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Breaking Bread and Sharing Dreams with
the Other-than-human: Extinction and
Multispecies Community in Lydia Millet's
How the Dead Dream

*Are we
extinct yet. Who owns
the map. May I
look. Where is my
claim. Is my history
verifiable. Have I
included the memory
of the animals. The animals'
memories. Are they
still here. Are we
alone. {...}*
(Jorie Graham, "Are We")

Animals are like rock stars, they have that charisma.
(Lydia Millet, "Jonathan Lethem and Lydia Millet")

In her introduction to *The Lives of Animals* (2001), the novella written by J.M. Coetzee for the 1997-98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, political philosopher Amy Gutmann praises the author's display of a very special "seriousness": "for a certain kind of artist," it is "an imperative uniting the aesthetic and the ethical" (3). Gutmann, in other words, celebrates Coetzee's narrative for its powerful deployment of literary

imagination to investigate complex issues – in this case our perception and treatment of the more-than-human – that require moral investments in the perspective of change and commitment to praxis.

Instead of a traditional philosophical essay, the South African writer opts to read a (meta)fictional piece, where the main character, Elizabeth Costello, is an aging Australian writer whose literary reputation earns her an invitation to give two talks at the fictional Appleton College in Massachusetts. The lecturer can freely choose the topic of her honorary talks and surprisingly decides to rule out literary questions in favor of “a hobbyhorse of hers” (16): a critique of human abuse towards animals and their commodification in postindustrial societies. This merciless cruelty, Costello explains, is made “invisible” by the same convenient blindness experienced by many people living just outside the extermination camps during World War II. In this way, the upsetting analogy between the way humans treat other animals and the Nazis’ treatment of Jews is made even more disturbing by the accusation that humans are all silent bystanders of a mass slaughter that is accepted as commonplace.

Whereas the two fictional unorthodox speeches are perceived as an unwelcome jeremiad against animal eating by the local academic community, Coetzee’s lectures reflect his long-standing censure of anthropocentrism together with his exuberant, often satirical, assessment of human deficiency to sympathize with the nonhuman. In “The Philosophers and the Animals,” Elizabeth Costello identifies Western philosophy as the culprit of this false exceptionalism: the privilege it grants to human mind and body leads to acquitted cruelty towards other animals that are thus perceived as “thinglike” (23), easily put “in confinement” (33) – mainly zoos and laboratories¹ – and condemned to several “forms of punishments (beating, torture, mutilation, execution)” (33). The horror of both the Nazis and the mute bystanders outside the concentration camps consisted in the fact that “they closed their hearts,” where “the heart is the seat of *sympathy*, the faculty that allows us to share at times the being of another” (34). Similarly, it is the lack of compassion that prevents human beings from considering animal rights. Yet, since “there are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” (35), humans can picture themselves as animal others.

When the following day Elizabeth Costello delivers her second lecture, “The Poets and the Animals,” one seat in the seminar room remains empty as a sign of protest: it was supposed to be occupied by a well-respected Jewish poet, who sends a written note instead, where he asks her: “If we refuse to break bread with the executioners of Auschwitz, can we continue to break bread with the slaughterers of animals?” (146). The analogy between the two groups of victims and the concept of “likeness,” according to the poet, is misunderstood to the point of blasphemy, “a trick of the words” that he reckons unacceptable. Costello, however, expresses her reluctance in the belief that words and things perfectly coincide when nonhuman animals are involved and offers some examples taken from poetry, where “animals stand for human qualities” (51). Nevertheless, there are some poets such as Ted Hughes who revalue the materiality of nonhuman subjectivity while inviting us to “inhabit” not the animal’s mind but rather the animal’s body (in this case a jaguar’s). In her lecture, Costello emphasizes the high value of such a poetry, one that “does not try to find an idea in the animal [...] but is instead the record of an engagement with him” (51) through “poetic invention,” a process that mingles “breath and sense” (51) or, to say it again with Amy Gutmann, the aesthetic and the ethical. Costello/Coetzee’s texts do not treat animals as “absent referents” but, rather, employ “a number of strategies for writing in a manner that is neither humanist, nor claims to speak on behalf of animal subjects” (Barrett 126). As a matter of fact, one of the major debates generated by *The Lives of the Animals* is whether it was intended, as Marjorie Garber suggests in her response, to use animals in order to actually talk “about *people*” (75; italics in the original) and “the value of literature” (84). In this sense, the other-than-human matters only insofar as it connotes the human. Coetzee’s “seriousness” eventually transpires through an exercise of sympathetic imagination that challenges the anthropocentric stance sustaining the “otherization” of nature, while offering stimulating conceptual grounds for the current debate on the posthuman and its investigation into the blurring of human-nonhuman boundaries.

Ten years after the publication of *The Lives of Animals*, Lydia Millet wrote *How the Dead Dream* (2008), the first novel of a trilogy² destined to express the same “seriousness” exemplified by Coetzee. In this work, however, the

debate's purview is extended to the point that extinction ceases to be a looming threat and becomes a quizzical everyday business. In this new scenario, Millet's novel, I argue, is a direct reply to Coetzee's invitation to reconsider the place of the human vis-à-vis the other-than-human within the complex framework of posthumanism. This implies a recession of the onto-epistemological and ethical divide among species that saturate popular discourses on extinction. Due to the unprecedented alienness and uncanniness of the universe, this species separation is exacerbated in the Anthropocene, which therefore represents "a new era of solitude" (Rose 10). As a reaction, multispecies scholars encourage us to think of humanity as an "interspecies collaborative project" (11), namely a lively entity in progress that is never alone. But how to narrate these stories of coevolution and cohabitation?

Undoubtedly, Millet's education, her personal interest in wildlife and some deadlock moments in her writing career³ sharpened her perception of how the narratives authored by the natural sciences are now exceeding speculative fiction in scale and scope. She also believes, however, that most of these narratives do not vary substantially in language and mode: echoing Ursula Heise's lamentation for a conventional binary rote that alternates the melancholic mourning paradigm with a homocentric heroic stance,⁴ Millet opts for a different formula. In her case, it is dark irony – at times exaggeration – that prevails.

While both terrestrial and aquatic species are already involved in the sixth mass extinction – what Elizabeth Kolbert calls "an unnatural history" (2014) – the "natural" other keeps being reconfigured together with an ever-widening classification of what is perceived as "human." This question, directly addressed by Stacy Alaimo in her study, *Exposed* (aptly titled " Dwelling in the Dissolve"), guides Millet's works:

What can it mean to be human in this time when the human is something that has become sedimented in the geology of the planet? What forms of ethics and politics arise from the sense of being embedded in, exposed to, and even composed of the very stuff of a rapidly transforming material world? Can exposing human flesh while making space for multispecies liveliness disperse and displace human exceptionalism? (1)

Our perception of this continuous shaping and reshaping of bodies, lives, and collectives in diverse environments has proved to be urgent to investigate the imbrications of multiple ecosystemic networks grappling with the predicament of living (*and* dying) in an increasingly diminished world. Given that living and nonliving beings in their interdependence share the same processes of becoming and un-becoming, it is imperative to recognize the other and respond to the other's call through "intense dramas of encounter" (Rose 12). In this sense, Millet's novels function as an exploration of realms beyond the human in the attempt to promote what Ella Soper calls "a politics of affect – that is a political stance that acknowledges and mobilizes the agentive potential of empathic realization" (747). In order to "live well with others" in the Anthropocene, humans need to learn how to cultivate "attentiveness" (Rose and van Dooren 2017). This is an ethical practice of inclusion built on "multispecies love" (Tsing 2011), a "passionate immersion" (19) in the other-than-human that does not necessarily imply mutuality, since we cannot expect that our narcissistic needs (such as physical contact, communication, recognition, or even affection) can and will be fulfilled by the nonhuman.⁵ In *How the Dead Dream*, this means that the human protagonist needs to learn how to break bread and share dreams with wild beasts: some dead (a coyote), some disappearing (kangaroo rats), some delinquent (a wolf), some waiting (elephants), some absent (a jaguar), some real (a tapir).

