the 'Malays' in general 'are very far from being savages' (256) and that the Javanese would very willingly consider themselves British subjects:

There are no people more capable of appreciating a benefit or forming an attachment; they have no prejudices of moment, or which stand in the way of civilization, and they will readily assimilate with Europeans as far as Europeans are inclined to assimilate with them; they will identify themselves as British subjects whenever they feel the benefit of British principles and the permanency of British power. (259)

For Raffles, the indigenous inhabitants of Java are perfect colonial subjects, without their own opinions or ‘prejudices,’ and more than willing to attach themselves to a suitably paternalistic power. The letter is entirely in line with the arguments that he would go on to make in the *History of Java*, that the Dutch had failed in their duties as enlightened colonists, and that Britain had put this right:

When I assumed the delegated administration of Java, humanity dictated consideration and respect for its European inhabitants, but policy required and justice demanded protection to the native population. This protection has been given, and is felt in the cottage of the peasant; he acknowledges, and is proud of the benefit, and in *one word*, the Javanese are decidedly English; give but the *other word*, and Great Britain produces not more faithful adherents to the crown than Java may afford. (260)

The idea that the Javanese have been transformed into grateful subjects with little difficulty is emphasised by Raffles’s allusion to the paternalistic ideal of protecting the homes of the rural labouring classes (‘the cottage of the peasant’). He claims that his enlightened administration has effectively made them ‘English’ (the ‘*one word*’); if Hobart is willing to reconsider and affirm the long-term future of Java as a British colony (giving the ‘*other word*’) then he can be assured of their loyalty and gratitude.

The irony of these letters is that by the time Raffles had heard the news of Napoleon’s reappearance, the former Emperor had already been defeated at Waterloo.<sup>57</sup> They reveal starkly the haphazard nature of imperialism in the period, when there was often a strong mismatch between the knowledge and objectives held by the centre and those of the peripheries. Imperialism in the early nineteenth century was a mis-firing assemblage in which agency was often inefficiently distributed. Proponents of empire sought to transcend the local but were continually mired in it due to the sluggishness of communications. The ability of an assemblage like the Tambora eruption to be present everywhere simultaneously clearly fascinated Raffles. As Lieutenant-Governor of Java, he was able to commission a report that represented a significant moment of cultural-political territorialization: an attempt to control the Tambora assemblage and mimic its apparent synchronicity. The importance of the narrative lies in much more than what it tells us about the eruption’s physical processes or even its effects on the local population. Its compilation of various experiences and interpretations reveals some of the

complexity of human-nonhuman entanglements that create an environmental catastrophe and the modern shift from moral-mythic interpretations of such occurrences to more scientific and supposedly disinterested accounts. My analysis of its publication in three different print contexts reveals not only the manifold imbrications of world and text, but the changing political valencies of those imbrications. In the following chapter, the global scope of the material-discursive Tambora assemblage is further addressed through an analysis of the Diodati Circle's 1816 writings. These texts certainly reflect the cultural politics of catastrophe and, like Raffles's account, reveal an elite perspective on a situation from which their authors were largely protected. They also respond to the climate crisis with some remarkable speculations about the extinction of the entire human species.

## NOTES

1. [Charles Assey], 'Narrative of the Effects of the Eruption from the Tomboro Mountain, in the Island of Sumbawa, on the 11th and 12th of April 1815,' *Transactions of the Batavian Society, of Arts and Sciences* 8 (1816): 3–4. Further references are in the text. The Tambora eruption and its aftermath were not widely reported. An instructive comparison can be made with the publicity generated by the much smaller Krakatoa eruption of 1883 due to the improvements in global communications in the intervening period, most notably the invention of the telegraph and the laying down of oceanic cables. Nonetheless, fragments of information about the eruption and its effects appear in English-language periodicals, taken from a number of sources, including Raffles's narrative.
2. Daniel Defoe's *The Storm* (1704) may have offered something of a prototype for the Tambora narrative. Defoe's innovative work is similarly composite and concerned with harnessing a range of eyewitness accounts in order to construct a wide-ranging and authoritative account of a catastrophic phenomenon. See Daniel Defoe, *The Storm*, ed. Richard Hamblyn (London: Penguin, 2005). I am grateful to Tess Somervell for suggesting this comparison.
3. Kate Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 3.
4. I have taken this distinction from Sheila Jasanoff, 'A New Climate for Society,' *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (2010): 233–253. I am grateful to Adeline Johns-Putra for drawing Jasanoff's work to my attention.
5. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 23.

6. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 24.
7. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 34.
8. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, 'Introduction,' in *Material Ecocriticism*, eds. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 1–17 (3).
9. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.
10. Iovino and Oppermann, 'Introduction,' 9. Karen Barad's work has proved particularly influential to this approach: see *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), especially Chap. 4.
11. I am grateful to Adeline Johns-Putra for drawing this to my attention.
12. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 586.
13. Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 587.
14. There is also a fourth version of the narrative, which I read from a bound volume of the *Transactions* held by the Royal Society. Apart from different pagination and a few typographical errors, it is identical to the original published version.
15. Iovino and Oppermann, 'Introduction,' 8.
16. For reasons of space, focus, and my own expertise, this chapter does not discuss indigenous perspectives on Tambora beyond those featured in the narrative. Wood (24–26) reports on present-day stories told by Sumbawans about the wealthy kingdom of Tambora before the *zaman hujan au* (time of the ash rain). Bernice de Jong Boers quotes from the indigenous poem *Syair Kerajaan Bima*, composed around 1830, which describes the eruption as 'the wrath of God Almighty / At the deed of the king of Tambora / In murdering a worthy pilgrim' (37).
17. The journal's Dutch title is *Verhandelingen van hat Bataaviaasch Genootschap, der Kunsten en Wetenschappen*.
18. Assey presumably left the administration when the island was returned to Dutch control in 1816. The same year, he published a *Review of the Administration, Value, and State of the Colony of Java*.
19. See, for example, de Jong Boers, 37, and Wood, 239.
20. The almanac is available online at <https://sites.google.com/site/sumatraswestkust/java-almanac-1>, accessed 30 May 2016.
21. Raffles heard that he was likely to be replaced in September 1815 and received news of the final defeat of Napoleon and the return of Java to the Dutch in early November 1815. For his last months in Java, see Victoria Glendinning, *Raffles and the Golden Opportunity* (London: Profile, 2012), Chap. 7.

22. The Klingamans make no reference to Ross or Assey, and seem to assume that Raffles is the sole author of the document (1–4).
23. Despite its heteroglossia, it only refers to one person by name (Lieutenant Owen Phillips).
24. Some of the information in this paragraph is taken from Eloise Smith Van Niel, *The Batavian Society and Scholarship in the Dutch East Indies, 1778–1850* (MA Thesis, University of Hawaii, May 1980), Chap. 3.
25. ‘New Regulations for the Batavian Society, of Arts and Sciences’ are printed in the seventh volume (1814) of the *Transactions* (xiv–xvii).
26. ‘New Regulations’, xiv.
27. Thomas Stamford Raffles, ‘A Discourse Delivered at a Meeting of the Society of Arts and Sciences in Batavia, on the Twenty-fourth day of April 1813, being the Anniversary of the Institution,’ *Transactions of the Batavian Society, of Arts and Sciences* 7 (1814): 26–27.
28. On two occasions, the corporate voice is replaced by a rather jarring first-person reference to the shadowy metanarrator: ‘no description of mine’ (6); ‘I shall conclude this concise narrative’ (21).
29. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin, 1968), 22 (l.593–599).
30. This passage is also alluded to in Gilbert White’s description of the fog caused by the Laki volcanic eruption in 1783: see *The Natural History of Selborne*, ed. Richard Mabey (London: Penguin, 1987), 265–266.
31. For the connected rhetorics of weather and warfare in the Romantic period, see Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), Chap. 3.
32. For a suggestive account of mists, mediation, and allusion in Romantic literature, see Tess Somervell, ‘Mediating Vision: Wordsworth’s Allusions to Thomson’s *Seasons* in *The Prelude*’, *Romanticism* 22 (2016): 48–60 (51–55).
33. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 21.
34. I have taken the term ‘nonlocality’ from Morton but use it in a slightly different way from him, in part because he is keen to distinguish hyperobjects from assemblages (*Hyperobjects*, 2).
35. For the imposition of western time-keeping on colonial cultures, see Giordano Nanni, *The Colonisation of Time: Ritual, Routine, and Resistance in the British Empire* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2012).
36. Some more religious interpretations of Tambora can be found in periodical accounts; for example, ‘Philomath,’ a correspondent published in the *Methodist Magazine*, prefaces a reprinted newspaper article on the

