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The multiple status of food in contemporary feminist dystopias: a neo-materialistic approach to The New Wilderness by Diane Cook

El estatus múltiple de la comida en las distopías feministas contemporáneas: una aproximación neomaterialista a The New Wilderness de Diane Cook

L'estatus múltiple de l'alimentació en les distopies feministes contemporànies: un enfocament neomaterialista de The New Wilderness de Diane Cook

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Abstract

The feminist dystopia has always resorted to material contexts and features to substantiate its political positions. Among these, food has a peculiar position; in relating issues pertaining to both the biologic and affective spheres, it can dismantle oppositions between material and immaterial. These multifaceted aspects can be analysed through New materialism, framing food procurement, preparation and consumption as performativity (Barad, 2003) between human and non-human. The analysis of Diane Cook's (2020) *The New Wilderness* in this direction will show how food substantiates the intersection between the animality of the Wilderness and its scientific framing, merging human bodies with surrounding contexts.

Keywords

Feminist dystopia; food studies; posthumanism; Diane Cook

Resumen

La distopía feminista siempre ha recurrido a contextos y rasgos materiales para fundamentar sus posiciones políticas. Entre estos, la comida tiene una posición peculiar; al relacionar cuestiones pertenecientes tanto a la esfera biológica como a la afectiva, puede desmantelar las oposiciones entre lo material y lo inmaterial. Estos aspectos multifacéticos pueden ser analizados a través del Nuevo Materialismo, enmarcando la obtención, preparación y consumo de alimentos como performatividad (Barad, 2003) entre lo humano y lo no humano. El análisis de *The New Wilderness* de Diane Cook (2020) mostrará cómo la comida fundamenta la intersección entre la animalidad del Wilderness y su encuadre científico, fusionando los cuerpos humanos con los contextos circundantes.

Palabras clave

Distopía feminista; estudios alimentarios; posthumanismo; diane cocinera

Resum

La distòpia feminista sempre ha recorregut a contextos i trets materials per fonamentar les seves posicions polítiques. Entre aquests, el menjar té una posició peculiar; en relacionar qüestions pertanyents tant a l'esfera biològica com a l'afectiva, pot desmantellar les oposicions entre allò material i allò immaterial. Aquests aspectes multifacètics poden ser analitzats a través del Nou Materialisme, emmarcant l'obtenció, preparació i consum d'aliments com a performativitat (Barad, 2003) entre allò humà i allò no humà. L'anàlisi de *The New Wilderness* de Diane Cook (2020) mostrarà com el menjar fonamenta la intersecció entre l'animalitat del Wilderness i el seu enquadrament científic, fusionant els cossos humans amb els contextos circumdants.

Paraules clau

Distopia feminista; estudis d'alimentació; posthumanisme; Diane Cook.

Introduction and state of the art

The relationship between what is commonly referred to as the sprawling genre of the feminist dystopia¹ and our extraliterary, real world is by all means a fraught one. One of the earlier theorists of the genre, Ildney Cavalcanti, recurred to the rhetorical figure of the catachresis to explain how “feminist dystopias display a more deviant relationship with their referents when compared with realistic (mimetic) literary forms” (2003, p. 49). More recently, Sarah Dillon (2020) returned on the topic to point out that many dystopias written in the last decade have been closing the gap between the narration and what Darko Suvin, talking about SF², described as “the “zero world” of empirically verifiable properties around the author” (Suvin, 1979, p. 11).

This connection with the real, empirical world is often created and/or remarked through the usage of concrete objects which make us recognise the dystopian worlds as concretely based upon ours. This connection was already pointed out in the broad field of Utopia³, with Moylan (2021) stating that, in that regard, “the subject matter has always mattered” (2021, p. 108), and through Jameson’s description of materialism as “a haunting which invests even the most subordinate and shamefaced products of everyday life” (2005, p. 6). This “matter that matters”, either by explicit allegory or through the “haunting” of everyday objects, becomes particularly hard to miss in dystopias, and especially so in feminist dystopias, in which what Jameson described as “an attention to the body which seeks to correct any idealism or

spiritualism lingering in this system” (*ibidem*) is often the very core of the patriarchal, misogynistic, objectifying dystopian society⁴. Such concrete attention to the woman’s body takes the form of a matter-of-fact realism that creates “grimly inexorable (...) fictive world(s)” (Dillon, 2020, p. 171): worlds that do not want to strike the reader as different than theirs, but which are characterised by a realism that makes them scarily similar to ours, down to the very objects that constitute them.