In her sixth novel, Lydia Millet narrates the story of T. (Thomas) and his conversion. As a child, he keeps people distant to prevent any physical and emotional contact while devoting himself to money that he accumulates through ruthless schemes and calculations. From his childhood through his college years, he learns the art of entrepreneurship: he earns a little small fortune by trading stocks and building relations among his frats that he would later use for his real estate ventures in Los Angeles. His "golden egg" is the building of retirement communities in the Mojave Desert, but the economic chronicle of T.'s success is abruptly interrupted by a series of unexpected events that shake his devotion to wealth: his gains soon become personal losses that inevitably invert his worldview and from rapacious speculator T. transforms himself into a tender caretaker. The first of these incidents is a roadkill: while driving to Las Vegas, T. hits a coyote and for

the first time in his lifetime he is prey of sudden empathy. As an immediate result of this newly felt emotion, he rescues a dog from the shelter, hosts his mother when his father leaves her, falls in love with a woman who enters his life and unexpectedly dies. Overwhelmed by unprecedented sorrow and unable to mourn, T. finds solace in the physical proximity of caged animals that he visits at night by sneaking into locked zoos. His new morbidity culminates in a journey in Belize after one of his developments is struck by a tropical storm.

T.'s final quest in the jungle is the sight of a jaguar that he will never encounter but that will contribute to his ethical awareness. Coetzee's text highly resonates here: the metaphoric visual representation of nonhuman animals is rejected in favor of a bodily contact with the alien other. As previously stated, Elizabeth Costello emphasizes the power of literature as an exercise of "sympathetic imagination." In Millet's novel, the wild jaguar runs free and refuses to be captured by T.'s gaze; yet, T. can sympathetically imagine the beast until one night, after the tragic death of his guide, he finally shares his space and his dreams with a tapir: "So an animal had come to him, in the end" (*How the Dead Dream* 242). In minutes the two motherless imperiled animals become indistinguishable in their common fate: "They found a way *not* to be" (242; italics mine). T.'s affective growth converges with the acceptance of a cohabitation that requires recognition and love, and finally nullifies human exceptionalism.

Dirty Obsessions

"Animals, framed either individually or as a collective identity, are the others against which humanity measures itself" (Baker 1), but T., the six-year-old protagonist at the beginning of the novel, is not aware of this yet, for the simple reason that animals are not allowed in his existence, not even in their minutest forms. His concept of value hinges on pure materiality.

When we encounter T., he is totally obsessed with money and its many rituals. His bills are hidden under his pillows and his mother, knowing that "currency was sacrosanct" (*How the Dead Dream* 3), would change sheets paying great attention to replace the pile in the exact spot where

she found it lest it provoke a hideous reaction. One time, for example, she forgets the banknotes on a bookshelf, and when T. stumbles into his little creatures “open to the elements” and “naked as babes” he is horrified; coins, on the other hand, are secreted away: “a thick and powerful quarter lodged under his tongue or discrete dimes tucked into the cheek pouches” (3). In both cases, T. feels the compulsive need to keep the valuable objects of his obsession eclipsed, separated, and contained by some sort of protective shell, in this case his own body. His mother’s preoccupation, on the other hand, resides in the risk for T. to come in contact with and be contaminated by bacteria: “Such a dirty habit!” she would complain regularly; “Do you realize how many *strangers* have *touched* those coins? Bacteria!” (3; italics mine).

In the opening pages of *How the Dead Dream*, Millet conflates several pivotal matters that constitute the backbone of her story. Two of these matters seem to be particularly relevant for a discourse on extinction and coexistence with the other-than-human. First of all, the Capital. T.’s selfish ambitions are fueled by material wealth that he accumulates through diverse equivocal activities: from serving as middleman for schoolyard protection rackets to inventing charitable causes for starving children. He also develops a pious ritual of counting his money that he keeps in a small safe in his room: rare dollar bills that he hands in latex gloves and lays out “on a sheet of newspaper spread across his desk, in strict order *from least value to most*” (8; italics mine). The excitement of the whole operation comes in tactile ways; it is the touching of his “naked babes” that makes him reel, while the pornographic fetishization of money offers him total gratification. But growing up, T.’s love becomes more “sophisticated”:

He no longer needed to touch coins or bills; he found his satisfaction in surges of energy, in the stream of contact between machines that processed binary. He learned to like abstract money better than its physical body. The solid house that money built sheltered him and he felt keenly that money was both everything and nothing, at once infinite, open potential and an end in itself. (13)

In one single paragraph, Lydia Millet draws a parable that moves the main character from the (auto)erotic adolescent pleasure of materiality expressed

through “surges of energy” to the more mature understanding of the immaterial flux of capital that protects him as in a shelter and completely satisfies him. Not surprisingly, when he later joins a fraternity, sex is not “a prurient interest” (25) of his and many classmates make allusions to his lack of manhood. His first sexual experience occurs only after leaving college, with “a female neighbor,” an emaciated model, quiet and doe-eyed, who would show up in his apartment “with a bottle of bad wine and a packet of good cocaine” (27), until one day she cuts her veins in her kitchen and is sent to rehab. His first nameless endangered animal companion shares with him some sort of addiction and his bed, but “she made no other demands on him beyond their weekly appointment”; when T. meets her in the hallway, she even refuses to look at him: “she slouched past him with her head down and her doe eyes averted” (27). Eventually, she ends up being locked in a separate protected environment that evokes the same confinement of the zoo cage, a space that T. will later visit to sooth his sorrow.

The second significant matter that Lydia Millet introduces in the first scene of her book is perfectly literal: matter. Millet seems to be musing not only on the mobility and circulation of capital – both increasing during T.’s growth and accruing dirt at each passage from one hand to another – but also on an ecological alterity that sustains the major discourse of the novel: the human/other-than-human compartmentalization and its fictional representations within the horizon of extinction. T.’s “dirty habit” of hosting coins in his mouth obviously repels his mother, and yet dirt “is the literal ground without which there would be no terrestrial life, and which is always shifting and on the move” (Sullivan 516). The “strangers” touching the coins and being responsible for the agglomeration of germs epitomize the same alterity that theorist Jane Bennett recognizes in her bodily “foreigners.” In *Vibrant Matter*, she introduces the notion of the “vital materiality” that speaks for the alien quality of human flesh and bodies, eventually reminding us of the unruly kinship between the human and the nonhuman:

My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners. The crook of my elbow, for example, is “a special ecosystem, a bountiful home to no fewer than six tribes of bacteria” [...]. In a world of vibrant matter, it is thus

not enough to say that we are “embodied.” We are, rather, an array of bodies [...]. (112)

If, as Rachel Carson affirms, “there is [...] an ecology of the world within our bodies” (189), to interrogate these alterities is the first step to understand the co-evolution of natural processes and social predatory practices that invariably victimize the vulnerable. In this sense, the analysis of the relation between the human and the other-than-human cannot transcend dynamics of power relations: the reconfiguration of species boundaries contemplates “questions of violence, suffering, and vulnerability” (Baker 7). Totally ignoring that even bodies are congeries of hybridized life forms, sites of “interconnections, interchanges, and transits” (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 2), T.’s mother is adamant in her species separation and does not permit pets in the house: animals belong “in paintings, stories, even stained-glass windows, but far from her living room” (*How the Dead Dream* 39). It is their stench that particularly repels her, and even when T. turns to his last resort and asks for a “smell-proof” goldfish (that he imagined could “breed and sell”), his request is rejected “on the grounds that they defecated [...]. They *poop* in the *water!*” (39; italics in the original). This time, T.’s witty response to his mother hits where it hurts: “Well, you do too!” (39).

T. gradually recognizes not only the similarities of the different animalities, but also the existence of a messy world that insists on the cohabitation of a multitude of actors. This process would take a long time and several traumatic experiences, but in the last pages of the novel, after T. has finally acquired a new sense of “value” of all living creatures as a consequence of their becoming “very scarce,” he admits that “the market has failed to see the animals for what they were” (238). This failure, Millet insists, is the result of a long process that started in nineteenth-century England:

nature that had been despised and avoided before it was destroyed by cities and farms and pollution became, when there was almost none of it left, the subject of poems and paintings, the highest access to the divine. Now some few persons, he [T.] thought, marginal persons in their marginal groups, knew the value of the animals and their world, and he was one among them. (238)

Lydia Millet's reference to Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* alluding, in turn, to John Berger's "Why Look at Animals?" is quite evident. In his famous essay, Berger critiques the eradication of the nonhuman in modernity, animals' substitutions with signs and metaphors, and the alienation of species as a consequence of industrialization and modern capitalism. Berger argues that animals disappeared from the perimeter of the visible when they were transformed into pets, segregated to the domestic space and reduced to spectacle in zoos ("Why Look at Animals?" 24-25). His ideological discourse concentrates on the concept of "nature as value" that necessarily implies the building of a binary system (man/animal, society/nature, reason/instinct, etc.) that justifies human exceptionalism and colonialism. A similar disposition is at work in *How the Dead Dream*, where the writer's critique is also directed to the settler-colonial and capitalistic paradigms that have dominated Western thought for centuries and the Euro-American context since its founding. The crystallization of a colonial legacy and of Western epistemologies that continue to be rooted in anthropocentrism eventually implies a solitude that Millet recognizes in the American cowboy myth, the epitome of personal freedom, independence, and self-reliance.

