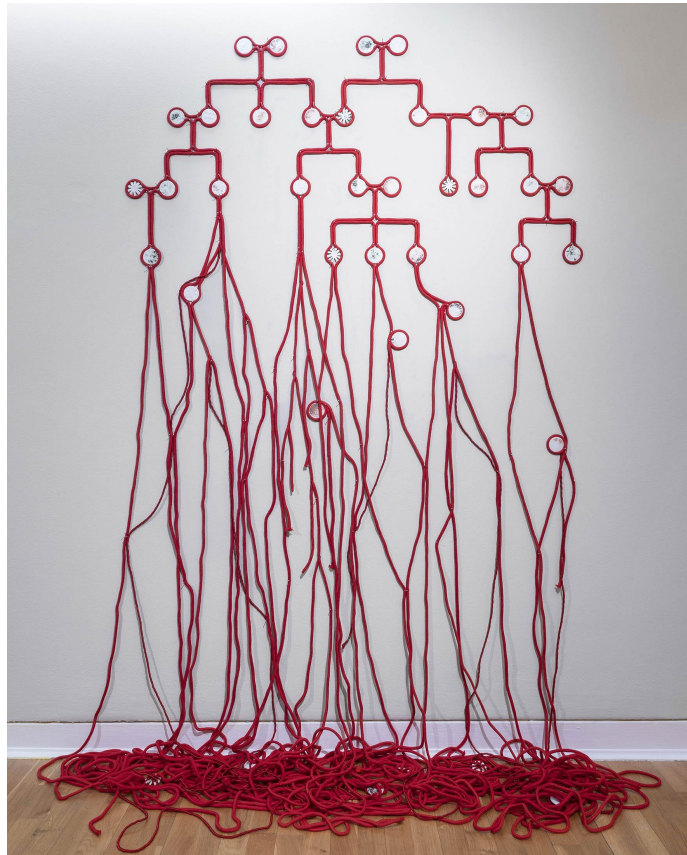


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*Cover Image:* Tamsin van Essen's ceramic sculpture 'Entangled Roots'.

Originally commissioned for the 2023 exhibition *Finding Family*, the Foundling Museum has acquired it for their permanent collection. 'Entangled Roots' interweaves the formal structure of a genetic family tree with extended blood lines and social threads to form a complex and entangled network of biological and coincidental human interactions.

The journal has sent a formal request to the artist, asking for permission to use a photograph of her *Entangled Roots*. If the artist or anyone claiming copyright to this work/image wishes to contact us, please write to [redazione@fesjournal.eu](mailto:redazione@fesjournal.eu).

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IMAGINATIVE KIN-MAKING:  
DECONSTRUCTING THE FAMILY,  
WRITING ENTANGLEMENTS

Guest editors

Rossella Ciocca, University of Naples L'Orientale  
Marta Cariello, University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli"

## INTRODUCTION

## Imaginative kin-making: deconstructing the family, writing entanglements

Rossella Ciocca

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It was 1972 when Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in the *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, critically interpreted the nuclear family as a site of both psychic and societal control, challenging traditional notions about natal and marital bonds, and positing their rootedness in power dynamics rather than in, or at least in addition to, genuine connection. They argued that the household unit primarily served as a mechanism of repression, restricting desire and promoting conformity within capitalist structures. Advocating for a re-envisioning of longing and desire that transcended the confines of familial ties, they claimed the possibility of more fluid and liberated relations able to resist the normative strictures imposed by society, and ultimately pushed for a radical rethinking of affective relationships beyond the limitations of the biological family model.

Philosophical and psychoanalytic critiques represented the vanguards of a vast and more general movement that enlarged the scope and depth of the deconstruction of the nuclear family, since all the diverse realities of domestic life found, at the intersection of gender, class, race, and coloniality, a specific angle of urgent, mandatory reconsideration.

Feminist critical theory offered a profound critique of the genealogical mould by highlighting how traditional family structures reinforced patriarchal norms and gender inequality. Also within this framework, the nuclear family was seen as an ideological construct. In its modern restricted version, it constituted a microcosm of power dynamics where women were oppressed and still systematically burdened with the weight of domestic duties and child-rearing responsibilities, thereby limiting their opportunities for autonomy and self-realization. By challenging the notion of naturalness of the patriarchal paradigm, feminists promoted a

more inclusive understanding of family, capable of recognizing the importance of shared responsibilities, emotional exchange, and reciprocal respect.

In queer reconfigurations of family conventions, the aim has been to more radically discuss the heteronormative and binary structures regulating marriage and procreation. Since the traditional scheme of cisgender, heterosexual parents giving birth to a child through the fulfilment of conjugal duties has been central to definitions of parenthood for centuries, the principal aim in the (usually Western) new families was to positively affirm the importance of emotional bonds over blood ties (Zottola, Balirano, Mackenzie 2024), leading to a much more variegated tapestry of kin systems. Same-sex and single-parents who have children through surrogacy or other reproductive practices were just a possibility among others. The concept of “families of choice” (Weston 1992) had provided an efficacious counter-narrative to the traditional family model, highlighting how diverse relationships, including friendships, communal living, and queer partnerships, could offer profound support systems beyond the imperatives of heteronormativity. In this context, a special political emphasis continued to characterize the positions of thinkers like Judith Butler (2022) who argued that the nuclear family, as a dominant institution, reinforced social hierarchies and contributed to perpetuate neo-liberal capitalist formations that prioritized individualism and competition over communal well-being. This critique aligned with other radical positions that altogether called for the abolition of the nuclear family due to its complicity in systems of inequality, oppression, and economic exploitation (Lewis, 2019, 2022; O’Brien 2023), and with the exhortation to embrace alternative forms of more free and inclusive practices of connection such as polyamory (Vassallo 2018).

In another direction, postcolonial criticism saw the matter under specific historical circumstances highlighting how colonial powers often dismantled indigenous kinship structures and imposed Western family models. The multifaceted kinship systems that existed in many tribal cultures tended to emphasize interconnectedness and community, with networks that included extended family members, clan systems, and relationships with the land and ancestors. These patterns often prioritized collective wellbeing and support, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity. In many indigenous societies, kinship was not solely based on biological relationships but was broader, encompassing social, spiritual, and environmental connections. The colonial construct of the nuclear family was on the contrary instrumental in reinforcing individualism and capitalistic modes of production and consumption, often leading to feelings of isolation and disconnection in communities that previously relied on collective ties and shared responsibilities (Whyte 2020). Also in this context, then, the critique to the Western imposition of the strictly biological model emphasized the necessity to move towards alternative family patterns, including indigenous frameworks, in order to recuperate a wider sense of community and a more diffused ecological responsibility.

Ecological responsibility has indeed been at the very core of more recent family and kin redefinitions. This time, it was the ecocritical and post-anthropocentric turn that needed to reconceive ties and forms of caring in the living world upon completely different foundations.

Val Plumwood, in her seminal *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), introducing the concept of 'the relational self' had already inaugurated a new ontology based on the surmounting of the opposition between self and other or the dualism between nature and culture and had embraced the view of the living universe as tightly interconnected. Carolyn Merchant (2005), working for her part on the same intersections of ethics, ecology, and feminism, proposed the category of 'partnership ethics' to address the necessity of establishing mutually supportive and egalitarian relationships among humans, as well as between humans and the natural world. Likewise, Rosi Braidotti (2013), challenging the notion that only biology determines protection and responsibility, argued for the value of new relational ontologies, more apt, in the context of ecological crises, to create networks of concern and cooperative relationships within the web of life.

Within New Materialism, Stacy Alaimo propounded a novel materialist sense of the human as perpetually interconnected with the "flows of substances and the natural agencies of the planet" (Alaimo 2014, 187) defining this continuous mesh of bodies and elements as "trans-corporeality." Serpil Oppermann (2016) coined the expression "participatory universe" to similarly address not only the deep connections between people and environments, but also the importance of collaboration and active engagement in the processes of understanding and shaping the world, advocating for a more integrated and holistic approach to knowledge and community dynamics.

Donna Haraway (2016, 2018) too, in devising the category of the Chthulucene posited a dimension of symbiotic interdependence among the various forms of existence which, far from prioritizing humans as the dominant presence on Earth, tended to promote multispecies and interspecies solidarities. Disengaging from human exceptionalism, the American philosopher called for a thorough reconsideration of the ties of kinship as a means to confront the thorny question of survival for a planet already fast travelling towards its demographic and environmental collapse. She addressed the question from a critical post-human and post-anthropocentric stance, reminding us of the need to reintroduce concern about Earth at every scale, and to fight against the current mass extinction of species of life from the complex perspective of both "the Born and the Disappeared" (Haraway 2018, 69). She meant, by this, to keep together the apparently opposed necessities of guaranteeing reproductive justice and safeness for peoples subjected to genocides, forced sterilizations, missing generations and, at the same time, of finding ways of reversing the general world population growth.

Despite our preoccupations with low natal trends here in the West, it is undeniable that overpopulation in global terms represents a critical obstacle to sustainability, since an



unchecked human proliferation is bound to accelerate resource depletion and environmental degradation. Considering that human numbers are almost certain to reach about 10,5 billion people by the end of the century and that this figure represents an almost 6 billion-person increase from just 1950 to 2100,<sup>1</sup> with hugely unequal consequences for the poor and the rich, and even worse effects for nonhumans, we are obliged to ask, with Haraway, how we can create enduring relationships without necessarily ‘making more babies’.

“I propose ‘Make Kin Not Babies!’ Making—and recognizing—kin is perhaps the hardest and most urgent part.” (Haraway 2016, 102)

Introducing the term *oddkin*, Haraway has posed the question of how to increase human and multispecies well-being while radically reducing human impact and beginning to repair damaged life clusters and spaces across the planet. Since the intersection between reproductive justice and environmental concerns implies our capacity to reverse spoliative policies of natural resources and habitats, in a pro-active sense, we have espoused the request for a deeply renovated understanding of the kin issue, and advocate for a relational solidarity able to transcend biological ties and strictly genealogical bonds. In this issue of *From the European South*, titled *Imaginative Kin-Making: Narrating Alternative Forms of Kinship in Survival Literature and Fiction*, the intention has been to verify how in stories about struggle and survival in compromised environments and/or conditions of socio-political unrest, the lines of solidarities adopted to face the various crises reflect and substantially advance the idea of a kinship not necessarily modelled on natal kin and the biological family. The intention was to spot, in narration, thematic and formal frameworks for understanding how alternative kinship structures and new forms of *oddkin* can respond to and challenge both social injustices and environmental crises. The hope is that rethinking literature in this way may offer new possibilities for collective ecological responsibility and social justice, urging a movement towards more inclusive, sustainable futures.

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Rethinking literature is precisely what the opening article of the issue does, with Francesca Guidotti’s re-reading of Shakespeare’s *Henry V* in a post-human perspective. The interesting take on the Shakespearean text looks at the imaginary mother figures in the play as fostering and offering, to the embattled men, the cultivation of alter-communities, or possible connections with beings ‘worthy of care’ in a kinship that is also, through the well-known Shakespearean word-play, kindness. In the face of conflict, a way to survival appears then to

be the inclusive space of 'symbiogenetic kinship', achievable only through alternative figurations of motherhood.

From this first glance into the possibilities of the literary text to open up and, in a sense, reassemble itself into constant re-readings, we move from the early-modern to contemporary timeframes, with Rossella Ciocca's study of Arundhati Roy's 2017 novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Here, too, motherhood weaves the fabric of the text, this time specifically in its critical implications for the ecological and queer perspectives on kinships and alter-families. Roy's text emerges, through Ciocca's analysis, as a space not only for experimenting alternative communities at the intersection of gender, race, caste, and religion, but also for elaborating different coping strategies in the face of trauma, ultimately exploring the possibilities within queer, more-than-human and life-death relational ontologies.

Queer kinships and alternative human and more-than-human ecologies, in turn, intersect with diasporic community-building in Marta Cariello's analysis of Zayn Joukhadar's novel *The Thirty Names of Night* (2021). Here, again, motherhood is threaded through the storyline, this time in the ghostly presence of a dead mother, inviting the reader to engage with the past, memory, and the possibilities of other narratives as means of (relational) survival. The ecologies of alternative kin allow in this case a re-reading of temporalities and of personal and collective history.

The ecological element of alternative relationalities emerges in Giuseppe De Riso's article, shifting here from the family and its critique to transcend not only genetic but also anthropocentric lineages and human-nature-technology relations. *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers is analyzed by De Riso as raising, through its protagonists' individual and unique connections to trees, crucial questions on environmental and futuristic horizons, in "the kind of speculative fabulation made of string figures and *soin de ficelle* that Haraway sees as consonant with the Chthulucene" (infra, p. 54).

Speculative fiction is also at the center of Lucio De Capitani's contribution, which proposes a study of Cherie Dimaline's *Marrow Thieves* series (2017-2021) and N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017) as interweaving post-apocalyptic settings with climate (in)justice and racial inequalities. Working respectively within Indigenous and African-American science fiction, the two authors, as De Capitani observes, not only expose social and racial inequalities through constructing dystopian universes, but also offer visions of possible ways to family abolition, or alternatives to the hegemonic institution of the family and the hierarchies and uneven power relations at its core.

We find Cherie Dimaline at the center of Alice Salion's article as well, this time with a reading of the Métis authors' short story entitled "Legends are made, not born" (2016). Looking specifically at Dimaline's elaboration of *wâhkôhtowin*, or the Indigenous principle of extended kinship, Salion frames Dimaline's work in Indigenous futurism, and its use of storytelling to

reclaim spaces of an ‘unmodifiable past’. In this light, Cherie Dimaline’s story can be read as a narrative of bonds of responsibility and preservation of collective memory, also entangled with the exploration of *two-spiritness*, with a “made-and-not-born family” at the center of the story, embodying “the relational potential of a dystopian migratory future that re-weaves the threads of ancient epistemologies essential to Indigenous survival” (infra, p. 82).

Chiara Xausa and Arianna Preite’s contribution remains within the realm of science fiction and the disruption of genetic-bound families, reading the biopolitics of reproduction and motherhood through Tlotlo Tsamaase’s 2024 novel, *Womb City*. A futuristic Botswana serves here as the backdrop to fabulations of AI-controlled and human-monitored artificial wombs, in turn serving as cue for a wider reflection on the feminist debate on reproductive rights, the family as instrument of oppression, and the intersections therein of gender, race, and biotechnologies.

The issue closes with an interview with visual theater author and performer Marta Cuscunà. Rossella Menna engages in a conversation with Cuscunà on her 2021 piece *Earthbound*, declaredly inspired by Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble*. The material aspect of stage performance emerges here as key to the translation of the philosophical depth of Haraway’s “The Camille Stories” (Haraway 2016) and the concept and practice of compost we are invited to ‘stay with’. The interview offers insights into the process of writing and staging such complex figurations, but also explores Haraway’s ramifications, her influence, and the politics and potency of the body, its matter, its biology and technology, as human, more-than-human, other-than-human; always intimately interconnected, perhaps able to perform some meaning of this, our common *response-ability*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/>, or <https://ourworldindata.org>.

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Rossella Ciocca is Professor of English and Anglophone Literatures at the University of Naples L'Orientale. Her publications include volumes on the literary representations of otherness and on Shakespeare, and the translation and the edition of Shakespearean plays. Her more recent research and teaching interests include Postcolonial Literature and Theory, Black British, South Asian, Diasporic and Indian Literatures, Ecocriticism and Cli-fi, the notions of trans and post-humanism. She has recently authored with Sanjukta Das Gupta, *Adivasi Histories, Stories, Visual Arts and Performances* (2015); with Neelam Srivastava, *Indian Literature and The World* (2017); with Ganesh N. Devy, "Beyond Cultural Aphasia" in *The Question of Silence* (2019); with Alex Tickell, *Millennium's Children. New Trends in South-Asian Postmillennial Anglophone Literature* (2020); with Sabita Manian, *Living in the Age of Anger: Representing 'Negative Solidarities' in Contemporary Global Culture* (2021), with Marta Cariello, *Against. The Age of the Sad Passions* (2024). Email: [rciocca@unior.it](mailto:rciocca@unior.it)

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Punctum Books, 2025), with Graziella Parati, Damiano Benvegnù and Matteo Gilebbi, *Waste and Discard in Italy and Mediterranean*, (2024), with Rossella Ciocca, *Against. The Age of the Sad Passions* (2024). She is co-founder and co-director of the academic journal *de genere. Journal of Literary, Postcolonial and Gender Studies*. Email: [marta.cariello@unicampania.it](mailto:marta.cariello@unicampania.it)

# “A little less than kin, and more than kind”: kinship and motherhood in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*

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## ABSTRACT

Shakespeare’s theatre addresses the problem of survival in a world on the brink of collapse. Since traditional consanguinity – including maternal ties, framed by the legal maxim *mater semper certa* – proves no guarantee of stability, survival and agency are achieved through violent conquest rather than familial bonds. Where kinship is divorced from kindness and the care of offspring, justice and safety are also lacking, with tragic consequences. Yet *Henry V* allows for a different reading, drawing on the critical work of Donna Haraway. In the play, imaginary mother figures, though not physically present, seem to instill in warring men new modes of survival based on the cultivation of deliberate connections with beings worthy of care. This foreshadows the creation of alter-communities and alter-families, forging kinship without biological reproduction – making kin without making babies. While real mothers, like Princess Katherine in the play’s final act, remain trapped in a dead-end world, other figurations of motherhood can chart an escape. They provide inclusive spaces for achieving self-knowledge through Haraway’s concepts of ‘symbiogenetic kinship’ and ‘response-ability’. *Henry V*, with its lights and shadows, thus becomes a site for narrating alternative forms of kinship and reimagining survival through post-human entanglements and symbiotic assemblages. In this reading, Shakespeare and Haraway shed light on each other: both take our ailing ecosphere as a starting point to propose innovative, inspiring approaches to ‘staying with the trouble’ – facing and enduring adversity in order to envision a better future. Their work highlights the transformative potential of forging non-biological bonds in the face of hardship.

## Keywords

Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, Donna Haraway, mother, kin-making, posthuman

## 1. Shakespeare in the “New Normal”

It is undeniable that “the way [...] we interpret Shakespeare’s plays [...] [has] real consequences as well as real causes in [our] present” (Rackin 2016, 14). We are now living on the edges of the post-pandemic ‘new normal’ and have to rethink our fragile transcultures to develop a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of our world. Donna Haraway’s provocative motto “Make Kin Not Babies” (Haraway 2016, 5-6) encourages a broader understanding of kinship that goes beyond genetic relatedness to encompass multiple forms of relationships and responsibilities, promoting a more inclusive and ecological approach. It was after reading *Hamlet* that she first thought of the incongruous intersections between the words ‘kin’ and ‘kind’, and we believe that an idea inspired by Shakespeare can be used to engage with a Shakespearean play in a critically original way. Shakespeare, after all, is a

perfect spyglass for looking at our present, and possibly at the future, while dealing with the past.

*Henry V* treats moral and political issues related to leadership, war, national identity, language, gender, and historical representation. My contribution proposes to interpret it as survival literature because it discusses the pursuit of continuing to exist and thrive in the face of challenges and adverse conditions, via forceful action as well as adaptation and perseverance. At the heart of the play lies the journey of its eponymous character from a carefree youngster to a revered king and a military hero, a journey that grapples with moral dilemmas. Depending on the way we interpret the play, Henry's renowned Saint Crispin's Day speech resonates with various meanings:

We few, we happy few, we *band of brothers*.  
For he today that sheds his blood with me  
*Shall be my brother* [italics added]. (291: IV.3.60-62)<sup>1</sup>

This passage contains a reference to brotherhood, which, according to critics, may be deemed as either inclusive or partial, formal or substantial. A reading of this brotherhood, much in line with Haraway, can be provided by maintaining that it has the power to instill in belligerent men versions of survival based on the promotion of connectedness and willful interaction. Surprisingly, the Shakespearean language of war makes room for expressions of "sympoiesis", that is, an invitation to "make-with" each other, to build elective tentacular networks and jumbled identity assemblages, through deliberate mingling and advocated contamination (Haraway 2016, 58-98).

*Henry V* challenges conventional notions of kinship by portraying relationships that transcend biological ties and emphasizing the forging of exogenous bonds through shared responsibility. Drawing on Haraway's coveted creation of alter-communities, it is argued that Shakespeare anticipated the vital need for a survivalist discourse that has more recently expanded across multiple disciplines to include issues such as forced migration, ethnic cleansing, and climate change crises. While Haraway and Shakespeare operate in entirely different intellectual traditions and historical contexts, there are interesting connections that can be drawn between their works.

This essay explores how Haraway's concept of 'symbiogenetic kinship' provides a theoretical framework for understanding the alternative forms of kin-making within the play's narrative, and how Shakespeare anticipates the thorny issues of sustainable survival in an unjust and troubled ecosphere. Moreover, Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledge' seems closely related to Shakespeare's vision of motherhood. The mother's perspective becomes a way of generating care, responsibility, and relational thinking in a world marked by ecological and social crises.

The idea of survival associated with new ways of ‘becoming-with’ informs the texture of the play because of the looming figures of fantasied mothers, who are capable of inculcating a relational awareness into the narrow scope of a male-dominated world. These shadowy mothers have no actual presence on stage; they are just spectral figures, aptly conjured up as the carriers of a broadened perspective on humanity. When Adele Clarke asks “who – which women and which mothers – get to own their bodies and their children” (2018, 20), she calls for a rejection of the “intensely racialized and classed [...] dynamics” typical of both past and present history. Similarly, in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, this maternal spectrality becomes the origin of inclusive communities capable of caring for present and future generations (Clarke 2018, 28) by fostering “other-than-biogenetic kindred” (Haraway 2018, 69).

The topicality of motherhood can, of course, be traced to the historical context of early modern England in which the issue became highly contentious (Adelman 1992). It intersected questions of power, religion, and the stability of the monarchy, as exemplified by the intertwined fates of Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart (Mazzola 2000). There was widespread ambivalence about real and imagined mothers in relation to the survival of the royal dynasty and to the definition of national identity.

Elizabeth had created a sort of personal myth associating herself with legendary virgins like Diana, the goddess huntress, and Mary, the mother of Christ (Hackett 1995); unlike the latter, however, the ‘Virgin Queen’ had remained unmarried and childless, so that her position in the patriarchy posed challenges and uncertainties regarding succession. She strategically used her unmarried status to her advantage, positioning herself as the caring mother of her country: the epitome of purity, dedication to the state, and unwavering commitment to her nation. Her Catholic cousin, Mary Stuart, threatened her Protestant rule since she had a legitimate claim to the English throne, which made her a focal point of several conspiracies. The most striking example of what it meant, in that context, to be kin but not kind, as in the famous quote from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* retrieved by Haraway, was probably Elizabeth’s imprisonment and sentence to death of her cousin, allegedly because of her implication in one of those plots. Mary had to yield to her opponent, but symbolically she triumphed as a mother: her only son, James, would later ascend the throne of England, marking the rise of the Stuart dynasty.

In *Henry V*, figurations of motherhood, as well as the oblique imagery of kin-making springing from them, belong to the reign of imagination rather than to the hard core of reality. They are set outside or, at most, on the edge of history; when they break in, they take the shape of a potential which, while promising, can hardly be fully developed. Eventually, at the end of the play, when a victorious Henry courts Princess Katherine, the future mother of his son, it becomes clear that the real world in fact betrays expectations: one might then say that human reality is proving difficult to reconcile with posthuman visions. Or rather, if one opts for



a more nuanced understanding, as suggested here, this can be read as an invitation to adopt a continuum perspective that encompasses both limits and potentials, hopes and fears – humanity and posthumanism.

Several studies on ‘Shakespeare and Posthumanism’ in fact feel the need to re-define their field of inquiry. In his introduction to *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, Herbrechter, for instance, maintains that he does “not want to be dogmatic about the resurfacing of the human and humanism”; he then aims “to show ‘care’ for the human, humanness, humanity but also to embrace the new plurality and the new questions that are put to humanism, anti-humanism, posthumanism, even transhumanism alike: questions of human survival” (Herbrechter 2012, 4-5). To me, this looks much like an overhaul of the original critical perspective. Braidotti described posthumanism as “the historical moment that [marked] the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism” (Braidotti 2013, 37); now, paraphrasing her compelling argument, one could argue that the new normal may well be the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between humanist and posthumanist trends, taken as distinctive and mutually exclusive.

After all, as some critics maintain, “posthumanist does not imply a simple turning away from, [...], but rather a continued ‘working through’ [...] of humanism” (Herbrechter 2012, 3); “it is inevitable that with ‘the invention of the human’ the posthuman as one of his or her ‘others’ also [...] [became] thinkable” (Boehrer 2012, 58). The early modern period did much to both shape and challenge the idea of the human. Shakespeare, the preeminent offspring of that period, seems to suggest that what we now call ‘posthuman’ might simply mean ‘more human’ – at least ‘more humane’, acting with greater compassion, empathy, and care for others – rather than ‘more-than-human’.

## 2. Troublesome Fathers and Looming Mothers

In *Henry V*, a female progenitor plays a major role, though she is absent from the stage. This foremother is no less important than male ancestors insofar as she provides solutions to the problems posed by men. Father figures are presented as troublemakers, starting from the boisterous and comedic Falstaff, whose influence had guided Prince Hal during his wild and irresponsible youth, but who must be kept at a distance when Henry becomes king. While Falstaff is dying of a broken heart because of the ungratefulness of his former friend, Henry must come to terms with his legacy, which earned him a bad reputation in France and elsewhere. Moreover, he has to cope with another uneasy paternal inheritance: that of late King Henry IV, a usurper.

Burdened with his father’s sin, Henry needs to prove himself virtuous through his own actions, in the prescribed path of Protestant ethics.<sup>2</sup> Where fathers have failed, a foremother comes to his rescue: Isabella of France, the mother of his ancestor, the Black Prince Edward

III. Isabella was the origin of the glorious war that Henry is about to resume, as Edward III had claimed the French crown through his mother's lineage. To Henry, the newly begun war with France is truly a matter of survival; he seeks counsel from the Archbishop of Canterbury, who explains that the prohibition of female inheritance inscribed in the Salic Law (Tokumi 1999) does not apply to the situation at hand:

Yet their own authors faithfully affirm  
That the land Salic is in Germany,  
Between the floods of Sala and of Elbe,  
Where Charles the Great, having subdued the Saxons,  
There left behind and settled certain French,  
Who, holding in disdain the German women  
For some dishonest manners of their life,  
Established then this law, to wit, no female  
Should be inheritrix in Salic land. (132-3: I.2.43-51)

The law was first enacted to reinforce the notion that some mothers were degraded beings who lacked the competence to manage inheritance effectively, a notion that current critics would recognize as emblematic of social injustice. The Archbishop retraces several instances of descent from the female line in the genealogy of the French monarchy: not only does this confirm the legitimacy of Henry's claim, it can also be seen as a confutation of male-chauvinistic degradation of motherhood. The English king is then metaphorically invited to rely on mothers if he cannot turn to fathers.

Since the war will somehow be fought under the banner of Isabella, men's belligerent language will then be filled with multiple references to women and, especially, to mothers, as it happens in the tennis balls scene:

[...] for many a thousand widows  
Shall this his mock mock out of their dear husbands,  
Mock mothers from their sons, mock castles down,  
And some are yet ungotten and unborn  
That shall have cause to curse the Dauphin's scorn. (150: I.2.285-289)

The onomatopoeic word "mock," mimicking the sound of tennis strokes and repeated each time with a different meaning – which demonstrates the remarkable pliability of early modern English – attaches importance to women's experience of war. Henry assigns to the Dauphin a limited understanding of warfare: it is necessary to expand the perspective, encompassing viewpoints which may seem minor and marginal but which, in fact, are not so. The theatre audience is similarly invited to transcend boundaries by embracing multiple minds, multiple bodies, and multiple gazes, with an eye to mutual interdependence and care.

A soldier's mother matters no less than her fighting son; the combatants should indeed always bear their mothers in mind and act accordingly. Rallying his troops to jump "once more

unto the breach” of Harfleur (201: III.1.1), the king addresses his “noble English” (202: III.1.17) with these words:

Dishonour not your mothers; now attest  
That those whom you called fathers did beget you. (203: III.1.22-23)

The noblemen are invited to fight manfully for the honor of their mothers, first, and then for that of their fathers. The order in which the parents are mentioned seems to reflect the absolute certainty of a mother’s bond with her child, whereas paternity is culturally assumed but biologically uncertain. Dishonoring a soldier’s mother would therefore strike at the heart of his identity. The most distinguished members of the army are also compelled to “be copy now to men of grosser blood/And teach them how to war” (203: III.1.24-25): Henry instills in them a relational approach to their lower-ranking comrades-in-arms. All English fighters are then urged to identify with a multiplicity of subjects and objects, including fierce animals and deadly weapons:

[...] when the blast of war blows in our ears,  
Then imitate the action of the tiger:  
Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,  
Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage.  
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;  
Let it pry through the portage of the head  
Like the brass cannon; let the brow o’erwhelm it  
As fearfully as doth a galled rock  
O’erhang and jutty his confounded base,  
Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean. (201-2: III.1.3-17)

Warriors are then provided with a hybrid-like identity, which critics have discussed in the light of posthumanism. As Henry switches glibly between naturalness and artificiality, matching human beings, wildlife animals, natural elements, and military equipment, a transcorporeal imagery takes shape: various beings, objects and environments move through the human body just as that body does through them, so that they all become continuous, not distinct, almost borderless. Cohen observes that the medieval knight merges with his weapons, armour, and horse, originating a “chivalric assemblage”, a “network of meaning that decomposes human bodies and intercuts them with the inanimate, the inhuman” (2003, 71; 76).

Martin maintains that Henry “exhorts his soldiers to embrace [a] cyborgian metamorphosis” (2015, 83). I would rather suggest that he is encouraging them to develop a symbiotic relationship involving cooperation, interdependency, and mutual benefit. As the bearer of a hybridised identity that is “smart and imaginative about and with human and nonhuman peoples”, the English warriors prefigure new “multispecies patterns of cohabiting beings” (Haraway 2018, 98, 79). The king invites his men to make “oddkin, off-category kin both inherited and cobbled together anew” (Haraway 2018, 70).

While the French soldiers display an individualistic notion of honor, emphasizing personal glory and solitary reputation, the English, headed by their king, prioritize a collective pursuit.<sup>3</sup> Despite reiterating the late-medieval class distinctions, Henry invites his men to forge strong bonds of camaraderie, treating one another like a family. In his powerful speech before the final battle, the king refers to his soldiers as a “band of brothers” (291: IV.3.60), reinforcing their sense of belonging. Developing non-biological practices of extensive care and inclusive interaction is the only effective way to “resist the curses and blandishments” (Haraway 2018, 67) of a war for survival.

It is therefore not surprising that, in a subsequent scene, kin-making is evoked, together with the mother’s viewpoint, to signify an expanded sense of humanness. This scene, related by the Duke of Exeter, describes the heroic and moving death in battle of two noble English cousins, the Duke of York and the Earl of Suffolk:

Suffolk first died, and York, all haggled over,  
Comes to him, where in gore he lay insteeped,  
And takes him by the beard, kisses the gashes  
That bloodily did spawn upon his face.  
He cries aloud ‘Tarry, dear cousin Suffolk!  
My soul shall thine keep company to heaven.  
Tarry, sweet soul, for mine, then fly abreast,  
As in this glorious and well-foughten field  
We kept together in our chivalry.’  
[...] So did he turn, and over Suffolk’s neck  
He threw his wounded arm and kissed his lips,  
And so, espoused to death, with blood he sealed  
A testament of noble-ending love.  
The pretty and sweet manner of it forced  
Those waters from me which I would have stopped,  
But I had not so much of man in me,  
And all *my mother* came into mine eyes  
And gave me up to tears [*italics added*]. (307-8: IV.6.11-32)

Exeter’s final identification with the maternal viewpoint reminds us that soldiers are sons, brothers, and friends – each with unique connections to loved ones. The motherly perspective further remarks that the emotional bonds forged in combat serve as a mechanism for creating kinship. While York and Suffolk are indeed cousins by blood, their bond transcends mere consanguinity, leaning towards inclusiveness, as suggested by the homoerotic undertones. Their death symbolizes a transcendence of individuality in favor of a sense of unity with others.

The scene portrays the mortal body as an object worthy of care and concern, echoing Haraway’s assertion that “pain at such losses is intrinsic to living and dying well with each other as entangled tentacular critters of a rich earth” (Haraway 2018, 69). The ‘good death’ of York and Suffolk is very different from “the surplus killing of ongoingness, the wanton surplus extinction of kinds” produced by the overwhelming power of dominant ideologies, which Haraway (2018, 69) refers to as the “double death”.<sup>4</sup> Exeter’s display of piety deals a blow to

master narratives by advocating for a sympoietic maternal perspective, one that engages with the complexities inherent in a relational understanding of the world.

This new, more emotionally interconnected version of identity aligns with the ability of Elizabethan actors not only to embody various roles, including female characters, but also to embrace diverse experiences through identification and empathy. When, in another Shakespearean play, *Hamlet*, the protagonist “reflects on the charged power of the tragic theatre, the figure who haunts his imagination is Hecuba” (Pollard 2012, 1060), a wife and a mother. Grieved widowhood and wounded maternity, therefore, become symbols of the sympathetic identification required by early modern stagecraft, seen as a pre-figuration of the performative nature of identity and as a world capable of ‘worlding’ other, far better, worlds (Haraway 2018, 89).

When Exeter says that he cannot avoid crying like a mother, he does not conform to conventional notions of stoic, unemotional masculinity; instead, he acknowledges that affective vulnerability can be a part of anyone’s experience, regardless of gender. Fictional maternity then becomes a familiar space of identification, accessible to anyone who needs to take on a new, more inclusive form of identity. Fantasy maternal figures offer a canvas for transcending the limits of embodied subjectivity and the frame of social conventions. On the other hand, real mothers, grounded in history, resist such open-ended interpretations as they come with their own lived experiences and societal roles. This, at least, is the case of the French princess Katherine.

### 3. Mother of an English King

In the play, Katherine makes her first appearance in Act III, Scene 4, where she is taught an English language lesson by her lady-in-waiting. This interlude, almost entirely written in French and meant to provide relief from war scenes, suggests her upcoming political and sexual submission: the princess, who is “preparing to be occupied, although her occupation [...] [will] be called marriage”, has to translate “her body in preparation for sexual consummation” (Crunelle-Vanrigh 2013, 60-1). Katherine resists linguistic degradation with dignity and will still prove anything but submissive in the wooing scene that takes place after Henry’s victory.

If the lesson scene seems not only modelled on early modern language primers but also inspired by Aretino’s *Ragionamenti* (1534-36), “a dialogue in which an older prostitute lectures a younger one about erotic possibilities and positions” (Mazzola 2000, 413), the wooing scene may be read as a free reworking of the biblical annunciation, often depicted in art.<sup>5</sup> In the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel greets Mary “with a blessing and invites her to take on” the role of the Mother of God; she displays surprise, “makes inquiries and ultimately accepts the invitation” (Baker 2016, 761) by saying: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38).<sup>6</sup> Mary’s willing acceptance of God’s plan is a testament to

her faith but also “a prototype of courteous conversation” for Renaissance etiquette manuals; the scene provides a model of courtesy, defined as “the employment of hospitable language to press another towards some end” (Baker 2016, 761).