Such everyday objects are significantly used to represent and to underline the strong polarisations that lie at the core of the dystopian systems, which are based on the construction of polarised hierarchies by means of that very same allegorical and concrete narrative power of everyday objects. The allegoric power that objects have about creating dichotomies, channelling “the binary and polarizing oppositions of matter/mind and nature/culture” (Braidotti, 2022, p. 111), is thus expressed to forcibly identify women with the material, natural, objectified side of the dystopian society, determining a radical class (as seen in Jameson, 2005) and gender (as seen in Monticelli, 2008) polarisation among those who inhabit the dystopia, who are clearly and materially divided in the eye of the reader⁵.

Starting from this acknowledgment, this paper aims to demonstrate that the utopian horizon that characterises contemporary critical dystopias (Moylan, Baccolini 2003), and which Dillon pointed out as being harder and harder to find in contemporary dystopias is actually still present: it comes to reside in how the female

¹ About the history of the term and in particular the relationship between “genre” and “gender”, see Baccolini (2000) and Cavalcanti (2003).

² Dillon’s important reconnecting of feminist dystopias to the SF is also extremely relevant because it allows us to put the genre on the same trajectory of neo-materialistic philosophy, bridging the gap between theory and literature. SF here is not only to be read as the genre of “cognitive estrangement”, in Suvin’s (and Dillon’s) sense, but also, to recur to Haraway’s words, “science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far.” (2016: 2).

³ Following the attempt to bridge philosophical theory and literary practice stated in the previous footnote, it is useful here to quote Lyman Tower Sargent’s definition of Utopianism: “I define the broad, general phenomenon of utopianism as social dreaming – the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live.

But not all are radical, for some people at any time dream of something *basically familiar*” (1994: 3, emphasis mine).

⁴ Dillon (2020) gives an example of this matter-of-fact dystopian realism: the TV series *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which premiered on Hulu in 2017. In the series, we see women forcibly identified with, and repressed through, their bodies, through extremely realistic acts and weapons of violence and submission (FGM being only one among the others).

⁵ More fictionalised examples of this object-driven essentialisation can be found in the use of colours and garments in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Margaret Atwood, 1985), the two-colours tickets in *Blue Ticket* (Sophie Mackintosh, 2020), food which exemplifies wealth differences in *Sweet Fruit, Sour Land* (Rebecca Ley, 2018), the physical restriction within the areas of the school in *Only Ever Yours* (Louise O’Neill, 2014), the concreteness of the walls in *Leila* (Prayaag Akbar, 2017), and the Summer of Fruition dividing young people from adults in *Gather The Daughters* (Jennie Melamed, 2017).

protagonists manage to operate a resemantization of their immediate, material, objectual surrounding contexts, in order to break the dichotomies and the hierarchies they represent, thus escaping the rigid and objectified polarisations which were pointed out as the basis of the dystopian system. This epistemological and ontological search of alternatives to the dystopic binarism of course falls well within the neo-materialistic and post-anthropocentric thought deriving from a “a specific theory of materialism that avoids dichotomies” (Braidotti, 2022, p. 121); in order to do so, the field of inquiry will be restricted to a specific class of symbolic objects which has an unparalleled capacity to bridge the aforementioned divides, namely, food.

Such an analysis of food, which will occupy the first part of the paper, will be of use to carry out a textual analysis of *The New Wilderness* devoted to assessing how this potentially utopian relationship between the female subjectivity and its material contexts can be constructed in a post-anthropocentric sense, so as to “disrupt our habitual humanisation of reality in order to uncover more-than-human realities and the ways in which the human is shaped by and co-evolves with nonhuman matter and object agencies” (Moslund et al., 2021, p. 3). Indeed, Cook’s novel was already pointed out by Atasoy and Komsta as “Anthropocene fiction” (2022, p. 2), which, as Neumann says, “create(s) radically new narrative forms that point toward alternative flat ontologies” (2019, p. 97). Within this novel, then, the objects which permeate the settings (and which not by chance congeal around the semantic field of food and foodways, as will be seen) assume a decidedly allegoric quality, suggesting a possible new ontology; Komsta and Atasoy remark “the text’s allegorical undertones”, as well as “an approach toward nature that contravenes hierarchical and

dichotomous means” and, most importantly, the novel’s “strength and transformative potential which (Cook) blends with fictional and factual elements”. (2022, p. 3-4). Therefore, the novel, through the “sympoietic model” (Komsta, Atasoy, 2022, p. 4) it puts forward, allows us to see how food-mediated relationship between human and non-human are a crucial step in order to deconstructing the “dichotomous mind-set” (Komsta, Atasoy, 2022, p. 5) of the dystopian system, creating a connection with the extraliterary, factual world of the readers through the familiarity and commonplace quality of the objects, and therefore managing to inspire in them a concrete critical and transformative response that goes beyond the literary text.