The Cowboy Myth: Solitude and Differences

Although T.'s mother is convinced that sucking on nickels and cohabiting with smelly animals are "unhealthy" habits, she also knows that they are not, strictly speaking, "un-American" (Millet, *How the Dead Dream* 4). Indeed, T.'s obsession with money comes from afar and is the result of unconditional admiration for national "authority" (2): the Presidents of the United States whose images stand out on banknotes, successful businessmen such as J. Paul Getty, the Puritans and the first inspiring pioneers soon become his idols. T. studies their words, reads their old texts combing "for signs of this sinful covetousness – a *pornography* of spirit, for nothing was more of a guilty pleasure than the greed of those who believed themselves righteous" (22; italics mine). What these men have in common is the bravery of initiative, the chauvinistic attitude toward progress that

T. admires and emulates: “He clung to a vision of forward motion, the breath of hope that could lift individuals into posterity” (2).

In an essay on the Sonoran Desert, climate change and extinction, Lydia Millet defines this attitude as “the cowboy myth,” a paradigm that thrives on a “romance of independence” (“From This Valley”).⁶ The writer’s evocation of a solitary adventurer crossing and conquering a *terra nullius* calls for a re-consideration of “placeless” national places, assaults on indigenous people, violent encroachments of nonhuman habitats, fortification and purification of the US domestic space. According to Stacy Alaimo, this space has served as “the defining container for the Western ‘human,’ a bounded space, wrought by delusions of safety, fed by consumerism, and fueled by nationalist fantasies” (17-18). Individualism, in other words, equals in/difference. While at college, T. demonstrates that he has plenty of both, and both are the results of some sort of compartmentalization. Despite his fraternity brothers trusting him in his role as a “father their own age” (*How the Dead Dream* 18), they are also aware that he stands apart, looking “to the life beyond, past the confines of the fraternity house [...]. He saw beyond what there was, and in the not-yet-existent imagined a great acceleration” (18), namely, the blooming of a small college town shortly to be invested in by new capital. But here Millet plays with words that will prove prophetic. T.’s proleptic vision of the future prepares the readers for his radical transformation which occurs after moving to California, a place he likes since speculators there “tended to ignore the foreshortened future of the hills, their promise of imminent collapse by mudslide, quake or fire” (28): indifference, in other words, towards a more critical climatic “great acceleration.”⁷

What in fact *makes* a difference in T.’s existence and will eventually bridge his perception of the many life separations is the accident with the coyote in the opening scene of the second chapter. Staying by its side and identifying with the dying animal, T. realizes that it “probably did not want him near; he should back off. Better to die alone if you were an animal like this one, a loner that avoided contact with humans” (37). And while he felt “surges of energy” when exposed to money, now he imagines “what must be a blind surge of the pain as the end closed in,” an end that approaches with distinctive smells: “of asphalt, exhaust, and gasoline, no doubt also

the smell of her own blood, and him, and other smells he could not know himself. The fullness, the terrible sympathy!" (37).⁸ T.'s epiphany resonates with Stacy Alaimo's suspicion that human exceptionalism may possibly be dispersed and displaced by "exposing human flesh while making space for multispecies liveliness" (1)⁹. This is, in fact, the real difference between species that T. recognizes at that very moment: "Animals died by the road and you saw that all the time, everyone did. You saw them lying there, so obvious in their deadness, sad lumps of dirty meat. [...] You saw the red insides all exposed. You thought: that is the difference between them and me. My insides are firmly contained" (*How the Dead Dream* 37). Death acquires relevance by humans' emotional reaction and T. knows that were he to lie on the side of the road, cars would stop and his body would be removed. "It was just a coyote," and yet T. "felt confused" (38), as if his attempt at self-absolution had miserably failed. As in Ted Hughes's poems mentioned in Coetzee's lectures, right when extinction is looming large, Lydia Millet advocates the inhabitation of the animal's flesh and the undertaking of an ethics and politics of exposure that, according to Stacy Alaimo,

may be differential, uneven, or incommensurate; yet to practice exposure entails the intuitive sense or the philosophical conviction that the impermeable Western human subject is no longer tenable. [...] To occupy exposure as insurgent vulnerability is to perform material rather than abstract alliances, and to inhabit a fraught sense of political agency that emerges from the perceived loss of boundaries and sovereignty. (5)

The accident with the coyote derails T. from his commitment of accumulating wealth, although his original dirty obsession is soon replaced by another, even dirtier, fixation: all of a sudden, he feels compelled to be in the presence of nonhumans, especially those at the brink of extinction, "final animals" (Millet, *How the Dead Dream* 197) that crowd zoos and smell of death. This urge is the outcome of a series of mounting losses in T.'s life – his mother's suicide attempt and consequent fast disappearance into dementia, Beth's car accident and death, his father's abandonment after coming out as gay – that first provoke a "numbness that crept up into

him" (54), then "inertia" (101), a sort of melancholic identification with the dead (Bateman 159).

It is at this point of the story that T. visits his Mojave development project for the first time to inquire about a pending lawsuit regarding a community of endangered kangaroo rats. While a biologist explains to him how this species could become extinct because of him, T.'s offer is "mitigation" which materializes through a parcel of land where these critters could be displaced and rebuild nests in "abandoned burrows of pocket gophers" (*How the Dead Dream* 124), far from anybody's sight. T.'s initial "buoyancy" (124) about this solution (which reminds us of the first American pioneers' removal of native populations), abruptly turns into disappointment when he learns that all the pinkies have died in the relocation. With such a reduction in population numbers, inbreeding depression highly jeopardizes the species' long-term survival, and whereas the biologist does not betray any emotion in her voice while giving this information, T. finds "his own throat closing" (125), a reaction that he justifies as an accumulation of grief after Beth's death. T.'s emotional explosion, instead, represents an epiphany that further shakes and problematizes his solid worldview and he cannot deny his misperception: the most irrelevant creatures under human feet (ants, for instance, and kangaroo rats) are the foundation of the "empire" (125) that can finally be seen as imbricated in complex ecosystems that reject compartmentalization: "Empire looked good built against a backdrop of oceans and forests. [...] If the oceans were dead and the forests replaced by pavement even empire would be robbed of its consequence" (135).

The removal of one single element in the supposed perfection of the Great Chain of Being is in fact critical enough to jeopardize entire ecosystems through a domino effect that apparently comes unnoticed – "The field stayed a field, the sky remained blue" (166) – only to realize that "a particular way of existence was gone, a whole volume in the library of being" (166). Millet challenges us to consider what it means to exist in a world that teems with different kinds of life, a vibrant conglomerate of agencies, signs, and meanings that offer multiple narrations, including our own story. Yet, as French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, this individual telling their own story is always a "plural being," a "singularité plurielle" (9), since its existence is indissociable from the existence of a

multiplicity. Moreover, far from being fixed and static, this “être avec” (9) is in constant becoming: “to be one,” says Donna Haraway, “is always to become with many” (4), namely within a domain that cannot be purely human because the nonhuman belongs here too.

Learning to recognize “the signs” (*How the Dead Dream* 140) of “the quiet mass disappearance, the inversion of the Ark” (139), and aware of the lack of information in “this matter of mass extinction,” T. resolves to make zoos “his study” (141). The first time he intrudes into such an artificial environment after its opening hours, it is to learn more about “postnatural animals” (Soper 748), i.e. creatures that have been removed from their natural habitats and show signs of aloneness: “not only alone in the cages, often, but alone on earth, vanishing. [...] *Alone*, he thought – a word that came to him more and more, in singsong like a jeer. [...] they were at the forefront of aloneness, like pioneers. They were the ones sent ahead to see how the new world was like” (*How the Dead Dream* 134-35). Everything that he once treasured secretly starts leaking away, as if his very philosophical foundations were creaking: his late-night incursions make of him an illicit intruder who transgresses “spatial as well as symbolical boundaries between culture and nature” (Völker 97).