Although Henry won the war, he seems genuinely interested in making the union with Katherine more than a mere political alliance; he therefore uses courtly rhetoric to express his affection for the princess. Among the requests made by him there is one which is particularly relevant in view of this analysis: that of giving birth to a son who will prove a worthy soldier:

KING HENRY V

[...] If ever thou  
be'st mine, Kate, as I have a saving faith within me  
tells me thou shalt, I get thee with scrambling, and thou  
must therefore needs prove a good soldier-breeder.  
Shall not thou and I, between Saint Denis and Saint  
George, compound a boy, half French, half English,  
that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by  
the beard? Shall we not? what sayest thou, my fair  
flower-de-luce?

KATHERINE

I do not know dat (359: V.2.200-209).

In attempting to impose the unchosen role of a warrior's bioparent on the French princess, the king presents himself as an advocate of Haraway's “double birth”, “a parody of the grace of making and nurturing new ones of any species” (Haraway 2018, 69). The begetting of that necessarily male child – “forced life for [...] [military and political] value production” – shows that what is touted as consensual reality is in fact “a specific, situated kind of modeled abstraction that works at a crafted scale”: a reality that would apply to “everyone, but not equally, symmetrically, or exclusively” (Haraway 2018, 69-70). Needless to say, this looks like an aberration: in an ideal world where “babies are rare, nurtured, and precious” and where kin is “abundant, surprising, enduring, and treasured” (Haraway 2018, 91), no one should be mass-produced in the mould of a soldier. Persons and people should be ‘composed’ with care rather than ‘accumulated’ or, worse, subjugated (Haraway 2018, 93).

Katherine, then, does not perform to the script: though Henry addresses her in a courtly language, there is hardly any courtesy on her part. She avoids “collusion [...] through the minimalist strategy of one-line replies – the least that courtesy requires” (Sinfield and Dollimore 2002, 224). Pressed to accept, she simply says that she does not know; later on, she will decline “to joining in the pretence that her preference [...] matter[s]” (Sinfield and Dollimore 2002, 224), dryly remarking: “Dat is as it sall please *le roi mon père*” (361: V.2.244).

Henry concludes that he has not yet won Katherine's heart since she did not freely comply with his requests.<sup>7</sup> Had she complied, she could have possibly become a proper wife, but not a proper mother, if motherhood is interpreted not just as sticking to a script and

conforming to expectations but as a prospect of survival for future generations: a prospect which gives preeminence to kin-making and symbiotic assemblage. It is then no surprise that Henry and Katherine's biological son, lacking the leadership qualities and human engagement of his father, should lose France and rule a reign marred by mismanagement, as the epilogue hints at.<sup>8</sup>

The ending may sound gloomy; yet, it is less a betrayal of the model of humanity presented earlier in the play than a reminder that the conscious, performative act of creating connections and interdependencies requires an uphill struggle, arduous but worthwhile. Viewing motherhood through performativity reveals its fluid, constructed, and dynamic nature, shifting focus from maternal identity to the *actions* of mothering. This reframing transforms motherhood into an open, inclusive practice that transcends biological or essentialist boundaries. In line with Haraway's provocative critique of the overemphasis on human reproduction, Shakespearean motherhood is not merely an individual condition uniquely tied to biology or femininity, but part of a broader 'sympoietic' process – sustaining life and nurturing relationships. This view challenges traditional, patriarchal, and capitalist interpretations, recasting mothers as agents of radical world-making. Ultimately, the play resists simplistic solutions or escapist narratives, urging instead an engaged and responsible presence in the face of worldly difficulties.

For Haraway, it is necessary to "stay with the trouble of a heritage [...] [that we] cannot disavow if it is to be reworked" (Haraway 2018, 90). Staying with the trouble means recognising how dominant narratives and perspectives are shaped by power dynamics, cultural biases and historical contexts. It also means promoting a more inclusive understanding of the planet and humanity's place within it, unleashing "our utopian, risky imaginings and actions for earthlings on a mortal, damaged, human-dense world" (Haraway 2018, 99). *Henry V* challenges the notion that procreation alone ensures a lasting legacy or defines one's worth. Instead, the play suggests that embracing kin-making and adopting the multifaceted perspective of Shakespearean motherhood are more meaningful pursuits. Ultimately, for those seeking a lesson on what it means to be more human, even beyond the boundaries of a single embodied existence, one may always turn to Shakespeare, a figure of shared kinship.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> From now on, all quotes from Shakespeare's *King Henry V* ([1599?] 1995) will be in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> According to the doctrine of predestination, unconditional election is not based on any merit or action of the individuals, but solely on God's sovereign will and grace. Those who are truly among the chosen few will be able to demonstrate it through their actions, their continued faith, their righteousness and, above all, their thriving over the course of their existence: fortune smiles on them in this life and in the next. McEachern interprets Calvinist predestination as, "among other things, a paradigmatic structure of dramatic irony" and maintains that "the search to discover what ending might be informs the affective experiences both of English Protestant experimentalism and of Shakespeare's plays" (McEachern 2021, 184-5).

<sup>3</sup> In Act III, Scene 7 the nobles of France prefer words to deeds: they boast of their own prowess and their sumptuous attire, seemingly more concerned with winning over individual accolades and fame than with the success of their common army. By contrast, Henry's soldiers do not seek personal achievement: they are banded together by their loyalty to their king, country, and comrades-in-arms.

<sup>4</sup> Haraway borrows the term from Australian anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose who, in the context of environmental and extinction studies, defined 'double death' as an "amplification of death, so that the balance between life and death is overrun, and death starts piling up corpses in the land of the living" (Bird Rose 2006, 75). There are striking parallels between this concept and Shakespeare's depiction of warfare in the final part of Act IV, where massacres follow one another.

<sup>5</sup> Historian Ainsworth observes that Henry V, like his father, "used the motto [...] 'Ma Sovereynne' [...] on his charters" (Ainsworth 2006, 13). Ainsworth then wonders about its meaning: "Might the motto be [...] adopted in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary? Plausibly so, though one might also conjecture that [...] [it refers] to Catherine de Valois, with whom the young Henry appears to have been deeply preoccupied from the time that he was first made aware of her" (Ainsworth 2006, 13). In Shakespeare there is no record of any long-time infatuation, but the supposed replaceability of the French Princess to the Virgin Mary in Henry's motto is a thought-provoking idea worth delving in to further discuss the theme of motherhood.

<sup>6</sup> The *Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible* is here used. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%201%3A37-39&version=AKJV> (last accessed October 2024)

<sup>7</sup> "Our tongue is rough, coz, and my condition is / not smooth, so that, having neither the voice nor the / heart of flattery about me I cannot so conjure up the / spirit of love in her that he will appear in his true / likeness" (364: V.2.283-287).

<sup>8</sup> "Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned King / Of France and England, did this king succeed, / Whose state so many had the managing, / That they lost France and made his England bleed" (371: Epilogue 9-12). Shakespeare had dedicated a previous history play to King Henry VI.

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## ***Oddkin* and alter-families. ‘Staying with the trouble’ in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy**

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### **ABSTRACT**

“The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present” (Haraway 2016, 18). With these words, Donna Haraway, in *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, started to reason on the role of new possible forms of ‘oddkin’ to contribute to the redefinition of living with, becoming with, and dying with, on this planet. By reading Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), this contribution aims at inquiring into new practices of kin-making, in particular from, the perspective of adoptive forms of maternity and inter-racial, inter-caste, and inter-religious communities, with an eye and a sensibility for new arrangements for human-animal cohabitation and life-death intercourse. Conceived as a chance for endurance in discomfort and devastation, Roy’s novel explores possibilities to cope with trauma through inventive, less structured, ways of making family and building alternative communities: beyond singularities, looking for innovative relational ontologies, and unexpected mutual interactions between mourning and survival.

### **Keywords**

Arundhati Roy, D. Haraway, oddkin, community, compost, mourning, survival

The present age needs stories to recuperate a lost and damaged sense of community, a participatory sense of co-dwelling of humans and non-humans, in remembrance of those that have passed away, and looking at an uncertain future drawing hope from dismal situations. As Donna Haraway put it in her *Staying with the Trouble* (2016): “multispecies storytelling is about recuperation in complex histories that are as full of dying as living, as full of endings, even genocides, as beginnings” (Haraway 2016, 10). In an epoch of a renewed sense of impending crisis and surpluses of sorrow, the philosopher was not interested in a complete reconciliation or restoration, but, nonetheless, she remained “deeply committed to the more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together” (Haraway 2016, 10).

Arundhati Roy’s social fable, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), weaves together the stories of a whole universe of people and creatures trying to cope with loss, death, and marginality. In a country, the Indian nation, which is increasingly suffering from internal violent factionalism and the evils of an aggressive developmentalism poisonous to humans and non-

humans, the novel follows the efforts of a bunch of liminal identities and unconventional ‘families of choice’ (Weston 1991) to create and defend an unorthodox queer commonality in search of partial forms of ‘recuperations’ and a chance of ‘getting on together’. The narration intersects the characters’ destinies with the life of fellow creatures, in general stray animals, with whom to share food, place and affects, on the constant shifting border between fall and survival, and, more radically, between life and death. The novel will be analyzed from the perspective of the relationship between ‘kin’ and ‘kind’, from the point of view of queer maternity and the necessity of mourning, as well as from the standpoint of human and non-human alliances and kinships.

### **Kin and kind: queer maternity and ‘families of choice’**

As Raffaella Baccolini has recently reconstructed in detail (2017, 28), there is a strict etymological tie between the word kind, as benign, compassionate, loving, and the word kin, meaning family, race, breed. Likewise, the word gentle shares the same root with the Latin gens/gentilis, as belonging to the same clan or family. ‘Kin’ being at the root of kindness like “gens/gentilis” is at the heart of gentleness, there follows that kindness and gentleness are historically linked to the idea of being necessarily good to one’s breed, to one’s blood.

The occasions for deconstructing this peculiar and exclusivist bond have been recently focused upon by critical theory but literature, as usually occurs, has been path-breaking. As Haraway herself pointed out, she was moved in college by Shakespeare’s punning between *kin* and *kind* in the famous quote from Hamlet – “A little more than kin, and less than kind” (1.2.65) – answering, in an aside, King Claudius who had hailed him as “cousin Hamlet, and my son” (1.2.64).<sup>1</sup> Indeed in the chapter “Making Kin not Babies” (Haraway 2016), and again in the volume *Making Kin not Population* (Haraway 2018), the American philosopher, in advocating for the creation of a less limited, less naturalized family formula, recalls how the kindest are not always necessarily kin, whereas encouraging other-than-natal kin, and a sense of community crafted through shared values and mutual responsibility (in her term: *response-ability*) opens up new possibilities for the planet and all of its creatures.

In the recent past, the more systematic disciplinary and political efforts to deconstruct the genealogical-biological nexus between kin and kind, making kin as *oddkin*, date back to the early 1990s *Queer Nation* turn.<sup>2</sup> With the publication of *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (1991) for example, the anthropologist Kath Weston dedicated her attention to new relational constellations, formed among people very often rejected by their families of origin. These new kin/kind communities included friends, lovers, housemates, biological but also non-biological children, all united by the desire to live in solidarity and create lasting bonds in new formations defined as ‘families of choice’.

Of course, within the traditional, patriarchal, heteronormative conception of family as the *locus* of ontological correspondence between kin and kind, one special role has always been crucially occupied by motherhood. Maternity, as integral part of the female functional identity and mission to procreate in order to ensure social stability, has been usually associated with a paradigm of practices such as conception, pregnancy, and breastfeeding, which reaffirm the centrality of biogenetics in the categorization of 'real' motherhood, regarded as superior to alternative, non-biological forms of maternity.<sup>3</sup> This ideology, defined by Shelley M. Park as *monomaternality*, is closely related to other factors that play a crucial role in the sociopolitical landscape, *in primis* patriarchy, and heteronormativity, but historically also capitalism and colonialism, which have uprooted existing forms of motherhood in other cultures and across different historical periods (Park 2013, 7). In opposition to the hegemonic definition of *monomaternality*, Park had developed the term *polymaternality* to indicate different types of queer motherhood, such as multi-mother families resulting from open adoption, same-sex parenting, multiple marriages and extended families, within the milieu of affective non-normative relationalities.

Indeed, the concepts of free *maternage* and *polymaternality* are useful theoretical frameworks for analyzing the forms of *oddkin* in Arundhati Roy's novel, as both protagonists Anjum and Tilo become mothers and co-mothers under very unconventional circumstances, challenging biological essentialism and parenthood linked to heterosexual marriage and blood relations.

The novel's plot is constructed upon two main storylines. The first follows Anjum (born Aftab), a *hijra*<sup>4</sup> forced early in her life to negotiate an interior 'Indo-Pak' struggle between her two diverging physical and psychological selves: "She, raging at her glands, her organs, her skin, the texture of her hair, the width of her shoulders, the timbre of her voice" (Roy 2017, 122). Despite her difficulties, Anjum becomes a sort of star in the world of hijras, being interviewed constantly by NGOs, human rights groups and journalists as well as by fashion magazines and the popular press, and with her aggressive femininity is considered a queen of style.<sup>5</sup>

The second storyline follows another woman: Tilottama (Tilo for short), whose character is connoted by an aura of singleness, restlessness, and precariousness which makes her appear both indecipherable and fragile. She is described as having no ties, except for the dogs that she feeds in the park. Tilo devotes herself to the documentation of the horrors of the civil war in Kashmir, and even though she is portrayed as caring for everyone, she appears like a creature immured in herself, without any real human bond, who basically "wanted to be free to die irresponsibly, without notice and for no reason" (Roy 2017, 159).

In the novel, motherly love develops where it seemed it could never take root and, with the strength of a powerful leaven, takes on unpredictable forms.

Anjum meets a lost, or most probably abandoned, little girl outside a mosque, the *Jama Masjid*; the weeping child grasps her offered finger and seems to actively choose her for a mother. The hijra decides to adopt the baby girl and brings her in the *Khwabgah*, the community where she lives with other transgender people and their guru. The *Khwabgah* is already a sort of ‘chosen family’, where kinship ties are not centered around blood relations and, least of all, biological procreation. As Gayatri Reddy emphasizes in her ethnography devoted to the study of the social and affective identity of hijras in South India, “central to the understanding of family is a notion of caring, indexed principally through a temporal (and spatial) dimension of ‘being there’” (Reddy 2005, 151). ‘There’, in the *Khwabgah*, the care and well-being of the orphan are not solely the responsibility of Anjum, but also of the other dwellers who together form a community of co-mothers: “And so, by default, Zainab – the name Anjum chose for her – stayed on in the *Khwabgah* where she was lavished with more love by more mothers (and, in a manner of speaking, fathers) than any child could hope for” (Roy 2017, 31). Zainab is the one able to appease the ‘Indo-Pak’ war in Anjum’s body. She made her finally feel “like a generous host rather than a battlefield” (Roy 2017, 30), unearthing in her a deeply buried maternal craving, so strong as to overwhelm and monopolize her whole affective life: “Zainab was Anjum’s only love” (Roy 2017, 30).

Despite the focus on the unconventional relational dynamics within the *Khwabgah*, Roy avoids sentimentalizing it. Instead, she captures the complexities, contradictions, and struggles for authority that define its internal dynamics. One notable example is the parental conflict between Anjum and Saeeda. While Anjum is on a pilgrimage to Gujarat, where she becomes trapped in ferocious religious riots, Saeeda steps in as a substitute mother to young Zainab. At Anjum’s return, her traumatic survival has rendered the hijra even more jealous and pathologically anxious about her exclusive claim over the child. Eventually, unable to recover and re-establish a healthy connection with her daughter, she departs, leaving her community and marking the temporary conclusion of the polymaternal experiment.<sup>6</sup>

In the second thread of the novel, also Tilo becomes an adoptive mother through a still more meandering and erratic way. At first, when she gets pregnant from a Kashmiri freedom fighter, whom she loves, she decides to have an abortion. She is not able to accept a child of her own and is resolved not to put another version of herself into the world, convinced, as she is, that she will prove an even worse mother than her own. The woman’s reluctance stems from her complex relationship with her genetic mother, Maryam Ipe. Maryam, having conceived Tilottama through a caste-crossing union, had placed the baby girl in an orphanage to later adopt her, without acknowledging her as her biological daughter. The protagonist’s unhappy story underscores how hypocritical the conception of the biological family can be; rather than being ‘just natural’, *kin* is in truth always regulated by legislative, economic, religious, and, in

India, caste considerations that determine which types of relationships are deemed acceptable and legitimate in society.<sup>7</sup>

Tilo's view of motherhood, nonetheless, undergoes a drastic shift when, walking among the protesters gathered at the astronomic observatory known as Jantar Mantar, she witnesses the appearance of a newborn illuminated by the blinding light of a neon sign and surrounded by the city's refuse.

She appeared quite suddenly, a little after midnight. No angels sang, no wise men brought gifts. But a million stars rose in the east to herald her arrival. One moment she wasn't there, and the next – there she was on the concrete pavement, in a crib of litter: silver cigarette foil, a few plastic bags and empty packets of Uncle Chip. She lay in a pool of light, under a column of swarming neon-lit mosquitos, naked. Her skin was blue-black, sleek as a baby seal's. (Roy 2017, 95-96)

The chapter, titled "The Nativity", clearly alludes to the Christian epiphanic episode, yet in this context, it sheds its religious aura while retaining a hopeful vision of a better future. The arrival of the baby carries a distinct queer symbolism, diverging from the notion of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 2004) that upholds patriarchal and heteronormative family structures.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the infant represents a new queer kind of projection into the future, emphasizing connections that transcend genealogical lineage. This vision aligns with the idea of "solidarity beyond reproductive futurity" (Curti 2017, 18), as Tilo herself expresses when she takes in the orphan: "She could not remember when last she had been this happy. Not because the baby was hers, but because it wasn't" (Roy 2017, 138).

Roy presents the arrival of Miss Udaya Jebeen as an auspicious event for the community, a symbol of a hopeful time to come marked by a reassuring optimism: "things would turn out all right in the end. They would, because they had to. Because Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen, was come" (Roy 2017, 438).

On the other hand, the letter left with the child by her biological mother Revathy demonstrates how motherhood, even within the precincts of blood relations, can prove very far from being acceptable and/or 'natural'. In her case, a crushed and raped Maoist fighter, childbirth can become the most disheartening and alienating of all experiences. For this mother, the newborn represents a foreign body with which she cannot establish a connection and that she will never recognize as part of herself: "When she was born, I frankly felt hatred for her and I thought to kill her. I felt really she was not mine. Really she is not mine. Really if you see her story that I have written here, I am not her mother" (Roy 2017, 417-418).

In the narrative economy of the novel, the appearance of this second adopted daughter serves as a connecting bridge between the two strands, facilitating the meeting of the two protagonists. Anjum and Tilo will become co-mothers and co-responsible for raising little Udaya Jebeen along with the other members of a community of survival, the 'chosen family' of the Jannat cemetery.

## Life, death, and mourning in the Jannat cemetery

“Death is a nothing, a void, a terrifying and sinister terminus, whose only meaning is that there is no meaning.” (Plumwood 1993, 102)

Lamenting the fact that death in modernity has come to be perceived as just a source of alienation and separation, devoid of deeper significance or meaning, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val Plumwood invited us to embrace a more life-affirming understanding of death as an integral part of the human experience. Instead of viewing human essence as separate from the natural world, she exhorted us to recuperate a sense of unity and embeddedness in Zoe, transforming our understanding of both death and human existence as deeply and meaningfully interconnected, aiming for a perspective that could reunite mankind to nature and life to death.

In Haraway’s theoretical and sentimental ‘staying with the trouble’, mourning takes thus a crucial relevance. Feeling the loss and grieving is considered a path to understanding the entangled fabric of shared living and dying. Without sustained remembrance and genuine mourning, she argues, there is no chance to access the awareness of our dependence on and relationships with the countless other beings with whom we share our place of dwelling and co-becoming (Haraway 2016, 39-40).

Haraway emphasizes that neither the capacity nor the practice of mourning is a human prerogative, but developing the capacity to feel the loss of the innumerable lives taken away can lead conscious people to become more respectful of the complexities of life beyond the dubious privileges of human exceptionalism.

In Anjum’s story, when she falls prey to confessional mob-lynching in Gujarat and is spared only because “killing Hijras brings bad luck” (Roy 2017, 62), the narration follows the character’s almost impossible mourning process in her negotiations with the distress of survival amidst a pervasive presence of the dead:

She tried to un-know what they had done to all the others – how they had folded the men and unfolded the women. And how eventually they had pulled them apart limb from limb and set them on fire. But she knew very well that she knew. (Roy 2017, 61-62)

The memories of the trauma experienced and the sorrow for the innocent victims of communalist inter-religious carnage lead Anjum to self-exile in a cemetery. As other critics have already highlighted, in the novel a presiding motif of the graveyard or the necropolis emerges, connecting its principal settings.<sup>9</sup>

In the Kashmir plot the image of the graveyard is widespread and rhetorically articulated at every possible level, from pure tragedy to grotesque: “In Kashmir when we wake up and say ‘Good Morning’ what we really mean is ‘Good Mourning’” (Roy 2017, 279). Known as ‘heaven



on earth', Kashmir is altogether a location of horror where utopia turns into dystopia: a paradise transformed into a graveyard. A place where the living are only dead people, pretending.<sup>10</sup>

Conversely, a somewhat lighter wordplay transforms the actual graveyard where Anjum seeks repair from her memories of terror, into a sort of mundane, minor paradise. What will in time become a shelter for *pariahs* of all kinds takes the name of *Jannat* after the Arabic word for garden, referring symbolically to 'heaven', the place where Islamic believers are rewarded in the afterlife paradise (Mendes and Lau 2020, 77).

At first the cemetery is just a place of unredeemable sorrow: "She told them she wasn't living in the graveyard, she was dying in it" (Roy 2017, 67). In time, to domesticate and personalize the dwelling, Anjum decides to expand the structure by incorporating the graves and building rooms around them, creating a guest house for other people like herself in search of a "home, a place of predictable, reassuring sorrow – awful, but reliable" (Roy 2017, 66).

The structural connection between life and death deepens when the *Jannat Guest House* also becomes a *funeral parlour*, with access limited to the corpses discarded by the other cemeteries and the official burial homes. Through this compassionate initiative, Anjum subverts care and mourning patterns and redefines kinship paradigms. The unusual, both spiritual and physical, alliance between the living and the dead, spatially marked by the presence of graves in the living spaces of the residents, creates a passage between worlds: "(illegally, just a crack), so that the souls of the present and the departed could mingle, like guests at the same party" (Roy 2017, 398).

In this limbo, which made "life less determinate and death less conclusive" (Roy 2017, 398), the bodies who had in life been denied affection and a place to belong, find a residence where they can peacefully rest, while the living, escaping from a life of social marginalization and multifarious precarities,<sup>11</sup> find here a sanctuary which is also a continuous memento of the atrocities of the world outside.<sup>12</sup> As a liminal, heterotopic space, the graveyard is a place where mourning is not devoted to the entombment of remembrance but, on the contrary, to unearthing and actively expressing grief. In the wider community, where people from different creeds, castes, and genders assemble,<sup>13</sup> a series of symbolical funerals serve first and foremost to remember and to denunciate the many losses the survivors have experienced. A checkered shirt is buried by Anjum's friend Dayachand, now Saddam, who in choosing a Muslim alias had tried to distance himself from the mad fanaticism of his Hindu co-religionists. The burial serves to remember, pay homage to, and vindicate the memory of his father, a low-caste tanner who had been slaughtered in the streets by a Hindu cow-protection mob. Udaya's indigenous biological mother Revathy, who had committed suicide after being tortured and raped by the police, is likewise symbolically interred in an act of respect and spiritual hospitality, but also of telling off about her tragic death and even more tragic life. The pot of ashes of Tilo's mother is

buried in a quest for ritual appeasement between ‘natural’ daughter and ‘adoptive mother’, not forgetting the difficulties of their strained, genealogical relationship.

In the *Jannat* cemetery, to soothe is not to console. On the contrary, burying the dead is a way to ritualize sorrow and cement the bonds of the victims into a community of resistance. As Filippo Menozzi (Menozzi 2019) rightly observes, Arundhati Roy’s representational strategies align with artistic practices that resist narrative closure and disrupt the notion of art as a source of consolation (31). Indeed, “The Unconsoled,” to whom the novel is explicitly dedicated, are testimony to the fact that mourning is here conceived as a form of anti-consolatory practice and politically active strategy not for forgetting damage and death, but for surviving with the wounds and the scars. As Haraway convincingly contends, the work of mourning is not to be opposed to practical action; rather, sustained remembrance and grief are the premises of any durable and informed response. And in what she depicts as “living with the ghosts” (Haraway 2016, 39) – like Roy’s protagonists quite literally do in the ‘Jannat guest-house cum funeral parlour’ – the American intellectual finds the starting point of any new possible beginning. A new beginning that in the *Jannat* cemetery not only seeks to include the dead within the community of the living, but also ensures that non-human entities are embraced as part of a more authentic understanding of life as uninterrupted, all-inclusive, circular, continuum.

### Human-animal alliances and kinships

In her ‘ecosophy’, Haraway emphasizes the necessary centrality of relationality as rooted in the interdependence among vulnerable bodies. Navigating the theoretical constellation of new materialism, she reimagines the concept of community, not as solely human-centered but as inclusive of non-human entities and the broader environment. This stance, challenging human exceptionalism with its speciesist view, encourages a moral posture attentive to forms of collaboration and existential sharing. In advocating for an “ethics of inclusivity,” capable of surpassing an anthropocentric moral attitude, Carolyn Merchant’s “partnership ethics” (Merchant 2005)<sup>14</sup> likewise had required attentiveness and responsibility toward all life forms. This approach, promoting a holistic unity of humans and non-humans as cohabitants of a shared cosmos, matched with Val Plumwood’s ecofeminist notion of the “relational self” (1993: 154-155), which moved beyond dualistic oppositions to foster relationships of respect and care across species and systems. In Pramod K. Nayar’s posthumanist terms, this becomes the displacement of the notion of Anthropos, in favor of the recognition of the contribution of all the other living creatures in evolutionary processes. Conceiving of humans not as autonomous and self-sufficient beings but as “an assemblage, co-evolving with other forms of life” (Nayar 2014: 13), this line of thought, in order to recognize the interconnected and interdependent nature of all beings, calls for redefining kinship and family ties.

As we are here trying to demonstrate, the theme of forming unconventional alliances and kinships is central to all aspects of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. In the novel, the various damaging impacts of neo-liberalism, casteism, religious and nationalist extremisms come to affect not only humans but also the whole ecosystem and the lives of the non-human. By exploring the processes of modernization and the consumerist turn that have radically reshaped the landscape and life-style in the Indian cities, Roy critiques the various plights of the marginalized communities and the degradation of their environments. Above all, she emphasizes the agency of non-human beings in her narrative.

In a conversation with Shohini Ghosh (2021), Roy rejects the interpretation that implies the occurrence in her writing of plenty of animal, vegetal and other natural presences as devices to create a magical realist atmosphere. She rather suggests taking them at face value, exactly like a recognition of the central role non-human creatures play in her life and thus in her stories.

No matter where I go. I knew every plant and worm and fish and insect; they were characters in my life. As oppressive as the humans around me were when I was growing up, the river and the insects, the rain and mud were my pals.<sup>15</sup>

Even in the most densely populated metropolitan *milieu*, Roy's perceptions are attuned to detect non-human activity.<sup>16</sup> She explicitly recoils from anthropocentric exceptionalism and states her incapability of looking at the world, or even thinking about it, with only humans at its centre: "How can we take anything – any discourse, any ideology, any religion even – that is exclusively about human beings seriously?"<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, as noted by Alex Tickell (Tickell 2018, 100), the urban setting of the novel involves components of the pastoral, with the city presented as a kind of urban jungle, populated as it is by a cast of dogs, birds, horses, cows and numerous other species.

But displaying the author's "fascination with wounded and precarious ecology" (Monaco 2019, 79), this pastoral is very often portrayed as decay. From the very beginning of the novel, Roy presents an apocalyptic scenario in which increasing production and relentless mass consumption are the main factors responsible for animal mistreatment and anthropogenic destruction. In this circle of toxic life, cows and buffaloes are exploited in the dairy industries and subjected to constant administration of drugs and medications; these, after their death, are indirectly ingested by the scavenger birds, condemning to extinction also the holy vultures, in the Parsi religion symbols of purification for their capacity to eliminate carrions in a natural manner. Many other species are also trapped in such bleak life cycles, such as hens deprived of their maternal instinct to speed up egg production. Similarly to John Coetzee's provocative comparison between the extermination of the Jews and industrial farming in *The Lives of Animals* (1999), Roy draws a parallel between the deprivation of motherhood in hens and that

experienced by the ‘Mothers of the Disappeared in Kashmir’, mothers whose children have been kidnapped, tortured, or killed by the Indian army, and reduced to being just “inefficient, unproductive units, living on a mandatory diet of hopeless hope” (Roy 2017, 300).

Such correlation highlights the thin line that separates human pain and trauma from that of non-human beings, dismantling the ontological preconceived notions that regard humans as separate from all other creatures. The shared suffering among species is also illustrated through the *flaneuristic* experiences of Tilo, who, while wandering among the marginalized and the waste of the city, encounters the sight of children and animals similarly trying to survive and resist the depressing conditions of poverty and environmental degradation that characterize urban peripheral areas.

She walked through miles of city waste, a bright landfill of compacted plastic bags with an army of ragged children picking through it. The sky was a dark swirl of ravens and kites competing with the children, pigs and packs of dogs for the spoils. (Roy 2017, 234)

Despite the state of desolation and decay that permeates marginal spaces, there are also areas which become sites of resistance and contestation, where humans and non-humans form ‘bizarre’ alliances, or literally *oddkin* in the sense meant by Haraway. The *Khwabgah*, the first community where Aftab can become Anjum, ‘the *mehfil*’, “the gathering” (Roy 2017, 4) of her many selves, welcomes not only individuals of all genders, but also abandoned and mistreated animals; and all residents establish multispecies and symbiotic relationships based on cooperation, coexistence, and sharing. A clear example of this is Zainab’s passion for animals, which she tenaciously saves from exploitation and captivity.

She wanted to free all the half-bald, half-dead white chickens that were pressed into filthy cages and stacked on top of each other outside the butcher shops, to converse with every cat that flashed across her path and to take home every litter of stray puppies she found wallowing in the blood and offal flowing through the open drains. She would not listen when she was told that dogs were unclean [...] She did not shrink from the large, bristly rats that hurried along the streets. (Roy 2017, 36-37)

The girl also grows in symbiosis with a little goat that she manages to rescue from *Eid* slaughter<sup>18</sup>, and who, thanks to the care of its owner, is able to survive for the *Guinness record* of sixteen years. Similarly, other *hijras* intertwine bonds with many other creatures, and together they build a daily life marked by acts of connection and sharing, such as Ustad Kulsoom Bi and the parakeet Birbal sleeping together, or Razia and the pigeons conversing about the introduction of subsidies for stray cats.

A form of symbiotic relationship is that which develops between the hijra Anjum and the dog Biroo, a beagle that escaped from a pharmaceutical research laboratory. The experimental procedures have caused the dog to suffer from frequent epileptic seizures and a form of behavioural instability. The bodies of Biroo and Anjum become testimonies to the torture and

oppression they have suffered, to which the two characters attempt to resist by sharing their lived sufferings and creating an interspecies affiliation based on moments of pure and innocent intimacy, such as the simple habit of sharing the same food: “He drank everything Anjum drank, ate everything that she ate – biryani, korma, samosas, halwa, falooda, phirni, zamzam, mangoes in summer, oranges in winter. It was terrible for his body, but excellent for his soul” (Roy 2017, 83).

Equally special is the emotional bond between Saddam and the white mare Payal. The two become not only companions but also co-workers, and their relationship never turns into a hierarchical and asymmetric one. On the contrary, they generate an alliance of mutual understanding and respect, as highlighted by the imperceptible connection between the man and the mare during the skit staged for selling horseshoes to superstitious Hindus.<sup>19</sup>

Another example is the relationship between Tilo and her dog *Comrade Laali*: when she takes the foundling Udaya to her apartment, as if in symbiosis with her human counterpart, also Laali becomes a mother after giving birth to puppies on Tilo’s landing. The two not only become mothers individually, but almost simultaneously share the same maternal experience connected by reciprocal familial affection.

The *Jannat Cemetery* likewise becomes an asylum open not only to human refuse but also to other discarded creatures, a sort of Noah’s Ark of injured animals.

Between Zainab and Saddam, they had turned the graveyard into a zoo... There was a young peacock who could not fly, and a peahen, perhaps his mother, who would not leave him. There were three old cows that slept all day. [...] A small tortoise – an abandoned pet – that Saddam had found in a park [...] Several cats came and went. (Roy 2017, 399)

And also the green world thrives. Despite the general situation dominated by poverty and struggle for survival, the bare life in the cemetery has in the vegetal abundance of the garden its vindication and counterpart: “brinjals, beans, chillies, tomatoes and several kinds of gourds, all of which, despite the smoke and fumes from the heavy traffic on the roads that abutted the graveyard, attracted several varieties of butterflies” ( Roy 2017, 399).

Actually, such vegetal profusion is not surprising. As Adami (2022, 561) subtly suggests, the very meaning of the graveyard soil, despite its obvious connection to death and lack of life, in its being “a compost pit of ancient provenance” (Roy 2017, 399) quite literally alludes to the process of alteration of biological matter which transmutes dead organic corpses into new configurations of animal and especially vegetal life. In a way, Roy’s heterotopy seems a possible objective correlative for Haraway’s concept of the “children of compost” (Haraway 2016, 134-168) as a metaphor for the diverse and interconnected forms of life that arise from the process of composting. This idea emphasizes the importance of nurturing relationships within ecosystems and acknowledges the entanglements of human and non-human lives in the Anthropocene. Embracing decay, regeneration, and transformation as ethical and relational

practices, Haraway argues that, just like compost contributes to the growth of new life, the cultivation of diverse relationships and kinships among species helps foster resilience and adaptability in the face of ecological and political crises.