A particular type of object: food

Having framed the material dimension of dystopias as something that can potentially be subject to a resemantization capable of going beyond the dystopian dualistic thought, before going on to see how this is played out in *The New Wilderness* we will narrow our focus on a particular type of everyday object that plays an essential role in interrogating how women⁶ manage to symbolically and materially interact with their dystopian surroundings: food. Food is uniquely pervaded by a conjuncture of multiple symbolic and material capacities, especially concerning its meaning and its relationship to women’s existence. Relating issues pertaining to both the biologic, bodily sphere and the psychological and affective one food can often become a locus of creation for new, positive, resistant meanings in bleak, dichotomous settings as the dystopian ones which were sketched earlier.

For this reason, the negotiation between interpretations of food as both a concrete and

⁶ The choice of focusing on the social category of “women” is dependent on my reliance on the findings of feminist food studies as the starting step of my analysis. As will be clearer later, according to such views food is no mere object, but it is something which is always layered with social interpretations and meanings, as well as contributing to shape further preconceptions about genders and about the social status of women in various sociocultural contexts. This implies “the way that gendered discourses on food and eating reinforce body-policing cultural narratives aimed at women” (Jovanovski, 2017: 1) as well as including the

acknowledgment that “women have unique relationships with food in care work (of people, animals, and the natural environment); as food providers in the private and public realms; or in many cases as farmers, fishers, hunters, and gatherers. In these important relationships with others, the earth, and with our bodies, we *embody* our relationships with food and our food practices define who we are. Food speaks to the core of our identities and to our relationships with each other and to the world around us.” (Parker et al., 2019: 5).

metaphorical symbol can be seen as performative (Barad, 2003), with regards not only towards the body/mind dichotomy but also towards the wider material/immaterial and human/non-human binaries. The performativity of food's procurement, preparation and consumption, as well as the numerous meanings that are produced and attached to it, are based on a constant interplay of human and non-human agents that correspond to what Barad (2003) describes as intra-activity, linking together who consumes and who/what is consumed and destabilising the binary opposition of subject and context.

A neo-materialistic interpretation of food, especially concerning its use in dystopias, will allow us to see that, while food is part of our surrounding economic, social, natural and material contexts, its intra-activity with countless human and non-human agents undeniably makes it a peculiar type of material object: through all the phases of its production and both the material and symbolic act of eating, it becomes part both of the human biological body and of one's identity. The very act of eating can thus be framed as an intra-action that entwines the human body and identity to its material, non-human and contextual surrounding.

Let us see up close how food in dystopias contributes to the dismantling of these binaries. First, food is clearly linked to the biological, bodily sphere of human embodiment, and as such it can be used to symbolise how the economy of the dystopian system impacts the everyday life of the dystopian citizen. This aspect of food as a marketable product was already pointed out by the sheer economic focus of Jameson (2005) and by the first analysis of the theme of food in dystopia carried out by Tower Sargent (Tower Sargent, 2015, 2016) and by Fátima Vieira's work – it is relevant here to quote her co-edited volume, aptly titled *Utopia Matters: Theory, Politics,*

Literature, and the Arts (2005). Yet within feminist dystopias food becomes of paramount importance and recurrence⁷. Food is a constant theme within the genre, and it is used to stress the materiality and precarity of the women's bodies, whose survival is threatened by the system and often depends upon how women can offer their bodies back to said dystopian system. The process of producing food according to the tenets of an economic context and the physical act of eating it, thus having it become part of a biological body, can therefore be interpreted not merely as a hierarchical interaction between a consumer and a consumed object, but as part of a performative network of intra-actions (Barad, 2003) that blurs the boundaries between the subject and the object of consumption. Through the socially determined act of food retrieving, preparing and producing, women contribute to creating the food, just as the food they consume ends up becoming part of their body and their identity, both materially and symbolically. In this way, women themselves are shaped by the society to which they collaborate (often forcefully, if they want to survive, as is the case of *The New Wilderness*) and by the food they must contribute to prepare. This apparently subordinate position actually gives them the agency that comes from being part of the meaning-creation potential that characterises food as a peculiarly symbolic object.