What T. cannot predict, however, is meeting “another kind of solitude” (*How the Dead Dream* 138), an in/difference of nature that strikes him almost as an “insult” (137). During one of his nocturnal visits, T. strives to catch a glimpse of the rarest animal in the zoo, a Mexican grey wolf that he approaches by climbing a wire fence. In the dark, T.’s imagination is amplified: “he could imagine not only wolves but almost anything, a secret menagerie. He was filled with the rush of this, with the idea of myriad creatures materializing from the blackness” (136) that he can only “sense,” not being able to see them (and, in turn, to be seen by them in a process of mutual recognition). Contrary to his intentions and expectations, when he finally recognizes the shape of the wolf in the dark, he points his flashlight straight towards its eyes and, although “in the wolf’s gaze there was a directness unlike the directness of men,” the animal “went away from him. [...] He would not get closer. The wolf would not allow it” (137). Similarly to the accident with the coyote at the beginning of his conversion, when T. felt bewildered by the depth of emotions springing from the observation

of the dying animal, it is the meeting of the two animals' gazes that elicits new reflections. Again, Millet is here reformulating John Berger's ideas of the modern zoo as a product of colonialism and capitalism, the ultimate "monument of loss" (26). Within this perimeter, the absence of contact with the wildlife – either through mutual gaze or touch – has become more and more disappointing, especially for children, since animals do not interact with them.¹⁰

The following day, while reconsidering the whole episode, T. identifies with "the villain of fairy tales," eventually admitting that "he had fallen into the trap" (138): his desire to touch the wild animal coincided with an implicit desire to domesticate it, and the verb "to domesticate," when referring to the taming of the other-than-human, "signifies both care and control" (Alaimo 19): domestication as/is domination.

T. as a New Pioneer: Learning to Break Bread and Share Dreams

The etymology of the verb "to domesticate" indicates the meaning of "dwelling in a house." Lydia Millet's conflation of the notions of "house" and "oikos," two different domestic spaces, permits her to spawn a discourse on ethics and inhabitation. It is again Stacy Alaimo who reminds us of Gaston Bachelard's contention that "the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6), since the home is "a bounded space, existing to keep the outdoors, outdoors, defining the human as that which is protected within" (20). With the exception of our pets, nonhuman creatures are supposed to sleep outside of the house, separated from the protected, sanitized human place, as T.'s mother insists at the beginning of the novel. Nevertheless, Millet's story has the ambition to introduce animals not just into our domestic spaces, but into our imagination and moral thoughts as well. Gradually, T. indulges in his need to share not only the same physical space with the creatures of the zoo, but also their oneiric time: cohabitation becomes coexistence in the same, most intimate, dimension. As Bateman argues, in a state of slumber, our distinctive identity dissolves to let us be "other people, inhabit other worlds" (156), thus enhancing T.'s surrender to a new and unpredicted closeness with the nonhuman. This takes place,

for example, with some female elephants rescued from a circus and made “resentful” by years of “domination” (Millet, *How the Dead Dream* 198). Confined to cages, unable to walk, suffering from indolence and aching muscles of eating food off the ground, these beasts are mostly catatonic in their long wait: “All of them waited and waited, up until their last day and their last night of sleep. They never gave up waiting, because they had nothing else to do. They waited to go back to the bright land; they waited to go home” (200).

Far from engaging her character in a heroic action of saving the other-than-human, Millet prefers to imagine new alternatives through the erosion of their separation. The very last pages of the novel feature a trip to Belize, where T. hopes to catch a sight of an elusive jaguar. After his development is hit by a hurricane, T. embarks on a boat ride, but his local guide suddenly dies and he is victim of a shipwreck. He has left “all the old geographies” (234) behind him, and while rethinking of his existence, while recognizing that he had been drawn to cities and buildings and institutions, he wonders what would have happened if instead of concentrating on “the lights across the continent” he had imagined “the spaces between them,” where in “the softness of the dark,” space was in fact “the dream of a sleeping leviathan,” a god from which “all the miracles of evolution” (234) flowed. “The miracles,” concludes T. “were the beasts” (235). T. will never find the jaguar, but while sleeping he is finally joined by a young tapir – one of a kind and soon to die off – that lays on him and wakes him up. Both motherless, the two animals now share the same rhythm of their breaths, thinking that they were “not alone anymore. [...] Sleeping here it could feel safe again” (243).

Building on Donna Haraway’s concept of “companion species” – literally species sharing bread (*cum panem*, with bread) – in the last pages of the novel Millet imagines new forms of cohabitation with the other-than-human by resorting to metabiosis, a form of commensalism (*cum mensa*, with table), a symbiotic interspecies relationship where only one life form, in contrast to parasitism, is benefited while the other remains unaffected.¹¹ Whereas the wolf locked in its cage is not willing to share anything with the human, the free tapir, instead, is: “Faced with being the last, faced with being alone” (*How the Dead Dream* 243), they have “one breath,” knowing that “home was flesh, was nearness” (244).

Although creative depictions of our environment may prompt questions and concerns about our planet's multiple crises, we also know, as W.H. Auden once famously wrote, that poetry – in and by itself – “makes nothing happen.” (93) In the perspective of the planet's impending vanishing, Lydia Millet's novel, instead, shows how artistic practice can make *something* happen: the urgency of reading new stories suggests ways of “staying with the trouble,” in Donna Haraway's words, that exceed expectations of reciprocity with other life forms. Without overwhelming her readers with a litany of destruction, the writer finds new forms of breaking bread and sharing dreams with the other-than-human.

Notes

¹ At this point of the book version, Coetzee includes the following note: “John Berger: ‘Nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most, the animal's gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond. They scan mechanically [...] That look between animal and man, which may have played a crucial role in the development of human society, and with which, in any case, all men had always lived until less than a century ago, has been extinguished’” (*About Looking* 26). I will return to Berger's “animal gaze” later in my article.

² Lydia Millet dedicates the book to the memory of the West African black rhinoceros, which got extinguished in the time that it took her to write it. A shorter version titled “Zoogoing” was later included in the short story collection *I'm with the Bears: Short Stories from a Damaged Planet* (2011). The trilogy also features *Ghost Lights* (2012) and *Magnificence* (2013).

³ In 1991, after dropping out of an MFA program at Arizona University, Lydia Millet moved to Los Angeles, where she took various undesirable jobs in Hollywood, including a position as a copy editor for Larry Flynt Publications, especially magazines for weapons enthusiasts and of mass-produced pornography. “Along the way,” she claims in an interview, “came the LA riots, the Northridge earthquake, several waves of fires, a near-mugging in Venice” (Timberg E.1). She holds a Master's degree in environmental policy from Duke University. Since 1999 she has been an editor at the Center for Biological Diversity.

⁴ Ursula Heise defines “declensionist narratives” those fictional writings stemming from a compelling awareness of climate change challenges and featuring a rhetoric of decline. In most of these narratives – mainly postapocalyptic, dystopic, and toxic – nature's beauty and value pervade the whole discourse. In other words, these human stories of disappearing nonhuman species betray a conservationist stance by deploying either a melancholic mourning sentiment or a heroic saving action to rescue a homogenized nature.

In an interview with René Steinke, Millet argues that her intention, instead, was to write about extinction without seeming “tedious or statistical – gross numbers or historical rates of species lost, versus species living today. There sometimes seems no way to write about it that isn’t journalistic on the one hand or Chicken Little on the other. I wanted to write about that kind of loss *and* about personal loss, somehow write them in parallel so they could infect each other” (n. pag.).

⁵ The best example in Millet’s book is offered by the scene with the caged wolf that I will later analyze. Quoting Werner Herzog, Oliver Völker calls this moment of disillusion the “overwhelming indifference of nature” (97).

⁶ Although Millet states that she “has never been drawn to the cowboy myth,” she admits that she loves “the solitude that the myth evokes [...] as a form of meditative communion between the small self and the limitless universe, the finite and the infinite” (8). A kind of solitude, of course, that does not pertain to T. at the beginning of his adventure.