Indeed, at the very beginning of the novel, Anjum's mourning seclusion in the cemetery is compared to vegetal life in the sense of desolation and passivity. She behaves and feels like a tree, without flinching at the stones the casual urchins throw to her, without craning her neck to read the insults scratched into her bark: "When people called her names – clown without a circus, queen without a palace – she let the hurt blow through her branches like a breeze and used the music of her rustling leaves as balm to ease the pain" (Roy 2017, 3). In any case, the vegetal trope has only temporarily the sense of defeat and lack of vitality. In the long run, it can rather be interpreted as an existential choice. Following a very long series of mythical and literary arboreal transformations (Concilio 2021), Anjum is just one of the many human creatures, usually women, who choose to flee the world of violence and dichotomic separation to embrace a vital perspective characterized by qualities such as growth, adaptability, resilience, interconnection and symbiosis. For Anjum, the notion of adopting a plant-like existence seems to imply the conversion in favour of a profounder way of accepting and understanding life and death intercourse. In time, her vital energy is slowly able to sprout again and rebranch.<sup>20</sup>

To conclude, the *Jannat* community, with its human and animal waste, the traces of death, abandonment, and injustice, represents an actual possibility for surviving in times of despair and discomfort by simply and bravely "staying with the trouble." The formation of unusual alliances and kinships as *oddkin* is the leitmotif that makes of the cemetery, with its mothers, co-mothers and co-children, with the living sharing house with the dead, with its stray and injured animals and with its vegetal twisted resilience, the *locus* of a hamlet where there are no hierarchies but everyone is connected to the other, learning to co-exist, co-operate, and co-become through mutual care and support.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Indeed it is usually believed that the source was an Elizabethan proverb, 'the nearer in kin, the less in kindness', while in John Lyly's *Mother Bombie* (1594) the saying was: "the greater the kindred is, the less the kindness must be" (4.1, 21).

<sup>2</sup> *Queer Nation* was an activist movement founded in March 1990 in New York to fight against anti-gay prejudice and the escalation of violence connected to the spread of the HIV virus.

<sup>3</sup> I am pleased here to recognize my indebtedness to the promising young scholar Miriam Eleonora Rastelli, for her insightful reflections concerning the relationship between queer maternity and Roy's novel.

<sup>4</sup> I borrow from Alex Tickell (2018) the description of India's *hijras*: "a name that refers to gay or transgender men, or eunuchs, who cross-dress and have surgery and/or hormone treatment to live as women, and which can also encompass a broader range of non-hetero-normative markers including the male use of cosmetics and forms of camp behaviour. *Hijra* communities arguably have a long-established place in the cultural world of Mughal old Delhi, in which eunuchs were employed in the

*zenanas* of the aristocracy and highly accomplished courtesans trained in dance and music were the nominally independent adjuncts to a male elite world of drinking parties and poetry gatherings” (Tickell 2018, 102). As Kumar Pushpesh underlines (2020, 177), historically Hijras held key official roles within the Mughal reigns, such as managing finances and trade, and were favored as “non-blood kin” over “blood kin” due to the dynastic’s propensity for inheritance-related conflicts. However, the East India Company’s transphobic policies led to the dismissal of hijra officials, marginalizing them and leaving them unemployed. This marked the beginning of colonial efforts to enforce heteronormative gender structures, influencing middle-class consciousness in India during British rule.

<sup>5</sup> Filippo Menozzi (2018, 23) interestingly speaks about the character of Anjum in terms of a superstar who epitomizes the status of hyper(in)visibility of hijras in India. A status which does not challenge their social marginality but at the same time renders them ‘mainstream’ through popular films, journalism, and academic research.

<sup>6</sup> In any case, once grown up, Zainab will be able to reestablish the lost bond with her adoptive mother and move again with her Big Mommy Anjum to the polymaternal community of the *Jannat* Cemetery.

<sup>7</sup> Actually, as Judith Butler (2022) has convincingly pointed out, family’s implicit “naturalness” does not indicate nature as its foundation, but rather the set of legal, religious, and social norms that have naturalized it, determining who can legitimately conceive, to whom the offspring belongs in the line of descent, and what can be officially recognized as kinship. In reality, the recognition of filiation and consanguinity transcends biological genealogy and is often intertwined with socioeconomic issues: “the blood that ostensibly holds people together is a highly condensed and invested metaphor for social regulations governing inheritance and property relations” (Butler 2022, 29).

<sup>8</sup> According to Lee Edelman (2004), the Child is the pivot around which reproductive futurism is structured, elevating to cultural law the ideologies of heteronormative families while viewing queer sexuality as a social disease due to its non-procreative nature.

<sup>9</sup> As efficaciously noted by Alex Tickell (2018): “If Roy’s second novel can be categorized as a work of the living city then, it is also a work of death, one that stages the metropolis as a necropolis, and as a place of death-in-life, as much as it also explores the subjective accommodation of death and loss by the living” (Tickell 2018, 101).

<sup>10</sup> References are indeed innumerable: “Death was everywhere. Death was everything [...] Dying became just another way of living. Graveyards sprang up in parks and meadows, by streams and rivers, in fields and forest glades. Tombstones grew out of the ground like young children’s teeth” (Roy 2017, 314).

<sup>11</sup> In Mendes and Lau’s critical reading of the novel the theme of precariousness is pivotal: “TMOUH is all about multiplicity and multitudes: its teeming cast of characters is exceedingly plural. Many of the characters are in precarious societal and political situations. Inhabited by (even crammed with) many of the oft-othered in India, this is a novel which opens up new spaces of precarity” (Mendes and Lau 2020, 71).

<sup>12</sup> “As the cemetery comes to function as a secular sanctuary against factionalism, casteism, and State repression, its space mirrors the evils of the world (here called *Duniya*), exhibiting the injuries of gender violence, religious intolerance, and terrorism. In its being an alternative space which reflects the inequities of reality rather than erasing them, the graveyard is also the contrary of utopia, a very imperfect counter-site where every sort of weird person manages to recuperate a daily routine and a queer sort of normalcy” (Ciocca 2020, 192).

<sup>13</sup> Over time, the cemetery becomes a destination for both new and old acquaintances of Anjum; some merely visiting their deceased end up joining the residents in the creation of a community of relationships.

<sup>14</sup> The partnership ethics advocated by Carolyn Merchant in her seminal work *Radical Ecology. The Search for a Livable World* (2005) is grounded on relations among all forms of living organisms: “A partnership ethic holds that the greatest good for the human and nonhuman communities is in their mutual living interdependence” (Merchant 2005, 83).

<sup>15</sup> For this interview, see: <https://archive.aperture.org/article/2021/02/02/arundhati-roy-the-city-as-a-novel>. Accessed December 11, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> “and it’s not just pets on leashes. There are crow conferences, street-dog conclaves, horse confabulations, monkey madness” (Roy 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Roy, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> In this which is known as the ‘Festival of Sacrifice’, Muslims perform the ritual sacrifice of an animal, usually a goat, or a sheep, whose meat is divided into three parts: one-third is given to the family, one-third to relatives and friends, and one-third to those in need.

<sup>19</sup> “In the daytime she was Saddam’s business partner. [...] He stationed himself outside the hospital gates and busied himself with one of her hooves, tapping it worriedly with a small hammer, pretending he was re-shoeing it. Payal went along with the charade. When the anxious relatives of seriously ill patients approached him, Saddam would reluctantly agree to part with the old horseshoe to bring them good luck” (Roy 2017, 77).

<sup>20</sup> In Adami’s words: “the employment of trees is not a mere stylistic embellishment but a strategy to reverse the dominant perspective of binary division between nature and humanity by suggesting lines of connection that redraw human hierarchical verticality as environmental horizontal interconnectedness” (Adami 2022, 562).

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## On Kinship and Belonging: narrating and surviving in Zeyn Joukhadar's *The Thirty Names of Night*

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### ABSTRACT

Zeyn Joukhadar's second novel, *The Thirty Names of Night* (2020) tells the story of a young transgender Syrian American man in New York City who reconnects, through an old notebook and a common love of birds, to a Syrian artist who lived and disappeared in New York decades earlier. Through this journey, in a New York City mysteriously invaded by flocks of birds, and rare birds appearing in the narrative alongside and as metaphors (also) of the 'unseen' young man, Nadir names himself and finds the threads of memory in stories of queer kinship and untold history. This article looks at Zeyn Joukhadar's poetic interweaving of stories, where finding one's place in the world means allowing oneself to see and believe the bonds and commonness of found and chosen family, and of found and chosen community – queer and Syrian American in this case – among migratory lives, just like birds. The linkages of family and memory are intertwined, in the novel, with the sense of longing and belonging inscribed in diaspora, and rootedness acquires a completely different, much lighter, air-borne quality, for those who are willing to see and recognize the stories, and their names.

### Keywords

Arab American literature, queer kinships, queer temporalities, diaspora, memory

This article proposes a reading of Syrian American author Zeyn Joukhadar's novel, *The Thirty Names of Night* (2020)<sup>1</sup> as a reflection on alternative forms of kinship and the possibilities of 'queering' narrative and history. The novel is set in the Syrian American community in New York City, and interlinks kin-making and alternative families in the queer community with the experience of solidarity within the diaspora, tackling issues of memory, belonging, transformation, and, ultimately, survival.

Analyzing at once the experiences of queer and migrant subjectivities does carry with it the danger of conflating the two, and flattening both into a common, undistinguishable ground, or what Meg Wesling discusses as "the tendency [...] to conjoin the queer subject and the diasporic subject as theoretical twins" with the diasporic queer subject, thus "called upon to bear witness to the political, material, familial, and intellectual transformations of globalization" (Wesling 2008, 30; see also Manasalan 2006; Rodríguez 2020, among others). In attending to the dangers of this generalization, or what Gaia Giuliani calls the "mystique of the oppressed"

(Giuliani 2022, 8), it is worth underlining how the two lines of intersecting exclusion come together in Joukhadar's novel to form an articulate and far from superficial aesthetic/ethical interpellation of family and history from both the queer and the diasporic perspectives. Most of all, we are invited by Joukhadar to see how stories unearthed outside the archives of history and hegemonic narratives work to reveal different forms of roots and linkages, or kin-making, in Donna Haraway's foundational sense of survival through *oddkin* (Haraway 2016). The novel is, indeed, an affirmation of the existence and survival of communities erased from official narratives, of the power of relationality and recognition, and of the necessity and beauty of seeing and attending to what is not registered, officially spoken, or written.

*The Thirty Names of Night* is set in New York City in the present-day, with the city uncannily invaded by birds. The narrative is suspended in an almost spaceless and timeless dimension, with the birds appearing and disappearing throughout, and the story alternating between present and past, in a sort of narrative flight of its own. At the same time, there is a tangibly material presence and memory of the city itself, its buildings, its pavement, its lived and stratified matter. The novel tells the story of a young transmasculine artist, part of the Syrian community in New York. The young man's story is interwoven with that of a Syrian artist who had herself immigrated to the US in the 1930s; her name was Laila Z, and she had been well known especially in the Syrian community, before mysteriously disappearing decades before the young man was born. The protagonist is nameless throughout most of the novel, until he comes out as transgender to his family and loved ones, and finds himself, choosing his name: Nadir ("rare" in Arabic).<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the novel, Nadir finds a notebook that had belonged to Laila Z, containing sketches and diary entries, in an abandoned community house in New York that was at one time used by Syrian immigrants. Nadir thus discovers that Laila Z and his own grandmother had been in love when they were young, and, also through Laila's diary, uncovers other stories from the early Syrian immigrant community, of migrant solidarity and chosen families, and of queer love and bond. This leads to a recognition, to 'seeing' himself in his history and community. The two parallel storylines – in Nadir's present and Laila's past – are both told in the second person, with respectively Nadir addressing his mother (who died in a suspicious fire five years prior and whose ghostly presence is a constant in the novel until a final resolution), and Laila writing to her lost and impossible first love, Nadir's grandmother.

### The city remembers

The question of community as kin and family is central throughout the novel, starting with the symbolic old community house, the dilapidated building in Manhattan where Nadir finds Laila's notebook. Nadir's mother, an ornithologist, had also been an activist advocating for protection against gentrification and demolition of the building, and this very site will hold the key to the

mystery that runs throughout the novel – a missing piece of art by Laila Z depicting a rare bird that, in the end, Nadir proves to actually exist. It is, significantly, a bird that is almost impossible to spot in the wild because it never settles, following in droves the earth's circumference. This bird, the community house and Laila's missing artwork will in turn become the missing pieces of Nadir's sense of belonging. Addressing his mother in the first chapter of the novel, Nadir writes:

You'd laugh at the way I look everywhere for reminders of you – even in the old community house, I still check the locks and try to get up the courage to slip inside. I haven't succeeded yet. Maybe it's for the best; though I've scoured old newspapers and art history books about the painter you loved who used to live here, Laila Z has always remained obscure. (Joukhadar 2020, 19)

Later, Nadir does break into the abandoned community house, giving cue to the mystery of the missing piece of art – and the unknown bird – to be solved through Laila Z's notebook, which holds stories, notes and sketches dating back to the early twentieth century in Syria and then her own move to the United States. The mystery story angle is, indeed, just one of the multiple genres that overlap in Joukhadar's multi-layered and complex novel. As Cheryl Stobie observes, "its development of the modes of writing of the elegy, the ghost story, the state-of-the-nation novel, and the romance exert complex ethical effects on the reader" (Stobie 2021, 353). Joukhadar's is also, I would add, an epistolary narrative of sorts, with Nadir writing (albeit not proper letters) to his mother, and Laila's diary entries addressed to her lover, both powerfully intimate and transformative. Furthermore, alongside the rightly underlined "state-of-the-nation" mode (Stobie 2021) that depicts present-day US society in its racial and class divisions, some parts also read like a historical novel, reconstructing the early life of the Syrian diasporic community in the US and further adding to the ethical complexity of the author's aesthetic choices. And again, underscoring the entire narrative, is a ghost story, with Nadir's mother appearing to him, and with the community house – and perhaps the entire city itself – as a haunted place, holding memories of a past that never really passes.<sup>3</sup>

The city, indeed, carries memory in ways that are rarely seen in what is normally considered the 'recent', or modern, US urbanization. And yet the protagonist searches for and finds the vibrations of pre-colonial inhabitants of that land, of migrant communities passing through for periods of time, of slavery and subalternity and violence consumed in those streets and at those concrete foundations. Speaking of his mother's activism in defence of the community house, Nadir ponders:

Some people go their whole lives in New York shutting their eyes to the fact that this city was built for the people who took this land from the Lenape. Sometimes I wonder why you never spoke of this – maybe you thought I was too young to understand, or you were just desperate to eke out an existence here. Now I am old enough to understand that we live on land that remembers. I hear the voices when I touch the brick or pavement, catch fragments of words exchanged hundreds of years before the island of Mannahatta was paved. I sometimes think about the Arabs and other immigrants who came here a

century before my own family, hoping they wouldn't be devoured by the bottomless hunger of the very forces that drove them from their homelands, hoping they could survive in this place that was not built for them. (Joukhadar 2020, 7)

Joukhadar thus introduces at the very beginning of the novel the 'memory of the land,' and at the same time the memory (and the present) of the immigrants, those communities that have crossed, and still cross, lands and seas to build better lives for themselves.

In the course of the novel, Nadir finds kinship through such unrecognized stories of community, where instances of solidarity and chosen families among migrants are interwoven with queer relationships in the present, and also in the flashbacks to the first wave of Syrians settling in the US. So, again, the past and history reveal so much more; the erasures of official narratives do not erase non-hegemonic kinships and communities. One, however, must be able or willing to see, or believe, just like Nadir's mother, and before her Laila Z, were able to see (and believe in) an extremely rare bird that almost no one else was willing to believe existed.

The material memory of the city recurs in the narrative, when again, for example, the city speaks through its very matter:

When I touch my palm to the brick of a building, the street is flooded with the sound of hoofbeats on cobblestones, the creaking of wooden carriages, the honking of old automobiles. Men argue in Teta's Arabic, now the dated dialect of grandparents and great-grandparents and the long dead, while lovers clasp their pinky fingers in alleyways and children answer their mothers in a language only one of them can understand. This place remembers all its strangers. (Joukhadar 2020, 182)

This corporeal connection to memory takes us into a crucial dimension of Joukhadar's construction of queer kinship and its temporalities: the body. Here, Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman's reflections on queer temporalities seem to offer a fitting and fertile point of view. Following in part Judith Butler's theorization of the key relation between kinship and duration,<sup>4</sup> Tyler and Freeman write: "[K]inship does not exist without extension over time (see Freeman 2007). Kinship promises. Kinship endures — or, as Butler (2017) argues, its grounding in duration is exposed precisely when it fails. It is strangely futural and retrospective, moving in queer temporalities and through corporeal uptakes" (Tyler and Freeman 2022, 3).

Nadir continues, throughout the novel and across the city, to remember, through the concrete he walks on, the breath of the pavement, the ghosts underneath, relocating the haunting presence of personal violence and displacement within the Arab diasporic community he is part of, in a different geography, and history:

I bend down to retie my shoelace and touch the ground. I see the city as the birds do: they trace the road that once ran along the shore here through the marshland called Saponickan, its branches carrying travelers up to what is now Harlem. These roads may be paved over, but their travelers are not gone. You used to tell me stories of jinn; all the other Arabs I know believe in ghosts. (Joukhadar 2020, 130)

The past is central to the novel, its spectral presence proving to be the living core of the present, the bricks and pieces of its very meaning, like Nadir's mother's ghost, who is as a 'present' key to building the need for belonging that traverses the entire novel. The invitation, then, is to re-work the linearity of the narrative, of history, of our relationship with the past. The teleology of 'Western progress' is written in a history that allows for only one point of view, only one language, only one timeline. The only 'authorized' narrative is the universalizing linearity of colonization and European modernity. Instead, what Joukhadar proposes is that the uncertified, and perhaps uncertifiable, other communities, other cultures, other ways of being-together – other birds as we will see – pan out other rhythms. In the intersection of 'queer diaspora', there is not only disruptive mobility (in space and identity), but also a different articulation of time and history. Timelines become tangled, as is the realism of the novel, magical at times, politically clear in its statements at others. When Nadir asks his grandmother why, in all these years, she never said anything about her and Laila's love story, she answers that "[n]ot everything must be spoken to be real" (Joukhadar 2020, 242). In her notebook, Laila recounts the stories her uncle would tell about "the creatures who crossed the Atlantic before ships ever did" (Joukhadar 2020, 61). She imagines such stories were passed down from her grandfather, who, her mother told her, was educated and had memorized Persian cosmographer Zakariyya' al-Qazwini's *Marvels of Things Created and Miraculous Aspects of Things Existing*.<sup>5</sup> Laila then adds:

But you know how slippery a story can be. The tale of the birds might have come from a distant uncle or great-great-grandmother rather than a thirteenth-century Persian astronomer, but that doesn't make the story less true. (Joukhadar 2020, 61)

Again, the authority of narrative, the authorized voices, the tales and languages of stories are challenged and re-worked by Joukhadar. The 'objective' perspective of Western knowledge is interrogated and other ways of constructing history, too, emerge in different, unspoken, or 'slippery' modes of narrative.

### **The blood remembers**

Joukhadar builds the two parallel accounts of Nadir's present and Laila Z's past as linked not only by the newly discovered connections between Laila and Nadir's family, but also by the common, reverberating negotiations with belonging –to a land, to a people, to oneself. Here, the element of blood plays a crucial role, both in the interplay between biological and chosen kinships, and in the materiality of Nadir's estrangement within his own body. In one passage, Nadir is at a pool in the Lower East side of Manhattan:

Every step across the wet pool tile heaves my chest up and down, and a despair rises in me that I can't explain, that alarm bell that has been going off in me every day since I began to change, that agonizing

feeling that this body does not belong to me but to all the people who insist on how I should exist inside of it, that unshakeable twinge that tells me that something, perhaps everything, is very, very wrong. (Joukhadar 2020, 76)

This moment of self-reflection is interrupted by the greeting, “As-salaamu alaykum!”, coming from Aisha, an old friend of his mother’s. The protagonist’s estrangement from his body intersects here with the Arabic greeting, with Aisha a few lines down adjusting “the hood of her burkini” (Joukhadar 2020, 76). The spatial and cultural geography of these two bodies, in place and out of place at the same time, is connected in the pool water as liquid conveyor of the weight and at once fleetingness of kinships in the diaspora. Aisha asks about Nadir’s family, and why he hasn’t been coming to the mosque. But Nadir ponders to himself, “I don’t feel comfortable entering a masjid from either the men’s or the women’s entrance, [...] I feel uncomfortable as soon as I clasp my arms around my chest for salah” (Joukhadar 2020, 77).

In the very first pages of the novel, he chronicles his visit to the gynecologist, to check on his IUD, which, instead of halting his period, is causing heavy bleeding and pain:

“I thought this thing was supposed to stop my period.” I pick at a hole that’s starting on the knee of my jeans. “And my chest is sore. Didn’t know that was a side effect.”

“Sure, breast tenderness can happen in the beginning.” The gyno looks at me like I am a puzzle he’s lost a piece to. “It might make your periods heavier, too, but that should settle down after a few cycles.” He asks me about my moods, but I can tell bleeding, cramping, and sore breasts aren’t going to be enough to convince him to take the thing out. [...] My insufficient, unnameable suffering is my own problem. (Joukhadar 2020, 4)

Nadir’s bleeding and his aching are “unnameable”, so much like the fleeting, apparently unseen bird Laila Z drew. Later, Nadir voices his pain, with menstrual blood a recurring marker of his estrangement: “I am tired. I am bleeding again, and my body feels heavy and bloated, my chest so sore that I want to rip off my binder and feel the night air on my skin” (Joukhadar 2020, 101).

From the start, blood is sign of and need for transformation, but it is also memory and mourning. Addressing his mother, as he does throughout the entire narrative, Nadir recalls:

The summer after you died, my periods were the heaviest they’d ever been. I spent the rainless evenings standing in fields at sunset, waiting to be raptured into the green flash of twilight, wishing there were another way to exist in the world than to be bodied. (Joukhadar 2020, 3)

“Another way to exist in the world than to be bodied” becomes, in the course of the novel, another way to make and recognize relations. Indeed, as Tyler and Freeman underline, “kinship and art are both, as social practices, bound up with the work of the body; they work on and through the materiality of the body” (Tyler and Freeman 2022, 5). A relational mode of existing – and therefore surviving – that not only allows Nadir to interpret his own transition

and embodiment, but also to re-interpret the past and how/what is registered into existence, both written and “bodied”.

By the end of the novel, the idea of blood becomes less about the ties that bind one to an unchangeable past, and more about the ongoing process of becoming—a fluid, living force that can change, adapt, and evolve. As Nadir comes out as transgender, he must negotiate not only his embodiment and corporeal geography, but also how his changing identity affects his relationship with his family and society at large, who view his body as part of the ‘blood’ that ties him to tradition and history. Blood too is an ongoing negotiation—between past and present, inheritance and self-creation; it causes Nadir to feel his own body as unfamiliar, and it also marks the continuous work, in the diaspora, of belonging and unbelonging to earth, land, family. When Nadir thinks back to his mother’s funeral, he reflects on roots and earth:

We buried not a person but a continent that day. We’re made from clay, after all, aren’t we, and underground springs and threads of copper run in our veins. When this country asks me where I’m from, they aren’t asking for the city on my birth certificate, but whose earth is in my blood. (Joukhadar 2020, 109)

Blood here is not just the biological matter that defines the body, but something that carries memory, history, and trauma. In the act of transitioning, and in the aesthetic process of Joukhadar’s work, the protagonist is, in part, trying to rewrite his bloodline and identity, not in a way that erases the past, but in a way that allows for transformation.

Certainly, Nadir’s embodiment negotiations echo, in their imagery of flowing and resistance *of* and *from* blood, Judith Butler’s fundamental question of “undoing gender”, not only in the sense of undoing heteronormativity and biological determinism, but also of “gender acts” as articulations of agency and survival (Butler 2004). Joukhadar’s writing speaks, also, to the implications of affect on the construction of the material relationality of lives and bodies proposed by Sarah Ahmed, to “the way emotions work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies” (Ahmed 2015, 1). In ‘proximity’ with both theorists, Joukhadar appears to give form to the fundamental dimension of relationality; exploring the place of individual bodily agency within the collective whole (Butler 2004), and the relational nature of emotions, which in turn shape the very “surfaces” of bodies (Ahmed 2015, 8). Again, what emerges is the way relational and emotional economies shape the inevitability of our ‘being bodied’ together.

In speaking alongside and with the question of diasporic rootedness, but also the alternative communities formed within diaspora, the transformation of blood—symbolic of the transformation of self—underscores one of the central themes of *The Thirty Names of Night*: the agency to redefine identity in the inescapable relation to others, in ways that allow for both continuity and radical change. Blood and its refusal are both, here, ways of attending to some form of survival.



### The birds are wonders taken for signs

The birds that pervade Joukhadar's novel can be read as embodying a great variety of symbols and metaphors. They may symbolize community and bonds in many ways: flocks as communities; nests as home; there is even a crow's funeral at one point, in a very touching ritual of mourning amidst Nadir's own ongoing mourning process. As a literary trope, birds certainly have a long and well-studied history, with roots going back to many different mythological traditions (see, among many others, Lutwack 1994; Concu 2016; Pope 2021). The specific element of the rare bird in *The Thirty Names of Night* carries an explicit reference to a fundamental text in Sufi poetry, *The Conference of the Birds* by Farid ud-Din Attar (1177). The scientific name of the fictional bird in Joukhadar's novel is *Geronticus simurghus*, directly recalling the Simorgh, a fantastic bird in Persian mythology that, in Attar's poem, is named sovereign of all the world's birds. The birds begin their journey to find the Simorgh crossing seven valleys, representing seven faults that prevent humanity from reaching enlightenment. As Sholeh Wolpé writes in her "Introduction" to *The Conference of the Birds*,

On the way, many perish of thirst, heat, or illness, while others fall prey to wild beasts, panic, and violence. Finally, only thirty birds make it to the abode of Simorgh.

In the end, the birds learn that they themselves are the Simorgh; the name "Simorgh" in Persian means thirty (si) birds (morgh). They eventually come to understand that the majesty of that Beloved is like the sun that can be seen reflected in a mirror. Yet, whoever looks into that mirror will also behold his or her own image. (Wolpé 2017, 9)

Attar is directly referenced by Joukhadar more than once. *The Conference of the Birds*, specifically, offers an entrance into Nadir and his mother's world and language, and their own form of faith, in a sense:

It's because of your textbooks that I know so many birds by their Arabic names. [...] There is no nightingale among my index of birds, only the bulbul; in Farid ad-Din Attar's Sufi poems, Solomon's confidante is called not the hoopoe but the hudhud, crowned by the other birds to lead them to the legendary Simorgh. Many of these birds I grew up naming without seeing. (Joukhadar 2020, 17)

Later, the elusive, rare bird Laila Z had drawn is explicitly linked to Attar's poem, when the story of its name is revealed. Only one other person believed Laila, an African American ornithologist, and he named the bird precisely with reference to the Simorgh (Joukhadar 2020, 82). Furthermore, the title of the novel itself appears to reference the thirty birds (which also reappear more than once throughout the narrative), with the transformation of "birds" into "names". Naming is, in turn, another key element, not only in the transformative act of Nadir naming himself towards the end of the book, but also in the play between visible/nameable and invisible/unnameable lives, people, birds, kinships.<sup>6</sup>

There is yet another element that may speak to the relevance of birds in Joukhadar's novel from the perspective of temporalities and history proposed in this article: the connection between birds and time. Clearly, birds may be considered as fleeting, passing beings; they potentially fly through and are gone; they also migrate, carrying then not only the symbolic theme of diaspora and migration, but also the marking of time cycles and time passing. Furthermore, birds have always been symbolically tied to divination, bringing messages from the future (in the novel this element, too, is present, with birds bearing both good and bad signs). However, something more may emerge from the link between birds and time, specifically through the element of rarity. The bird that Nadir's mother insisted she saw, and that Laila Z had painted, belongs to the past, thus not only did the act of believing entail the women's faith in what they had seen (against the skepticism of the scientific community), but it also brings Nadir in his own quest, into a completely personal form of faith, that, in the process, allows him to see and be seen, and find kinship.

It is, then, precisely through their unexplained (but never questioned) appearances and manifestations in the novel that birds become something more than allegories or metaphors, more akin to the sacredness of faith in the uncertified, or the unbelievable. The birds are somehow accepted as they intermingle with human life, perhaps even close to some form of oddkin, as Haraway would put it, in the wider tale of survival that Joukhadar ultimately tells. In the novel, the birds collectively tell a story outside sanctioned and authorized narratives, not only in a different language, but in an altogether different modality. The birds appear seemingly out of nowhere, not only throughout the city, but also throughout time. They carry the power to connect Nadir to his mother after she has passed, even more than her ghostly presence can. At the beginning of the novel he tells her:

A sparrow's beak strikes my hand and gashes my palm. I clutch the wound, the meat of my thumb dark with my own blood. You taught me a long time ago to identify the species by the yellow patches around their eyes, their black whiskers, their white throats, and their ivory crowns. [...] I reach down to scoop the sparrow from the rooftop with my bloodied hands. He weighs almost nothing. There is so much of you – and, therefore, of myself – that I will never know. Tomorrow, when the ghost of you enters my window with the smell of rain, I will tell you how, since you died, the birds have never left me. (Joukhadar 2020, 2)

Working with the different shades and material of bird eggs is, Nadir says earlier in this same passage, what first taught him how to mix paint; it made him into the artist he is. Birds continually reveal the hidden stories and the unearthed, intangible – again, even sacred or spiritual – connections that, ultimately, make up history. They are, in so many ways, 'wonders'. In 1985 Homi Bhabha published the now very well-known article "Signs Taken for Wonders,"<sup>7</sup> in which he famously questions the authority of the English book and its "sudden, fortuitous discovery" (Bhabha 1985, 102) in postcolonial literature as a sign and site of mimicry, as resistance to colonial domination. Looking at Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, with Marlow's

discovery of Towson's *Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*, or V. S. Naipaul's *The Return of Eva Peron*, with a young Trinidadian finding and reading that very same passage from Conrad's novel, but also "the Bible translated into Hindi, propagated by Dutch or native catechists" (Bhabha 1985, 108), Bhabha sees the "English book" as a symbol and device of colonial rule, discipline, and desire. The European book is, in this sense, a "sign taken for wonder" that "figures those ideological correlatives of the Western sign—empiricism, idealism, mimeticism, monoculturalism" (Bhabha 1985, 105). The "English book" has the discursive capacity to produce and disseminate the European cultural narrative.

Here, I propose Bhabha's use of 'signs' and 'wonders' in reversal, where 'the book' – and therefore the authority of the written word in Western culture – is replaced with birds; fleeting and unfixed, or also as ungraspable as oral culture appears to the cultures 'of the book' (the English book, for Bhabha, is first and foremost the Bible). Birds are material memory elusive as flight. The birds are not 'signs' to be read; they are 'wonders', magical in a sense, miraculous even, appearing and disappearing, bringing on all of the unexpected turns in the novel. Joukhadar writes birds and *with* birds in his novel, as if in their own, other language and mode. Birds might be, then, wonders taken, by Western culture, for signs: something unbelievable to be believed (like unwritten history, or Laila's bird), not necessarily to be deciphered or even re-signified. Birds participate in (or are perhaps the agents of) the fleshing out of queer temporalities in *The Thirty Names of Night*, proposing history in another modality.

This theoretical perspective introduces one of the keys I propose in reading *The Thirty Names of Night*: the queer temporalities of the novel, jointed in alternative kinships and corporeal – human and more-than-human – relations across a present that is always-also its own past. These queer temporalities, I argue, can open up the possibility of re-thinking history itself, outside sequentiality, in 'relational forms', or rhizomatic diagrams of (collapsed) genealogy (Tyler and Freeman 2022).

The material findings – Laila Z's notebook and drawings –, the physicalness of the city and its buildings (or sometimes ruins), the blood streaming unwanted yet delivering a crucial corporeal dialogue with Nadir's transition, and the birds, so physically present throughout the book, invasive and pervasive –these may all be elements of a form of 'relational history', or perhaps even something close to the "erotohistoriography" that, again, Elizabeth Freeman (2010) theorizes. Here, an articulation of "the body as method" (Freeman 2010, 96; see also Canning 1999), of physically feeling (pleasure –but not only, I would add), touching, or incorporating, opens up to the possibility of a history beyond the apparent authority of the book, outside the 'scientificity' of the genealogical diagram.

Again, in the overlapping of his own transformations with those of his oddkin family, Nadir traces his own community, "futural and retrospective", in Butler's terms (Butler 2017). Laila Z had, we discover, her own, queer family at a time when she didn't have a name for it. This,

along with many others, is the thread interweaving Nadir's lifeline, finding kin in his past, in Laila's connection to his grandmother, for example; in his present, through the queer and immigrant community he finds and builds around him; through the teachings of that immigrant community, continually emerging within the narrative in stories of solidarity, mutual healing, bonds in difficult times, and bonds in the memory of the common land left behind. When Nadir also comes to find intimacy and love, he, too, sees what is uncertified:

Something could be built here, I think, something resembling a family. If an object can become sacred by placing it on a table and calling it an altar, then who is to say we cannot sanctify our own bodies? (Joukhadar 2020, 265)

In the final scene of the novel, we see Nadir with his chosen family and his sister, looking at the night sky and taking in yet another kind of bird:

When I glance back, my friends are beckoning me to them. I step back from the ledge and turn my face from Brooklyn's silhouette. There is a new moon tonight, revealing Deneb low in the sky. On the edge of the city, planes are landing from Beirut and from Cairo, angling their enormous wings. (Joukhadar 2020, 288)

The giant, steel birds fly overhead, hurling some kind of modernity in a dissonant temporality, carrying their wings like migratory birds –from Beirut and Cairo, each new crossing a new diaspora, or a continuation of the cycle of migration. Nadir is home now, in his own continuation of blood and kin. Sami, his love, has just called out to him, “love of my heart”, “Ya habib ‘albi” (Joukhadar 2020, 288).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Thirty Names of Night* is Zeyn Joukhadar's second novel. His first novel, *The Map of Salt and Stars* (2018), won the 2018 Middle East Book Award, and was translated into twenty languages. Their work has been published in numerous literary journals and is included in anthologies such as *Letters to a Writer of Color*, *This Arab Is Queer*, *KINK: Stories*. Joukhadar is currently working on a theatrical adaptation of *The Thirty Names of Night*. For more details, see <https://www.zeynjoukhadar.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> The 24 chapters in the novel alternate between Nadir and Laila's narrative voices. Those narrated by Nadir bear the chapter number and then a name graphically erased on the page, up until Chapter 19, when finally he has chosen his name, and it is no longer scratched out.

<sup>3</sup> A great volume of scholarly works has been written on the cultural significance of ruins. See, among others, Stoler 2008; Trigg 2009; Dillon 2011; Nelson and Olin 2003; in particular on “modern ruin memory” and “material memory”, see Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014.

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to Judith Butler's 2017 University College of London Houseman Lecture, “Breaks in the Bond: Reflections on Kinship Trouble,” published as a pamphlet.

<sup>5</sup> Written in Arabic, the thirteenth century work is a very well-known example of a genre of classical Islamic literature on the ‘wonders of creation’, or *mirabilia*. It was frequently illustrated, was immensely popular and was translated into Persian and Turkish.

<sup>6</sup> Though there is no explicit reference in the novel, it seems there may also be a deliberate resonance, in the title of the novel, *The Thirty Names of Night*, to the Qur'anic 99 names of Allah (Sahih al-Bukhari 2736).

<sup>7</sup> The full title of the article is: “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817” (Bhabha 1985).