For this reason, food, through its powerful and unique symbolic capacity, always layered with immaterial meanings, demonstrates perfectly New materialism's essential tenet that no material, biological feature is merely so. Food is not only imbued with economic and social meanings, but it is also loaded with symbolisms linked to the affective and identitarian sphere, and is the core of a network of intra-active relationships which mutually change numerous subjects. As such, it can be framed as the perfect locus of the aforementioned resemantization process that constitutes the

⁷ Other novels which demonstrate this connection between food and the existence of women within dystopias are: *Under the Skin* by Micheal Faber (2000); *The Handmaid's Tale*, but especially its sequel, *The Testaments* (2019); *Sweet Fruit Sour Land* by Rebecca Ley (2018); *The Water Cure* (2018) and *Blue Ticket* (2020) by Sophie Mackintosh; *Gather the Daughters* (2017) by Jennie Melamed; *Blonde Roots* (2009) by Bernardine Evaristo; the *MaddAddam*

trilogy (2003 – 2013) by Margaret Atwood; *Only Ever Yours* (2015) by Louise O'Neill; N. K. Jemisin short stories "Cuisine des Mémoires" (2018) and "Give Me Cornbread or Give Me Death" (2018). It is not a coincidence that many of these texts overlap with the previous list of dystopias in which objects have a great symbolic value: food's heavily symbolic potential is often recognised and narratively exploited in dystopias.

core of the utopian opening of dystopias. In dystopian contexts, women find a way of rewiring the materiality of the food that is such an important part of their daily life by means of changing the meanings attached to it and in this way changing their own positioning within their oppressive context, finally overturning the dichotomous hierarchies of consumers and consumed.

This potentially positive and performative capacity of the relationship between women and food was underlined by feminist food studies during the course of the last twenty years (Voski et al., 2005; Brady et al., 2019), which have stressed the productive ties between women and food well beyond the previous negative interpretations of such relationships and have focussed on its social, communitarian potential. Yet, analysing these ties from a more ontological point of view, the discussion about food has also entered, although still marginally, the area of New materialism. One example of this is Anna Tsing's influential work on the matsutake mushroom (Tsing, 2015), which demonstrates the capacity of food to have multiple roles and meanings, from being a commercial product, to a scientific object of study, to the fruit of a given natural environment, and, finally and most importantly, also something that can shape human lives and become part of the human body, blurring the boundary between subject and object. The complicated process of gathering, selling, buying, giving and receiving the matsutake mushroom is based on a network of reciprocated influences: for example, during her extensive discussion of the mushroom foragers and how this activity has shaped their culture and ways of living, Tsing states that "the mushrooms become part of the foragers, just as if they had eaten them" (Tsing, 2015, p. 121). The interplay that Tsing builds between human and non-human agents of assemblages is extremely varied, but the act of eating and being eaten is always present, often being the first element that comes to mind: "how the varied species in a species assemblage influence each other—if at all—is never settled: some thwart (or eat) each other; others work together to make life possible; still others just happen to find themselves in the same place" (Tsing, 2015, p. 22). Moreover, here, the act of

eating is never seen as a unilateral consumption but always as an action imbued with meanings and with the capability of changing worlds, subjects and contexts, bringing the act of eating on a post-anthropocentric dimension and opening interesting connections between how humans and non-humans eat and are eaten. For example, the non-human act of eating can be described not merely as consumption, but as world building: "Yet fungal eating is often generous: It makes worlds for others (...) Fungi are thus world builders, shaping environments for themselves and others" (Tsing, 2015, p. 137-138).

The textual analysis of *The New Wilderness* that follows will be based on these theories we have briefly outlined, offering us the possibility to see how this potentiality of food is played out in a novel in which the theme of food is used in a distinct post-anthropocentric direction. Located at the centre of the intersection of the animal world, scientific discourses and bodily processes, food in *The New Wilderness* is the locus of a continuous negotiation and renegotiation of meaning, shifting from concrete to metaphorical, from material to immaterial. In the novel, food is the central feature and preoccupation of a world that continuously unsettles the dichotomy of human and non-human, of who eats and who is eaten, sketching a post-anthropocentric episteme that is expressed through the always present possibility that the human who hunts and eats today will be hunted and eaten tomorrow. The retrieval, preparation and consumption of food in the novel will thus be framed as a Baradian performance, acting as the hinge of the relationship between contexts, bodies and identities, while humans who make food are at the same time made by that very food, which shapes their bodies and identities while allowing their survival. All of the interactions between human and non-human in the novel, as we will see, are hinged on the act of eating, which concretises the process of becoming-with (Haraway, 2016) of the protagonist, ultimately outlining the possibility of a different, post-anthropocentric way of living. Its protagonist learns a "sympoietic model of identity that implies the entangled and blurred boundaries rather than dichotomies" (Atasoy,

Komsta, 2022: 5); the following analysis will be aimed to assert to what extent the dichotomy eater/eaten comes to constitute a part of such a newfound sympoietic identity. In order to do so, I have broken down the protagonist's process of becoming following Braidotti's (2013) important definitions of "becoming-animal" and "becoming-earth": this will also help us to see how food is fundamental in the process that Haraway terms "worlding-with" (p. 58), both within and beyond the literary text.