⁷ I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewer who reminded me that oftentimes indifference towards climate-related disasters may rather be considered as “vested interest”.

⁸ In the novel, the theme of smell recurs in anticipation or as a consequence of a new episode of death and corruption. In chapter 3, for example, Beth, T.’s girlfriend, dies of an undiagnosed cardiac disease while driving the car with T.’s mother. Many critical months later, T. goes back to her apartment where he finds a smelly white tennis sock: “He breathed in the scent. This was what he had left” (101). In the following chapter, on a visit to his rapidly deteriorating mother, he realizes that her mania for cleanliness had been replaced by a general neglect of hygiene and a new unnecessary frugality (146): the smell of rancid food coming from the trashcan is unbearable and representative of the materiality of unplanned and unwelcome affective investments. The coyote, Beth and his mother elicit in T. a compulsion to emotional obligation that will later acquire morbid forms when he starts breaking into zoos, while measuring the value of each death, a process that is similar to his bills’ ordering – “form least value to most” – at the beginning of the novel.

⁹ In the attempt to dismantle dichotomies and binary thought, hierarchies and the unethical humankind’s sovereignty, and by focusing on relationality rather than individualism, materialist feminists such as Stacy Alaimo introduce the concept of “liveliness” to refer to a certain quality of the matter (bodily matter included). This is a “mangled” (Pickering 1995), “enfleshed” (Braidotti 2002), “agential” (Barad 2007), “viscous” (Tuana 2008), “vibrant” (Bennett 2010) animation, intention, and energy of the nonhuman in its multifold entanglement with the human.

¹⁰ The scene of the wolf, in chapter 5, is preceded by a disturbing encounter with a family who wants to take a shot of a bear sleeping in its cage under the sun. While the father is adjusting a lens of his camera, his child keeps throwing litter to the animal in the attempt to wake it up (132-34).

¹¹ The Collins Harper Dictionary provides the following definition: “a mode of living in which one organism is dependent on another for preparation of an environment in which it can live” (<<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/metabiosis>>).

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VALENTINA ROMANZI

Love Is a Thing with Feathers: Posthuman Metamorphoses in *This Is How You Lose the Time War*

Introduction

In 2005, American author Naomi Shihab Nye wrote in her poem “Sifter”:

When our English teacher gave
our first writing invitation of the year,
Become a kitchen implement
in 2 descriptive paragraphs, I did not think
butcher knife or frying pan,
I thought immediately
of soft flour showering through the little holes
of the sifter and the sifter’s pleasing circular
swishing sound, and wrote it down.

[...]

Everyone laughed
and acted but the more we thought about it,
we were all everything in the whole kitchen,

[...]

This, said our teacher, *is the beauty of metaphor.*
It opens doors.

(n. pag.; italics in the original)

This, indeed, is the *power* of metaphor: it builds bridges to realms other than reality. Or, rather, to realities other than ours. In what follows, I wish to explore how metaphor contributes to the expression of the posthuman subject, taking up Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone’s 2019 novella

This Is How You Lose the Time War as a case study. In the text, the pervasive use of metaphor projects the protagonists onto a posthuman dimension, a plane of existence that is not wholly other from what we know and inhabit, but that expands it by embedding materialities and subjectivities often relegated to the margins or discarded as inanimate.

My claim is that metaphor, as a discursive construct, has a material, bodily counterpart in metamorphosis. In other words, the discourse of posthuman subjectivity engages with the possibility of metamorphosis prompted by metaphors. Metamorphosis will yield figurations of subjectivities and spatialities that well surpass the traditional, humanist view of Man and conventional perceptions of the world, giving way to a nexus of subjects and spaces reflecting Braidotti's vision of the posthuman.

As a text of and for the posthuman, *This Is How You Lose the Time War* questions the very concepts of corporeality and spatiality: through an unconventional set of metaphors, the chrono-spatial continuum – the environment in its widest definition – acquires not only materiality but corporeality, and in turn the body itself becomes space, an environment. The result is a protean, posthuman assemblage of body-space-time-otherness-identity-language in which these concepts intermingle, interact, and exchange properties. *This Is How You Lose the Time War* follows chrono-agents Red and Blue as they move “upthread” and “downthread” through the time-space continuum, depicted as a braid of interwoven hair locks, to fight a seemingly endless war between their respective factions, the Agency and Garden. Written in epistolary form, the novella traces the evolution of their relationship from enmity to star-crossed love. Each letter is preceded by a third-person section illustrating Red and Blue's lives as they carry out assignments and find each other's letters, which are then presented to the readers. Blue's sections were written by El-Mohtar, a Canadian poet and short story writer, and Red's by Gladstone, an American science fiction and fantasy writer.

The novella can be read as an example of climate fiction, since it is “deeply engaged with the central conceptual struggles underlying the environmental crisis, and [...] consequently questions the assumptions of human mastery and exceptionality that led to anthropogenic climate change” (Caracciolo et al. 9). In this formulation, cli-fi does not need to be

explicitly about environmental collapse, but it does need to interact with the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to it. It needs to entertain the notion that “the ecological crisis is, at its core, a failure of humanism” (10), something that in philosophy sits squarely within the purview of posthumanism.

In *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, Red and Blue hint at habitat destruction, climate change, and human responsibility for planetary collapse (3). Often tasked with manipulating societies in order to *cause* such destruction, in their letters the protagonists reflect on the delicate balance ensuring the persistence of life, with Red, for instance, musing that it is “so easy to crush a planet that you may overlook the value of a whisper to a snowbank” (13). Despite these occasional references, human responsibility for the demise of whole planets across the many threads of reality never takes center stage, but lingers in the background of the whole narrative. A parallel to our own experience of climate change and the slow unraveling of our habitat, the destruction of the many worlds across the space-time continuum is cast as a hyperobject – i.e., a phenomenon whose effects may be experienced, but whose massive dimensions escape human capacity for definition and containment, whether in space or time (see Morton). Its ghostly presence pervades the story, expressing what Bould has recently theorized as the “Anthropocene Unconscious,” i.e., the silent yet ubiquitous shadow of the human footprint on our planet in contemporary narratives, even when they are not specifically about it.

The treatment of anthropogenic environmental collapse in *This Is How You Lose the Time War* and its depiction of a homoromantic relationship between the two female-identifying protagonists situate it within the contemporary panorama of progressive SF. However, what truly sets the novella apart is its use of language and style. Despite abundant evidence of the opposite, it is still widely believed that most SF works are not worthy of attention regarding stylistic and formal issues, which are “dealt with in a knee-jerk fashion, assumed to be either plain and unexperimental [...] or downright poor: clumsy, intrusive, and unconcerned with literary quality” (Mandala 16). SF’s strength seems to lie in worldbuilding, which surpasses any other element of composition (see Sanders). Yet, form is essential for some of its most authoritative writers. Le Guin, for instance, claimed: “The

style, of course, is the book. If you remove the cake all you have left is a recipe. If you remove style all you have left is a synopsis of the plot” (30). Peter Stockwell echoes this when he argues that we cannot separate content from language, especially when we are carrying out a literary analysis. After all, we cannot escape the boundaries of language, as it is an all-encompassing trait of our species. Through language, we can cognitively and figuratively experiment with the realm of the more-than-human or other-than-human, an environment which might bring us closer to a fuller understanding of both the human and the posthuman as correlated concepts. While ideas of the Posthuman have been advanced through both discursive practices and examples from several kinds of human and non-human aggregates (from medical devices to cyber-life to companion species), few examples of how to bridge the gap between the discursive and the corporeal are available. By focusing on the idea of metaphor-induced metamorphoses, I suggest a way in that direction, showing that literary texts can serve well to imagine the posthuman not only speculatively but also generatively.