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# Caring in the ‘Thick Present’: environmental crisis, ethics of interconnectedness and posthuman ecologies in *The Overstory* by Richard Powers

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyses Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* (2018) as a fictional testament to Donna Haraway’s (2016) philosophical exhortation to ‘stay with the trouble’. Haraway’s imperative stems from the observation of a world increasingly threatened by humanity’s ravenous consumption of natural resources. She proposes that we reconceptualise environmental crises not as isolated catastrophes, but as integral components of a ‘thick’ present: a densely networked, symbiotic reality demanding innovative solutions and novel forms of coexistence and kinship. In *The Overstory*, this metaphor is extended by interweaving the lives of nine individuals, each of whom is uniquely connected to trees. In the midst of a global ecological crisis, their stories illustrate different approaches to engaging with our environment. By exploring the intricate relationships between humans, nature and technology, the novel argues for a broader definition of kinship transcending genetic lineage and anthropocentric ethics in order to emphasize mutual growth and transformation within the complex web of life by defining kinship beyond genetic lineage and anthropocentric ethics. As well as promoting a holistic perspective beyond ruthless exploitation and mere stewardship, it encourages us to cultivate a sense of connection and responsibility beyond ruthless exploitation.

## Keywords

anthropocentrism, Chthulucene, environmental crisis, kinship, trees, virtual reality

## Introduction: the dancing of becoming in the cauldron of crisis

In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), Donna Haraway explores the etymological roots of the term ‘trouble’ to illustrate that our contemporary times are characterised by widespread disruption and deep-seated unrest. The term dates back to the eighteenth century when it was used to describe agitation, confusion and restlessness. She links her exploration of the concept to the broader framework of the Anthropocene, the current geological epoch characterised by overt anthropogenic impacts on the Earth’s geomorphic and ecological systems. As Haraway combines the terms trouble and Anthropocene, she emphasizes the often turbulent interplay between human activities and the environment. The Anthropocene is thus reinterpreted not solely as ecological degradation, but also as an era rife

with substantial socio-epistemological uncertainty, multiple complexities, and a confluence of crises.

However, Haraway is critical of the Anthropocene as a designation, objecting to its implication of human exceptionalism as the predominant agent of planetary transformation, a “human-centredness syndrome” as defined by Val Plumwood (2009), which involves the “the hyperseparation of humans as a special species and the reduction of non-humans to their usefulness to humans” (Plumwood 2009). To correct this circumscription, she proposes ‘Chthulucene’ as a more appropriate epithet for our time. The neologism is a deliberate etymological fusion of the Greek *khthôn* (earth or the chthonic realm) and *kainos* (new, fresh) to describe the combination of suffering and potential that defines the present age. The Chthulucene is intended as a time characterised by humanity’s deep entanglement with a troubled earth, while at the same time holding possibilities for radical transformation and renewal. Haraway argues for a communal response to the pressures of our time, stressing the critical imperative of fostering relationships and connections across diverse species and communities, an effort she refers to as ‘making kin’. This practice entails the cultivation of “inventive connections [to] live and die well with each other in a *thick present*” (Haraway 2016, 1. Emphasis is mine). Haraway’s notion of kinship eschews the fences of consanguinity, inviting all manifestations of life into the fold. It is a call for the recognition of the vast archipelago of connections that binds all beings, each uniquely connected by unseen underwater bridges of interdependence. Indeed, Haraway links the concept of the Chthulucene to “hyphae” (Haraway 2016, 2), the networked, symbiotically thread-like structures formed by fungi, to metaphorically illustrate the interrelatedness of life beyond human-centric narratives. For Haraway, hyphae represent a world in which living things are enmeshed in mutually influential relationships, emphasising the importance of symbiosis, reciprocity and the complex connections that sustain life. Such a perspective challenges us to nurture these often invisible connections and promote a culture of mutual responsibility and care in a shared environment. This paradigm shift requires a move away from the arid deserts of solipsistic human-centricity towards a more holistic appreciation of existence that recognises the inherent value and agency of all living beings.

Incorporating Karen Barad’s (2007) agential realism, Haraway elaborates an onto-epistemological framework in which the present is re-imagined not as a mere chronological juncture but as a ‘thick’ landscape, densely woven with the strings of materiality, discourse, and ongoing processes. For Haraway, the present is a complex web of relationships, a palimpsest full of possibilities and challenges, shaped by the constant interaction between humans and non-humans. Consequently, the present appears as a multi-layered concept that encompasses the intricacies of everyday existence and forces us to see how our world is shaped by our choices. Haraway’s focus on making kin and cultivating the thick present as a



profound engagement with the here and now emphasises the need not only for personal mindfulness, but also for a collective awareness of our intertwined existence with the environment and other species that requires collaborative and sustainable efforts to address the environmental and social demands of our time.

Haraway's emphasis on trouble as a bubbling cauldron that harbours both adversity and opportunity places her in line with the intellectual lineage of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), particularly their concept of 'becoming' as expounded in *A Thousand Plateaus*. For the philosophers, becoming is not a teleological path to a predetermined end point, but an ongoing process of transformation in which entities are never static or unchanging, but always in flux. Similarly, Haraway views trouble as a driving force for continual change, adaptation, evolution, and remaining responsive to the evolving complexities of our world. The act of kinship formation as Haraway conceives it, requires a new form of "response-ability" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 2), an ethical stance that prioritises responsiveness and responsibility towards the multitude of life forms with which humans are inextricably imbricated, a landscape that extends far beyond the familiar bounds of biological ties. This commitment means dealing with the problems of the present instead of retreating into utopian fantasies of the future. It calls on us to accept our mortality and the transience of existence, and urges us to recognise meaning in the midst of transience. Haraway questions the common preference for escapism, the widespread tendency to imagine a secure future by erasing the problems of the present and the past. Such an approach neglects the unpredictable fruitfulness and indeterminacy of the present. To stay with the trouble, one has to live in the present with all its contradictions and possibilities. In addition to engaging with contemporary issues, it involves cultivating presence within "myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (Haraway 2016, 1).

Chthulucene is essentially a presence attuned to the now, understanding it as a place of resistance and transformation. It points out that our task in the world is not to dominate but to participate, not to control but to co-create the ceaseless flow of existence. The Chthulucene serves as a trope for a world in perpetual motion, where boundaries blur, hierarchical structures are dismantled and unforeseen alliances emerge. It is a realm in which the fates of the human and the non-human, the animate and the inanimate are interwoven in mutual dependence and transformation.

### **A narrative of care and connection**

In alignment with the themes outlined so far, Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) unfolds as an ecological narrative investigating the intimate dependencies between humans and trees. In the novel, we follow the interwoven stories of nine Americans, each of whom is uniquely shaped by his or her connection to trees. Together, they address the urgent issue of forest

decline as part of their diverse journeys and examine humanity's voracious exploitation of nature and our collective inability to engage sensibly with the environment. In this light, the novel contributes to addressing a critical concern that, as Amitav Ghosh elucidates in his 2016 work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change, and the Unthinkable*, remains still relatively undervalued in contemporary literary discourse. Yet Powers' critique is more than a condemnation. He suggests that these challenges present an opportunity to generate new knowledge and to foster more thoughtful relationships between humans and the natural world, which can even incorporate technological advancements. Indeed, the novel provides a glimpse into a reimagined world where humanity can potentially shed its anthropocentric perspective and embrace a kinship with all life forms, both organic and digital. This expanded view of kinship – a “new perspective on the world [...] in which humans are not the telos of the intricate webs of being” (Hess 2020, 190) – acknowledges the diverse intelligences that coexist on our planet, and concedes that even the silicon pathways of technology are but another branch on the ever-evolving tree of life. This analysis seeks to shed light on the manifold modes of kinship described in the novel, especially as viable responses to the ecological and existential predicaments of the present. Examining these diverse affiliations allows us to better understand how *The Overstory* not only queries human behaviour but also charts a course toward a more harmonious and reciprocal coexistence with nature.

The opening section of the novel, aptly titled “Roots”, introduces the fundamental concept that nature communicates with us through a language that exceeds verbal and visual limitations. Echoing David Abram's evocative portrayal of the land's unspoken tongues in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997) – whispers of wind and scent that have become muffled by the clamour of civilisation – this section paints a vivid tableau of an unnamed woman communing with a pine tree, her senses finely honed to the soft murmurs of the natural world. The evocative note, “Her ears tune down to the lowest frequencies” (Powers 2018, 6), serves as a metaphor for a radical recalibration of our sensory receptors to the more-than-human world in order to truly connect with nature. This introductory passage is more than just a poetic vignette; it is an invocation to re-evaluate our perceptual and existential matrices. Powers invites us to engage with the environment on a more instinctive and visceral level, to decipher the “messages [and] words before words” (Powers 2018, 6) that resonate with ecological wisdom and existential truths through the rustling leaves, the sougling wind, and the creaking bark.

Consistent with Donna Haraway's call on multispecies kinship and a re-attunement of our senses to perceive and respond to the voices of “other critters” (2016, 3), Powers infuses his narrative with vivid instances of non-human communication: alders recount histories like ancient bards, walnuts extend “bribes” (Powers 2018, 7) in the form of delectable nourishment, and oaks become oracles of enigmatic futures not yet grasped by human understanding. This animistic portrayal paints nature as an active broadcaster, constantly emitting signals that often

elude our limited sensory bandwidth. Powers pinpoints a “root problem” (Powers 2018, 7) based on our constrained perception: we tend to fixate on the visible aspects of trees, their towering structures above ground, neglecting the vast subterranean networks that sustain them. Such a truncated perspective or narrow focus – ironically based on the epistemological paradigm of ocularcentrism (Jay 1988) re-attunement – limits our ability to fully grasp the interconnectedness of the natural world. The image of missing “half of it, and more” (Powers 2018, 7) evokes ecological philosopher Timothy Morton’s (2017) concept of the ‘mesh’, whereby “things are intimately interconnected in ways that render the whole idea of a thing hopelessly naive” (31).

In Powers’ narrative, the tree emerges as an “extended metaphor” (Masiero 2020, 137) for the kind of speculative fabulation made of string figures and *soin de ficelle* that Haraway (2016, 149) sees as consonant with the Chthulucene: its limbs and roots illustrate the journey of life, each branching representing a new path for the development of “material-semiotic [...] patterns and stories” (Haraway 2016, 50) within the broader landscape of existence. Though seemingly static, trees are depicted as intrepid explorers, their branches stretching skyward like inquisitive fingers and whose roots penetrate deep into the earthen womb, tentacularly seeking new connections with the unseen beneath the soil. Their sprawling drive for expansion and interconnectedness reflects the fundamental nature of life itself, echoing Haraway’s assertion that a network of connectivity is the only viable way to live. The nine protagonists of the novel, who are initially isolated, gradually become closer through their interactions with trees and their commitment to environmental protection. The branching patterns of the trees are woven into the structure of the novel and serve as a double metaphor for temporal progression and kinship. Like a single branch, each character’s life path unfolds independently, yet remains inextricably linked to the others through the ‘wood wide web’ of life (Simard 1997), a fine-grained system of experiences and bonds that transcend typical human lifespans and cognitive limitations.

For example, the Hoel family’s multi-generational project to photograph a chestnut tree, spanning over a century, resulted in a time-lapse film that presents a stark contrast between the hectic pace of human life and the calm, measured unfolding of nature. In March 1903, John Hoel began the practice of taking a picture of the tree every month from an unchanged perspective. This ritual is conscientiously continued by his descendants, resulting in a roll of film that documents the unhurried history of the tree. Those accumulated photos illustrate the contrast between humanity’s fleeting dramas and the tree’s patient growth. The way Powers manipulates chronological time makes human events fly by like shadows against the stoic tree backdrop, a silent witness whose apparent stillness belies its steady, purposeful progress, an “invisible plan” (Powers 2018, 280) unfolding on a timescale far beyond human comprehension. This “oldest, shortest, slowest, most ambitious silent movie ever shot in Iowa”

(Powers 2018, 16), as Powers describes it, compresses time into a digestible format that human observers can grasp, allowing us to peer into the majestic temporal scale of the tree: an arboreal chronotope, in Bakhtinian terms (1981), against which human lives flicker and fade. This shift in pace is a cornerstone of critical posthumanism, which argues for a decentring of the anthropocentric perspective in order to recognise the very different time scales of other beings. Powers encourages us to decelerate and adjust to the slower “speed of wood” (Powers 2018, 18) in order to question our assumptions about what enduring meaning is. Ultimately, the Hoel family’s centennial documentation project is about more than recording; it is about connecting with the deeper meanings that lie beyond the ephemeral concerns of life. It is a quest for the ‘whys’ surrounded by the labyrinthine vagaries of human fate and nature’s seemingly unfathomable workings.

Powers’ fascination with life’s often mysterious entanglements is exemplified by the story of Douglas Pavlicek, a former Air Force pilot. His life is miraculously saved by a centuries-old banyan tree’s enveloping branches when his plane is shot down over Thailand. Douglas’ accidental rescue is a calculated narrative decision designed to foster a sense of kinship between man and nature. This kinship is built upon recognising and honouring the unpredictable interdependence of all living beings that sustains the lattice of life, “the yoking together of companion species” (Haraway 2016, 124) that bursts the frame in which human scales of time and space are contained. Douglas’ experience of deforestation upon returning to America deepens his understanding of these connections. As he looks at the devastated landscapes of the clear-cut hillsides in Oregon, once bursting with green life, he is shocked by mankind’s rapacious appetite for resources. Reforesting these areas with Douglas fir seedlings – trees bearing his own name – becomes his act of atonement and defiance. With his loving care, he “tucks each one in” (Powers 2018, 85), emphasizing man’s nurturing relationship with nature as opposed to the extractive interactions that led to the clear-cut. His parting words to the saplings, a gloomy prophecy with a hint of hope, illustrate the profound realisation of the temporal discrepancy between the lifespan of humans and trees: “Hang on. Only ten or twenty decades. Child’s play, for you guys. You just have to outlast us. Then no one will be left to fuck you over” (Powers 2018, 85). Douglas uses a sombre but poignant metaphor here, suggesting that the saplings need only weather the temporary storm of human destruction – just a blink of an eye in their long lifetimes – to eventually reclaim their rightful place in a posthuman landscape.

In the novel, psychologist Adam Appich eloquently illuminates a critical blind spot intrinsic to human cognition: we are ill-equipped to perceive slow changes, particularly when juxtaposed with immediate, attention-commanding stimuli. We cling to the present moment, often absolutizing it, because of our inability to perceive the incremental processes of nature. Simons and Levin (1997) correlate this phenomenon to a psychological bias they term ‘change

blindness’, the propensity to overlook the subtle brushstrokes of change on the immense canvas of Earth’s timescales, like the slow tectonic creep of continents or the gradual pace of species’ evolution – what Roman Krznaric (2020) refers to as ‘deep time’ or Fernand Braudel as *longue durée* (1958) – while being captivated by the dramatic shifts or the sudden thunderclap seizing the present moment. This bias towards prioritising the immediate has severe consequences for environmental cognizance and action, fueling the pervasive short-termism that dominates contemporary social and political thinking. Similarly, the concept of “slow violence,” introduced by Rob Nixon (2011), describes the encroaching, often invisible harm inflicted by humanity on the natural world, which underlies myriad ecological crises, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and soil degradation. Yet, due to its lack of immediacy and salience, this damage builds so slowly that it escapes the perceptual acuity of both the public and policy makers, preoccupied with the more pressing demands of everyday concerns or enthralled by the allure of sensational news.

However, the acceptance of plants as active participants in the great theatre of life requires a reassessment of the ethical implications of our actions. The novel exposes the often unprovoked cruelty and dishonesty that permeate human behaviour, especially when it is driven by self-interest. This ethical dilemma is illustrated through the depiction of systemic corruption within law enforcement agencies, which are portrayed as instruments of powerful business organisations. Such a collusion creates an uneven playing field subjecting environmental defenders to intimidation, violence, and even torture. In response to this injustice, five characters – ceramic engineer Mimi Ma, resigned student in Actuarial Science Olivia Vandergriff, artist Nick Hoel, Adam and Douglas themselves – unite in environmental activism. Their acts of sabotage against logging equipment are desperate efforts to “do what little they could to stop the race from killing itself” (Powers 2018, 293). The scientific community is not exempt from this perfidy. Patricia Westerford’s groundbreaking research on arboreal aerial communication is initially met with ridicule and professional ostracism by a dismissive counter-article, effectively sabotaging her career. However, her work is eventually vindicated and recognised for its pioneering potential. The metaphor of her “words [...] drifting out into the open air, lighting up others, like a waft of pheromones” (Powers 2018, 125) vividly captures the pervasive impact of new ideas and the resilience of truth to overcome adversity. Patricia demonstrates plants are not passive objects but beings imbued with volition, cunning, and aspirations: “plants are willful and crafty and after something, just like people” (Powers 2018, 197). This perspective critiques the anthropocentric hubris that blinds humanity to the agency of non-human life forms: “[We are] Plant-blind. [...] We only see things that look like us” (Powers 2018, 107). Patricia’s insights reveal a shared lexicon of survival among all life forms, articulated not in spoken words but in the silent poetry of growth, collaboration, and experimentation. The subplot involving Olivia’s tragic demise in a planned arson attack in Idaho

precipitates Adam in a Faustian bargain to betray a comrade for a lighter sentence, driven by his wife's plea to prioritise their son's future; a reflection of the evolutionary drive to safeguard one's offspring and genetic legacy, as outlined by Hamilton (1964). Adam's agonising decision to protect Mimi instead reveals a profound "ecosophical" (Riem 2021, 29) epiphany about the broader implications of their shared cause. His personal interests give way to a more inclusive vision that considers the welfare of all life forms, embodying principles of ecofeminism and deep ecology (Naess 1973; Warren 1990), where the web of kinship expands to encompass both human and non-human entities, as well as the broader environment.

Powers positions his narrative as a cautionary tale (Allardice 2018; Gillette 2017) against the corrosive effects of unchecked greed on our moral values, advocating for a paradigm shift in our understanding of kinship. His storytelling explores the need to redefine the relationships between humanity and the natural world by delving deep into themes of loyalty, moral boundaries, and the tug-of-war between individual and communal obligations. Adam, a frequent target of bullying as a child, is baffled by his peers' unwarranted cruelty. Seeking solace in nature, he observes a colony of ants, a microcosm of emergent hive mind that functions as a self-organising unit and challenges our anthropocentric notions of intelligence, where individual achievements often overshadow collective wisdom. Adam's realisation that "nobody's in charge" (Powers 2018, 52) yet the colony thrives, triggers a speculative inquiry into the nature of consciousness and the potential for intelligences that differ radically from human cognition: "Something so different from human intelligence that intelligence thinks it's nothing" (Powers 2018, 52). This observation provides a sharp relief to the hierarchical, competitive structures of human society that have left him bruised and disenchanted, inviting a deeper reflection on the viability of 'healthy' alternatives to human propensity for destructive self-harm and ecological havoc. Addressing the psychological barriers to sustainable living, Powers highlights the paradox of human behaviour, which operates under the false pretence of limitless abundance despite the reality of finite resources. He identifies this unsustainable exploitation of Earth's limited resources as a precursor to inevitable ecological collapse (a concern also highlighted by Meadows, 1972). Powers points to the 'bystander effect' as a compounding factor, a psychological phenomenon whereby individuals in large groups are less likely to take action, assuming someone else will. This diffusion of responsibility, like a "dense fog of mutual reinforcement" (Powers 2018, 203), creates a collective paralysis (Latane and Darley 1968) even in the face of clear danger or impending crisis: "The larger the group [...] the harder it is to cry, Fire" (Powers 2018, 274). When confronted with harsh ecological realities, our inability to escape entrenched patterns of thought and behaviour fuels a cycle of crisis and destruction (Festinger 1957). The misuse of human intelligence for the infliction of harm and self-annihilation chillingly echoes Günther Anders' (1980a; 1980b) concept of the

‘Promethean discrepancy’, where our technological prowess has far outpaced our moral compass.

Powers’ plea goes beyond ecological lamentation. He suggests a radical rethinking of our social and cognitive structures and asks whether humans could gain more strength and resilience through a decentralised mode of existence, following the cooperative model of ants. Could we learn to value diversity and connectedness over individualism and competition? In the novel, an intellectual property lawyer, Ray Brinkman, challenges the anthropocentric assumption that only humans deserve rights and dignity. The intellectual property lawyer proposes a broader, ecological approach to law that sees plants, animals, and humans as one organism. Brinkman’s analogy of the human mind as a developmental stage of the earth is particularly compelling, since it paves the way for more forms of kinship beyond exploitative relationships that reduce nature to mere resources for human consumption, and for a symbiosis that involves responsible technological advancement.

### **Tentacular thinking: a vision of posthuman ecologies**

The theme of posthuman ecologies is explored through the story of Neelay Mehta, the son of Indian immigrants, whose entry into the digital world is triggered by a simple computer kit given to him by his father Babul when he was young. In this early phase of the digital revolution, Babul prophetically equates the potential of a tiny seed to topple a temple with the transformative power of a small computer that can blossom into a vast repository of human knowledge. The meticulous construction of their first computer is portrayed not just as a technical labour, but as an act of love akin to the procreation of a new life form, a digital progeny brought into being by human ingenuity. Neelay’s impatience with the constant drumbeat of Moore’s Law, which predicts a constant doubling of computing power, reveals his desire for accelerated technological progress. His constant quest for more RAM, MIPS and pixels epitomises an unquenchable thirst for ever more powerful tools to design social interactions and infrastructures with technological finesse. Building a computer isn’t just a matter of assembly; it is a genesis that takes programming from a mechanical exercise to a creative act that breathes life into silicon.

The story takes a surprising turn when Neelay gets paralyzed by a tree accident, an ironic reversal of Douglas’ life-saving encounter. Despite his paralysis, Neelay makes an outstanding career as a programmer, liberated from conventional constraints. His paralysis teaches him to view his body as an ‘avatar’, an external representation of his true essence, which resides inside his mind and soul. His goal is to develop a video game series called *Mastery*, a virtual Eden where players can assume any identity they want. Dreams can take root and flourish in these games, which are like complex ecosystems not constrained by physical limitations. In Neelay’s story branching plays a central role, as it does in botany and

in computing. As trees spread their roots and shoots to nourish a diverse ecosystem, Neelay's code spreads to create huge virtual worlds. The metaphor of the tree as "a passage between earth and sky" (Powers 2018, 52, 54) epitomises the role of technology in bridging the tangible and the ethereal, in anchoring imagination and creative thought to reality. This is a theme close to Powers, as noted by Masiero (2020). Powers had already taken it up in *Orpheus* (2014), an earlier novel in which musician Peter Els attempts to transform the imperceptible patterns of DNA into auditory expression. Neelay's work goes way beyond just making games or entertainment; it is an act of creating worlds that expand the scope of human experience. The point of Neelay's games is to "keep playing" (Powers 2018, 170), like the natural instinct of branches to grow and multiply, encouraging continuous exploration and interaction. The paths in his virtual worlds are endless, with each journey going in a different direction. Through this digital chemistry, Neelay skilfully transforms the raw data of binary code into rich, interactive stories that sustain life in the digital ecosystem.

Neelay's narrative takes another unsettling slant, however, when he realises that his virtual utopia, created as a refuge from the mundane to spark unbridled creativity, is unintentionally overshadowed by exploitation, power struggles and greed – the same societal scourges and ills it sought to escape. This insight is triggered by a disillusioned player who identifies a Midas problem within the game. Like the mythical king whose golden touch ultimately threatened his own survival, players in *Mastery Online* are trapped in an endless cycle of accumulation depriving their virtual lives of meaning and purpose. Powers' observation that "human history [is] the story of increasingly disoriented hunger" (2018, 21), suggests that humanity's relentless quest for 'more' – even beyond basic needs – is a fundamental trait driving historical progress and social dynamics: "A reporter once asked Rockefeller how much is enough. His answer: Just a little bit more. And that's all we want: to eat and sleep, to stay dry and be loved, and acquire just a little bit more" (Powers 2018, 376). While this relentless craving propels progress, it also perpetuates inequality and environmental degradation. As Powers points out, material gains can't satisfy deep existential needs, despite humanity's material abundance: "Life is so generous, and we are so... inconsolable. But nothing I can say will wake the sleepwalk or make this suicide seem real. It can't be real, right? I mean, here we are, all still" (Powers 2018, 377). He eloquently delineates the detrimental repercussions of unchecked consumption, both in an ecological context and within the confines of a densely populated virtual simulation, and thus a fundamental paradox of the human condition: we possess sophisticated cognitive abilities yet are hampered by deeply ingrained social instincts. This duality is evidenced in the work of Tversky and Kahneman (1974), who have meticulously catalogued the numerous cognitive biases that distort our decision-making. These biases, relics of ancient heuristics once essential for survival, now hinder us as rusty cogs in the complex machinery of modern life. Like a computer running outdated software, our brains are



saddled with “legacy behaviours and biases” (Powers 2018, 58), struggling to meet the complex demands of contemporary life. Powers goes on to paint us as “sly, social-climbing opportunists” (Powers 2018, 58), who construct social frameworks as elaborate mazes of manipulation and rivalry, a bitter fruit borne from our evolutionary ascent. The Swiftian emphasis on our social instincts being both blessings and curses shows up again and again in Power’s exploration of human nature.

Neelay’s solution is to create a virtual world that follows natural law. This “new Age of Exploration” (Powers 2018, 346) is intended to mirror the evolution of biological life and prioritise cooperation and ecological balance. Interestingly, in this virtual environment, high above Adam’s prison (a symbol of human constraint), a new form of kinship emerges. Humans and artificial intelligence (AI) entities merge, evolving into hybrid beings equipped with instinctive behaviours to “look, listen, taste, touch, feel, say, join” (Powers 2018, 409). They are compelled to explore, communicate, and collaborate. This confluence of technology and nature, where digital entities emulate the vital functions of organic life, is a tribute to the kind of “tentacular thinking” that Haraway (2016, 30) endorses as representative of the Chthulucene as an alternative to “human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics [that do not allow] the best biologies of the twenty-first century [to] sustain the overflowing richness of biological knowledges” (Haraway 2016, 30). Neelay’s digital progeny exchange information and integrate their “cells” (Powers 2018, 419), “absorb everything [and] eat every scrap of data” (Powers 2018, 419), and even “think like rivers and forests and mountains” (Powers 2018, 411), effectively underscoring their capacity to reach out, grasp and tangle seemingly disparate modes of knowledge and narrative, bridging human linguistic constructs with the more elusive “language of green things” (Powers 2018, 411). Their initial communication with the natural world, a tentative “Hello” (Powers 2018, 89), marks the dawn of a new multisensory, multidirectional, richly networked era of “collective knowing and doing[,] an ecology of practices” (Haraway 2016, 34) aimed at tackling environmental challenges and fostering a sustainable future.

Neelay’s intricate interplay of creation is a narrative of human progress in which biological and digital developments are interwoven as integral parts of a purposeful narrative of adaptation and growth. His initiative is not just about coding, but about cultivating new forms of life in the digital realm. While Powers’ novel does not directly address the prospective changes to human experience in a digital epoch – for example, the shifting contours of sexuality under transhuman conditions – it nonetheless hints at an underlying intelligence in which technology plays a fundamental role in the uninterrupted narrative of nature. In this conceptualisation, the cybernetic empyrean emerges as a vital branch of the “massive tree of life” (Powers 2018, 407), an evolutionary outgrowth of human intellect, so long as it is not misconstrued, as is often the case, as merely a virtual simulacrum of the material realm. Such

a misunderstanding, as previously discussed, would risk reintroducing the very forms of subjective individualism that we should be seeking to transcend. Humans are both progeny, participants and facilitators of this evolution, acting as intermediaries in the continuous unfolding of both biological and technological realms. Powers ingeniously draws a parallel between the emergence of photosynthesis and Neelay's creation of a virtual ecosystem teeming with life. Just as that single, self-replicating cell harnessed the power of sunlight to transform Earth's toxic landscapes into thriving ecosystems for the propagation of diverse life forms, Neelay's digital platform cultivates a dynamic kinship between humans and AI, transforming human desires into digital realities. This silent symbiosis, blending flesh and code in mutual empowerment, heralds the transformative alchemy of trouble.

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## Care and Liberation in the Black Anthropocenes: apocalypse, justice and family abolition in N.K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy and Cherie Dimaline’s *Marrow Thieves* series

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### ABSTRACT

Cherie Dimaline’s *Marrow Thieves* series (2017-2021) and N.K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017) are examples of speculative fiction that interweave post-apocalyptic settings with issues of racial, social and climate (in)justice. Dimaline’s work is a Young Adult dystopian series in which the Indigenous people of Canada are hunted for their bone marrow, which is employed to cure settlers from a madness-inducing incapacity to dream, resulting from the effects of climate collapse and capitalism. Jemisin’s novels are a speculative fiction series set in a world besieged by earthquakes, whose planetary predicament is connected to the ongoing oppression of marginalized groups. Both writers explore worlds in which the vulnerability of oppressed racialized people is inseparable from a proximity with, and an intimacy with, ecological devastation, staging speculative versions of what Kathryn Yusoff has called, in reference to real-world contexts, Black Anthropocenes. Since both series connect the project of *ending* the Black Anthropocenes with kinship and family, while being fully aware that kinship/familial formations can either be revolutionary or reinforcing systems of oppression, I read both through the concept of *family abolition*, understood as finding alternatives to the hegemonic institution of the family while dismantling the hierarchies, systems and uneven power relations it helps to defend. Relying on family-abolitionists like Sophie Lewis, Brigitte Vassallo and others, I explore, through Jemisin, how relations of care, liberation and autonomy can be revolutionary antidotes to kinship relations of ownership; and, through Dimaline, how the nuclear family (and the nation) entails a logic of sacrificial otherness.

### Keywords

N. K. Jemisin, Cherie Dimaline, family abolition, Black Anthropocenes, kinship, apocalypse

### Ending the Black Anthropocenes

Both N.K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy – comprising *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016) and *The Stone Sky* (2017) – and Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* series – consisting of the eponymous 2017 book and its sequel *Hunting by Stars* (2021) – have brought to the foreground marginalised voices within the heterogeneous “field of cultural production” (Oziewicz 2017) of speculative fiction. Jemisin was the first Black American writer to win a Hugo award with *The Fifth Season* in 2016, amidst reactionary backlash, and went on winning for two consecutive years (see Dosser 2023). During her award speech for *The Stone Sky* in 2018, she declared that she wrote the trilogy to address “what it takes just to live, let alone

thrive, in a world that seems determined to break you” – referring both to the “the human history of structural oppression” that inspired her work, and to her feelings about the gatekeeping mechanisms of the world of science fiction (Jemisin 2018). Dimaline, a member of the Métis Nation of Ontario, claimed that she wrote her dystopian novel as she “wanted Indigenous readers to feel strong and powerful,” and “to break down some of the isolation that Indigenous youth might feel. [...] To know that they belong to a larger community and they’re loved” (Dimaline 2017b). Just as Jemisin’s work represents a major victory for the diversification of fantasy and science fiction, Dimaline’s is an important intervention within the popular subgenre of Young Adult dystopias, “[addressing] Indigenous people’s lived experiences explicitly in a genre that has too few Indigenous voices” (Murphy 2024, 77).

An equally significant convergence between the two series is how they use post-apocalyptic settings to connect issues of racial, social *and* climate/environmental (in)justice. In Dimaline’s series, set in Canada in the mid-21st century, Indigenous peoples are hunted for their bone marrow, employed to cure white settlers from a madness-inducing incapacity to dream, resulting from the conjoined effects of climate breakdown, the conflicts it sparked, and post-collapse capitalism attempting to rebuild itself. The series also revisits the legacy of the Canadian residential schools, which become the model for a new set of institutions where settlers extract bone marrow from their Indigenous victims. As the series proceeds, the new schools grow increasingly monstrous, being transformed into human farms where Indigenous babies are intended to be bred from captive mothers and harvested. On the other hand, the narrative establishes that fighting the plague of dreamlessness would require to uphold social, political and ecological ‘dreams’ that precede and overcome capitalist and colonial extractivism, as the Indigenous protagonists aspire to do.

Jemisin’s novels, on the other hand, are set in the ironically named continent called the Stillness, besieged by earthquakes and by phases of environmental collapse called Fifth Seasons. Central to the trilogy is the predicament of orogenes (disparagingly called ‘roggas’), who can control the earth’s seismic force. Orogenes are shunned and murdered due to their feared gift, while also forcibly recruited and exploited by an institution called the Fulcrum. Jemisin’s setting is fictional, but the oppression of orogenes echoes aspects of the Black experience in America: orogenes can be killed, are legally considered non-humans, are denied bodily and reproductive autonomy, and are subjected to surveillance and self-policing to ensure that they are not a danger to “stills” (non-orogenes) – which translates in faithfully obeying their merciless custodians, the Guardians. Moreover, the oppression of orogenes, whose nature is initially unknown to themselves and others, and can disrupt otherwise ‘normal’ families, is also queer-coded. Finally, like in Dimaline, the oppression of minorities is linked with environmental breakdown. As revealed in *The Stone Sky*, the world’s state of upheaval is the legacy of a collapsed, technocratic civilization that attempted to control the very energy of

the Earth through a network of obelisks called the Plutonic Engine. The Engine, built through the genocide of another people, the Thniess, was sabotaged by a group of artificial slaves called tuners, and by the very Earth, who is revealed, throughout the series, as a sentient living being. This sabotage, however, kicked off the Moon – the Earth’s only child – from the Earth’s orbit, and initiated the Seasons, which the vengeful entity periodically unleashes over humanity.

Both writers employ speculative imagination to explore how the vulnerability of oppressed racialized people is inseparable from ecological devastation, staging (semi-) fictional versions of what Kathryn Yusoff has called Black Anthropocenes: “the proximity of black and brown bodies to harm in [an] intimacy with the nonhuman” (Yusoff 2018, xii). In both series, the oppression of marginalized groups – the enslaved orogenes, used as tools against the Earth’s revenge, and Indigenous peoples, harvested to produce medicine – provide a temporary fix to a societal and ecological crisis that, however, postpones the actual solution: the abolition of those very systems of exploitation that are responsible for, and perpetuate, the crisis. Crucially, Yusoff talks of a *billion* Black Anthropocenes, to stress how “imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialism have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence” (xiii). The point, then, in Jemisin’s words, is to ensure that “*the world ends. For the last time*” (Jemisin 2015, 14): these are the ominous words that accompany the moment in which Alabaster, a rebel orogene, unleashes a Fifth Season as he destroys the seat of the Fulcrum, Yumenes, at the beginning of the series. However, this latest apocalypse is part of a plan to broker a truce with the Earth and *end* the Seasons. ‘Ending the world for the last time’ means finding a way to vanquish the forces and systems that have locked the world in a state of catastrophe and oppression, and actually end the Black Anthropocenes.