***The New Wilderness* by Diane Cook – a food-based, neomaterialist analysis**

Conflicting, dichotomic contexts

The novel is entirely set within the Wilderness, a pristine space among mountains, hills and rivers where a Community of twenty people live without any sort of modern technology and must survive on a hunting-gathering lifestyle. Yet we soon learn that this context is not actually "natural": it is the framework of an experiment, conducted by the scientists of an unnamed City, in order to see if humans are still capable of living within a natural context without having to destroy it to ensure their own survival. Therefore the protagonists need not only survive, but they must do so while complying to the rules given by the Rangers, who act on the scientists' commands. These numerous rules include the command to keep to a nomadic lifestyle and "leave no trace" (p. 125) – although it is clear from the start that mutual, intra-active changes between subjects and contexts are impossible to avoid.

The protagonist, Bea, decided to take part in the experiment with her very sick daughter Agnes in order to save her from the polluted and decaying environment of the City which was killing the child. In the Wilderness, Bea and the rest of the Community are constantly on the go, walking from a Post to another, and all of their time is dedicated to survival – which, as it is immediately clear, equates to the search of food, and to the attempt not to become somebody else's food. Hunting animals in order to eat and stay warm with their skins; gathering herbs and fruits; escaping predators who,

moved by their same scopes, want to prey on them. They attain this lifestyle "not because it was thrilling, but because they could. And because they were *hungry*. Had they ever really been adventurers?" (p. 277, emphasis mine).

For this reason, food – and the survival it symbolises – is framed as the entity that drives and influences every movement within the Wilderness, both human and non-human. Each setting of the novel, both the Wilderness and the City, is described through the availability (or scarcity) of food that it presents, suggesting how the materiality of food is not only shaped by each context, but actually contributes performatively to shaping each context. The scarcity of the City is depicted by "Lines snaked out of every shop. Fights breaking out over something like broccoli" (p. 252), while meat is now industrially produced as "Meat™" (p. 255). After Bea goes back to the City for a period, the first questions she is asked are "What did you see? (...) What did you *eat*?" (p. 251, emphasis mine). Even the transition from one world to the other is described in food-terms, aimed to symbolise the clash between the two dimensions. The arrival of the Community in the Wilderness is described as follows: "on their first morning (they) made pancakes. They sprinkled sugar on them. They flavored their early stews with bacon. None of that stuff lasted long, though" (p. 51-52). In this sense, the description of the two contexts echoes New materialism's

commitment to remain invested in the question of context (...) no longer a flat or smooth surrounding, but spiky and interfering in different ways, constituted by multiple relational and competitive agentialities. When taken as 'context', environment, spatiotemporality, territory, bodies of literature and transcorporeal bodies as fleshy, leaky, unbounded and involuntary assemblages, home, public sphere, cell, petri dish and so on, achieve a multiplicity of prominences (Åsberg et al., 2015, p. 150).

The contexts of the novel achieve such prominence through the very materiality Åsberg et al. (2015) talk about, which here takes the form of a food-based materiality that plays a

vital role within the becoming of human and non-human agents, as will be argued later.

If at the beginning the two contexts appear dichotomically opposed, we are soon introduced to the similarities between them: they are both food-based and survival-based. Yet the two environments never manage to merge; the City enters the Wilderness only by means of the liminal spaces of the Posts, where the Community receives letters and gifts – often food – from their families at home who know perfectly well they will never see them again. Food again plays a characterising role, as it not only embodies the affection coming from unseen agents, but it also demonstrates that the bodies of the Community have changed forever, and cannot digest the food of the City anymore. It is therefore significant that the impact that the Wilderness had on their bodies needs the interaction with food to be clear to the reader. Their mail includes “stale cookies” and “a brownie that was now rock hard” (p. 125); the decay of these gifts mirrors the changes the Community’s bodies have undergone as well, as they cannot eat such food anymore without feeling sick: “she couldn’t eat things like that (chocolate) anymore without becoming ill, her body overwhelmed by what it used to crave in their old life” (p. 11).