Posthumanism

In Rosi Braidotti’s formulation of “critical posthumanism” (*Posthuman* 49),¹ the posthuman subject is understood as a relational configuration – i.e., a construct shaped by the continuous exchange and contact with others, both human and nonhuman. It retains a strong “embodied and embedded” (50) nature, which stresses its ties to the community, and is “nomadic” – i.e., powered by the ethics of becoming. A concept derived from the works of Deleuze and Guattari, to which Braidotti often returns, the nomadic subject relinquishes the unity, stability, and hegemonic positioning of the humanist subject in favor of an ever-shifting subjectivity that nevertheless does not leave its corporeality, its embodiment, behind. For Braidotti, echoing Hayles’ position, the posthuman subject is not a purely conceptual or mental construction; it exists within the world and as part of it, as an element that is interlocked with the many living beings and living *essence* that transverses it – what Braidotti calls *zoe* (60). Braidotti’s view can be supplemented by Stacy Alaimo’s notion of *trans-corporeality*, by which she

means that “all creatures, as embodied beings, are intermeshed with the dynamic, material world, which crosses through them, transforms them, and is transformed by them. [...] The figure/ground relation between the human and the environment dissolves as the outline of the human is traversed by substantial material interchanges” (435). The environment, in Alaimo’s view, acquires the same status as the human. No more mere background to the exceptionalism of the – “transcendent, disembodied” (436) – humanist subject, the world that surrounds us takes center stage. Matter, especially when traversed by *zoe*, reclaims its relevance in determining the metamorphic nature of the posthuman subject through the notion of *becoming*, that is, of entering into contact with other *zoe*-forms in such a way that the human subject will be metamorphosed, turned into something more-than-human not in an evaluative sense (as in *better than the humanist subject* the way that transhumanists wish the Posthuman to be; Ferrando 27-28) but in a quasi-quantitative way, which makes the posthuman subject *polymorphic*, composed of more than one dimension. *Becoming*, as we will also see regarding *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, is a state of being, a process that *in itself* is a feature of the Posthuman subject, and not just a means of achieving a fixed, final result. On the contrary, a full metamorphosis of the human subject is not desirable, as it would only shapeshift one static, rigid subjectivity into another. It is rather in the malleable, ever-shifting process of metamorphosis, which will continuously have to find some fuel to perpetuate change, that the Braidottian posthuman subject is realized.

In 2008, Bruce Clarke linked the posthuman to metamorphosis explicitly, arguing:

Posthuman metamorphs couple the media systems that enact them to the social systems communicating them to the psychic systems of readers or viewers variously comprehending them. The contemporary discourse of the posthuman signifies a post-Darwinian world, where, as [...] Bruno Latour has remarked, “the human form is as unknown to us as the nonhuman. [...] It is better to speak of (*x*)-*morphism* instead of becoming indignant when humans are treated as nonhumans or vice versa.” (3)

Instances of posthuman metamorphosis extend across *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, marking the evolution of Red and Blue's relationship. Such fleeting, challenging shifts find their linguistic expression in and through metaphors, whose literalization brings about the enmeshed, entangled posthuman subject that is always *becoming*.

From Metaphor to Metamorphosis

In his classic essay "Metaphor" – still notable among the trove of studies on the topic² – Max Black explains that substitution-based metaphor (i.e., metaphor understood as replacing one statement with another through analogy) can occur when there is "no literal equivalent, L, available in the language in question" (32). In this specific instance, metaphor is "a species of *catachresis*, [...] the use of a word in some new sense in order to remedy a gap in the vocabulary; catachresis is the putting of new senses into old words. But if a catachresis serves a genuine need, the new sense introduced will quickly become part of the literal sense" (33). However, such literal sense does not derive from a simple, one-to-one relationship of analogy – that is, metaphor does not coincide fully with the literal meaning it is trying to replace or compensate for. Rather, Black argues for interaction-based metaphors, i.e., metaphors whose meaning originates from the *entanglement* of two "systems of commonplaces" (40), whereby the reader will apply some of the features of the "subsidiary subject" to the "primary subject" of the metaphor,³ generating meaning that cannot be fully explained through translation into "plain" literal language. Such intellectual operations on the reader's part demand "simultaneous awareness of both subjects but [are] not reducible to any comparison between the two" (46). The result of metaphor, in other words, is not the arithmetic *sum* of the literal features it extracts from these systems of commonplaces but the *product* of their interaction. Such a view of the generative meaning-making power of metaphor evokes some of the traits of the posthuman, among which inter-relationality plays a fundamental role. Indeed, more than one of Black's observations on metaphor can be applied to the posthuman, as conceptualizing it stretches the boundaries of language: whereas scholars can refer to resources like

the *Posthuman Glossary* to delve into the intricacies of terminology, literary authors must resort to rhetorical strategies to manifest the inexpressible, and metaphor is chief among them.

When metaphor meets the posthuman, language acquires (or, possibly, reacquires) a material dimension. “Man is a wolf,” an example Black uses, becomes literal in *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, as Blue shapeshifts into a monstrous wolf to protect Red from a trap set by Garden (79). In this specific case, and others I will analyze in the next section, the metaphor is literalized, realized concretely. (Wo)man is not only aggressive, wild, dangerous – or any other feature we might infer from connecting man to wolf. Blue *becomes* a wolf and *is* a wolf, not just like one. This metaphor does not play on similarity or substitution, it works on *identity*, through the interaction of states of being, of a metamorphic, polymorphic subjectivity. In other words, when expressing the posthuman, metaphor becomes metamorphosis.

Kai Mikkonen argues that “for a change to be described as a metamorphosis, it requires a presupposition of the original form. Consequently, we may think of the construction of the new form in terms of a metaphor that both replaces and compares one with another and that creates two or more forms into a new, meaningful image” (311). In other words, metamorphosis both encloses the interpretations of metaphor identified by Black, and always implies that something of the original shape is retained. Thus, it is to be understood as an expansion on the original subject, not as its total annihilation through substitution. Similarly, Bruce Clarke states that the “metamorphic imaginary since Darwin has a distinctly evolutionary valence” (2). Darwin’s work attributes to metamorphosis both a natural, i.e., not *supernatural*, status and a progressive one: post-*Origins*, metamorphosis is often read as the next step in the evolutionary ladder, a necessary transformation which intimates “that the essence of the human is to have no essence” (2). This ties post-*Origins* metamorphosis to the posthuman, which starts from the assumption that the humanist subject is but an incomplete, outdated conceptualization that does not express the whole potential of/for humanity. Nevertheless, we cannot have the *post*-human without the human. Some elements will be retained, just as metaphor and metamorphosis demand. Notably, Clarke’s argumentation

that posthuman metamorphosis has an evolutionary valence ties into what Mikkonen, deriving insights from Le Guern and Jakobson, writes about the difference between metaphor and metamorphosis: “metamorphosis paradoxically supposes that it can make metaphors and similes real, that is, analogous with the reference point of a sign, by literally fusing the opposites of a metaphor together to *provide a literary figure with a sense of physicality and time*” (312; emphasis added). In other words, metaphors exist as atemporal figures of speech; when they are placed within space and time, they become metamorphoses. This collapse of the difference between signifier and signified thus leads to the collapse of the difference between the realm of words and the realm of objects (Jakobson, “Statue” 35). The literalized, materialized, temporalized metaphor that is metamorphosis bridges the gap between language and reality.

Thus, language finds itself enmeshed in the posthuman assemblage, becoming one of its fundamental components. The posthuman subject is as much discursive as it is embodied. After all, the human subject has always been a product of language⁴ – or rather, of a linguistic fallacy. In his *Unbecoming Human* (2020), Felice Cimatti draws from Derrida to argue that the humanist ideal of the human, conceptualized as “the living being that is *not* an animal” (1), relies on a word, “animal,” that has no referent in the world: “The animal of which we speak is never the animal as it is in and of itself: the animal is always an ‘*animot*,’ the spoken-of animal, metaphorised and idealized. [...] The animal does not exist” (2). It follows that the relational concept of the human, too, cannot be grounded. Cimatti’s work pushes the human towards *unbecoming* – that is, relinquishing the discursive construct of the human as other than the animal – in order to reappropriate the very animality of the human, of which language is but an expression.⁵ This, he argues, may lead to a newfound communion between human and environment, a return to an understanding of the human as part of the environment and of the environment as part of the human.