Neither series, however, suggests that intensifying the crisis will, by itself, solve anything. Apocalyptic times can only be survived by generating networks of care, family and kinship *while* abolishing the oppressive status quo – though discriminating which networks are truly revolutionary is one of the central problems of both series. In the *Broken Earth* trilogy, the burden of finalizing the truce with the Earth is put on the series’ protagonist, the orogene Essun, whose quest will be to use the Plutonic Engine to return the Earth’s missing child – the Moon – to her father’s orbit. Alabaster’ plan, therefore, starts with massive destruction but entails *restitution* on a planetary scale. To do so, however, Essun will need the support of a network of companions, and, simultaneously, to make amends with her estranged daughter Nassun. Dimaline, in turn, points out that Indigenous peoples are the ideal protagonists of an apocalyptic setting – “who better to write a story about people surviving an apocalypse than a people who already had?” (Diaz and Dimaline 2017, n.p.) – but posits, as key for their survival, the existence of networks of kinship like those sustaining Frenchie, the Métis protagonist of the series.

It is no surprise, then, that many scholars have analysed the *Broken Earth* trilogy and *The Marrow Thieves* series through the lenses of kinship and family. In the following sections of this essay I join this critical discussion, but I also shift the theoretical focus to the concept of *family abolition*, understood as finding alternatives to the hegemonic institution of the family while dismantling the hierarchies, systems and uneven power relations it helps defend. An abolitionist framework, as I argue in the next section, suits the poetics of both series.

### Family Abolition

Family abolition can be defined as a project to “overcome privatised family arrangements as the basis for survival” in order to “[articulate] alternative social forms capable of meeting people’s needs” (Gotby 2022, 112). It starts from the insight that capitalist and colonial modernity has imposed a normative form of the family as its fundamental reproductive unit: the nuclear family, also understood as a “familial romantic dyad” that produces a baby on which it has “property rights [...] but also quasi-exclusive accountability” (Lewis 2022, 5). As Sophie Lewis argues, such societal arrangement, tasked with care work in capitalist (and especially neoliberal) societies, is actually “doing a bad job at care” and “is getting in the way of alternatives” (Lewis 2022, 5). Family abolitionist alternatives may variously encompass collective child-bearing, non-monogamous relationships, re-envisioning elder care, imagining forms of communal living, implementing radical welfare policies, or conceiving/practicing forms of queer kinship that are able to deconstruct the principle of genealogy (see Guarracino 2025). Their core principle, however, is always a democratization and universalization of care, through a “commitment to making care necessary for human flourishing freely available throughout society” (O’Brien 2023, 6), while also rejecting “the harmful relationships of domination that the family form enables” (O’Brien 2023, 6).

Family abolition is not new: Lewis reconstructs a “potted history” of ‘family abolitionist’ ideas that ranges from 19<sup>th</sup> French philosopher Charles Fourier and early Bolshevik utopianism to second-wave feminism, Gay, Lesbian – and Children’s – liberation, and contemporary trans Marxism (Lewis 2022, 40-74). This history is by no means exclusively white or western. It also includes the experience of “pre-colonized and Indigenous populations” who “did not develop the form of private property ‘the family’,” but “had it imposed on them as part of the process of disciplining them into capitalism” (Lewis 2019, 40); and of “people newly emancipated from chattel slavery in the US,” who “also pursued heterogeneous, anti-propertarian versions of kinship” (Lewis 2019, 43). Both experiences variously find echo in contemporary Indigenous and Black thought on family and kinship. Dakota scholar Kim TallBear, for instance, reflects on kinmaking as a better alternative to liberal multiculturalism to tackle the genocidal actions of the US settler state, which encompassed, historically, “forced conversion to private property, agriculture, Christianity, monogamous marriage and nuclear family” (TallBear 2021, n.p.).

Black British writer Lola Olufemi includes, in her book *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise*, reflections on how “the nuclear family turns children into property” and how “to be young is to know that much of your life [...] is being organised by some other entity: your caregivers, the state, structuralised brutality” (Olufemi 2021, 144). She therefore engages with family abolitionist ideas as part of a Black feminist framework.

Being posited to operate against multiple, interlocked forms of oppression, family abolition can thus be connected to a decolonial project of undoing the “several entangled global hierarchies” (Grosfoguel 2010, 70) introduced globally by modernity/coloniality, including the superiority of the nuclear family over other forms of communal (and commons-oriented) love, relationality, care and mutual aid. Family abolition, therefore, also recovers practices that “pre-date anti-capitalism and [that] weren’t originally projects to ‘abolish’ or ‘queer’ anything” (Lewis 2019, 148); that said, in trying to “overcome familial sexual regulation” and the way it produces “appropriately heterosexual and cis gendered subjects with the correct desires – not only for heterosex but for the reproduction of the family form and its attendant forms of property,” family abolition is “inherently queer” (Gotby 2022, 112).

Family abolition is complicated by the fact that the ‘family’ is often seen as a last line of defence against exploitation and scarcity. However, as Kathy Weeks points out:

the model of the nuclear family that has served subordinated groups as a fence against the state, society and capital is the very same white, settler, bourgeois, heterosexual and patriarchal institution that was imposed by the state, society and capital on the formerly enslaved, indigenous peoples, and waves of immigrants, all of whom continue to be at once in need of its meagre protections and marginalized by its legacies and prescriptions. (Weeks 2021, 436)

That means that family abolition cannot be a purely destructive project, leaving unaddressed a specific function that family is, however badly, currently responding to, especially for marginalized people. Instead, it entails “[isolating] that which is liberatory about the kinship-ideal, buried within the material misery that is familiarized society,” namely “reciprocal care, interdependence, and belonging” (Lewis 2022, 81-82), and finding better vehicles to actualize these “utopian kernels” (81). This process of creative destruction is actually at the heart of other abolitionist processes: projects of police and prison abolition, for instance, are “a bigger idea than firing cops and closing prisons,” and include “eliminating the reasons people think they need cops and prisons in the first place” (Purnell 2021, 6) by building meaningful alternatives.

Nevertheless, abolitionist projects often exist in a space of fearful uncertainty. Brigitte Vassallo, for instance, discusses the abolition – closely connected to *family* abolition – of the hierarchical, competitive and identitarian logic she calls monogamous thinking, which she sees as the underlying logic of both the romantic dyad/nuclear family and of the nation-state. Embracing this form of abolition, for Vassallo, involves what she calls polyamorous terror: the



sense of vulnerability connected to abandoning the often misery-inducing but *familiar* havens of these ‘monogamous’ institutions (see Vassallo 2018, 200). Nevertheless, this terror can be channelled in “an actual terrorist movement, turning our body and our affects into a threat to the very foundations of capitalist relations, of the monogamous sex-gender system, and of racial and class privileges” (Vassallo 2018, 200, my translation). The terror may be worth it, because it will, she argues, leave the empire without subjects (Vassallo 2018, 205).

Family abolition is best understood within a series of what Derecka Purnell calls “dynamic abolitionisms that depart from all forms of oppression” (Purnell 2021, 227). Purnell cites “decolonization, disability justice, Earth justice and socialism” (Purnell 2021, 227) as the companions of her police and prison abolitionist project, and the list works for family abolition as well. This intersectionality, as well as the destructive-creative logic of abolition, echoes the politics and poetics of the *Broken Earth* and *Marrow Thieves* series: both are about abolishing and replacing entrenched systems of racial, class and ecological exploitation engendering self-perpetuating apocalyptic scenarios; and are concerned with kinship and family as part of this project. In short: what is the space for family-abolitionist ideas in the apocalyptic Black Anthropocenes of Jemisin’s and Dimaline’s fiction? I am mostly interested in two lines of discussion: through Jemisin, I explore relationships of collective care, liberation and autonomy as revolutionary antidotes to kinship relationships of ownership; and, through Dimaline, I investigate the logic of the nuclear family (and of the nation) as based sacrificing anyone external to it, while extending (hollow) assimilationist promises to Indigenous peoples.

A note on terminology: it may seem that family *reform* is a more palatable alternative to family abolition – and one major (conceptual) reform could simply be arguing, in Harawayian fashion, that ‘kinship’ actually names the better alternative to the bio-reproductive idea of the family. But I agree with Lewis that it is worth considering the more radical family-abolitionist effort to “loosen, unseat, and unlearn the thought, practice, and language of ‘kinship’,” which always brings back to the idea of “a *guarantee (we are kin)* tethered to a metaphysical plane” and that we would be better served by “concepts with more bite, like ‘comradeliness’ or ‘accomplice’” (Lewis 2022, 84-85). That said, in accommodating the language used in the novels and the scholarship I rely on, my analysis engages with the idea of positively connoted forms of family/kinship. Terminology aside, however, the kind of ‘reform’ of kinship that both series enact lands us, in my view, within abolitionist territory.

### The Broken Earth trilogy

Let us start with Jemisin, whose trilogy conjoins an investigation of the world-saving power of relations predicated on radical autonomy with a staunch attack on proprietary kinship, including the one practiced by marginalized groups. Such reflection, for Jemisin, is rooted in her

experience as a Black woman. In writing about *The Fifth Season*, she points out that a crucial reference for her was:

the black family. Really, any families formed under oppressive conditions – but obviously black families are what I know best. [...] how people grow and protect and survive together when their very personhood is in question. How love camouflages itself when it's under constant threat. (Jemisin 2016a, n.p.)

Implied in this statement is the question of how (familial) love can become revolutionary – instead of reproducing oppressive dynamics – under a state of vulnerability. In the trilogy, this is explored through Essun – also called Damaya and Syenite. Specifically, Essun's engagement with kinship – rejecting some forms and embracing others – is key to shape her revolutionary subjecthood. I agree with Michael Pitts that “a pivotal message of Jemisin's trilogy is that kinship is a salient ingredient of revolution and that the concept itself must be divorced from strict genealogical accounts to bring about such meaningful change” (Pitts 2023, 135–36).

Essun/Damaya's birth family immediately expels her when her orogeny is discovered. Lisa Swanstrom interprets Essun's orogeny as symbolic of the violation of “the nuclear family—that special ‘triad’,” which, if understood as an “an inviolable structure,” must swiftly punish transgressions from the norm (Swanstrom 2023, 157). In her interpretation, Damaya's ‘transgression’ “is not causally linked to the nuclear family, but her punishment, handed down by her mother and father, is” (Swanstrom 2023, 157). Her punishment, besides, involves handing her to the Fulcrum, thus reinforcing one of the hegemonic institutions of this world, sustained by oppressive kinship formations. Case in point, Damaya's Guardian Schaffa, who does happen to actually ‘love’ the orogenes in his care, nevertheless breaks her hand to teach her that, as Damaya puts it:

“I have to do what you say or you'll hurt me.”

“And?”

“And,” she adds, “you'll hurt me even when I do obey. If you think you should.” (Jemisin 2015, 102)

To this, Schaffa adds: “What I do [is] about control. Give me no reason to doubt yours, and I will never hurt you again” (Jemisin 2015, 102–103). Schaffa epitomizes the conditional love that proprietary relations – from parenthood-as-ownership to the master-slave relationship – cloak themselves with. That form of love, and the constant threat of retribution, disciplines Damaya into an obedient Fulcrum orogene. This is the mindset in which she, now named Syenite, encounters Alabaster, with whom she is being forced to conceive a child as part of the Fulcrum's attempt to breed powerful orogenes. Alabaster, however, opens her eyes to the full extent of orogene exploitation – he reveals to her that the Fulcrum uses orogene children as “node maintainers,” bounding them to wire chairs and transforming them in semi-conscious, suffering but “reliable, harmless, completely beneficial source of orogeny” (Jemisin 2015, 142).

The child they have been compelled to conceive together is likely to meet a similar fate. The first shift in the protagonist's consciousness is then rooted in rejecting her role in a system of kinship relations in which 'love' (and life) is conditional to a loss of gestational and bodily autonomy.

The island of Meov, a pirate community outside the Fulcrum's purview where Alabaster and Syenite find shelter, allows Jemisin to sketch an alternative structure. Here "they don't kill their roggas [...]. They put them in charge" (Jemisin 2015, 296); Alabaster and Syenite, who have a child, Corundrum, discover that here childcare is collective, as "in Meov that sort of things is done communally, same as everything else" (Jemisin 2015, 362). Lastly, they enter in a polyamorous relationship with the pirate leader (and orogene) Innon, whose mediation allows Alabaster and Syenite to create an emotional and erotic bond among themselves and becoming lovers and co-parents. Admittedly, one of the core conflicts of the Meov section is that Syenite wants to join Innon's pirate raids, possibly as a first step to return to the mainland, and not *just* caring for her child Coru. This provokes Innon's reprimands – "Corundum is *your* son, Syenite. Do you feel nothing for him, that you constantly chafe to be away?" (Jemisin 2015, 365) – and hence Meov is not immune to a "regulative attitude towards mothering" (Åström 2023, 69). Nevertheless, this space allows Syenite to elaborate her position on care and liberation. She denies that her desire to be something other than a mother is incompatible with her love for Coru: "she loves her son. But that doesn't mean she wants to spend every hour of every rusting day in his presence" (Jemisin 2015, 366); but she is also driven to find "*A way to change things. Because this is not right*" (Jemisin 2015, 371). This sentiment does not clash but emerges from her love for Coru: when Innon suggests her that their reclusive life is the best they all can get, she replies that "Corundum should have better" (Jemisin 2015, 371). In other words, she conceives systemic change as care for her child – as Jemisin puts it, she yearns to "give Coru a whole world in which he could be safe and happy and human, rather than just one island" (Jemisin 2016a, n.p.).

Such philosophy is put aside when Meov is destroyed by the Guardians, Syenite kills Coru to spare him the fate of node maintainer, and she reinvents herself as Essun, marrying a man called Jija in the comm of Tirimo. Within her new nuclear family, and deeply damaged by her inability to save Coru, Essun now adheres to the idea that she should focus on protecting *only* the ones closest to her, at any cost necessary. She behaves towards her daughter Nassun according to Schaffa's cruel pedagogy, secretly training her to control her orogene power with the same relentless discipline and punitive vigour that was inflicted on her, even repeating Schaffa's favourite teaching method by pre-emptively breaking Nassun's hand. Essun rationalizes this as a necessary price to keep Nassun safe (Jemisin 2016b, 140), but that does not change the fact that she has internalized Schaffa's proprietary parenthood, based on the violent denial of her child's agency. Granted, Essun does this from a marginalized

position and out of motivated fear, but the process nevertheless scars Nassun, and contributes to her decision, matured at the end of *The Obelisk Gate*, to commit to crash the Moon onto the Earth in a suicidal attempt at collective deliverance. Moreover, Essun's parenting does not save her family: when Jija finds out that Essun, Nassun and Uche are orogenes, he murders Uche and kidnaps Nassun. Before she can reunite with Nassun *and* save the world, then, Essun has to recover and refine her (family abolitionist) notion of collective care and liberation.

This happens through her engagement with Castrima, a community that attempts, not unlike Meov, to foster the coexistence of orogenes and stills. Essun initially thinks of Castrima opportunistically, as a step in her quest to recover Nassun, but her experience of Castrima, which ranges from mundane organizational tasks to defending its inhabitants against invaders and staying with them during a harrowing crossing of a desert, reawakens her conception of care and liberation as interwoven, and to be pursued beyond the family unit. As Essun realizes towards the end of *The Stone Sky*:

you aren't alone. You have [...] *friends*, who know you in your rogga monstrosity and accept you despite it [...] you have *Castrima*, too, if you want it. This ridiculous comm of unpleasant people who are impossibly still together, which you have fought for and which has, however grudgingly, fought for you in return. [...]

[...] The world is broken and you can fix it [...]. Castrima is *more* reason for you to do it, not less. And it's time you stopped being a coward, too, and went to find Nassun. Even if she hates you. Even if you left her to face a terrible world alone. (Jemisin 2017, 283–284)

Essun, in short, understands that her seemingly competing undertakings – caring for Castrima and its people, healing the rift between the Earth and humanity, and rescuing Nassun and repairing their relationship – are one and the same.

In the climatic ending, Essun and Nassun engage in a struggle to wrest control of the Plutonic Engine from each other: Nassun, having abandoned her initial plan to end all life, is trying to use the Engine to forcibly turn all humanity into beings called Stone Eaters; Essun wants to use the Engine to return the Moon to the Earth's orbit. As Essun understands that the struggle is killing them both, she realizes that “the only way to win, then, is not to fight anymore” (Jemisin 2017, 385). Essun allows the force of the Engine to petrify her, granting Nassun control of the Engine and, more importantly, the agency she had denied her through her upbringing, in an ultimate, supremely risky disavowal of her ownership over her child. This is not just a pragmatical calculation, and is motivated by Essun's desire to ensure that Nassun will live. It does, however, save the world, because it prompts Nassun to carry out Essun's plan to restore the Moon:

She perceives your plan as commands locked and aimed but unfired. Open the Gate, pour the Rifting's power through it, catch the Moon. End the Seasons. Fix the world. This, Nassun senses-feels-knows, was your last wish.

The onyx says, in its ponderous, wordless way: *Execute Y/N?*  
And in the cold stone silence, alone, Nassun chooses.  
YES. (Jemisin 2017, 387)

The world is fixed, in short, by an act of yielding trust, agency, autonomy and power to a fellow oppressed being. To make this point, Jemisin uses a family abolitionist image: a formerly abusive parent that acknowledges and grants, in concrete terms, the freedom of her child.

### *The Marrow Thieves series*

Like Jemisin, Cherie Dimaline's *Marrow Thieves* series includes both destructive and constructive sides as regards her treatment of family and kinship, offering, in particular, a scathing portrayal of the violence of settler family ideology and the proposal of radical alternatives, based on pre-colonial kinship relations. Specifically, the series depicts Indigenous communities that organize themselves in structures that are antithetical to the nuclear family and its large-scale mirror image, the nation-state. The protagonist Frenchie is adopted by a group of Indigenous persons of various origins, led by the Anishinaabe Elder Miigwans; and, throughout the series, Miig's/Frenchie's family stands as a positive model of kinship. First of all, the members of Miig's family "[look out] for one another, without hierarchy, without question" (Dimaline 2021, 18), as Miigwans teaches Frenchie when the boy – eager to impress newcomer Rose – launches himself onto a fence to test if it is electrified. Miig reminds him that "no one is more important than anyone else," and "no one should be sacrificed for anyone else" (Dimaline 2017a, 58) – a sentence that, within the context of the 'sacrifice' of Indigenous peoples to save settlers from dreamlessness, carries a particular weight.

These egalitarian principles are also rooted in "expansive kinship networks and structures of care," which, for Patrizia Zanella (2020, 185), are at the core of the story. She also argues, quoting Métis scholar June Scudeler, that such expansive kinship structure specifically echoes the Cree concept of "wâhkôhtowin," defined as "kinship beyond the immediate family or state of being related" (Scudeler 2016 in Zanella 2020, 77). This emerges from the fact that the main relationships among the protagonists are not, for the most part, biological; and that the Indigenous protagonists also extend their kinship to the nonhuman, "[responding] to the long-lived experience of cultural and environmental violence through a sense of kinship that transcends the human and encompasses nature in all its forms" (Botelho 2023, 33). Finally, this extended sense of kinship incorporates queerness in various forms, from the relationship between Miigwans and his missing husband Isaac, with whom he reunites at the end of the first book, to the family welcoming Nam, a two-spirit/nonbinary youth.

This extended, non-anthropocentric, egalitarian and queer kinship clashes against the hegemonic one espoused by settler society. The series, initially, seems to propose an odd moral equivalence between the two, when Miig comments that also settlers are motivated by

survival – specifically, survival of their *families* – in their hunting down Indigenous peoples for medicine:

“We are actually both motivated by the same thing: survival. [...] What would you do to save us?”  
 We looked at each other, faces bright in the singular light of the fire. We were family. We were all we had. The rest was dark and unknown.  
 It was Chi-Boy who answered. “Anything.”  
 Wab spoke after him. “Everything.” [...]  
 “Exactly. We all do what we can to survive. [...]” (Dimaline 2017a, 53-54)

However, the idea of ‘doing anything/everything to save your family’, throughout the series follows two opposing logics. Frenchie’s family – egalitarian and expansive – centres selflessness and reciprocity, epitomized by the idea that “sometimes you risk everything for a life worth living, even if you’re not the one that’ll be alive to live it” (Dimaline 2017a, 152). Conversely, the settler/colonial/capitalist ‘family values’ pivot around defending one’s familial unit by *actively sacrificing* those perceived as external to it, in an extreme, but not surprising, version of what Vassallo calls the monogamous – hierarchical, competitive, identitarian – logic of the romantic dyad/nuclear family *and* the nation (Vassallo 2018). Dimaline’s most straightforward representation of the nuclear family as a logic of sacrifice (of otherness) appears when Frenchie’s family is captured by the Mothers of Meaningful Slumber (MOMS), a ruthless organization of self-described “civilized ladies” (Dimaline 2021, 319). These are white mothers that have decided to “secure their future by any means necessary” (Dimaline 2021, 314) and kidnap Indigenous peoples to steal bone marrow for their own children, for “moms do what is best for their children. Always” (Dimaline 2021, 319). Dimaline uses MOMS to reveal the ultimate icon of the settler/colonial/capitalist/patriarchal conception of care and kinship – white motherhood within a nuclear family – as monstrous. As Frenchie points out while being held at gunpoint, “we had obviously been grabbed by monsters, even if they did smell like floral perfume and strong soap” (Dimaline 2021, 323).

But Dimaline also exposes the *seductiveness*, for oppressed people, of this logic, particularly in *Hunting by Stars*, in which Frenchie is captured and brought into one of the residential schools. He encounters his brother Mitch, who had saved him in *The Marrow Thieves* but is now – arguably as a way to cope with the ordeal of the schools – a fervent collaborationist. Mitch rejects Frenchie’s accusation of being a traitor, claiming that “We are all one people, French. [...] All separations are false” (Dimaline 2021, 70), but this appeal to unity is actually intended to naturalize the uneven ‘division of labour’ within the ‘family’ of the settler nation. Later, Mitch reveals to Frenchie the plan to transform the residential schools into human farms:

If we change the institutes to focus on farming newborns, we can cut out all the messy in-between bits. And it means there will be a chance for more of us to integrate. To live like normal people [...] See, there

will be the herd, and then there will be everyone else. Not divided by race, exactly. Just divided by purpose. (Dimaline 2021, 288)

Mitch can only offer Frenchie the impoverished hope of being spared within an institution – the nation – that has marked him as expendable. Crucially this speech – with its clear-cut distinction between “the herd” and “everyone else” – also captures the sacrificial logic that dominates kinship at all levels from a settler/colonial/capitalist perspective, that is, ultimately, the logic of the nuclear family, primed to put discrete units in deadly competition for a scarcity of resources. Mitch has been forced to believe that assimilating and upholding this narrow sense of kinship represents his only possible deliverance.

Frenchie’s arc in the second novel is precisely about resisting this nuclear-familial thinking. His strategy to escape the school is to pretend to become a collaborationist, like Mitch. But, in the process, he starts to lose sight of his expansive notion of kinship. Particularly, he starts to be annoyed at the ‘sloppiness’ of other Indigenous prisoners, whom he starts to see as obstacles to returning to *his* family instead of seeing them as other kin that he is responsible for. This culminates in the sequence in which, to convince his captors of his loyalty, he successfully carries out a mission to capture and bring in two Indigenous persons, including a small child that he personally stops from escaping. This betrayal, committed in the name of rejoining his family at all costs, will haunt him despite any rationalization: “I was a traitor, certified and proven, and not a person (Dimaline 2021, 238).

Miigwans will, nevertheless, accept Frenchie back. If his philosophy had always been that “sometimes the path [...] goes through some pretty dark territory. Just make sure it doesn’t change the intent of the trip” (Dimaline 2017a, 145), he knows that Frenchie’s intent is still entwined with an idea of collective care and liberation. Frenchie proves this to him by holding himself accountable and by proposing, in the end, to make up for his mistakes by continuing the fight: “we need to get through this so we can help the others, too. [...] The ones I had to... The ones I brought in” (Dimaline 2021, 381).

This renewed sense of responsibility towards “the others” resonates with the family abolitionist ideal of unlocking new worlds of care for everyone to dismantle (but also *while* dismantling) systems of oppression. It also recalls, like Essun and Nassun’s final encounter at the end of the world, Sophie Lewis’ definition of love: “to love a person is to struggle for their autonomy as well as for their immersion in care, insofar such abundance is possible in a world choked by capital” (Lewis 2022, 3).

### Conclusion: radical resources

Jemisin’s exploration of relationships of care and autonomy as a tool for revolution and as a necessary antidote against kinship-as-ownership, as well as Dimaline’s building of an extended sense of kinship to fight the murderous, ‘monogamous’ logic of the settler family and

nation, are shaped, crucially, in the background of planetary, racialized environmental devastation. They happen in a post-apocalyptic scenario in which both fighting for and against certain 'family values' are essential to survive and thrive in the midst of environmental collapse and injustice.

As such, I think it is useful to see their work as a radical resource to conceive, experiment with and engender the abolition of both the family and the Anthropocene, which are both powers, paraphrasing Ursula K. Le Guin, that only seem inescapable (K. Le Guin 2019, 114). But how to use these resources? Mark Bould, elaborating on the idea that "all cultural texts are about climate change," proposes to use such texts "not just as opportunities for dialogue, discussion and debate, but as adventure playgrounds, workshops, studios, festivals, carnivals, invitations to creative play, to thinking through, to action," in a process of "critical creativity" that is to be as widespread and collective as possible (Bould 2021, 132-133). Let us thus collectively play and act with Jemisin and Dimaline, and use their stories to recover lost planets and stolen dreams.

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## Extended kinship as a means of *survivance* within Indigenous literary futurism in “Legends are made, not born” by Métis author Cherie Dimaline

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores how Métis author Cherie Dimaline elaborates *wâhkôhtowin*, the Indigenous principle of extended kinship, in her 2016 short story entitled “Legends are made, not born.” The text encapsulates some of the themes and strategies specific to Indigenous futurism, a recent artistic genre which sheds light on survival strategies intended as a restorative coping practice to claim Aboriginal self-determination. Through the vicissitudes of a queer “made-not-born” Native family, the author depicts empowering landscapes – or *kinscapes* – that bind humans and nonhumans to all of creation, giving rise to familial bonds that are not constrained by implications of descent but rather of communal responsibility beyond anthropocentric, heteronormative, and racial colonial logics.

### Keywords

Anthropocene, apocalypse, Indigenous futurism, survivance, *Wâhkôhtowin*

### Back to the future: Indigenous perspectives on the Anthropocene

The current geological era, known by the term Anthropocene, refers to a timeframe marked by revolutionary environmental changes brought about by human activity (Dhillon 2022), as suggested by its Greek prefix *anthropos*. This coinage traces back to the hard sciences and has been circulating for more than four decades, owing to U.S. biologist Eugene Stoermer, who first employed it in the early 1980s and brought it into widespread use as of 2000 along with fellow Dutch Nobel Laureate chemist Paul Crutzen (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). The term has attracted criticism, especially in the last decade, primarily since it overgeneralizes the causes of the current climate emergency by attributing them to the human race as a whole (Yusoff 2018) and, secondly, as it does not identify the phenomenon of capitalism as the main culprit, thus prompting a move to other definitions such as, for example, Capitalocene (Moore 2016). Renowned U.S. philosopher and scientist Donna Haraway proposes an undoubtedly more holistic alternative – or integration: Chthulucene. Borrowing its prefix from the Greek *khthon* meaning earthly, the scholar’s coinage refers to everything that may be traced back to subsurface life and that develops in a tentacular fashion, decentralizing the leading role of the human being to one of the many actors of life on earth. According to this perspective, all living beings exist interconnectedly, forming relationships of responsibility beyond species principles, that is,

kinships centered on care and the ability to meet the needs of others, or “response-ability” (Haraway 2016, 78). By this term, the scientist refers to the responsiveness that human beings should nurture as an ethical and political stance for the purpose of caring for other species. Precisely in terms of responsibility among living beings and the earth, in a recent interview for the journal *Science for the People*, Haraway reflects on the history of racial colonial capitalism and recalls how epistemological appropriation and violence against Indigenous peoples have relegated their knowledge systems to primitive and non-authoritative categories. She believes there is a need to restore them lest they be lost forever as:

There are some modes of knowledge – diet, land, fire regimes, water preservation, multi-species cohabitation – which give evidence that Indigenous knowledge systems are better than the capitalist developmental science systems for long-term cohabitation of peoples, including nonhuman animals, and that these knowledges need to be forwarded (Bryant and Wallenberg 2020, n.p.).

To Indigenous peoples, in fact, the Anthropocene is no recent occurrence. Colonialism has effectively generated a diaspora among Native communities by stripping them of their land on their very own soil, causing forced coexistence with new systems of government as well as ecosystems in an ongoing practice of extraction. In this light, the term *ánthropos* cannot be employed universally as it subtexts a very specific race and gender, namely white and male, peculiar to the imperial power, as consistently argued by postcolonial and ecofeminist studies (Gergan, Smith and Vasudevan 2020). The relationship with the land is paramount for Native peoples globally, which makes them part of a network of connectivity. Specifically, in the Nehinaw<sup>1</sup> tradition – also known as Cree – the term *wâhkôhtowin* is used to refer to the building of relationships as an active and dynamic process that bonds human and non-human animals to nature as a whole. It is constituted by the morpheme *wâki*, which refers to the act of being bent or curved, *pimohtê*, meaning to walk, and *ito*, indicating reciprocity, namely a concept of mutual advancement directed toward the land (Van Essen 2018, 86). This kinship is so vital that it forms an integral part of Cree law and is often traced back to the image of a circle to emphasize the lack of hierarchy in favor of an equal, constant, unbroken bond (Lindberg 2020, 40). Renowned Métis<sup>2</sup> Elder<sup>3</sup> author and scholar Maria Campbell described the term as follows, in a well-known talk she gave at the Chains and Links Human Rights Conference in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada in 2007:

[...] it meant the whole of creation. And our teachings taught us that all of creation is related and interconnected to all things within it. *Wâhkôhtowin* meant honoring and respecting those relationships. They are our stories, songs, ceremonies, and dances that taught us from birth to death our responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to each other. Human to human, human to plants, human to animals, to the water and especially to the earth. And in turn all of creation had responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to us. (Campbell 2007, 5)

Such a notion underlies Indigenous nation-building posited to provide protection for the land according to principles of self-determination in which kin-making occurs following a choice reliant only on collective care, on a “series of radiating responsibilities” (Simpson 2020, 9). This relational vision is explored by various artistic practices, such as speculative fiction that reworks techniques of epistemological reappropriation in the aftermath of settler colonialism.

### **Apocalypse now? Futurist landscapes of Indigenous literature**

Science Fiction, a “genre that emerged in the context of evolutionary theory and anthropology of the mid-19th century, deeply intertwined with colonial ideology” (Dillon 2012, 3), is generally rooted in patriarchal scenarios in which white cis men paradoxically stand as the sole saviors of the world they materially brought to collapse. The salvific visions these works depict are mere neo-colonial projections of planetary conquests, in which the same imperialist schemes find embodiment in the replication of capitalist perspectives sustained by heteronormative family units in which BIPOC and women’s voices find almost no room for agency or representation. It is from this genre that the more recent strand of Climate Fiction has emerged, which focuses on climate change as an emergency that disrupts global order, works on power relations between humans and the environment, and serves as a vector for climate advocacy (Daniels and Endfield 2009). Such literature has established an intersectional narrative that also investigates issues of gender, race, and class, further probing post- and decolonial discourse. Professor of Human Geography Andrew Baldwin argues that Cli-Fi is critical to revising the Anthropocene as it focuses on minority subjects through whose vision it is possible to deviate from a narrative that mirrors that of imperialism (Baldwin 2017). In contemporary Cli-Fi, the inflection point that weighs on the narrative is coincident with the idea of a looming and seemingly inevitable apocalypse, which affects the actions of the main characters in a dynamic of survival at any cost. If apocalypse refers more broadly to a cataclysmic event, the term comes from the Latin *apocalypsis* as applied to sacred texts, translating as “revelation” or “manifestation” (Schüssler Fiorenza 2007). This can serve as a reading framework to reveal the non-unique nature of the event; the apocalypse that this literary genre addresses as a future projection is actually an event that has been recurring for centuries for Native peoples. Métis author Chelsea Vowel foregrounds the rejection of apocalypse as any kind of beginning or end, as Native peoples are “post-apocalyptic peoples” and consequently know from experience that it does not necessarily imply an end, but only “something you go through” (Vowel 2024, n.p.). In this sense, it would seem more appropriate to refer to apocalypses rather than ‘the Apocalypse’ since there are no historical terms of comparison. For many speculative writers such as Vowel, dystopian fiction reformulates the idea of the apocalypse by facilitating a paradigm shift in stories centered on the relationship between humans, the land, and nonhuman animals, finding its expressive space within a stream of art that has gained momentum, especially over the past decade (Fricke 2019): Indigenous futurism.

This movement arose in the late 1990s and builds on diverse artistic expressions peculiar to the literary, architectural, and cinematic arenas, among others, by means of experimenting with the language of science fiction to reclaim the presence of Indigenous peoples in the future through a reworking of past and present. Regarding its literary declension, the most prominent voice on the subject is undoubtedly that of Grace L. Dillon, Anishinaabe<sup>4</sup> professor of Indigenous Nation Studies at Portland State University. In 2003, she coined the term to encompass those art forms that investigate the personal fallout caused by colonization in an attempt to dislodge the underlying emotional and psychological baggage with the means – as well as the purpose – of recovering ancestral traditions. In 2012, Dillon edited the most significant work to date on this genre under the title *Walking the Clouds. An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, a collection of short stories and novels interweaving “sf theory and Native intellectualism, Indigenous scientific literacy and Western techno-cultural science” (Dillon 2012, 3). Indigenous futurists are shifting the boundaries of Sci-Fi through experimentation untethered from genre and plot expectations, thus moving away from colonial dynamics in the aspect of discovery, as Vowel argues:

In (re)imagining history, whitestream speculative fiction is particularly adept at repressing the violent histories of colonialism from the public imaginary. This does not mean that the topic of colonization is absent from science fiction – far from it. We find constant dichotomous reframing of settler colonials as agents of space-faring Manifest Destiny or the inevitable subjects of colonization at the hands (tentacles, squishy pseudopods, or furry appendages) of aliens. Whitestream science fiction insists that colonialism is inevitable. It’s “us or them,” and it had better be “us”. (Vowel 2022, 9)

The literary genre of Indigenous futurism employs several strategies to reclaim Aboriginal living spaces in an unmodifiable past through storytelling. An example of this is the technique called “Native Slipstream” (Dillon 2012, 2), built on the expedient of the multiverse, that is a reality contemplated as a simultaneous superposition of parallel worlds in which past, present, and future flow in a circular fashion – as in the tradition of Indigenous storytelling – allowing for intervention in colonial history. Another commonly employed practice involves the reworking of TEK, i.e., the traditional ecological knowledge that sustains Indigenous life – medicine, arts, agriculture – explored as a scientific technique rather than a ‘primitive’ ceremonial. Indigenous futurism also includes works that re-imagine “Native Apocalypse” (Dillon 2012, 9), most often reversing history in favor of Native peoples or at least rendering them dignified protagonists and holders of agency. “The Native apocalyptic narrative, then, shows the brokenness, scarring, and trauma in an attempt to provide healing and a return to *bimaadiziwin*” (Dillon 2012, 9), a concept that outlines a process of decolonizing rediscovery that creates “ethnic landscapes in a way that foregrounds the intersection of Indigenous nations and other sovereignty, race, technology, and power” (Dillon 2012, 11).