Yet food is extremely present within the Community: their first appearance features a lengthy list of their cooking setup, which is even repeated twice, to stress its material heaviness and concrete presence (p. 13, 16). As a matter of fact, the only objects that the Community holds and cherishes from beyond the Wilderness are, not by chance, a teacup (20) and a Cast Iron (52)⁸: objects linked to the semantic area of food and, accordingly, objects capable of bringing with them a wide array of meanings and symbolisms. Both of them, in fact, gained this status through the performativity of communal eating: “With little discussion they voted to leave it (the Cast Iron) behind. It was an obvious decision. But that night they cooked in it. And they’d been carrying the Cast Iron ever since” (p. 52) and the frail,

delicate teacup, which “they’d used during ceremonial moments for rituals they had made up early on for the different milestones of their new life” (p. 20).

Within the Wilderness, food is used to embody feelings of affection and protection, contributing intra-actively to creating bonds. Glen shows love to Agnes by “always giv(ing) her more meat than he gave himself” (p. 25). Even Ranger Bob does the same; he cannot give objects to the Community as that would be against the rules, but he gives Bea a lollipop for Agnes (p. 39), demonstrating again the qualitative difference between mere objects and food, and the special status of the latter. The performative capacity of food as a peculiar type of object is moreover underlined in the description of the immediate changes that Bea experiences in her body when she decides to protect Agnes and eat it herself: she feels “her heart rev(ing) from the green sugar” (p. 41).

Having analysed these two contexts from the point of view of food, it is clear that they can be defined as materially and epistemologically dichotomic: yet it is hard to distinguish between a utopian and dystopian pole. The utopian perspective of the Community (with the exception of Agnes, as will be argued) does not lie in the Wilderness they inhabit, but in yet another place which might not even exist, the Private Lands: “The Private Lands were the opposite of the City and had all the freedoms the City could no longer offer, and you either believed in it or you didn’t” (p. 46). Moreover, it is also significant that every description of the City happens in retrospect, through memories or recountings. This going backwards and forwards in time not only stresses the dissonance between the Wilderness and the city, between a material present and an abstract memory, as if they are unable to coexist in the same material framework, but it also represents the Wilderness as the only possible present, eternal and concrete: “Eventually it dawned on Bea that the ground they trudged wearily upon day after day would be endless” (p. 20). On the other hand,

⁸ Regarding the use of capital letters and the heavy symbolism it suggests, is relevant here to note also that “the Anthropocene-related, ideological foundations of the Community are established by means of strict regulations

as well as objects, such as the Book Bag, the Cast Iron, or, most importantly, the Manual, capitalized in the narrative to highlight their status as artifacts of anthropocentric dominance.” (Komsta, Atasoy, 2022: 8).

notwithstanding the similarities which were outlined, the City comes across to the reader as characterised by the same incorporeal quality of the Private Lands, as it is described only in retrospect through tales and memory. This gives an ephemeral quality to its materiality as it no longer has the power of shaping the bodies of the protagonists.

For this reason, the Community itself appears as existing in a fragile in-between, a material enclave within an abstract world that they can no longer turn back to. The Wilderness, a context characterised by its material specificities just as much as those specificities have shaped the Community, defies any sort of pre-existing dichotomic thought, that very thought which will be argued as characterising the dystopian episteme of the city. The Community exists in a liminal space between life and death, between utopia and dystopia. A blank slate, a “precarious living” (Tsing, 2015, p. 163) which can be used to imagine and create new assemblages, new ways of “living and dying well” (Haraway, 2016, p. 56), as will be argued shortly.

The dichotomy of survival: eat or be eaten

As previously outlined, food is the agent that determines every movement of this very alive and active entity that is the Wilderness, made up by every living thing inside it, human and non-human. There is only one rule: to eat and survive, doing “what you’ve always done: walk, hunt, live.” (p. 353). The hardships of life within the Wilderness and the reversal to this hunting-gathering lifestyle determine an epistemology of survival based on eating, which creates an opposition between prey and predator, between who eats and survives, and who is eaten and dies. This dichotomous polarisation between prey and predator is a constant textual metaphor that courses especially throughout the first section of the novel, the one narrated by Bea. In her words: “some watching wolf had seen the carrion birds, was signaling prey” (6), the prey being the stillborn daughter of Bea; “Bea imagined that as Agnes grew up this would change. She might feel less like prey and more like a predator” (p. 7). Agnes is later described as “(going) limp like prey” (p. 256),

and again: “Agnes stood rigid and still as though her mother were a predator and she were prey” (p. 336-337).