- eruption with the rhetorical question, 'O when will the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness, seeing the judgements of God are abroad in the earth!': see 'The Works of God Displayed: An Account of a Volcanic Eruption,' *Methodist Magazine* December 1816: 910–911 (910).
37. Thomas De Quincey, 'Travelling in England Thirty Years Ago,' in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. by Grevel Lindop et al., 21 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000–2003), X, ed. by Alina Clej, 96.
  38. John Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Constable, 1820), II, 124.
  39. Phillips notes that the 'Natives' suppose this to be caused by drinking water impregnated with ash and that horses had suffered a similar fate. For the human tragedy of Tambora, see Oppenheimer, *Eruptions*, 308–312.
  40. Wood, *Tambora*, 31. A coyang is 3300 lb, which makes a total of 207,900 lbs of rice. Given around a pound of rice per person per day, this could plausibly feed 10,000 people for twenty days. (The United Nations World Food programme provides, on average, a little under a pound of rice per person per day.)
  41. They might also have found fragmentary news of Tambora in periodicals and in reviews of the *History*. I have found a total of nine original ones: in the *British Review*, the *Eclectic Review*, *Edinburgh Monthly Review*, the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Literary Gazette*, the *Literary Panorama*, the *Monthly Magazine*, the *Monthly Review*, the *Quarterly Review*. Three of these mention Tambora. The *British Review* quotes the opening and closing paragraph from the footnote, the *Eclectic Review* quotes part of Raffles's preamble, and the *Monthly Review* transcribes the whole of the footnote except for the opening paragraph.
  42. Gillen D'Arcy Wood, 'The Volcano Lover: Climate, Colonialism, and the Slave Trade in Raffles's *History of Java* (1817)', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 8 (2008): 33–53 (36).
  43. Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, 2 vols (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1965), I, 161. Reprint of 1817 edition.
  44. Raffles, *History*, I, 31.
  45. Raffles, *History*, I, 34.
  46. Raffles, *History*, I, 24, 29.
  47. Wood, *Tambora*, 31. An earlier lengthy footnote in the same chapter includes an account of three Javan volcanoes by the naturalist Robert Horsfield, which describes the eruption of Papandayan in 1772 that reportedly killed nearly 3000 people: Raffles, *History*, I, 15.
  48. Wood, *Tambora*, 31.
  49. Raffles, *History*, I, 25–26.
  50. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 39 (II.402–410).

51. Raffles, *History*, I, 28.
52. Wood, 'The Volcano Lover,' 42.
53. I suspect that Raffles cut this reference so that the footnote would not appear self-serving in what was meant to be a disinterested, scholarly publication.
54. Wood, 'The Volcano Lover', 49.
55. Sophia Raffles, ed., *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles* (London: John Murray, 1830), 241. Further references to the *Memoir* are in the text.
56. William Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of King Richard the Second*, in *Complete Works*, eds. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (London: Palgrave, 2008), 847 (II.i.40–42). England is also described as 'this fortress built by nature for herself / Against infection' (II.i.43–44), which resonates with Raffles's emphasis on Java's general healthiness.
57. *En route* to England in May 1816, Raffles convinced his ship's captain to stop at St Helena so that Raffles could meet with Napoleon. From his own account, he seems to have been rather disappointed with the defeated emperor (*Memoir*, 277).

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