If we accept that language is an intrinsic part of being human, then, by extension, metaphor is, too. However, whereas the humanist construct of human and animal masked its purely discursive nature, there is a sort of “sincerity” in the metaphor: it does not try to hide that, in general, it does not have a referent in reality. Metaphors carry no strong claims to a real-

world referent. At times, when used as catachresis, they do serve to make up for a lack of signifier to a new signified, but, in general, metaphors exist within language, as the potential for new referents. If metaphors are a forge wherein to *create* referents, then, they may be also instrumental in inspiring new hybrids, new perspectives, new entanglements, in a way that eschews the normative, mutually exclusive view of human and animal entities produced by humanism. Literalizing a metaphor, turning it into a metamorphosis, means embodying it in a real-world referent, enmeshing it into the chrono-spatial environment. It also means generating links between the many elements that make up the human, some long accepted, others – like animality – rejected. Accepting the human as a discursive construct allows us to move beyond the conceptualization of “man” as the counterpart to the simulacrum “animal” – a conceptualization that, as mentioned above, derives from humanism (Cimatti 1). At the same time, this view allows for a reconceptualization of human subjectivity as the contingent outcome of discursive composites made up of another form of language, not built on dichotomies but on relationality: language that holds infinite generative potential may usher in new subjective formations capable of embodying and expressing non-dichotomous relations between species.

Analysis

As I have argued, metaphor is one of the primary literary devices deployed by authors to express instances of the posthuman, in that it generates a discursive space where the identity of the characters can be fluid, protean, always in a state of *becoming*. In *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, posthuman metamorphoses engender an assemblage of subject-body-space-time-language that blurs the boundaries between matter and environment, making the case for a different understanding of *zoe* in the posthuman age. This happens primarily through the pervasive use of metaphors, which are

deployed to describe settings, actions, characters, impressions, emotions. Following Alaimo (“Transcorporeality”), they break down the figure/ground distinction that normally exists between agents performing tasks and the environments hosting them. Thus, interaction-based metaphors tie space and time to a corporeal dimension, and bodies to a spatial dimension. The environments which Red and Blue cross are often personified, given bodily features and agency, invested with *zoe*: Blue, for instance, “combs or snarls the strands of time’s braid” (El-Mohtar and Gladstone 10) and Red “braids and unbraids history’s hair” (85). As the day breaks, “the horizon blinks, and morning yawns above it” (39). “The volcano [...] vomits rocks into the air” while “the lava [...] spits” (49). In turn, Red and Blue’s (post)human bodies become one with the chrono-spatial continuum. Blue writes: “I feel you, the needle of you, dancing up and downthread with breathtaking abandon. I feel your hand in places I’ve touched” (102), experiencing Red’s presence in time/space as if she were caressing a part of her body. Red, in turn, writes: “I want to be a context for you, and you for me” (130), making herself an environment for their love.

These quick references to the metaphorical use of language already introduce the blurred boundaries between the human and the nonhuman in *This Is How You Lose the Time War*. Such contamination is at its most evident, though, when we focus on the “species” to which Red and Blue belong. Braidotti introduces the act of *becoming* as a triad of processes that can – but not always do – happen simultaneously: becoming-animal, becoming-machine, and becoming-earth (66-67). From the outset, these processes are embodied by the leads of the novella. Red, who belongs to the Agency, is introduced as she roams a barren battlefield:

She holds a corpse that was once a man, her hands gloved in its guts, her fingers clutching its alloy spine. She lets go, and the exoskeleton clatters against rock. Crude technology. Ancient. Bronze to depleted uranium. He never had a chance. That is the point of Red. [...] Her weapons and armor fold into her like roses at dusk. Once flaps of pseudoskin settle and heal and the programmable matter of her clothing knits back together, Red looks, again, something like a woman. (El-Mohtar and Gladstone 2-3)

Red is a mechanical hybrid, whose shape can approximate that of a human female but does not coincide with it. Her appearance can shapeshift easily so that she will blend in or stand out, depending on the necessities of a given mission through space and time. In her first letter to Blue, an answer to a taunt on her enemy's part, she explains that members of the Agency experience life differently from Garden people: "We're not so isolated as you are, not so locked in our own heads. We think in public. Our notions inform one another, correct, expand, reform. Which is why we win" (12). Later, Red explains that Agents exist within the cloud, and inhabit "cyborgian" bodies which are designed or modified rationally in order to suppress physical impulses and needs (61). The description of Red's Commandant reiterates the point:

Usually Commandant operates upthread from some gleaming crystal citadel or other. At times the Agency has called Red to report to a bare platform orbiting an unfamiliar star, forgetting even to produce a humanlike superior she can address. The stars alone listen. Commandant [...] retreated to her pod long ago and now roams time and space as a disembodied mind, wedded to, webbed through, the Agency's great hyperspace machines. She takes form only when she must, and when she does, she chooses any form that lies to hand, or none. [...] Commandant stands before [Red], in the form of a big woman in an army uniform, wearing an apron, with bloody pliers in one hand. She holds them as if she is not used to holding things. (133-34)

Based on the insight Red offers through her letters and description of the nature of the Agency's members, it is possible to argue that they are already expressing several of the features Braidotti associates with the Posthuman subject: relationality, nomadism, inter-connectedness. They are, in a sense, the expected result of the process of *becoming-machine*, as they are represented as hybrid creatures more in touch with technology than with feelings and sensations. In relishing her embodied nature as a field agent, Red is unique among her peers.

Conversely, Blue and her peers belonging to Garden embody the *becoming-earth/animal* processes. She explains as follows:

Garden seeds the past with us [...] and we learn from and grow into its threads. We treat the past as trellis, coax our vineyard through and around, and harvest is not a word for swiftness; the future harvests us, stomps us into wine, pours us back into the root system in loving libation, and we grow stronger and more potent together. I have been birds and branches. I have been bees and wolves. I have been ether flooding the void between stars, tangling their breath into networks of song. I have been fish and plankton and humus, and all these have been me. But while I've been enmeshed in this wholeness — they are not the whole of me. (71-72)

The metaphors, here, are evidently drawn from the semantic field of agriculture: seeding, growing, harvesting. Blue is both the plant undergoing these processes and the one harvesting the time-braid. She is, at times, animals or natural elements, but never just them, and never just herself. Her subjectivity is polymorphic and relational. Like the Agency, Garden, too, keeps its members embedded. Narrating to Red the tale of how she had been infected by an insatiable hunger as a child and had to be cut off from Garden, she writes:

Garden can, does, has, will shed pieces, always, cuttings, flowers, fruit, but Garden endures and grows stronger again. [...] I had never been alone. [...] I was only my own body, only my own senses, only a girl whose parents were running to her because she had a bad dream. I touched their faces, and they were mine; I touched the bed I was on, smelled apples stewing somewhere outside. It was as if, in my own small way, I'd become Garden — so me in my wholeness, me in my fingers, in my hair, in my skin, whole the way Garden is whole, but apart. (123)

Only in her isolation, for the first time, does Blue experience a sense of completeness, as for the rest of her life she exists as a member of a bigger, interconnected whole. She is repulsed by it, and longs to be taken back by Garden, to be again part of that entangled totality of interwoven beings. Even as an adult, back to being part of the Garden, she revels in that sense of belonging to a greater organism.

Thus, the human-machine and human-earth/animal hybrids that make up the Agency and Garden even before the events of the novella begin

coincide with processes of *becoming*. Nevertheless, at the point in which the diegesis starts, their inter-relationality has lost much of its posthuman potential: members of the Agency and Garden, despite representing alterity for the readers, are not *interacting with* alterity, at least not in the sense that Braidotti implies. Even though there has been, at some point, a process of becoming through contact with the Other that originated the posthuman subjectivities of the Agency's and Garden's members, that process has long been interrupted in favor of isolating themselves once more as a "species." There is no communication among members of these opposed factions, no true exchange of information, values, emotions. Only when Red and Blue start writing to each other can the Posthuman process of subject creation through becoming and relating to Otherness resume. From such foreign contact, unexpected and awe-inspiring, derives the metamorphosis expressed through generative language – i.e., metaphor. It is Blue that transforms Red through her words, and vice versa.

The first and most visible step of this transformation, stylistically, is the deployment of metaphors in the salutation of the letters. Blue becomes, for instance, Mood Indigo, 0000FF, Lapis, Blueprint, while Red is Cardinal, Miskowaanzhe ("red light" in Anishinaabemowin language), Price Greater Than Rubies, Strawberry, Raspberry, Apple Tree, My Heart's Own Blood. The nomination through referents evoking the color of their names (in themselves metaphorical) continues past the direct address that opens each letter. In a passage describing Red finding a message by Blue, the authors choose this wording: "She feels each letter and word and wonders how long the sky and sea spent winding this cord, and who taught her the knot code in the first place, whether the iris bit her lip in frustration as she worked through a difficult passage" (70). Later, writing directly after Blue has saved her life by taking her wolf form and fighting the beast that wanted to kill her, Red confesses: "I try not to think of you the same way twice. [...] I change your shape in my thoughts. It's amazing how much blue there is in the world, if you look. You're different colors of flame: Bismuth burns blue, and cerium, germanium, and arsenic. See? I pour you into things" (81).