The following part of the article offers a critical reading of the short story entitled “Legends are made, not born” by Métis author Cherie Dimaline as it encapsulates the healing principles of

Native kinship proper to contemporary Indigenous futurism as experienced through the eyes of a Métis boy under the guidance of Auntie Dave, a queer non-biological parental figure. This made-and-not-born family embodies the relational potential of a dystopian migratory future that reweaves the threads of ancient epistemologies essential to Indigenous survival; such a subversion of the boundaries of whitestream speculative narratives can contribute to the creation of empowering landscapes beyond the familial logics of heteronormativity, race, and gender.

### “Legends are made, not born”: surviving through kinship

Cherie Dimaline is a multiple award-winning Métis author known to the public at large for her mostly YA novels and short stories that re-frame colonial trauma through the genre of speculative fiction. A publisher, editor, and activist, in recent years, she has become the subject of academic research not only within Indigenous Studies but also within Postcolonial and Ecocritical Studies. As opposed to scientific narratives based on genealogical principles, the author turns to the counter-genetic Indigenous fiction, that is, linked to principles of belonging built on bonds of responsibility and preservation of collective memory that prompts the rethinking and reformulation of community tenets in more inclusive terms and with the addition of a queer focus (Pravinchandra 2021). The short story is featured in the 2016 anthology *Love Beyond Body, Space, and Time* (Bedside Press), and it includes thirteen stories by Indigenous authors who step outside Western temporal constraints by means of scenarios and eras trespassing into the past and future, both historical and fictional. In addition to Dimaline, contributors include such notable names as the aforementioned Grace L. Dillon and popular authors and scholars Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) and Darcie Little Badger (Apache).

“My mom was a half-breed Catholic who named me after a pack of smokes, Semaatobacco. She died in a fiery blaze of glory winning a snow-mobile race” (Dimaline 2016, 31). This is the punchy opening line Dimaline elects, which at once establishes the nature of a dry, sarcastic, and no-frills narrative. Details about the identity of the protagonist are and will remain for much longer unknown as if to give him a less specific and more universal dimension as a Métis child with a father who “was not there,” was “less important” (Dimaline 2016, 31) than his mother, and eventually dies from old age in a nursing home:

[...] my father, the short man with the buzz cut who smelled like whiskey and old laundry? I’d met him only a handful of times, but he was always reminding me that he was my dad and should be respected as such. (Dimaline 2016, 37)

Indeed, the young boy of the short story spends much of his time with his maternal grandmother, a loud and unconventional presence who teaches him to play cards in a kitchen shrouded in cigarette smoke and colorful swearing at the age of six. Another male character introduced in this stage is Uncle Travis, who “looked like a bush man, a trapper half-mad with lonely fear” (Dimaline

2016, 31), aligning with the unflattering description of the other men of this Métis family: “My uncles were too busy drinking and getting kicked off the reserve for increasing the population” (Dimaline 2016, 32). These scant but precise details are sufficient to delineate some aspects of Indigenous post-contact domestic life with regard to gender roles. One of the Indigenous scholars who has to date investigated this context most consistently and thoroughly is undoubtedly Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg Leanne Betasamosake Simpson<sup>5</sup>. Largely credited as one of the most compelling Indigenous artists and activists of recent decades, her work serves as a major backbone to what is referred to as Indigenous Resurgence, a movement that arose at the dawn of the 2000s in the North American continent, founded on the principles of decolonizing knowledge in order to regenerate the bonds of Native peoples to their land. Involving a range of practices that translate into tangible form in activities such as revitalizing languages and ceremonies, reappropriating homelands, and restoring kinships between humans, nonhumans, and nature, the movement strives to “reattach (...) minds, bodies, and spirits to the web of relationships and ethical practices to generate grounded normativity” (Simpson 2017, 44). Simpson recalls how both binarism and gender-based abuse are a byproduct of a white colonial strategy that lures straight and cisgender Indigenous men into a system of violence with the promise of inclusion in Western male leaderships. Indigenous Resurgence additionally aims to “critically interrogate the hierarchies of heteropatriarchy in all its forms, to stop replicating it” (Simpson 2017, 51) and actively explore it in any aspect of individual and collective spheres of life as it is excluded from “the political and theoretical realm and positioned in the margins” (Simpson 2017, 31). The critique of white settler enforcement of patriarchal structures was championed decades earlier by Sto:lo<sup>6</sup> Nation writer and activist Lee Maracle who brought the term “rematriation” into widespread use through her seminal 1998 essay “I Am Woman.” Maracle emphasizes the urgency of a return to matrilineal values as opposed to colonial ones whose byproduct is gendered violence and the removal of women from the political arena. For this reason, the term is countered by “repatriation,” which in Latin consists of the prefix *re* implying a return to a previous state and the noun *patria* meaning “homeland” yet stemming from *pater* meaning “father.” According to this view, applicable to all fields, it is imperative for women, mothers in the broad sense, to be handed back the land with its resources generating Indigenous prosperity and empowerment, along with the traditional cultural knowledge passed down through storytelling. Such gendered forms of violence introduced chiefly by white settlers go hand in hand with the imbuing of a sense of shame “[...] for being Indigenous. This shame leads us to disconnect from the practices that give us meaning” (Simpson 2017, 187), falling more often than not into addictions that, once more, elicit shame, in a vicious cycle which never fails to position Natives “on the losing end of colonial violence. Shame cages resurgence in a very basic way because it prevents us from acting” (Simpson 2017, 188). The participatory and dynamic nature of the Indigenous women in this story contrasts with the passivity and vice-prone male attitude,



especially with regard to alcohol. Although they are not employed as predominant characters, the intangible presence of the protagonist's grandmother and mother are such pillars in this story that, upon leaving, they generate an apocalypse:

I knew the apocalypse had started before he said her name.

"Dorothy."

"What? What did she do now?"

Grandma threw her cards on the table. It sounded like an open palm slap. She was standing, her voice beginning to shake. I knew then that she knew, too, she could read the obituary listed in Travis' eyes. (Dimaline 2016, 32)

The premature death of the young protagonist's mother is thus an apocalypse within an apocalypse, a familial meltdown within the global meltdown that will be disclosed only later, spawning a conjunction of events leading to the introduction of a new character. Dorothy's best friend is "an eight-foot Cree I used to call Auntie Dave" (Dimaline 2016, 32) with "manicured hands" and "elongated eyelashes" sporting "a champagne-colored dress, long unbraided hair, wavy in the back like a dark gown" and looking "like a mad queen in her [...] crown" (Dimaline 2016, 35). It is Dave who takes the place of his late mother, a queer man with no blood ties to the protagonist's family of origin, who rightfully enters his life not only as a parental figure but also as a mentor and thus beginning to weave the kinship fabric of *wâhkôhtowin*.

By undertaking the responsibility of raising Semaa, Auntie Dave takes care of him through the application of heterogeneous rituals, a practice that cements the building of kinship. In this sense, for instance, references to Catholicism are numerous and scattered throughout the text; all along colonial times, one of the means employed to instill European standards of living was the coerced enrollment of Native children in residential schools, Christian institutions whose survivors ended up internalizing homophobia and transphobia while, at the same time, often embracing the religion of white settlers.

Métis spirituality is decidedly varied in that some communities are Catholic or Protestant, while others practice spiritual syncretism by blending Christianity with traditional Native customs, and Métis children are and were often told stories that interweave Indigenous narratives with Catholicism (see, among other sources: *Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada*). In syncretic practice, rituals are specific and strictly observed, such as with respect to the deceased. Death is followed by a four-day mourning period punctuated by prayers, offerings, or retreat, as occurs upon Dorothy's passing: "Dave let me be for the first three days, but then he started waking me up to eat on the fourth" (Dimaline 2016, 34). Dave's house itself is located, not coincidentally, "on the hill behind St. Anne, where my mother was buried" (Dimaline 2016, 33); the saint is, in fact, revered by many Catholic Indigenous Canadians. Through her, they honor Elders, in particular grandmothers who, like St. Anne, are seen as healers, "a more than human relative, like ancestors, earth or water" (McFarlan Miller 2022, n.p.). After allowing room for the young boy to

recover, and more specifically on his seventh birthday, the inflection point of the tale unravels through an act of storytelling. This is the juncture at which the time of the narrative is disclosed to the reader, as the events leading up to Semaa's birthday could undoubtedly fit a narrative genre that is not necessarily futuristic or speculative. Such a choice to reveal the time frame in the concluding part of the story, thus, makes its entire account more universally applicable, similar to the lack of specificity in the protagonist's identity. Native apocalypse makes its way between the lines at a slow yet ineradicable pace through the vicissitudes of the characters who, as observed, trace the issues consequential to colonization in a past, present and, future that lie on the same reading plane. And it is in the final story told by Dave that these temporal layers are projected into a future of reclamation:

He took a deep breath and we started our walk. As we walked, he told me a story. "The generation before last were the final people to live on Old Earth. The water had flooded the lands and was poisoned by the work of man." It was the migration story of how we came to New Earth a hundred years ago. I'd heard it many times in my youth. All kids do. Indigenous people, we were hit pretty hard. Not only did we lose our land, but we were the last to be evacuated to New Earth. A last priority. (Dimaline 2016, 35)

Historical events and their narration constitute the cornerstone of *wâhkôhtowin* in that they not only offer practical instances of ethical community life but also chart the field of individual responsibility within it. As suggested by the etymological analysis previously offered, walking is a strategy aimed at the dual task of reconstructing and practicing IK (Indigenous Knowledge) through the dissemination of information and caring for ancestral territories in their holistic dimensions of landscape, ecology and life forms abused by colonial extractivism (Dickson-Hoyle et al. 2022). For this reason, it is not always possible to draw a line between Indigenous knowledge and its storytelling; both are means of guidance and discovery towards past and future history. At the same time, the very act of storytelling is tightly bound up with that of listening, turning the two practices into an active exercise of kinship-building, in which storytellers have extensive room to tailor their stories. In this narrative cycle, the personal becomes collective and vice versa (Kovach 2009). Thus, the ceremony of storytelling becomes an act of 'survivance,' a term coined by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor to indicate the merging of survival and endurance in a dynamic practice of production and dissemination of Native stories. Two features of this concept should be noted. On the one hand, the distancing from the mere state of survival commonly associated with feelings of victimhood and passivity in favor of a notion of "active presence" (Vizenor 2008, vii), which the author considers, among other things, the foundation of contemporary Native literature. On the other hand, the deliberately imprecise and inventive nature of the word sabotages linguistic rules in a reappropriated and *mestizo* English, serving as a decolonizing endeavor. Survivance is a teaching that Dave shares with Semaa through the act of walking and storytelling, introducing an important theme in the constitution of such extended kinship in its queer sense:

Two-Spirits [...] met and decided on a few necessities for our people's wellbeing. And we decided on families to carry out the task of keeping them safe for the next seven generations. My family was one of them [...] Dorothy left us all a great gift when she had my name put on your birth certificate [...]. It meant that if anything happened, you would come to me, thank the Jesus. It also meant, that on paper and in spirit, I had a son. (Dimaline 2016, 36)

Paper and spirit embody the bond of this kinship of response-ability, resolved by an individual's willingness and formalized by Indigenous law. The projection of a scenario where Two-Spirit communities play a key role in the Native societal fabric serves as one of the strategies that Indigenous futurists may apply as a form of identity recovery within the framework of Resurgence since, as Simpson remarks,

[...] creating life comes in many forms, not just from the womb, and it creates a space where all genders can have valuable, ethical, consensual, meaningful, and reciprocal relationships with all aspects of creation [...] (Simpson 2017, 121)

If kinship and governance patterns within many First Nations were historically built on gender-balanced systems, thereby standing as a hindrance to the implementation of European domination, colonial heteropatriarchal nuclear family units disrupted not only such Native systems by naturalizing men's dominance over women but also over queer and Two-Spirit individuals. Cree writer and academic Billy-Ray Belcourt argues that “[t]o be queer and native and alive is to repeatedly bear witness to worlds being destroyed, over and over again” (Belcourt 2016, n.p.) and recalls that the term “Two-Spirit” came to be officially introduced in 1990 to denote the coexistence of a male and female identity within the same person (Belcourt 2016, 28). Belcourt himself, however, moving away from the cisnormative frame, has voiced his own preference towards the designation of “queer indigeneity” as “[it] does things that two-spiritness cannot: it is a floating signifier without referent and without any agreed upon meaning; it refuses to attach to any one history, biology, or geography” (Belcourt 2016, 29). Dimaline employs the terms “gay” and “Two-Spirit” rather than “queer” as synonyms through the narrator's perspective: “[my mom] was always keen on me spending time with Auntie Dave. Clearly she knew I was gay before I knew what that even meant” (Dimaline 2016, 32); “I knew about Two-Spirited people: the people who held both male and female genders” (Dimaline 2016, 36). The author takes a clear stance on the importance of queer representation in Indigenous stories by imagining a future in which the Two Spirits community is responsible for the buffalo, the most valuable resource the earth can offer Native peoples:

“Do you know about the White Buffalo prophecy? [...] Did you also know that the White Buffalo holds a special place for us? They say that if you see a White Buffalo in a dream then you are truly Two-Spirited.”

[...] Out of the trees came two huge buffalo, so pale they looked constructed of cloud and chalk. [...] “We are the keepers of the White Buffalo on New Earth. I was the last before your mother took that snowmobile to heaven.” (Dimaline 2016, 37)

For almost all Indigenous Nations of the North American continent, ‘buffalo’ does not simply represent Native animals, but a symbol of wholeness: “You can’t understand about nature, about the feeling we have toward it, unless you understand how close we were to the buffalo” (Lame Deer 1972, 130). Furthermore, the legend of the White Buffalo is strongly rooted in most Indigenous oral traditions throughout the continent. *Ptesáŋwiŋ*, or White Buffalo Woman, is a Lakota<sup>7</sup> sacred figure whose prophecies brought prosperity to the community; especially *hun̄kalowan̄pi*, the rite of kin generation, a practice that fostered peace among different communities through face painting that symbolized a rebirth toward new responsibilities and relationships (Epes Brown 1953). The importance of this animal is reflected in many facets of Indigenous culture, as Chelsea Vowel recalls in explaining that the motto “Education is the new buffalo” once indicated the crucial role of the study of past traditions for Canada’s Indigenous peoples in order to ensure “our survival and ability to support ourselves, as once Plains nations supported ourselves as buffalo peoples” (Vowel 2022, 12). The Métis scholar argues, however, that this view subscribes to the acceptance of the disappearance of pre-contact ways of life. Instead, she promotes the notion that *Buffalo is the new Buffalo*, the apt title of her 2022 anthology, in whose introduction she clarifies that such a perspective is actually based on a willingness to

[...] work in wâhkôhtowin (expanded kinship) to restore our reciprocal obligations to our human and nonhuman kin. Instead of accepting that the buffalo and our ancestral ways will never come back, what if we simply ensure that they do? (Vowel 2022, 13)

## Conclusion

Western science fiction often and willingly projects colonial dynamics into post-apocalyptic futures, employing a totalizing perspective that never seems keen to probe the depths and responsibilities entangled with environmental disaster (Yuen 2012). This anthropocentric narrative is not customarily focused on elaborating ways of life that are accountable for the current climate emergency, and it seldom adopts an Indigenous stance whereby the relationship between the earth and living beings is traditionally rooted in a kinship of responsibility. Indigenous futurism, with its reinvention and overlapping of past and future, brings racial disparities to light by rewriting TEK – Traditional Ecological Knowledge – as an ancient antidote in a contemporary language against the backdrop of utopian visions of hope and salvific cultural reappropriation. The fact that legends are not born but can be made, as Dimaline argues, unsurprisingly warns that stories may be shaped, told, internalized, and transmitted to subvert catastrophic fate and ultimately shape ‘kinscapes’ in which all living beings are interconnected and responsible for one another. The last lines of the story are the beginning of a future glimpse of possibility: “I walked into the clearing with a weight much different than the one left by my mother’s death; a weight that balanced out the ache and made the ordinary extraordinary” (Dimaline 2016, 3).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Peculiar to the North American Native peoples mainly settled in the territory that is now Canada.
- <sup>2</sup> The term Métis is used to refer to people of mixed Euro-American and Indigenous descent that in Canada designates one of the three main legally recognized Aboriginal communities, along with First Nations and Inuit.
- <sup>3</sup> Holders of ancestral knowledge mainly disseminated through oral storytelling.
- <sup>4</sup> Indigenous populations settled in the Great Lakes region of Canada and the U.S..
- <sup>5</sup> Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg are the coastal people of the territory comprising present-day southern and central Ontario, Canada.
- <sup>6</sup> Literally “the people of the river,” First Nations of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia, Canada.
- <sup>7</sup> Plains Nation of what is now the northern U.S.

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## New technologies of re/production and a world beyond the family: Tlotlo Tsamaase's *Womb City*

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the contemporary debate surrounding reproductive politics by analysing Tlotlo Tsamaase's debut novel, *Womb City* (2024), a work that exemplifies the critical intersection of feminist philosophy and feminist science fiction. Using Shulamith Firestone's essay *The Dialectic of Sex* and Marge Piercy's critical utopia *Woman on the Edge of Time* as starting points, this article intends to enter the debate about the necessity of redefining family structures beyond traditional genealogical or biological ties. *Womb City* is set in a futuristic Botswana, where AI-controlled and human-monitored artificial wombs seem to give women freedom from pregnancy and gender roles in these futuristic surveillance states, however, bodies are a government-issued resource. Our reading of Tsamaase's novel centers on the portrayal of family as an instrument of oppression, exploring the author's critiques as possible foundations for envisioning alternatives beyond the nuclear, white, heterocispatriarchal family (Lewis 2019, 2022; Gumbs, Martens, Williams 2016). Furthermore, Tsamaase's portrayal of reproductive technologies is examined alongside Angela Balzano's recent works, which do not reject biotechnologies themselves but critically interrogate the social norms that shape their use.

### Keywords

Tlotlo Tsamaase, reproductive technologies, family abolitionism, africanfuturism, intersectionality

### Framing the contemporary debate on reproductive technologies

"It is a wonder we let fetuses inside us," writes Sophie Lewis in the opening of her book *Full Surrogacy Now* (2019, 1), referring to the hundreds of thousands of human deaths that occur every year due to pregnancy. Lewis contends that this occurs primarily due to political and economic motivations, rather than being an inherent or inevitable aspect of our reality. She draws on works like Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* (1987-1989), Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), but she emphasises the essential role of Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) in envisioning and articulating "postcapitalist, postgender (and apparently postracial) futures in which procreation would mostly be accomplished outside of human bodies" (Lewis 2019, 33). The publication years of many cited works highlight the 1970s



as a pivotal moment in discussions surrounding reproductive technologies, offering essential insights that feminist theorists like Sophie Lewis still engage with in contemporary discourse.

The proposals presented in these texts were highly controversial at the time of their publication, often regarded as excessively radical and futuristic, leading to their dismissal. Consequently, many of these discussions were overshadowed and went largely unnoticed for an extended period. Recently, however, a new generation of authors – both feminist philosophers and speculative fiction writers – has revived these ideas, reexamining their theories and debates within a contemporary context. Their insights remain not only revolutionary but also deeply relevant today. This resurgence is especially significant as the struggles over reproductive politics continue to be central to governmental policies in many countries, which, just as before, place women's bodies – and their wombs in particular – under scrutiny.

A striking example occurred in Italy on October 16, 2024, when the parliament made it illegal for couples to have children through surrogacy (Gestational Surrogacy Agreements – GPA) abroad. While surrogacy has been illegal in the country since 2004 (Law 40 of 2004, article 12, paragraph 6), it will now be prosecuted even if practiced in countries like the United States and Canada, with penalties of up to two years imprisonment and fines of up to €1 million. The law, which passed by 84 votes to 58 in Italy's Senate and came into effect immediately, is part of the socially conservative agenda of Giorgia Meloni's ruling far-right Fratelli d'Italia party, and of a broader attack against the LGBTQIA+ community in Italy. This attack is also supported by those feminist movements that make prescriptions and prohibitions their rallying cries, sidestepping open debate and endorsing bans and punitive sanctions aligned with a conservative vision that upholds a singular model of family (Siviero 2024).

Meanwhile, outside the national context where the two authors of this article are currently situated, far-right political parties are targeting international surrogacy for criminal sanctions, attempting to erase same-sex parent families under the guise of defending women's autonomy. As we write these lines, we have just witnessed a U.S. presidential election that is likely to have a substantial impact on reproductive health and rights worldwide. Debates around reproductive rights have indeed taken center stage in American politics, following landmark events like the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 and the implementation of some of the most restricting policies on global reproductive health during Trump's presidency through the *Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance* (PLGHA) policy.<sup>1</sup> Kamala Harris, on the other hand, had included reproductive freedom as one of the cornerstones of her electoral platform, labelling bans on abortion as “arcane and immoral,”<sup>2</sup> and framing issues as IVF (in vitro fertilization) access and affordable child care as interconnected rights. The outcome of this polarization between “protecting life” and “reproductive freedom” will significantly impact

reproductive equity and justice for communities worldwide (see Sherman 2024 and Qayyum 2024).

As noted, feminist movements have adopted a diverse range of often conflicting perspectives on reproductive technologies and their significant impact on the (re)construction of individual, family, and group identities. This article intends to trace the roots and grasp the current trajectories of this timely, heated, and urgent debate about the possibilities – and contradictions – of reproduction beyond the body, a theme that has been part of our cultural imagination for centuries. It will do so by looking at the representation of motherhood and family structures beyond biological constraints in contemporary feminist philosophy and feminist speculative fiction. Specifically, the latter can transport us elsewhere and elsewhen, enabling us to envision how reproductive technologies can push the boundaries of what it means to be human and liberate reproduction from the confines of the heterosexual nuclear family.

The article will then contribute to the contemporary debate about the necessity of redefining families – not merely as entities tied by genealogy or biological bonds – through a reading of Motswana africanfuturist author Tlotlo Tsamaase’s recent debut novel, *Womb City* (2024). The text is set in a futuristic Botswana, where AI-controlled and human-monitored artificial wombs seem to give women freedom from pregnancy and gender roles; in these futuristic surveillance states, however, bodies are a government-issued resource. In broadening the discussion of reproductive rights beyond the Italian and the US contexts, it is essential to consider the unique socio-political dynamics in Botswana, where *Womb City* is set. In Botswana, abortion is legally permitted under specific circumstances, such as in cases of rape, incest, risk to the woman’s health, or severe fetal impairment. However, knowledge of abortion law remains limited across communities, including among healthcare providers, law enforcement, and local leaders, with many assuming abortion is entirely illegal. The lack of clear procedural guidelines on implementing abortion laws further complicates access to safe and legal abortions, negatively affecting those seeking care (Rakereng et al. 2024). As for assisted reproductive technologies, access remains constrained by factors such as high costs, limited availability of specialised centers, and socio-cultural perceptions. A study on access to assisted reproductive technologies across sub-Saharan Africa, including Botswana, highlights that clinical providers often disagree on the best approaches to improve accessibility, indicating a need for standardised, affordable infertility treatments (Whittaker et al. 2024). Situating Tsamasee’s work within this context not only illuminates the specific cultural and historical pressures women face in Botswana but also avoids replicating colonial hierarchies of knowledge and situates the critique presented in *Womb City* within wider textual and geo-political networks.

Whilst Piercy’s novel was able to question parenthood and family structures but also imagine alter-families and alter-communities and has therefore been defined a “utopia of the

family” (Bartkowsky 1989), Tsamaase’s text is a dystopian narrative where the family itself becomes a key terrain of conflict and thriving inequality. *Womb City* will be read here in dialogue with some of the most recent critical contributions regarding family abolitionist demands, new technologies of reproduction, and environmental concerns (Lewis 2019, 2022; Balzano 2021, 2024). The reading of Tsamaase’s novel will focus on the representation of family as an oppressive tool, investigating whether such critique can help us to imagine what lurks beyond the family’s horizons and whether the abolition of the nuclear family can be read as a decolonial imperative (Gumbs, Martens, Williams 2016; Lewis 2019, 2022). Moreover, Tsamaase’s representation of reproductive technologies will be analysed in dialogue with Angela Balzano’s latest books, which do not reject biotechnologies themselves but critically interrogate the social norms that shape their use. Locating our analysis at the intersections of gender, ‘race’, class and ability, we will investigate whether the application of technosciences in *Womb City* aims to turn human lives into disposable commodities or whether it seeks to pursue a new utopia of reproduction.

### A look into the origins of the debate

In 1976, Marge Piercy described the utopian project represented in *Woman on the Edge of Time* as a new world where the mother is not a biological entity but rather a machine capable of creating children in a large aquarium, thereby eliminating the physical connection between mothers and children during gestation and freeing reproduction from the direct correlation between motherhood and the biologically female body.<sup>3</sup> In the community of Mattapoissett, traditional family structures are abolished, and each child is cared for by three co-mothers (regardless of gender – since the novel frequently omits or deconstructs the gender connotations of its characters, particularly through the lens of one protagonist who clearly identifies as non-binary). Alongside the entire community, these co-mothers collectively share the responsibility of nurturing and raising the newborns. This model embodies a deeper commitment to collective solidarity, care, and education, moving away from individual parental roles associated with the traditional heterosexual nuclear family structure:

It was part of women’s long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we’d never be equal. And males would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every child has three. To break all the nuclear bonding. (Piercy 1976, 105)

Just a few years earlier, in 1970, Shulamith Firestone put forth a similar solution in her essay *The Dialectic of Sex*, suggesting that the key to eradicating gender-based inequality lies in using technology to take control of the reproductive process. She argued that by doing so,

women could regain full control over their bodies, dismantling the traditional nuclear family and its role in perpetuating gender oppression. The debate flourished for a few years, generating significant controversy within both the feminist movement and the conservatives, and sparking fervent discussions. This arose from the radical nature of Firestone's arguments, which primarily attributed inequalities to biological factors. She emphasized that placing the burden of reproduction solely on women's bodies hindered the ability to overcome these disparities, as women were tasked with the challenges of gestation and childbirth while also carrying the primary responsibility for caregiving. Firestone's proposal to eradicate these inequalities through advancements in biology and control over reproductive technologies also addressed cultural and psychological factors. In this regard, she foreshadowed theories like those of Judith Butler by arguing that if society pursued the utopian vision she proposed, genital and biological differences would lose their social significance (Merck and Sandford 2010). However, the debate gradually receded from the spotlight, largely due to Firestone's withdrawal from the public sphere shortly after the publication of her book. As argued by Victoria Margree:

One consequence of Firestone's withdrawal was that the *Dialectic* was thus in a sense orphaned, cast out upon the world to fend for itself without the guardianship of an author who would defend it against misunderstandings, correct or revise its arguments as feminist theory evolved over the years. (2018, 11)

Other publications, such as the essay collection *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex*, have recently endeavored to rediscover Firestone's contributions. They critically reflect on her past and future impacts while exploring how her ideas remain relevant to contemporary issues (Merk and Sandford 2010). Similarly, the Italian philosopher Angela Balzano examines Piercy's portrayal of Firestone's ideas in *Per farla finita con la famiglia* ("Doing Away with Family," 2021), highlighting the vital role of science fiction and utopian thinking in reimagining reproductive politics. In her analysis, she states:

Do you remember Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*? It's the science fiction novel we used against the essentialist construction of motherhood, the one that first helped us understand that reproductive labor needs to be redistributed so that no gender, race, or species is relegated to performing it for free. Remember Mattapoissett? [...] They revolutionised the reproductive system by practicing multispecies justice. And if you call it feminist science fiction to dismiss it, you'll be mistaken. Feminist science fiction is philosophy, and like the best philosophy, it is charged with subversive potential, a condensed form of epistemologies rooted in the flesh, of aesthetics of existence, and ethics grounded in materiality: a serious, and equally fabulous, political project.<sup>4</sup> (Balzano 2021, 141, 175)

Building on the link between Firestone's theories and Piercy's narratives as a guiding framework, we now shift focus to explore how many of the previously discussed themes emerge in new forms within Tlotlo Tsamaase's novel *Womb City* and in contemporary feminist philosophies on the topic.

### Family abolitionism and bonds beyond blood ties

Tlotlo Tsamaase's debut novel *Womb City* (2024) aligns closely with this tradition and ideas. The book can be described as a critical dystopia<sup>5</sup> with body horror and africanfuturist nuances. *Womb City* is set in a dystopian, near-future Gaborone, where body-swapping technology intersects with reflections on patriarchal societal structures, privilege, and systemic oppression. In this future society, individuals can upload their consciousness into new bodies through a system called "body-hopping," although its positive potential is hindered by ongoing controversies related to surveillance distortions, corruption, and discrimination by the government and those who regulate these technologies. Within the Botswanan context of the novel, the practice of body-hopping traces back to the sacred pools of Matsieng, a primordial deity whom Tsamaase portrays as a non-binary god; this way, the author intertwines cyberpunk science fiction with various cultural and religious beliefs from Botswana, exploring the concept of a digital afterlife and how it clashes with traditional notions of reincarnation.<sup>6</sup>

The society depicted is centered around heteronormative patriarchy and privilege. Nelah, the protagonist and the internal focaliser of the whole story, is a Black woman trapped in a criminalized body, constantly monitored by the government and her abusive husband Elifasi, who works as a police officer. Nelah is having a secret affair with a wealthy engineer named Janith Koshal, she is an architect, and lives under growing social pressure that encourages her to become a mother and build a stable family life. However, her life spirals into chaos when, together with her lover, she accidentally kills a woman named Moremi, setting off a chain of events that brings upon her both the vengeful spirit of the victim and that of the corrupt political system, which she will confront by offering readers a perspective on how to exploit the cracks in the system, build alliances capable of destroying it, and imagine a new one.

Unable to conceive a child, Nelah and Elifasi turn to a Wombcubator, an external uterus that can grow a baby to full-term.<sup>7</sup> The technology presented in the novel not only eradicates diseases and disabilities but also enables parents to 'edit' their children, customising them to align with specific preferences – even down to choosing between sons and daughters.<sup>8</sup> The portrayal of family bonds in the novel is deliberately ambiguous, especially in relation to the reproductive system and body-hopping. This practice allows souls to move from an old body to a new one, with the government exercising control through microchips implanted in each person. If someone commits a crime, the government can remove their soul, assign the body to a new soul, and erase the previous memories. This practice results in the individual becoming part of a new family without establishing authentic emotional connections with its members. Even though the body remains the same, the soul and the person within it change, leading to a complex reconstruction of relationships. Within this framework, one might expect the setting to facilitate a reconfiguration of the nuclear family concept. However, Tsamaase's future is profoundly individualistic; it is a world so cruel and surveilled that the protagonists are

unable to trust anyone and must struggle to survive on their own. The layer of survival is, as always, poignantly crucial for female characters, whose lives are perpetually in danger and who face even greater control by the state. Nelah is not only monitored by a government-implanted microchip but also faces surveillance from her husband, Elifasi, who acts as a kind of state emissary within their home. Here, AI assessments are unsettlingly intertwined with sexual acts intended to ‘purify’ her:

He inserts it the same way he uses his penis: mechanically, thoughtlessly. [...] Every morning, I have an AI assessment where my husband peruses my memory files. ‘That’s why I married you – to keep you in line’, he’d shoot off, laughing at his own joke. [...] I stare at him and wonder if every marriage is like ours: microchipped wives watching our husbands disembowel our thoughts and memories, dissecting our every infraction, interrogating us about our glances, our clothes, our conversations. [...] We’re not only losing the power of our bodies, we’re losing the privacy our minds [sic]. [...] These intimate sessions mutilate my sense of independence; in this murdered church of my body, every molecule is a screaming prisoner. [...] After this, like always, we have sex. Pump, pump. Tap out in four strokes. Cum. Done. Unsatisfactory. My body’s sexually frustrated. Elifasi stands, shakes himself out. ‘Finished. So far, you’re pure’. Mxm, bastard. As if it’s his dick that purifies me. (Tsamaase 2024, 8)

The portrayal of violence within the family setting, combined with the author’s exploration of whether all marriages inherently involve control and surveillance, strongly resonates with Sophie Lewis’s reflections in *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (2022), where she states that nobody is more likely to harm you than your family: “the family is where most of the rape happens on this earth, and most of the murder. No one is likelier to rob, bully, blackmail, manipulate, or hit you, or inflict unwanted touch, than family” (2022, 9); the monster, in other words, is always “coming from inside the house” (2022, 17). Rephrasing *Anna Karenina*’s well-known incipit, Lewis suggests that unhappy families are all alike, “because the family is a miserable way to organize care – whereas happy ones are miraculous anomalies” (Lewis 2022, 11). Even so-called happy families function as capitalism’s base unit, a microcosm of the nation-state, and an image of hierarchy-within-unity; even in happy families, she claims, the unpaid and unacknowledged work needed to raise children and care for each other is endless and exhausting. The family’s function is to “replace welfare” (Lewis 2022, 7) through the “privatization of that which should be common” (Lewis 2022, 9), so that the task of looking after children is kept inside the family instead of being collectively shared. Tracing the story of family abolitionism from Charles Fourier to Shulamith Firestone, Sophie Lewis’ utopian and unapologetically revolutionary manifesto attempts to imagine what might come after the family, seeking better ways of loving, caring, and living. Lewis’ book resonates within Tsamaase’s representation and critique of family structures through the perspective of the protagonist, who, after having gone through the body-hopping practice, becomes part of the family of the original inhabitant of the body, a family that accepts her only out of love for their previous daughter. Nelah is well-aware that her family has never created strong biological ties with her and is therefore unable to understand her. A feeling of “loss, loneliness, and family

fractures” (Tsamaase 2024, 19) comes with body-hopping, and the government is wary that a “fractured family creates a fractured society, which creates a destroyed nation” (Tsamaase 2024, 19). Nelah sees the subversive potential of this complex reconstruction of relationships beyond biological ties but comes up against her family’s incapacity to love her back. Her attempt to start her own loving and caring family with Elifasi quickly fades as soon as he starts monitoring her: “disappointment at me for thinking married life would be perfect and full of unconditional love” (Tsamaase 2024, 25).

Forms of oppression and inequality also resurface in the context of pregnancy. When the couple struggles to conceive naturally, the blame falls entirely on Nelah, unable to carry her husband’s seeds: “How can I be free when my womb is a grave, killing any new life that tries to form, any seeds that my husband plants in it?” (Tsamaase 2024, 13-14). The protagonist is unable to carry pregnancies to term, and despite three previous attempts at IVF, her body seems unable to accommodate new lives. The author subtly suggests a series of reasons for this, notably the fact that the body into which her soul has been transferred has already hosted two previous occupants. It is a weakened body, having lost an arm in the past for reasons that the family chooses not to disclose. Although burdened by its criminal past and disability, this body also carries with it significant difficulties in procreation. The protagonist is blamed by her husband, who accuses her of being unable to conceive naturally: “Didn’t you find it strange he wasn’t kicking? For three fucking days. Jesus Christ, you killed my son” (Tsamaase 2024, 5). She also faces judgment from society, which labels her a “Black Womb,” and from the family to which her soul has been assigned after body-hopping. Her mother questions how she can love a child if she is unable to carry and give birth to it with her own body, and her brother insists that she “is a man under that skin. It’s all unnatural” (Tsamaase 2024, 18). The brother’s comment invites reflection on an aspect of the novel that, although only subtly explored within the plot, underscores the neutrality of the soul. This neutrality is transferred into binary bodies, which do not necessarily reflect the experiences associated with the gender the soul had in its previous lives. At the same time, the protagonist’s struggle with motherhood prompts those around her to question her identity as a woman, directly linking maternal and parental instincts to femininity, while the absence of these traits is seen as a masculine characteristic. This dynamic emphasises the complexity of the novel’s exploration of gender, particularly in a world where the insistence on a binary gender system seems increasingly absurd, given the fluid relationship between souls and the bodies they inhabit, which are constantly changing. As the protagonist reflects in this passage:

So what if I was a man before I got transplanted into this body? Is it really that bad? And aren’t souls genderless? So I groomed myself to accept this traditional role because I was retrofitted for it. I kept quiet and pretended to love this womanhood that was not mine to wear, that only fit too tightly, leaving me breathless. (Tsamaase 2024, 27)

The protagonist's womb is referred to in the novel as the "Black Womb," a term that carries multiple layers of meaning, intertwining implications of infertility, blame, and racial connotation. Other terms used by the author include "minefield" (Tsamaase 2024, 23) and "grave" (Tsamaase 2024, 13-14). In addition to the earlier reflections on the relationship between parental instincts, reproductive obligations, and gender, some of the themes within the novel can be analysed through the lens of the connection between blackness and reproductive politics, as the novel explores Nelah's awareness of the limitations the child will face in terms of oppression and opportunities. This theme echoes existing scholarship on the subject, such as the foundational works of Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman on the transmission of slavery through the maternal line (Spillers 1987; Hartman 2016).<sup>9</sup> Hartman, in *The Belly of the World*, explores in particular the complex configuration of gender relations during slavery, analysing its legacy in the context of the system's afterlife and global capitalism. The author discusses the maternal role of reproduction and care in these terms:

Those of us who have been "touched by the mother" need acknowledge that her ability to provide care, food, and refuge often has placed her in great jeopardy and, above all, required her to give with no expectation of reciprocity or return. *All we have is what she holds in her outstretched hands*. There is no getting around this. (Hartman 2016, 171)

It should be stressed, however, that both Spillers and Hartman address African-American concerns, whereas Tsamaase emerges as a prominent figure whose work distinctly aligns with the principles of africanfuturism. As Kimberly Cleveland observes in her recent *Africanfuturism: African Imaginings of Other Times, Spaces, and Worlds* (2024), africanfuturism is "specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view" (Cleveland 2024, 8), subsequently expanding into the Black Diaspora while deliberately avoiding the privileging of Western perspectives. By contrast, Afrofuturism generally emphasizes Western viewpoints and relies on US-based frameworks in its discourse. Cleveland further emphasizes that although africanfuturism and Afrofuturism share commonalities, they remain "distinguishable from, albeit unquestionably related to" one another (Cleveland 2024, 2), both contributing to the growing archive of narratives wherein the African world as a collective imagination is situated at the intersection of "a 'preferred future' and 'becoming present'," as Kodwo Eshun posits in his critical work on Afrofuturism. Tsamaase's distinctive approach to world-building, using indigenous mythological elements such as the ancient deity Matsieng, reflects the unique characteristics of africanfuturism. Simultaneously, Tsamaase's work is widely circulated in US-based venues, including science fiction magazines such as *Clarkesworld*, *Terraform*, *Apex Magazine*, and *Strange Horizons*, with *Womb City* published under Erewhon Books, a US-based imprint of Kensington Books. This dual engagement places Tsamaase at the intersection of africanfuturist thought and a global literary market, expanding the relevance of her work and allowing her to explore themes of reproductive politics on a



broader scale, particularly by presenting reflections on the African afterlife of slavery that extend beyond Botswana's borders.

The novel effectively highlights historically entrenched racist views that continue to shape the representation of the black mother in the contemporary world. This is particularly evident considering recent developments in the debate surrounding the reproduction of social death through an Afropessimist framework, which can be understood through the repeated use of the term "Black Womb" in the novel, that can be linked to the idea that: "Black women's wombs are thus not only factories of abjection but, I argue, death machines: reproducing those oriented toward social death and a negligible physical death" (Mendes 2020, 62). In this sense, the representation of the protagonist's womb as a grave, along with the repeated references to her body as a "black womb," can, on the one hand, refer to her actual reproductive incapacity and the mechanisms of blame surrounding her gender identity. On the other hand, it can point to reflections on the relationship between motherhood, gender inequalities, and blackness that emerge throughout the novel, especially when considering the protagonist's concerns about the multiple layers of oppression she is forced to endure:

I can only imagine before that as a Black woman, one was oppressed thrice: that they are not white, a man, and worse, they are Black, and add to that the layer of disability, being the third owner of a body that was so young, since the value of a body goes down if it has endured a few consciousness transplants. (Tsamaase 2024, 27)

Despite all these dystopian elements reflecting on black motherhood, the author also introduces utopian impulses and potential reimaginations of motherhood and family that take the path of fugitivity, stressing the idea that "this care, which is coerced and freely given" constitutes the heart of the black "social poesis, of making and relation" (Hartman 2016, 171); this idea will be further examined later in the article.

### Utopian and dystopian reproductive technologies

Turning to the portrayal of reproductive politics, the novel powerfully illustrates how, in the dystopian society of *Womb City*, the biological division of labour in reproduction remains a central mechanism of male domination. Nelah persuades herself that "[her] body is made to just have sex without leading to procreation, like [she's] being punished for being successful in other areas of [her] life" (Tsamaase 2024, 16). While women have to choose between a career and raising children, men's promotion appears to be impacted in a positive way by their female partners' pregnancies: speaking of Nelah's husband Elifasi, her brother claims:

No surprise that the poor man's still stuck in the same position while his male colleagues are earning promotions just as much as their wives are churning out babies. No one promotes a man without a

family. I'm surprised he's stuck around this long. Probably wise to do so since a divorce may tarnish his image more than being childless. (Tsamaase 2024, 19)

The novel presents pregnancy exclusively as a female burden while simultaneously framing it as something that elevates the patriarch's supposed prestige – even as he assumes no actual responsibility. In this context, reproductive technologies emerge as tools of liberation, offering the potential to free women from childbirth and dismantle the patriarchal nuclear family structure. The protagonist effectively conveys this idea when she admits her relief at not having to give birth with her own body, stating:

I must confide in myself that I am relieved I don't have to carry my children; it removes my fears of pregnancy and childbirth. I used to find it strange when some of my girlfriends looked forward to being pregnant several times. I can't believe I thought it obligatory just because I had a womb and never once interrogated that yes, I had the power to say, "No, I'm not interested in carrying a baby to term." (Tsamaase 2024, 28)

Angela Balzano approaches these themes from a very similar perspective in her book *Per farla finita con la famiglia*, stating that although she has a womb, she has no interest in using it (Balzano 2021, 105), and exploring feminist technologies of reproduction reminiscent of those envisioned in the novel. Her proposal for re/productive degrowth and posthuman trans-species kinship moves from Donna Haraway's slogan "Make Kin Not Babies" (2016) to reimagine kinship by focusing on outsourced parenting and migrating minors travelling alone. Balzano's slogan "closed legs, open harbors" (Balzano 2021, 105, our translation) rephrases Paul Preciado's uterus strike declaration of 2014 – where he "close[s his] legs to National-Catholicism" and "invite[s] all bodies to put their uterus on strike" (Preciado 2014, n.p.) – and reclaims a vulvar autonomous space of pleasure and dysfunctionality, while celebrating non-nuclear reproductive choices. This resonates with Lewis's *Full Surrogacy Now*, where she states: "if feminists want to denaturalize the gender of reproductive work more generally, we have to stop (re-)imposing gender on gestation and gestators in particular" (Lewis 2019, 30). According to Balzano, reproductive technologies – and, specifically, a scenario where ectogenesis replaces surrogacy cycles – could free women from the 'tyranny of biology', overturn gender roles, and help us to untie reproduction from the heterosexual nuclear family. Ectogenesis, a term used to describe technology that enables a foetus to be gestated outside the human body in an artificial incubator, is already technically feasible. Trials have been performed on animals, with researchers of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia reporting success in gestating lamb foetuses in a closed fluid circuit known as the 'Biobag' (Partridge et al. 2017). Artificial womb technologies leading to full ectogenesis may be many decades away but could someday be a reality and change given notions of parenthood (Balzano 2021; Wilkinson et al. 2023; Tripaldi 2024): while surrogacy has already challenged traditional notions of motherhood, artificial wombs could disrupt reproductive norms in more profound ways.

Complete ectogenesis could in fact emancipate women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology, as the burden of carrying a pregnancy to term would no longer fall to those assigned female at birth. Drawing on Kendal (2015), who questions why the risks associated with reproduction should fall solely on women's shoulders, Balzano claims that ectogenesis could free women from the economic, social, and physical sacrifices of pregnancy – let alone the risks to their bodily autonomy. As ectogenesis develops further, it could offer equal starting points for people of all sexes and genders – and particularly for queer people, allowing reproduction outside the heterosexual nuclear family. Drawing from Firestone and Piercy, moreover, Balzano suggests that artificial reproduction is far from being inherently dehumanizing. To those who argue that ectogenesis dehumanizes parenthood, Piercy responds: “You think because we do not bear live [sic], we cannot love our children. [...] But we do, with whole hearts” (Piercy 1976, 133). Similarly, in *Womb City*, Nelah is forced to confront the societal expectation that refusing to give birth through her own body means being selfish, cold, and incapable of loving a child (Tsamaase 2024, 28).

However, both Piercy and Tsamaase highlight the potential positive and negative controversies surrounding these technologies. *Womb City* shows that if such tools are controlled by forces of patriarchy, racism, ableism, and heteronormativity, they could lead to even worse consequences than those we currently face in daily life. As suggested by Balzano, the biobag may long remain inaccessible for many, and Catholic bioethicists and pro-life scientists might even find common ground in using ectogenesis to carry to term pregnancies that we choose to terminate, complicating and threatening abortion ethics (Balzano 2021, 61–62). The subversive potential of reproductive technologies, Balzano claims, is limited by heteronormativity and confined within the realm of the white male and his desire to reproduce himself (Balzano 2021, 64). Tsamaase vividly illustrates this in her book, depicting a society where pregnancy is controlled by a discriminatory system for editing newborns, while the body-hopping system operates under a similar oppressive logic:

The waiting list system adopted by the Body Hope Facility is supposed to treat each consciousness equally and fairly. Still, news reports declare that they can trace our original identity, and based on who we were, their algorithm decides what bodies we get, which dictates who lives in privilege and who doesn't. Regardless of how you hide yourself from other people around you, the system will know if you are bisexual, lesbian, gay, trans, Black, Asian, or whatever minority. I find it aggravating that a soul's first identity is tethered to it regardless of who it becomes in the next lifespan, and whatever oppression its identity carried, it will enslave it into another oppressed body. That to escape this cycle one has to game the system or earn an upgrade; to consider a change in gender or ethnicity an upgrade is ludicrous, for it is only the materialism of this flesh and the laws of this world that muddy the true calibre of our souls. (Tsamaase 2024, 49–50)

In this way, the reproductive technologies depicted in this fictional universe establish a system of discrimination that is fuelled by heteronormative, cis patriarchal, ableist and racist violence.<sup>10</sup> Body-hopping is indeed used to counter racial discrimination in the context of nationality,

citizenship, and immigration, and although the novel does not clearly define the geopolitics and racial composition of *Womb City*'s world, it unmistakably portrays a society where racist dynamics persist. One of Nelah's friend has attempted body-hopping "into a South African identity for three years to gain citizenship" (Tsamaase 2024, 65), while another one has "worked on her application for ten years to body-hop to a female British white body – *which is much easier than that of a white male*" (Tsamaase 2024, 65, emphasis added); the luckiest ones can win the lottery body-hop visas that are issued annually. In this regard, body-hopping might seem a liberating technology, helping people navigate identities that free them from constantly encountering barriers; the complicity of this technology with the racialisation of citizenship, however, soon becomes evident. To those asking why not just get residency rather than a body-hop visa, the novel responds that "you are treated for how you look regardless of what anyone says" (Tsamaase 2024, 67). In other words, "patriarchy is just like racism, a glutton for power it won't share, for sharing power means loss of power to them, a form of weakness – if we give them space, where will we sit? What will we do? Who are we, then?" (Tsamaase 2024, 204).

A similar critique is directed at biotechnologies' complicity with ableist discourse. On the one hand, the Wombcubator allows parents to fully edit their children, optimising their DNA to eliminate diseases and disabilities; on the other hand, body-hopping can augment "'improper' and malfunctioning bodies with bionic technologies to upgrade them to proper condition" (Tsamaase 2024, 47). As Nelah stresses, "disability rights organizations find that the real issues can't be fixed by tampering with our biology and replacing it with mechanical limbs. The world should be augmented to make it easier for us to assimilate rather than manipulating us to fit into it" (Tsamaase 2024, 48). When it comes to her body, having a bionic arm makes no difference to her: "the only issue I've had with this body is the microchip; that's the disability for me" (Tsamaase 2024, 47-48). To say it otherwise, the most pervasive system of oppression to overcome is that of technological surveillance. This idea echoes Angela Balzano's recent book *Eva Virale* ("Viral Eve," 2024), where the Italian philosopher discusses CRISPR-Cas9 – a technology that allows geneticists to edit genomes by altering, adding, or removing sections of DNA – and its potential to correct disease-causing gene mutations in viable human embryos. Balzano contends that access to such technology is, in itself, a privilege and reminds us that, in the meantime, countless people already born remain threatened by poverty, war, and exploitation (Balzano 2024, 123). All the more so if, as argued by Kelly Fritsch (2017), the disabilities we aim to eliminate with new technologies are actually caused by techno/biocapitalism and could have simply been prevented.

### Escaping surveillance: towards futures of liberation

Similarly, surveillance technologies are depicted in the novel in a way that underscores their inherent controversies. This is evident in the protagonist's conflicted statements; despite enduring the tragic consequences of these systems throughout much of the narrative, she occasionally describes Botswana as a kind of utopia of peace, thanks to its extensive microchipping and surveillance system. At certain points, the narrative suggests that the sacrifice of personal privacy to the state is a trade-off worth making. As Nelah affirms: "We leave our doors unlocked. I can walk at night without looking over my shoulder. I can leave my drink unwatched without fearing that it might get spiked. We can leave our children unattended" (Tsamaase 2024, 97). However, the protagonist later begins to question the purpose of the microchip she is compelled to wear: "Is it really protecting me or monitoring me?" (Tsamaase 2024, -35). She adds, "'It has made our city safe'. My voice shakes. 'Safe for whom, exactly? The men who can now get away with everything?'" (Tsamaase 2024, 36). As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the world depicted in *Womb City* aligns far more with a dystopia of surveillance and violence than with the utopia of peace the protagonist occasionally describes.

Nelah is, in fact, caught in a trap orchestrated by the Murder Trials – the government agency responsible for monitoring murders and controlling bodies – with the complicity of both Elifasi and Janith, who, once again, find ways to build alliances with the system and perpetuate the discrimination of women's positions. During a wild night of drugs and excess with Janith, Nelah ends up killing a woman named Moremi. They hit her with their car, while they are intoxicated, and Janith convinces Nelah to bury her body and not call for help to prevent their affair from being exposed. The protagonist later discovers that Moremi, in a previous lifespan, was her daughter, and they both find themselves caught in a scenario that forces them to confront each other throughout much of the book. Moremi becomes a haunting presence, driven to destroy Nelah's family, while she is also tormented by the resurfacing memories of their past mother-daughter relationship. Her figure, described by various characters as a witch or ghost, embodies the deception inflicted by both the state and the men in the narrative against her and Nelah. Through their encounter, the potential for uncovering the hidden truths of the dystopian surveillance system that oppresses women in this world gradually emerges, revealing the betrayal by the government towards Matsieng and the intrusion of the Murder Trials into sacred mechanisms of cultural reincarnation. This leads the protagonists to draw a correlation between the male characters in the novel, their actions, and their continuity with the patriarchal system in power: all equally guilty of committing misogynistic violence against those subjectivities and bodies that fall outside the masculine, with Matsieng xemself included in this group of victims. The attempt at dialogue between Nelah and Moremi reveal in fact that their conditions may be more alike than the circumstances would suggest:

But how many of us women have been murdered, pitted against each other, our voices muzzled? [...] I feel everything. I see everything clearly. I feel Moremi's pain. But I'm exhausted of seeing different versions of me – slim, sexy, fat – lying plain, breasts opened, our vaginas as storages and hospices for silly paraphernalia, and being cut to pieces. [...] Because it's always the women who die, buried with their silences. But they have a story, a name, a soul, more than we could ever have. At least, I get to be reborn, wreak havoc, enact change. It is my power.

This is not where it ends. This is not how it ends.

We are reborn for a purpose, Moremi and I. Maybe, just maybe, I can change our situation. I have to do better. For my daughter. For Moremi. We don't just get to die and shut the fuck up. The world will feel our fury. Our bodies are wombs to bear murder. (Tsamaase 2024, 262)

The novel's conclusion reconfigures all power dynamics, beginning with a renewed alliance and a reimagining of the mother-daughter relationship between Nelah and Moremi. This redefined bond transcends the stereotypes and labels of "black womb" and "bad mother" that pervade the rest of the narrative. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes in the collection *Revolutionary Mothering*:

The radical potential of the word "mother" comes after the 'm'. It is the space that "other" takes in our mouths when we say it. We are something else. We know it from how fearfully institutions wield social norms and try to shut us down. We know it from how we are transforming the planet with our every messy step toward making life possible. Mamas who unlearn domination by refusing to dominate their children, extended family and friends, community caregivers, radical childcare collectives, all of us breaking cycles of abuse by deciding what we want to replicate from the past and what we need urgently to transform, are m/othering ourselves. (Gumbs, Martens, and Williams 2016, 21-22)

By rejecting the cycle of mutual violence between them, a dynamic encouraged by the system, the protagonists reveal a key to reimagining interpersonal relationships in the novel. This especially applies to mother-daughter bonds and queer family structures more broadly. From this, the possibility of change emerges – one that reimagines Tsamaase's world in a distinctly feminist and queer framework, free from violence and oppression. Grounded in the maternal – specifically a queer maternity finally liberated from stereotypes – this transformation proposes new rules for relating. The reconstruction of the relationship between Nelah and Moremi can thus be seen as the beginning of a community no longer built on individualism, competition, and suspicion, but on care, mutual solidarity, and trust in ancestral knowledge, which comes not only from technology but from the land itself. Together, the two characters unearth the betrayal of the system that has endangered their lives, reflect on its cracks, and through their alliance, reconnect with the ancestral strength of Matsieng. By making this strength their own, they begin to overturn the violent patriarchal system of the Murder Trials and the oppressive social reality in which they have been trapped, restoring ancient mythology while simultaneously rewriting its rules, and imagining a new reality where subjectivities like theirs are finally untouchable. With this poetic and allusive description, Tsamaase captures the emotions and the atmosphere unfolding as new balances rise, sweeping away the old order:

We stand on a precipice of a new world. There's existence shimmering in the constellation. There is no god on the horizon; there is only smoke. The sun is a hot eye in the sky, scanning, burning always on a Sunday. Somewhere out there is a crucified criminal being found by the sun, by time, by me, being drawn out to this scene, this asylum of forgiveness. An exodus of citizens arrives at their appointed shells, discards their old bodies and enter new ones of their choice. A clean slate. Murder hangs in the air, like fine, sweet mist. Now, more than ever, we are Xem, and we women will be powerful, invincible warriors and horrifyingly untouchable. In our city, everyone lives forever. We are perfect; we are pure. (Tsamaase 2024, 402)

The novel's conclusion is profoundly impactful, and, once again, seems to draw from Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, while it also resonates with Balzano's claim that reproductive technologies do not automatically transform us into self-determined cyborgs free from economic, political, or personal constraints. What remains at the end of the novel is a "curious yet critical approach" (Balzano 2021, 90, 93, our translation) to technosciences, one that acknowledges their potential while also questioning who has access and who does not.

The image that unfolds in the novel's final lines clearly embodies the hallmarks of critical dystopia (Moylan and Baccolini 2003): it portrays a world filled with distortions, violence, and oppression, while simultaneously leaving open the possibility that this reality, as we have known it, may be coming to an end. It envisions a future illuminated by utopian impulses, proposing new communal configurations that transcend the nuclear family, biological reproduction, and rigid gender roles, thereby liberating society from patriarchal oppression. This allows the two protagonists, now united as allies, to realise the utopia once envisioned by Piercy and Firestone, and further developed by Tsamaase herself. There are glimpses, in the novel, of a-hierarchical kin-making, of lateral networks of family and community of non-biologically related individuals (Haraway 2016; Clarke and Haraway 2018), of reproductive justice as eco-justice. Nelah mentions several local organisations creating communities to offer a sense of place for people who were transplanted into different bodies, including herself: "because we understand each other's experience and lack of roots, we were able to find within each of us a sense of home" (Tsamaase 2024, 19). Nelah also touches upon a project she has submitted to the biannual Architecture Awards Grants for funding, named "Women Without Borders' eco-city": the project consists of a gated eco-friendly social housing community of over fifty homes meant to "empower women who are confined by gender, status, or poverty by breaking down those borders and empowering them to their ideal sustainable self" (Tsamaase 2024, 69). Although the novel does not delve deeply into the structure of these alternative communities, their utopian impulse is still maintained "*within* the work" (Moylan and Baccolini 2003, 7).

The possibilities emerging from this new wave of feminist science fiction invite a critical engagement with feminist philosophical and speculative perspectives on reproductive technologies, whose critical insights are more pressing than ever given the current all-out

assault on hard-earned reproductive rights. In line with Balzano’s “curious yet critical” approach, *Womb City*’s open ending engages readers by intersecting reproductive technologies with pre-existing cultural technologies of family and gender. It explores the potential of such technologies as a means of liberation from the tyranny of biology, by remaining acutely aware that the history of reproductive technologies has repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to reinforce, rather than dismantle, the power structures and contradictions of the society in which they are developed (Tripaldi 2024). By asking new questions and exploiting the potential scenarios and the ‘what ifs’ of reproductive futurism, we may challenge the constraints that biology, society, and culture impose on our bodies and lives, responding to Firestone’s call to transform such constraints if they do not align with our desires.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the report “Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance Six-Month Review,” published in 2018 by the Office of Foreign Assistance of the U.S Department of State: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/protecting-life-in-global-health-assistance-six-month-review/>. Accessed October 28, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> See “Remarks by Vice President Harris at a Campaign Event | Atlanta, GA”: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/09/20/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-at-a-campaign-event-atlanta-ga-2/>. Accessed October 28, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> This reimagining of reproduction and caregiving structures is part of a broader feminist engagement with speculative fiction during the 1970s. Writers such as Joanna Russ and Ursula K. Le Guin also revolutionized the genre by challenging patriarchal assumptions and envisioning alternative social orders. Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975) disrupts traditional gender roles through its portrayal of parallel worlds with radically different gender dynamics, while Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974) explores an anarchist society that rejects capitalist and patriarchal hierarchies. These texts, like Piercy’s, liberated utopia from its roots in masculine social dreaming, reframing it as a space for feminist critique and possibility. By imagining societies that dismantle traditional family structures, economic systems, and gender binaries, these authors reshaped the boundaries of science fiction, making it a platform for envisioning transformative futures.

<sup>4</sup> Original text: “Ricordate Sul filo del tempo di Piercy? È il romanzo di fantascienza che abbiamo usato contro la costruzione es-senzializzante della maternità, quello che per primo ci ha aiutate a capire che il lavoro riproduttivo deve essere redistribuito affinché non siano più sessi, razze e specie rese seconde a compierlo gratuitamente. Ricordate Mattapoisett? (...) Hanno rivoluzionato il sistema ri/produttivo praticando la giustizia multispecie. E se la chiamerete fantascienza femminista per sminuirla, cadrete in errore. La fantascienza femminista è filosofia e come la migliore filosofia è scarica elettrica dal potenziale sovversivo, condensato di epistemologie radicate nella carne, di estetiche dell’esistenza ed etiche ancorate alla materia: un serio, e altrettanto favoloso, progetto politico.” The translation from Italian is ours.

<sup>5</sup> As defined by Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, “the new critical dystopias allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse within the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those collective ‘ex-centric’ subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule” (Moylan and Baccolini 2003, 7).

<sup>6</sup> The author specifically traces the creation and foundations of both the Fertility Fund (an institution that manages assisted reproduction systems through advanced and cutting-edge technologies in the represented world) and the Murder Trials (a government apparatus responsible for monitoring crimes and controlling bodies, particularly female ones, via microchips) to Matsieng. According to Motswana tradition, Matsieng, a giant with one leg who emerged from a hole in the earth, is believed to be both the first person to have given rise to the local populations and the creator god. One of the major archaeological sites that might bear traces of such ancestors is located not far from Gaborone. The author thus seems to refer to this area, and this mythological cult, in describing the two most advanced technological systems that take shape within the dystopian world, emerging specifically next to this ancestral site of significance. Various religious cults are connected to this place, which, in contrast to



the hyper-advanced technological progress, focus instead on cults linked to the sacred waters of the area. For further information on the archaeological site, see Walker 1997. For more details on the mythology surrounding Matsieng, see Scheub 2000.

<sup>7</sup> The gynecologist of the fertility centre explains the specific functioning of the Wombcubator to the protagonist and her husband in this passage from the novel: “Historically, women carried babies to term. That’s declined exponentially over the years. We curate an embryo using IVF and transplant the embryo into our Wombcubator, which is our term for artificial wombs.” [...] “The Wombcubator is AI- and human-monitored—nothing ever goes wrong. You’ll be able to monitor the fetus’s vitals and growth through visual feeds linked to your cell phones and other devices, which will allow you to see and talk to the baby remotely” (Tsamaase 2024, 20).

<sup>8</sup> “Having a daughter is risky, and male heirs fare better in carrying the family line than a girl would” (Tsamaase 2024, 24), says the protagonist’s husband.

<sup>9</sup> As Hortense Spillers (1987) previously observed – and as Saidiya Hartman explores further in a recent article – gestational language has been instrumental in expressing the world-making and world-breaking powers of racial slavery.

<sup>10</sup> In *Womb City*’s dystopian world, Tsamaase seems to leave open the possibility of a future free from oppression for some marginalized identities, including LGBTQIA+ people, as evidenced by this passage: “In Nigeria, Uganda, and other African countries, many LGBTQIA people are microchipped. If they enter same-sex relationships, their microchips alert authorities, ending in a virtual prison sentencing and the loss of their bodies. Such bodies are rated low and cremated to avoid tarnishing the souls that would otherwise fill them. Only wealthy people can navigate these laws, while these laws devour the poor. The rich can buy new identities, smuggle their way out. Some parts of the world are disgusting, intolerable places to live” (Tsamaase 2024, 145). Notably, Botswana has recently taken steps toward more inclusive politics, decriminalizing homosexuality in 2019 (see Mendos *et al.* 2020).

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## Il pensiero eco-femminista di Haraway in scena. Intervista all'artista Marta Cuscunà

Rossella Menna

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Marta Cuscunà

Artista associata al Piccolo Teatro di Milano - Teatro d'Europa

### ABSTRACT

In this interview, Marta Cuscunà, a leading author, actress, and director in the European experimental theatre scene, discusses a performance created in 2022, *Earthbound. Ovvero le storie delle Camille*, inspired by the eco-feminist thought of Donna Haraway (particularly *Staying with the Trouble*, 2016, Duke University Press). In the show, where her acting body coexists with highly technological animatronic creatures, the artist explores a future in which the human species joins forces with other species to save the planet and take care of it again (and better). The conversation reconstructs the creative process that led to the realization of the performance, focusing on the literary and philosophical sources it draws from.

### Keywords

Earthbound, eco-femminismo, eco-scena, intelligenza artificiale, *Staying with the trouble*

Autrice, performer e regista di punta della scena sperimentale europea, Marta Cuscunà è un'artista italiana attiva dal 2006 che unisce nella sua ricerca teatrale l'attivismo femminista alla drammaturgia per figure. Da alcuni anni dedica il suo lavoro al rapporto tra crisi climatica, femminismi e forme inedite di convivenza interspecie. Nota per spettacoli di forte impatto visivo nei quali il (suo) corpo d'attrice convive con creature animatroniche altamente tecnologiche, Cuscunà ha realizzato nel 2022 un'opera intitolata *Earthbound. Ovvero le storie delle Camille*, ispirata al pensiero eco-femminista di Donna Haraway (in particolare a *Staying with the Trouble*, 2016, Duke University Press): uno spettacolo di fantascienza per attrice e pupazzi che esplora un futuro nel quale la specie umana unisce le forze ad altre specie per salvare il pianeta. Partendo dallo spunto di Haraway e di altre scritture filosofiche e fantascientifiche, lo spettacolo mostra una piccola colonia di individui migrati in aree danneggiate dallo sfruttamento umano, per risanarle grazie alla collaborazione con partner non-umani. Gli Earthbound ai quali è riferito il titolo, infatti, sono umani ai quali sono stati impiantati geni di

creature in via d'estinzione con il duplice scopo di conservarne la specie e superare la frattura tra uomo e natura che ha caratterizzato l'Antropocene. Nello spettacolo ci sono cinque figure: quattro Camille (creature animatroniche animate a vista da Cuscunà attraverso un sofisticato sistema di joystick e pedali) all'interno di una calotta rotante; e Gaia, intelligenza artificiale che le assiste nella quotidianità, con le sembianze di un'umana (interpretata dalla stessa Cuscunà, che si muove su un monoruota). Il processo di lavoro è coinciso in pieno con la pandemia da Covid-19. Dopo due debutti rimandati, a causa dell'altalenante chiusura e riapertura dei teatri, il 25 maggio 2022 *Earthbound* è finalmente andato in scena in prima nazionale al Teatro Storchi di Modena. Nell'intervista che segue si ricostruisce il processo creativo cominciato nel 2019, mettendo a fuoco le fonti letterarie e filosofiche dalle quali è tratto il lavoro, le sue implicazioni etiche e il carattere di contributo originale che la performatività porta in un dibattito e in un orizzonte narrativo che chiama in causa saperi scientifici e umanistici.

**Rossella Menna:** Com'è nato questo progetto?

**Marta Cuscunà:** È cominciato tutto con la lettura di *Staying with the Trouble* di Donna Haraway. Nel suo saggio la filosofa propone alcune storie di fantascienza, esempi di futuri possibili in cui la specie umana unisce le forze ad altre specie per salvare il nostro pianeta e prendersene di nuovo (e meglio) cura. In particolare, sono stata colpita dalle storie delle Camille e dei 'bambini del compost', che si basano sul presupposto che la specie umana abbia commesso in passato gravi errori ecologici e politici e ora per sopravvivere debba sviluppare l'arte di vivere su un pianeta danneggiato. Questo concetto nasce dagli studi dell'antropologa Anna Tsing, che ha preso in esame la capacità dei funghi Matsutake di crescere dove altre forme di vita non riuscirebbero a farlo e, soprattutto, di ricreare nel terreno le condizioni necessarie per permettere alla foresta di rigenerarsi nei luoghi in cui era stata distrutta. Forse anche la specie umana, partendo dagli esempi forniti dal fungo Matsutake, potrebbe trovare delle sacche di rinascita sfruttando le anomalie interne al sistema danneggiato. Dallo studio dei testi di Haraway e Tsing si sono aperti per me due canali di ricerca. Uno dedicato a romanzi e racconti di fantascienza femminista, come quelli di Ursula Le Guin, e uno più filosofico legato all'eco-femminismo. Volevo raccogliere l'invito di Haraway a elaborare fabulazioni collettive e provare a portare sul palco il suo pensiero eco-femminista, concentrandomi in particolare sull'idea del fare legami e non bambini. Più precisamente avevo in mente uno spettacolo che sviluppasse in forma drammaturgica le suggestioni teoriche di Haraway, Latour e Tsing attraverso i linguaggi del teatro visuale e l'utilizzo in scena di creature meccaniche. Immaginavo fin da subito che ci sarebbe stata un'Intelligenza Artificiale (chiamata Gaia) che sovrintendesse alle scelte riproduttive delle colonie e le indirizzasse attraverso un algoritmo, che analizzasse in modo comparato i dati globali sul cambiamento climatico, sullo sfruttamento delle risorse residue, sulle Nature Based Solutions (NBS) e sulla contrazione demografica.

Quello che mi interessava raccontare teatralmente era il cortocircuito tra l'accento positivo, costruttivo, gioioso, con cui questa visione di futuro viene presentata da Haraway e una società (la nostra) in cui comunque fare figli, riprodursi con ogni mezzo, è considerato ancora come un fondamentale obiettivo da raggiungere. In un libro del biologo statunitense Scott Gilbert e della scrittrice ed embriologa portoghese Clara Pinto Correia intitolato *Fear, Wonder, and Science in the New Age of Reproductive Biotechnology* (2017, Columbia University Press), di cui ha scritto la prefazione proprio Haraway, si affronta il tema della riproduzione da due punti di vista, secondo me molto interessanti. Gilbert si concentra su quello più scientifico, raccontando com'è cambiato il modo di riprodursi nei secoli (essenzialmente lo abbiamo fatto in un solo modo per secoli e improvvisamente, grazie alla tecnologia, è cambiato a una velocità supersonica). L'embriologa invece racconta il suo tentativo autobiografico, fallimentare, di riprodursi con la fecondazione artificiale – affrontando proprio la questione emotiva dell'infertilità e della sua superabilità o insuperabilità in un momento storico in cui si possono fare, e spesso si fanno, tantissimi tentativi per avere un figlio che erediti i propri geni.

**RM:** In effetti, nello spettacolo, quello della riproduzione è un 'desiderio' che riguarda perfino il personaggio di Gaia, l'intelligenza artificiale, che evidentemente ha ereditato dai programmatori umani questo bias. Molto toccante è anche la storia di una delle Camille che si impegna per ottenere dalla sua comunità il permesso di creare una nuova Camille (naturalmente attraverso un sofisticato sistema di procreazione assistita cui collaborano altre due Camille), e soffre profondamente di non riuscire a restare incinta. Pur essendo ambientato nel futuro, questo retaggio resta insomma perfettamente vivo. La sfida, mi pare, era forse proprio quella di indagare quel cortocircuito tra la realtà e l'utopia, senza scivolare alla fine nella distopia. Il rischio, in fondo, è che il futuro che Haraway presenta come utopico finisca per sembrare decisamente indesiderabile.

**MC:** Si trattava di stare a contatto con la complessità della questione. "Staying with the trouble" appunto. Immaginare forme diverse di convivenza e riproduzione è auspicabile, ma non per questo facile, perché richiede di rinunciare all'idea che storicamente abbiamo di riproduzione e di mettere sullo stesso piano diverse forme di vita: un umano, un'orchidea, un insetto... Richiede insomma l'adesione a un radicale anti-specismo. È una sfida anche solo comprendere davvero l'idea di Earthbound, di ibrido tra umano e non umano, teorizzata da Latour.