Such metaphors, though, do not work merely on analogy, as comparisons or substitutions. As mentioned above, Blue can take any shape through

Garden. She is animal, plant, and matter – anything traversed with *zoe*. Red, equally, can mechanically shapeshift according to her needs. They *are*, in essence, the many things they call each other, not singularly but as a whole. Blue is all the different colors of flame, the sky, the flowers; singling only one of them out is merely naming them through synecdoche – a part for the whole. Fundamentally, this whole encompasses any and all facets of *zoe*, a fact that is all the more true because it is acknowledged by the Other. Put differently, their naming each other things, their referencing elements that evoke their polymorphous identity constitutes the interaction, the act of relating to each other that originates one of the elements of critical posthumanism. They enter into communication, and thus start changing each other. In her first message, for instance, Blue brags that she has “infiltrated” (8) Red’s mind, and Red answers back arguing: “I’ve repaid your letter with my own. Now we have a correspondence. [...] Who’s infecting whom?” (14). As they warm to each other and start revealing their grudging respect turned into affection and, later, love, the concept returns. Red writes: “I have built a you within me, or you have. I wonder what of me there is in you” (95).

This declaration foreshadows what will happen towards the end of the story, when Red’s Commandant orders her to kill Blue with a poisonous letter and Red chooses to renounce her essence and take a literal part of Blue into herself to save her. In this sense, Red and Blue’s transformation into an entangled posthuman subject is not only figurative, as expressed by their growing feelings for each other, but literal. Key, here, is the way in which the authors choose to represent the missives. Far from being traditional letters, Red and Blue send each other messages in the most disparate ways, translating words into things, *materializing* language. They subvert all tropes about epistolary exchanges while retrieving them. This becomes evident from the very beginning:

On a span of blasted ground, [Red] finds the letter. [...] There should not be a sheet of cream-colored paper, clean save a single line in a long, trailing hand: *Burn before reading*. [...] She finds a lighter in a dead soldier’s pocket. Flames catch in the depths of her eyes. Sparks rise, ashes fall, and letters form on the paper, in that same long, trailing hand. [...] The letter burns her fingers as the signature takes shape. She lets its cinders fall. (4-5)

Here, the classic intimation often found in spy stories, “burn after reading,” is overturned. Only by destroying the letter can the message be received. The following missives are written in equally unexpected media: boiling water inside an MRI machine, bones of long-dead pilgrims, feathers, knots, tree rings, the stirring of tea. Two examples to illustrate the point: first, after consulting the literature on wax and sigils and perfumes, Red sends her letter on a piece of undigested dried cod inside a literal seal that Blue kills on a mission (41-43). This case of homonymy (seal=sigil; seal=marine animal) gives corporeality to a feature of epistolary exchanges, turning the wax seal into a slaughtered animal, whose function is *still* that of protecting the contents of the letter, extending the metaphor through similarity.

Second, Blue sends six letters in crimson seeds, delivered in a pouch tied to the neck of a goose and written in aftertaste. Red “eats the first three seeds one by one. [...] As each letter unfolds inside her mind, she frames it in the palace of her memory. She webs words to cobalt and lapis, she weds them to the robes of Mary in San Marco frescoes, to paint on porcelain, to the color inside a glacier crack. She will not let her go” (101). Ingesting the seeds induces a temporary metamorphosis: as she reads the fifth, “she is not a person anymore. She is a toad; she is a rabbit in the hunter’s hand; she is a fish. She is, briefly, Blue, alone with Red, and together” (117).

By materializing the letters in all these different instances, words themselves acquire a corporeal, physical dimension. Saying that Blue’s letter was a feather is no more a simple metaphor conveying notions of levity and softness, but a literal metamorphosis of the language. These corporeal words interact with Red and Blue’s bodies, changing their physiology, contaminating them and transforming them in such a way that will draw them closer, and further from their respective factions. Indeed, it is such corporeality of words that ensures the survival of the two characters. Once the Agency succeeds in poisoning Blue, Red chooses to travel back to all the moments in which she opened Blue’s letters in order to absorb as much of her as possible, revealing that the shadow she had noticed following her through time and space, only known as Seeker, is Red herself.

“Red kills time” (174), and she does it literally – once more, a literalized metaphor – as she moves from strand to strand with no regard for the preservation of time’s braid. She works on an assumption, that Blue cannot

be killed by a poison built for a Garden agent if she has been contaminated by Red's essence: "They have sprinkled bits of themselves through time. Ink and ingenuity, flakes of skin on paper, bits of pollen, blood, oil, down, a goose's heart" (179). Thus, she collects these bits as the Seeker, absorbing them into her body:

Red finds water in an MRI machine in an abandoned hospital and drinks. In a temple abyss, Red gnaws fallen bones. In a grand computer's heart, she peers through optic circuits. In a frozen waste, she slides a letter's splinters into her skin. She takes them into herself, adapts. Finds all the missing shades of Blue.

As the letters' taunts change tone, she must be more inventive. A spider eating a dragonfly. A shadow drinking tears and coiled enzymes within. [...] She travels the labyrinth of the past and rereads the letters. Recreates both herself and Blue, so young-seeming now, in her heart.

She clutches the text like a spar against a flood.

(182)

Once she has collected all traces of Blue, she is ready for her final metamorphosis:

On a bare island far upthread, she places the seal upon her tongue, chews, swallows, and collapses.

She shades herself with Blue, from blood, tears, skin, ink, words. She thrashes with the pain of growth inside her: new organs bloom from autosynthesized stem cells to shoulder old bits of her away. Green vines twine her heart and seize it, and she vomits and sweats until the vines' rhythm matches hers. A second skin grows within her skin, popping, blistering. She claws herself off upon the rocks like a snake and lies transformed. And more: A different mind plays around the edges of her own.

She feels herself alien. She has spent thousands of years killing bodies like the one she wears. Sea spray breaks the barren sunrise to rainbows.

(184)

With Blue growing inside her, Red can then access Garden to find Blue as a child and give her the antidote for the poison. Saved from certain death, Blue writes one last letter, in which she acknowledges their interwoven nature. "I want to explain myself – this self you've saved, this self you've

infected, this self that was Möbius twisted with yours from its earliest beginning” (196).

Thus, the circle is closed, in an array of metaphors pertaining to the field of bodily sensation (eating, touching, digesting, hurting, and so many more). Red is Blue and Blue is Red, both identities tangled together through the threads of time they so often walked. Their subjectivities, born from interaction with alterity, produce two posthuman beings settling into a permanent state of becoming: Red becoming Blue, Blue becoming Red. In the background – but no less relevant – lies generative, metaphorical language made matter, body, and space (“Letters are structures, not events. You give me a place to live inside,” writes Red; 95), ingested, digested, preserved within posthuman bodies slowly becoming posthuman subjects.

Red and Blue share a protean nature. Change is implicit in their existence; thus, their metamorphosis is never complete. Whatever shape they take will never be the last. In a state of permanent mutation, transformation, *becoming*, they embrace their being with each other and with their environment, letting their subjectivities be permeated by otherness. In sum, *This Is How You Lose the Time War* engages with the posthuman imagination to the point of reading as a manifesto for life *in fieri*, the highest expression of that inter-relational *zoe* which transverses all living matter.

Notes

¹ Due to space constraints, I point the reader to Ranisch and Sorgner (2014) for an overview of the Posthuman. Ferrando (2013) also offers useful insights on terminology.

² Due to space constraints, I am leaving out references to other studies of metaphor. I am especially eschewing mention to Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* and the research on conceptual metaphor on the grounds that I am not looking at the abstraction of the concept, but at its concrete realization in a specific case study.

³ In a simple metaphor like "Man is a wolf", man is the primary subject, the one invested by metaphor, and wolf the secondary, the one that lends its features.

⁴ On the discursive nature of human subjectivity, see Butler.

⁵ Unbecoming, in my understanding, is but another type of becoming in the sense illustrated before. It is becoming by deconstructing, by relinquishing notions unveiled as fallacious.

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