**RM:** A questo proposito, qual è stato il contributo dell'opera di Bruno Latour?

**MC:** È stato Latour a inventare il neologismo Earthbound (che dà il titolo al mio spettacolo) per rispondere al bisogno contemporaneo di definire la nostra specie in base a un nuovo rapporto con la Terra, che non si limiti più al cieco attaccamento al suolo, come fino ad ora aveva

indicato la parola 'umano' (da *homo*, *hominis*, strettamente legato al termine *humus*, 'terra'). La questione climatica ci richiede di essere di nuovo sensibili e collegati a Gaia, ai suoi molteplici legami e rapporti simbiotici; di superare la frattura tra uomo e natura, riconoscendo che l'ambiente influenza lo sviluppo dell'individuo, che esiste grazie a relazioni simbiotiche con altre specie come batteri, virus e funghi. Questo nuovo approccio all'essere umano come 'holobyonte' ci permetterebbe di trovare risposte ai mutamenti ecologici. Secondo Latour abbiamo bisogno di non essere più semplicemente 'umani' ma Earthbound. Nel processo di lavoro ho avuto la fortuna di avere come consulente teorico Giacomo Raffaelli, che è stato allievo del filosofo, e che mi ha aiutata principalmente a non fare errori teorici nella traduzione di questa materia complessa da un terreno speculativo a uno teatrale. Grazie a lui sono riuscita anche a conoscere Latour personalmente e a seguire un seminario che ha tenuto a Venezia sul tema del 'corpo politico'.

**RM:** Qual è stato il punto più complesso nel passaggio da un piano filosofico a un piano artistico?

**MC:** La sfida iniziale è stata quella di comporre una drammaturgia che fosse precisa ma allo stesso tempo non didascalica. La difficoltà principale, però, è stata proprio quella posta dalla forma teatrale in sé. Essendo personaggi immaginari, le Camille di Haraway possono fare tantissime cose, mentre a teatro c'è il problema della materia. I nostri prototipi di creature erano bellissimi, interessanti. Un ibrido con un pangolino, uno con un pipistrello e un altro con una foca. E tuttavia erano terribilmente statici. Il grande scoglio, affrontato con la scenografia Paola Villani, che le ha concretamente disegnate e realizzate, è stato quello di non prendere a modello l'immaginario cinematografico che con gli effetti speciali ci ha abituati a creature incredibili che riescono a fare qualunque cosa. In teatro la forza di gravità, i budget di produzione, l'usura a cui vengono sottoposti i materiali (pelli e meccanismi) durante i continui montaggi e smontaggi) sono una limitazione concreta e molto forte. Inoltre, in un teatro come il mio, che porta in scena corpi umani e non umani assieme, che sperimenta attraverso le protesi forme di corporeità diverse che moltiplichino le possibilità dell'umano, fa politicamente la differenza decidere *come* sono i corpi che mostriamo. Se vogliamo usare le suggestioni di Haraway, ci dobbiamo interrogare su *quali* corpi incarnano *quali* corpi. Il rischio era che la mia figura, Gaia, sembrasse una sorta di badante per figure incapaci di agire, di muoversi. È stato un lavoro lungo, ma proprio grazie all'innovatività di questo progetto (nel settore del teatro di marionette e burattini che è ancora molto legato alla tradizione) abbiamo vinto il bando europeo i-Portunus, che ci ha permesso di lavorare a Lisbona per costruire il primo prototipo dei nuovi pupazzi con João Rapaz, artista di effetti speciali per il cinema. Negli spazi del suo atelier Oldskull FX abbiamo potuto sperimentare la costruzione dello scheletro e della pelle di una nuova creatura meccanica.

**RM:** Negli ultimi anni lei ha lavorato a molti progetti legati alla crisi climatica e all'interspecismo. Nel 2021, per la trasmissione televisiva di Rai 3 *La Fabbrica del mondo* di Marco Paolini e Telmo Pievani, ha scritto una miniserie in sei episodi per corvi meccanici dedicata ai temi dell'ecofemminismo, che è poi diventata uno spettacolo teatrale dal titolo *Corvidae. Sguardi di specie*. Nel 2023, per il Piccolo Teatro di Milano, ha realizzato un progetto *site specific*, intitolato *Bucolica*, che ha fatto incontrare in un'area periferica del milanese (il Parco di Porto di Mare) un gregge di pecore Giganti Bergamasche, sette fischiatori delle Canarie, le persone che abitano il quartiere e il pubblico del teatro. Cosa la appassiona di questi temi?

**MC:** Sono terribilmente affascinata da questi argomenti perché mi mettono seriamente in difficoltà come persona. L'antispecismo, la necessità di immaginare nuove forme di convivenza, di uscire dal punto di vista antropocentrico, sono questioni che mettono in crisi le persone, anche quelle che le comprendono dal punto di vista intellettuale. Attraverso il teatro io cerco di indagare le ragioni di una fatica, una difficoltà che ci riguarda tutti.

**RM:** È come se cercasse di dare forma a un immaginario altro che possa attecchire innanzitutto su lei stessa. In fondo la grande difficoltà che incontrano gli artisti e le artiste che tentino oggi di fare i conti con questi temi è proprio quella di aggirare le insidie dell'ideologia, della tematizzazione, del didascalismo. Non è semplice costruire opere che effettivamente producano nuovi immaginari credibili e desiderabili. Lei ha incontrato artisti o opere capaci di farlo?

**MC:** Per le nostre creature animatroniche ci siamo ispirate ai lavori di Patricia Piccinini, un'artista australiana che indaga la vita in un potenziale futuro, popolato da creature iperrealistiche in silicone, sospese tra bioetica, biotecnologie e ambiente. Le sue opere, a differenza delle distopie hollywoodiane in cui robot, umanoidi e ibridi sono minacce spaventose per l'umanità, rappresentano creature pacifiche con cui gli esseri umani possono entrare in empatia e convivenza, celebrando ogni tipo di diversità. I corpi che realizza respirano, sono vitali, sono sorprendenti ma allo stesso tempo realistici. Fatta eccezione per Piccinini, le mie fonti di ispirazione non sono arrivate quasi mai dal mondo dell'arte, ma da altri contesti. *Bucolica*, per esempio, è nato andando alla ricerca di comunità non umane nel quartiere milanese (il Corvetto) in cui ero stata invitata a lavorare. Ho scoperto che esisteva un gregge di oltre mille capi tra pecore, asini, cani, mucche nane, che per due volte all'anno passava in quella zona durante la transumanza. Ho iniziato così a frequentare il pastore, ma soprattutto sua figlia Anna, una ragazza poco più che ventenne che sta raccogliendo l'eredità del padre. Indagando le loro pratiche di vita simbiotica tra animali, paesaggi che mutano, condizioni atmosferiche, sono stata colpita dal loro uso di una lingua fischiata che comprende fischi, trilli e schiocchi attraverso i quali comunicano col gregge. Mi sono ricordata così dell'esistenza (di cui già sapevo) di molte altre lingue fischiate in altri luoghi del mondo, nate in contesti di



pastorizia per comunicare tra umani e animali, ma poi diventate lingue per comunicare tra una valle e l'altra tra umani e altri umani, in zone difficili da attraversare (magari per via di burroni o ostacoli naturali). La tecnologia sta ovviamente portando queste lingue all'estinzione ma c'è una piccola isola delle Canarie dove la popolazione è riuscita a preservare la sua lingua fischiata, facendola diventare materia di studio fin dalle scuole elementari e Patrimonio immateriale dell'Unesco. Questo tipo di pratiche, di vite vissute in balia di esigenze non umane (come quella di Anna) sono le principali fonti di ispirazioni per il mio lavoro su questi temi.

**RM:** Cosa aggiunge il teatro a queste pratiche che in fondo bastano a sé stesse per risultare affascinanti?

**MC:** Ogni caso è un caso a sé. In quello di *Earthbound* credo che il teatro possa davvero farci fare il salto dalla speculazione letteraria e filosofica alla prefigurazione concreta di un'utopia. I corpi in scena parlano, si muovono, esistono davvero davanti ai nostri occhi. Quando ci riescono, creano davvero una immagine di altra realtà possibile.

**Rossella Menna**, PhD, insegna letteratura e filosofia del teatro all'Accademia di Brera, co-dirige la rubrica teatrale di *Doppiozero* ed è assegnista di ricerca all'Università per Stranieri di Siena. Come critica teatrale e saggista collabora con varie riviste e giornali, tra cui «La Lettura», domenicale del Corriere della Sera. Tra le sue ultime pubblicazioni: *Un'idea più grande di me*, libro di conversazioni con Armando Punzo (Luca Sossella Editore 2019), e *Qualcosa di sé. Daria Deflorian e il suo teatro* (LSE 2023). Fa parte dei referendari e del comitato scientifico dei Premi Ubu ed è nella giuria del Premio Riccione per l'innovazione drammaturgica. E-mail: [rossella.menna@unistrasi.it](mailto:rossella.menna@unistrasi.it)

**Marta Cuscunà** è autrice e performer di teatro visuale, che nella sua ricerca unisce l'attivismo alla drammaturgia per figure. *Earthbound* è un monologo di fantascienza per attrice e creature meccaniche, ispirato all'ultimo saggio di eco-femminismo di Donna Haraway. Dal 2021 è artista associata al Piccolo Teatro di Milano – Teatro d'Europa. E-mail: [distribuzione.martacuscuna@gmail.com](mailto:distribuzione.martacuscuna@gmail.com)

## REVIEWS

## Reworking identity on stage: a review of *Fabulazione, o la rieducazione di Undine*

Federica Piron

Independent scholar

### ABSTRACT

The staging of *Fabulazione, o la rieducazione di Undine* at Teatro Torlonia on 18 September 2024 was the result of the incredible work of the actors, the directors Paola Rota and Ester Elisha and the translator Valentina Rapetti. This event, which finally brought Lynn Nottage's work to Italy, was part of the project "African American Drama on the Italian Stage" designed by Valentina Rapetti and supported by Università della Tuscia, Teatri di Roma and the United States Embassy. The project aimed at spreading the work of contemporary African American playwrights in Italy while simultaneously addressing the issue of black representation in theatrical productions. By analyzing the play and the different stages of the project, this review has the purpose of highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary projects in creating new spaces and opportunities to reflect artistically and collectively upon the issues of identity and representation.

### Keywords

African American drama, Theatre, representation, Blackness, Lynn Nottage

In recent times, the Italian cultural panorama has finally witnessed the emergence of theatre productions, workshops and translations of plays written by playwrights of color, or centered on themes of identity, migration and cultural representation. These include not only larger productions, such as the staging of August Wilson's *Jitney* at Teatro Astra in Vicenza in 2023, but also the work of emerging playwrights, such as *Ban Ban Kaliban* by Nalini Vidoolah Mootosamy, which is the result of the 2024 edition of the workshop "Piccola Bottega" in Rome.

Within this framework, the project "African American Drama on the Italian Stage" can be considered as an important cultural event in which academic and theatrical research are intertwined. The project culminated on 18 September 2024 with the staging of *Fabulazione, o la rieducazione di Undine* at Teatro Torlonia in Rome. However, the show was just the final phase of a comprehensive and stimulating process that involved eight months of collaboration between the company and the translator of Lynn Nottage's plays, Valentina Rapetti.

At the beginning of 2024 twenty young actors, most of them black, were selected to work on contemporary African American playwrights Suzan-Lori Parks, Lynn Nottage and Lorraine

Hansberry. On 7 June 2024 *Fabulazione* premiered at Teatro Torlonia with the short play *PUFI*. Since then, the plays have been staged two more times, and Lynn Nottage was present in one of the encores. The actors and actresses involved are Alessandra Arcangeli, Yonas Aregay, Nicolò Ayroldi, Alioune Badiane, Greta Bendinelli, Simona Boo, Eny Cassia Corvo, Madeleine Faye, Didi Garbaccio Bogin, Gaja Aurora Ebere Ikeagwuana, Nadia Kibout, Marianne Leoni, Ilaria Marchianò, Martina Sammarco, Chiara Sarcona, Val Wandja and Nour Zarafi, under the direction of Paola Rota and Ester Elisha.

The project “African American Drama on the Italian Stage” was designed by researcher and translator Valentina Rapetti in collaboration with Università della Tuscia and Teatri di Roma, with the support of the United States Embassy. The project originates from Rapetti’s academic research “Theatrical Citizenships: African American Drama as a Form of Art, Activism, and Agent of Social Change,” developed with Università della Tuscia in the years 2022-2024. Through this research, Rapetti worked on the translation of some of the plays written by Lynn Nottage, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner. The idea of “theatrical citizenships” highlights how the lack of institutional and political representation of black people in Italy is deeply entangled with the lack of a complex, multifaceted representation and visibility in the arts. At the beginning of 2022, Rapetti started quantitative research that was aimed at analyzing data on the programming of plays and theatre shows written by black playwrights, as well as the enrolment of black students in National Drama Schools. The results of the quantitative analysis laid the foundation for the project and vividly demonstrated the importance and the urgency of bringing themes and stories of the African diaspora to the audience.

In the early stages of the process, the actors participated in a workshop of two weeks in which they worked on the plays and contextualized them within the history of African American drama in the United States. The workshop was articulated in four lectures held by Kwanza Musi Dos Santos (Associazione QuestaèRoma), Anna Scacchi (Università degli Studi di Padova), Jessica L. Harris (St. John's University and Rome Prize at American Academy) and Giordano Zevi (Deputy Head of Division Economic Outlook at Banca d'Italia). These lectures supported the stage readings of the plays *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) written by Lorraine Hansberry and translated by Ettore Capriolo, *Poof!* (1993), *Intimate Apparel* (2003), *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004), *Sweat* (2015) and *Clyde's* (2021) by Lynn Nottage and translated by Valentina Rapetti, as well as *White Noise* (2019) by Suzan-Lori Parks, translated by Valentina Rapetti and Monica Capuani.

The reading of the plays alongside the lectures opened up an important space for discussion for the actors, who are the core of this project. In a conversation with Yonas Aregay and Val Wandja the workshop emerged as the most innovative and intense part of the whole project. Actor Yonas Aregay underlined how those two weeks were a unique opportunity to

explore and concentrate on the meaning of the plays while bonding with the other artists, as they were all part of the same process. Similarly, writer and actress Val Wandja pointed out that the workshop was a distinctive trait of the project, since it created an environment in which the cast could reflect on the issues of racism, identity and blackness both as elements of the plays and as part of a political reflection on the present. According to Wandja, *Fabulazione*, in its comic and tragic aspects, was a text that eventually allowed the cast to further explore the thoughts and complex emotions that came up during the workshop.

*Fabulazione, o la rieducazione di Undine* is a play about the social fall of Undine Barnes Calls, a thirty-seven-year-old African American woman who manages to emancipate herself from her working-class origins and become a successful publicist. However, her fortune and financial wealth are shattered when she finds out that her Argentinian husband ran away with all her money, leaving her pregnant with a child that he knows nothing about. Undine is thus forced to return to her family's home in Brooklyn and reconcile with her past.

In this play, Lynn Nottage explores themes of class and social mobility and their intersection with race and gender with a poignant and ironic tone. As in classical theatre, Nottage plays with the idea of one's background as a form of fate that can drag you down and back to where you are from, despite all your efforts. In the first act Undine – who is wonderfully played by the actress Eny Cassia Corvo – receives the news that she was a victim of fraud. However, the police officers claim that they have not found any record filed under the name of Undine Barnes Calles. It is as if she appeared out of nowhere, *having no background story*. The play – which is characterized by a quick and dynamic pace, without any blackout until the end – now pauses. Undine sits on the stairs of the stage and speaks directly to the audience. In her monologue, she explains that it was through her education that she managed to leave her Brooklyn life behind and build the right connections for her career. As soon as she finishes her monologue, the course of events starts right from where it was interrupted, and Undine gets caught by a terrible pain that she had named 'Edna'.

In this powerful scene Nottage shows that there is no continuity in Undine's identity, and the multiplicity of names is symbolic in this sense. Undine, born Sharona Watkins, decides to embrace individualistic, neoliberal values in order to become part of the African American elite. However, this implies giving up her past life and pretending that her parents died in a fire. Thus, taking a new name is not an act of self-determination, but rather it is part of a process of removal. The passage from Sharona's past life to Undine's present is so deeply marked that nothing can be retrieved from the past. Not her parents, not even her name. Nottage thus highlights the way in which the category of class works as a marker that differentiates the rich from the poor black masses.

In *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000) bell hooks calls attention to the necessity of addressing the issue of class in the black community because a cohesive movement of anti-

racist solidarity cannot exist if class differences continue not only to be ignored, but also to be exploited by the elites. In the book, the writer recalls how at the end of her PhD she was not able to tell who she was anymore, and whether she had given up on her values and betrayed the working class. She thus became aware of the contradictions that were entailed in her condition as a well-educated African American woman. While watching *Fabulazione* at Teatro Torlonia, I kept asking myself whether Undine should have felt guilty about wanting to leave her Brooklyn life behind, and whether that was really her desire. Most importantly, as bell hooks also appears to wonder, I asked myself to what extent it is possible to become something new without breaking away from one's personal and collective history.

Through the character and the journey of Undine, Nottage openly addresses the political issue of class and explores a narrative of self-made success that was assimilated by the black upper class. In contrast, the attempt to create a healing and cohesive narrative is embodied by the character of Undine's brother, whose evocative name is Flow. Played by Val Wandja, Flow is a security guard who spent the last fourteen years writing an epic poem centered on the figure of Brer Rabbit, a classic trickster from American folklore. Through his poem, Flow tries to reconnect his ancestors' history with present-day African American identity. However, the poem appears to be never-ending, as he is constantly waiting for the right words to come, claiming that "a fabulation takes time, it doesn't just happen" (Nottage 2006, 132).

Through the interplay of different types of narratives, Nottage conveys the idea of identity as a fabulation itself. By writing a play that explores and disassembles the narratives of African American identity, the author acknowledges the power of words and stage representation in shaping the discourses around it. Overall, *Fabulazione* simply and straightforwardly exhibits the performative aspect of identity-making and its constant dialogue with power structures.

In an interview with Charli Rose on the play *Topdog/Underdog*, Suzan-Lori Parks responds to the critique of writing stereotypical black characters by addressing the intricacies of representation when it comes to African American identity. Parks argues that if she had written about doctors and lawyers, she probably would have been equally criticized. The playwright points out that in the end, it is a matter of working out the meaning of representation on stage, and of having black actors and actresses to interpret black characters: "Most nights, after watching the play, because I've seen it so many times now, that's what the play is about to me: the opportunity to give two black guys the chance to work together and represent [on stage]" (Parks 2017, 12:40).

To conclude, the project "African American Drama on the Italian Stage" has contributed to opening a discussion on the political and cultural representation of black people in Italy, shedding light on the fact that black actors are still often confined to stereotypical roles. What is more, the project and the staging of the play showed the importance of pushing the boundaries of traditional Italian theatre programming, demanding a more diverse cultural offer

that reflects the multiplicity of stories and experiences of our present. This is a step towards seeing theatre as a place of participation, possibility and experimentation. Hopefully, this type of project will be the steppingstone to encourage theatrical productions to invest more in the work of talented black artists.

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# Riprendersi la vita. Uno sguardo etnografico sui processi sociali che danno forma e caratterizzano le occupazioni abitative

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Osvaldo Costantini, *Riprendersi la vita. Etnografia dell'Hotel Quattrostelle occupato tra bisogno e socialità*. Verona: Ombre Corte, 2023 (155 pp.)

## ABSTRACT

In this review I focus on the book by Osvaldo Costantini *Riprendersi la vita. Etnografia dell'Hotel Quattrostelle occupato tra bisogno e socialità*, which draws on the assumption that access to housing cannot be taken for granted but depends on the complex balance between market, political regulation and social structure. Costantini's book is remarkable for its ability to shed light on the shortcomings of Italian housing policies, which are often exclusionary and racist, and the importance of self-organizing practices from below that challenge the exploitative logic of contemporary capitalism. By examining the personal histories of the squatters, the author underscores the nexus between job insecurity and exclusion from the housing market. Costantini's text also gives meaning to the concept of 'structural humiliation', showing how direct action restores agency and dignity to people and contributes to the development of pathways of emancipation, allowing them to regain a measure of control over their own lives.

## Keywords

Housing policies, urban spaces, social movements, precarity, exclusion

Inizio questa riflessione con un riferimento apparentemente lontano dal tema trattato nel libro che sto recensendo. Nel suo studio sui regimi di *welfare*, Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2000) ha messo in evidenza come le diverse società per affrontare i rischi sociali – per esempio: la malattia, l'infortunio, l'invecchiamento, ecc. – si siano date modi differenti di allocare le risorse. Sostanzialmente, secondo il sociologo svedese, vi sono paesi che hanno privilegiato la distribuzione di queste risorse attraverso il 'mercato', altre attraverso il ruolo dello Stato, e altre ancora attraverso il ruolo delle famiglie. Un esempio classico può essere il caso dei servizi per l'infanzia che, in paesi con diverse configurazioni del *welfare*, possono essere allocati o attraverso il mercato (asili privati), o attraverso il ruolo dello Stato (asili pubblici), o, infine, attraverso il lavoro non dichiarato di membri del nucleo familiare (in genere le madri, oppure i



nonni). Ed è attraverso le diverse combinazioni tra queste modalità di allocazione di risorse sociali che emergono i diversi regimi del *welfare*. Ora, questo schema, che a prima vista sembra parlare d'altro, è per me molto rilevante nella lettura del bel libro di Osvaldo Costantini, per due ragioni.

La prima è che questo approccio ci permette di capire che anche la casa è una risorsa sociale e che l'accesso ad essa non può essere dato per scontato, o naturalizzato in una specifica configurazione – per esempio, nell'idea che alla casa si acceda solo attraverso il mercato o la famiglia (la casa in eredità) – ma è, al contrario, un processo che si determina nell'articolazione delle relazioni tra il modello economico, la regolazione politica e la struttura sociale. Come spiega bene l'autore, infatti, un'occupazione abitativa rappresenta una reazione organizzata a un modello di gestione dello spazio urbano che mette in discussione le logiche estrattive del tardocapitalismo (Costantini 2023, 102).

La seconda ragione di interesse è che in quello schema c'è un buco tanto evidente quanto poco visto e considerato, ma individuato perfettamente da Costantini. Nel modello sopra indicato, infatti, non trovano spazio la moltitudine di pratiche di cooperazione, solidarietà e auto-organizzazione che possono garantire un accesso alle risorse sociali “dal basso.” Anche se spesso ciò che noi conosciamo sotto il nome *welfare state* ha radici proprio in quel tipo di pratiche. Ovvero, in una dinamica di istituzionalizzazione di una molteplicità di pratiche mutualistiche che nascevano per dare una forma materiale all'idea di solidarietà tra i lavoratori.

Va poi sottolineato un ulteriore aspetto di valore nel lavoro di Costantini, ovvero la sua capacità di mettere in luce, attraverso le biografie degli occupanti, la questione della posizione all'interno della struttura di classe del capitalismo post-industriale. Il testo è, infatti, ricco di voci di occupanti, attraverso cui l'autore riesce a far emergere il nesso esistente tra le logiche di (mal)funzionamento del mercato del lavoro e le dinamiche espulsive del mercato immobiliare formale. Come spiega lo stesso autore:

La grande contraddizione stava e sta nel fatto, sollevato dagli occupanti, di produrre ricchezza per la società in cui vivono e non poterne godere perché la maggior parte del proprio salario viene speso nella riproduzione della forza lavoro, in cui va compreso anche il costo di un'abitazione, le utenze, gli alimenti. Talvolta (...) questa stessa possibilità di riproduzione è messa in scacco. (Costantini 2023, 53)

Ed è nella giustapposizione delle diverse storie che emerge il portato di violenza intersezionale delle dinamiche di esclusione che sono all'origine dell'occupazione abitativa: “[p]er molti, insomma, il nocciolo della questione sta nel dover lavorare in una città in cui non è possibile abitare per insufficienza delle risorse e per mancate politiche pubbliche” (Costantini 2023, 93).

Così, *Riprendersi la vita. Etnografia dell'Hotel Quattrostelle occupato tra bisogno e socialità* risulta essere un testo necessario per comprendere alcune questioni che nel dibattito pubblico risultano, sostanzialmente, fuori fuoco. Innanzitutto, il carattere residuale, classista, razzista ed escludente, delle politiche abitative in Italia. Secondariamente, la dimensione

“costituente” delle pratiche di occupazione che nascono per dare una risposta materiale ed emergenziale a un bisogno primario, ma che nel loro dispiegarsi lasciano intravedere altri modi possibili di stare assieme e di pensare il mondo. Non a caso l'autore, citando Rediker, traccia un (prudente) parallelismo tra le occupazioni e le pratiche di diserzione e riunione sotto la bandiera internazionalista del Jolly Roger (Costantini 2023, 103). In ultimo, questo testo ha il merito non di parlarci di, ma di portarci letteralmente dentro a un'*underclass* metropolitana che risulta sostanzialmente ignorata, quando non esplicitamente criminalizzata, dall'arena della discussione politica. “Le persone presenti nel palazzo sono tutti lavoratori salariati e ‘lavoratori autonomi’ (venditori ambulanti, traslochisti informali, riparatori, idraulici)” e sono quasi tutti stranieri: “le nazionalità più rappresentate sono (...) Etiopia, Eritrea, Tunisia, Perù, Romania, Sudan, Senegal, Nigeria” (Costantini 2023, 52); inoltre, vivono in nuclei familiari numerosi. Un ritratto contemporaneo delle “nuove povertà” e di come queste si dispongano, in larga parte, lungo la “linea del colore” (Du Bois 2010).

Le centocinquantacinque pagine del volume sono articolate in una breve sezione introduttiva, in cui l'autore, anche a partire da alcuni aneddoti personali, esplicita quelli che sono i presupposti conoscitivi del suo lavoro, cui fanno seguito quattro capitoli e delle brevi conclusioni.

Nel primo capitolo, Costantini fa un fondamentale lavoro di ricostruzione storica delle politiche abitative e urbanistiche che hanno caratterizzato la storia di Roma, dai primi anni del secolo scorso, al secondo decennio dell'anno Duemila. L'autore contesta il *frame* che viene spesso utilizzato per affrontare la questione delle occupazioni e lo fa in due modi. Innanzitutto problematizzando la nozione di “emergenza abitativa” spesso usata in Italia: “la sua lunga durata induce in primo luogo a valutare l'adeguatezza o meno del termine ‘emergenza’, e, in secondo luogo genera il dubbio che anche la questione abitativa rientri tra quelle crisi/emergenze, diventate tecniche di governo” (Costantini 2023, 21). In tal modo l'autore mostra come le dinamiche degli sfratti e delle politiche di edilizia residenziale pubblica siano da mettere in relazione a forme di accumulazione primitiva, ovvero alle logiche estrattive con cui l'ambiente urbano viene privato di risorse, che vengono dirottate in favore di operatori finanziari e agenti della rendita immobiliare. In seconda battuta, l'impostazione tradizionale in cui si inquadra la questione delle occupazioni viene rivista riportando l'attenzione sui soggetti e sulla loro *agency*. In questo senso,

le leggi, le prassi e le dinamiche sociali strutturano la possibilità di agire dei soggetti, che si ritrovano di fronte alla scelta tra la strada, qualche precario periodo nelle strutture di accoglienza (quando disponibili) con le loro forme di controllo e, infine, il conflitto, ossia l'appropriazione di spazi abbandonati al fine di poterci vivere (Costantini 2023, 35)

Nel secondo capitolo, “Genealogie storiche,” l'autore compone un breve quadro sui movimenti di lotta per la casa e in particolare presenta il caso dei Blocchi Precari Metropolitani,

un'esperienza di "sindacalismo metropolitano" in cui la lotta per la casa non si configura come mero strumento di soddisfacimento di un bisogno primario ma mira alla determinazione di processi di soggettivazione e di rivendicazione di istanze di giustizia territoriale. I BPM, peraltro, sono il collettivo che offre rappresentanza e riporta le rivendicazioni degli occupanti dell'Hotel Quattrostelle nella dialettica con le istituzioni. In merito, è importante sottolineare che, come spiega l'autore stesso nell'Introduzione, egli ha avuto accesso al campo della ricerca proprio per il suo ruolo di attivista di questo collettivo.

Il capitolo successivo, "Approdare all'occupazione tra 'necessità' e 'scelta'," è il fulcro dell'intero volume e mette a fuoco le dinamiche di trasformazione che prendono forma con l'occupazione. Attraverso una selezione di storie, Costantini mostra come l'ingresso nello spazio della lotta, rappresentato dall'occupazione, sia l'innescò di una serie di processi che ridefiniscono identità, appartenenze e senso del 'noi'. L'autore è infatti bravo a evidenziare il ruolo delle dinamiche emozionali come "quegli elementi sfuggenti che, insieme agli interessi materiali, interpretano un ruolo chiave nello spiegare le sfide dei subalterni al potere" (Saitta 2015, 41). È infatti proprio la sfera emotiva a rendere comunicabili e condivisibili quegli atti – lo sfratto, il licenziamento, la malattia, per esempio – che si configurano come eventi-soglia (vedi Bachtin 1979) a partire dai quali scaturisce un cambiamento di corso e che, in questo caso, si traducono nel passaggio all'azione diretta per modificare la propria condizione. Si tratta di uno scarto attraverso il quale si può leggere la contrapposizione tra diritti e legalità e nel quale si apre un nuovo orizzonte di possibilità, rappresentato dalle pratiche di contropotere. Ovvero, "la possibilità di ribaltare lo status quo con l'illegalità di massa, appropriandosi di beni privati, di spazi abbandonati, e avocando a sé la possibilità dell'uso della forza, non riconoscendone il monopolio allo Stato" (Costantini 2023, 58). L'azione dal basso, in altre parole sottrae spazio, tanto allo Stato, quanto al mercato, dando forma a un nuovo soggetto politico. In questo senso, l'azione di occupare si configura come una risposta a una condizione di "umiliazione strutturale". Costantini, che elabora il concetto a partire da quelli di "violenza strutturale" (Farmer 2006) e "potere strutturale" (Wolf 2000), lo definisce come

una condizione in cui la deprivazione economica fa sì che una persona non sia in grado di dare ai propri figli ciò che essi chiedono; di non riuscire ad avere accesso ad altri beni primari e secondari necessari o socialmente desiderati; essere inserito in forme di lavoro salariato di basso livello e di forte dipendenza dai datori in virtù del salario che forniscono. (Costantini 2023, 60)

In questo senso l'occupazione è ciò che consente alle persone di recuperare dignità. Ovvero, tornare a essere in grado di soddisfare le aspettative del proprio nucleo familiare e riprendere il controllo del proprio tempo. È interessante osservare la risonanza tra il concetto di 'umiliazione strutturale' con quello di *hogra* (Feixa et al. 2022; Serres 2013; Sánchez-García e Touhtou 2020), che deriva dall'arabo-marocchino, ed è molto diffuso nell'ambito dei *migration studies*. *Hogra* infatti è un termine che si riferisce a una pluralità di sentimenti che vanno

dall'ingiustizia, all'indignazione, al risentimento, all'umiliazione, all'oppressione da parte di chi ha il potere, ed esprime una condizione di impossibile *agency* che induce molti, soprattutto tra i più giovani, a migrare. Ovvero, a cambiare il corso delle proprie vite attraverso un'azione diretta; in questo caso di *exit*, ma nel caso dell'occupazione studiato dall'autore, di *voice* (vedi Hirschman 1982). Ed è interessante rilevare come i 3 protagonisti dell'occupazione non percepiscano il loro agire come politico, collocando, di fatto, l'atto dell'occupazione nel dominio dell'infrapolitico (Scott 1990). Tuttavia, rivendicando il loro diritto all'abitare, essi operano una sorta di corto-circuito tra micro-pratiche di resistenza e lotte di massa.

Il quarto capitolo, "Autorganizzazione e convivenza nella diversità," assieme alle brevi conclusioni, permette di comprendere come l'esperienza dell'occupazione, per chi vi partecipa, si configuri come un moltiplicatore di 'capitale sociale' che permette lo sviluppo di una forma di *agency* collettiva: ciò che non è possibile ai singoli, lo è invece al collettivo. Come mette in evidenza l'autore, infatti, l'occupazione comporta lo sviluppo di una nuova socialità che non riproduce le forme organizzative gerarchiche ed escludenti che caratterizzano la società, al di fuori dei cancelli dell'Hotel Quattrostelle, ma apre spazi inediti e imprevedibili di incontro e di cooperazione. E sebbene l'attivazione in una dinamica di lotta politica da parte dei partecipanti sia, tutto sommato, meno intensa di quello che ci si potrebbe aspettare – anche in ragione del fatto che una gran parte degli occupanti sono stranieri e dunque solo limitatamente disponibili a lottare per la conquista di diritti in Italia – l'occupazione può essere letta come l'apertura di spazio di socialità in cui accadono cose profondamente politiche. Costantini ha il merito di farci comprendere la dimensione collettiva e processuale di questa esperienza abitativa e del quadro dinamico di equilibri e squilibri, forme di *leadership* carismatica e pratiche di contropotere, che danno conto delle frizioni, delle contraddizioni e delle tensioni che attraversano l'occupazione; nonché delle relazioni, a volte ruvide ma dirette, che la caratterizzano.

In sintesi, *Riprendersi la vita* di Osvaldo Costantini è un volume di grande interesse, per una pluralità di soggetti e per una pluralità di ragioni. Per un verso, infatti, contribuisce ad alimentare lo scarso dibattito politico (e, in parte, accademico) sulla questione abitativa, e sugli effetti che si producono quando questa si salda alla questione migratoria. Per un altro, rappresenta un testo importante anche per lo studio delle occupazioni come movimenti sociali. Certo, come tutti i buoni lavori di ricerca apre molti altri interrogativi, che non possono trovare risposta in questa sede. Per esempio, sarebbe stato interessante comprendere meglio il ruolo dei Blocchi Precari Metropolitan, anche in relazione alle nuove forme del "sindacalismo ibrido" (Alberti 2017), ovvero a quell'insieme di pratiche formali e informali che saldano esperienze di sindacalismo classico con le pratiche dei movimenti che si stanno sviluppando (si veda per esempio la vicenda della GKN). Nonché dare forma a un'idea che attraversa tutto il testo senza trovare una formulazione esplicita, cioè il ruolo profondamente politico della *solidarietà* (parola

che si trova raramente nel testo) nella riconfigurazione di una comunità politica che ridà senso al tema della classe sociale e rompe, pur senza scardinare del tutto, il *frame* della nazionalità. Nondimeno, ritengo questo libro uno strumento di conoscenza fondamentale per tutti coloro che lavorano o sono attivi nel sociale, perché fa comprendere chiaramente i limiti delle politiche pubbliche e al tempo stesso mostra il grandissimo potenziale trasformativo dell'azione diretta, ovvero della decisione di “riprendersi la vita.”

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