The same dichotomy is reiterated through the binarism of “friend or foe”, described as the call of the Wilderness: “like a coyote listening for the calls of the Wilderness—*friend or foe, friend or foe*” (p. 14); “Far off, behind some butte, coyotes yodeled to one another, *friend, friend, friend*, and Bea felt bereft at the sound of such communion” (p. 23). Again later: “Even the deer that munched dewy grass on the outskirts of the camp were listening. They bleated to their young, to their mates, to make sure they were there and safe. Then they snorted out into the night beyond their sight, *Friend or foe? Friend or foe?* to warn off the unwelcome. In the distance Agnes was certain she heard the wolves howl back. *Foe.*” (p. 271).

Such binarism, although it may seem to be an adaptation to the rules of the Wilderness, actually reproduces the capitalistic, objectifying logic of the City where human life and death are part of a binary system which falls within the City’s scientific episteme. Every death that takes place within the Community is taken note of, according to the City’s necessity of counting and classifying everything, following its accumulating episteme that conceives of life and death as entities of their own, detached from the environment where they take place. An example of this is how Ranger Bob reacts to the stillbirth of Bea’s daughter while taking note of the deaths:

“Wait,” Bea croaked. “One more. Madeline. Stillborn.” Her face blazed. She stammered, “I didn’t know if it counted.” Ranger Bob gazed at her for a moment, then looked at his form, flipping it over and back. “Well, seems like it doesn’t count. Good to know. So let’s just call it three, shall we?” He scratched out the 4 in the column for Total Deaths, smiling a mayor’s smile, tight, all lip. Bea sputtered in agreement so she wouldn’t whimper. Her little unfinished girl was not quite finished enough to count. (p. 37)

According to the City, some deaths “count”, and some do not. The classification and

commodification of life and death is also clear when we are told that, according to the Manual, there are fines for everything, even dying:

It was the part about the Wilderness State's system for fines. (...) The most absurd one to Agnes was the hefty fine for dying. She doubted as they read they even understood that's what it meant, it was so odd. Carl had explained it to her one day, skipping stones into the river. How even though your body would hopefully be scavenged, your clothing and personal items would need to be retrieved in order to lessen the impact, and that usually amounted to a rescue mission, the tab for which the dead person's family or next of kin would have to pay. "Yet another reason to stay alive," Carl had said to her. (p. 171).

The tendency of the City to control, punish and define everything, through bureaucracy, physical exams, drones, reroutings "meant as punishment" (p. 29) and addenda to the Manual including "ever narrowing interpretations of wildness and wilderness" (p. 109), even compelling the Community to use a clicker to count their steps while walking (p. 43), are demonstration of the rigidity of the scientific eye of the City, which does not accept nor understand that the life in the Wilderness cannot abide by such quantitative rules. This stance mirrors Tsing's description of the scientific view of the predator-prey relationship: "until quite recently many people—perhaps especially scientists—imagined life as a matter of species-by-species reproduction. The most important interspecies interactions, in this worldview, were predator-prey relations in which interaction meant wiping each other out", a vision wherein "mutualistic relations were interesting anomalies, but not really necessary to understand life" (2015, p. 139). Such a dichotomic view about life and death, about eater and eaten, a vision equating survival with accumulation and reproduction, is soon demonstrated as unfitting for the Wilderness where everybody is prey and predator at the same time, where eating is framed as a mutual, intra-active performance which shapes the human bodies as well as the Wilderness itself:

this will be clear especially in the second section of the book, narrated by Agnes.

Indeed, the difference between Agnes and Bea lies in their different ideas concerning death – and therefore their relationships to eating, which was already described as synonymous to survival. Agnes, who effectively faced death, and whose life was saved by the Wilderness experiment, appears as the only one capable of overcoming this binary logic between death and life, merely conceived as an accumulation of what Braidotti would define as "bios", as opposed to "zoe". Braidotti "oppose(s) zoe, as vitalistic, prehuman, generative life, to bios, as a discursive and political discourse about life" (2008, p. 177). Braidotti's differentiation, "by making the notion of life more complex, implies the notion of multiplicity. In turn, multiplicity allows for a nonbinary way of positing the relationship between same and other, between different categories of living beings, and, ultimately, between life and death" which is therefore framed as "that aspect of life which, though it goes by the name of death, is nevertheless an integral part of the bios/zoe process" (2008, p. 178). Agnes, having grown up in the Wilderness, breathed its air and eaten its food, understands that she, as well, can become the food of something or someone else; she is predator and prey at the same time. She actually conceives of death as a sort of game: "Agnes giggled with delight as she pantomimed slicing his (Glen's) abdomen open and pulling out his entrails" (p. 42). Even her way of playing this game shows the difference that sets her apart from the rest of the community:

It was just like what Carl did when he and Agnes played Hunted! When he was the hunter, he liked to give long speeches about mercy and compassion and would catch her and let her go several times before he killed her. When she was the hunter, she just killed him immediately. From the ground, pretending to be dead, Carl would whisper, "You're supposed to play with your prey a little—it's the best part." He liked the drama. But she didn't see the point. (p. 164)

For Agnes, death is not something cruel, but something which ensures someone else's survival through eating: this is totally and completely integrated in the posthuman framework she lives in, as it often equates with the only possibility of eating and surviving.

The animality of zoe, underlined by Braidotti, becomes clear as we discover Agnes' survival strategy: she communicates with animals, following them to find sources of food and water, and she is the only one that presents her drive to survive as a post-anthropocentric materialist vitalism, refusing any type of hierarchy between species and accepting the reciprocity and fluidity of the relationship between human and non-human. She states "The animals are always right, and when I do what they do, nothing bad happens" and, after they lead her to a source of water, Bea, surprised, tells her "Next time we're hungry, thirsty, or lost, I'll follow you." (p. 68-69)

Agnes' capability of "living and dying well", as Haraway would describe it (2016, p. 56) constitutes the cornerstone for a network of harawayan "response-ability" (*ibidem*) according to which Agnes lives and survives in the Wilderness, which indeed Haraway describes as being "about both absence and presence, *killing and nurturing, living and dying*" (2016, p. 28, my emphasis). Haraway's description of the concept of "wilderness" is also extremely fitting in this case; she talks about the necessity of "imagining and caring for other worlds, both those that exist precariously now (including those called wilderness) (...) and those we need to bring into being in alliance with other critters, for still possible recuperating pasts, presents, and futures" (2016: 50). The Wilderness is something inherently precarious and filled with precedent and contaminated histories, and it is not something that exists in and of itself. Its existence bends the dichotomy between human and non-human, human and animal, life and death, self and other, "mind" and "body" as postulated by Braidotti (2008).

Becoming-animal (Braidotti, 2013)

As we have seen in the last section, the act of eating in the novel is endowed with the potentiality of breaking dichotomies between prey and predator, friend and foe, who lives and who dies. We will now see that this is particularly effective in breaking the boundary between human and non-human through Agnes' blurred identity. Agnes is the hinge of the relationships between the Community and wildlife; she is the most capable in communicating with them and she understands that, in order to survive, the Community has to learn from animals. Yet the Community has a different orientation than hers, which is described here:

Over time, they learned when to hide by listening to birds. They learned to be cautious by watching deer. They thought they learned to be bold by watching a wolf pack take down a healthy moose. But then they learned how to see the almost imperceptible limp that a healthy-seeming moose was hiding. (...) They knew the different flavors of leaves depending on the season; knew the secret sweetness of the red-tipped grasses in the fall, and the bitterness of last season's grass, buried in winter snow but somehow still green, like how poisonous mushrooms have alluring colors. Those colors only beckon the foolish. Colors are warnings. They learned that too. *They learned what to eat by watching the animals eat.* (p. 53-54, emphasis mine)

While the rest of the Community is content with "learning" techniques regarding hunting and the recognition of wild herbs (as underlined by the repeated anaphora in the preceding excerpt), a process which implies a hierarchical, accumulating perspective which is still part of the episteme of the City, Agnes is the only one who abandons the anthropocentric perspective that the Community has inherited from the City and undergoes a real process of becoming-animal⁹ (Braidotti, 2013), again hinged on the

⁹ I am here resourcing to the long history embedded in the concept of "becoming", as a term which was originally used by Deleuze and Guattari to describe a "dynamic and rhizomic subject-in-becoming" (Braidotti, 2006: 14), and

which was first transposed into "ethics of becoming" in Braidotti's work *Transposition* (2006). It was then further elaborated in a post-anthropocentric direction in *The Posthuman* (2013), and this text and the categories

act of eating. A process of co-becoming of companion species, whose etymology, as Haraway fittingly reminds us, comes from “cum panis” (Haraway, 2015, p. 55): species who eat together (and who, in this case, occasionally eat each other), co-become together. In this sense, Agnes is the perfect embodiment of Braidotti’s description of becoming-animal, which is based on the “zoe-egalitarianism” that was identified as characteristic of Agnes:

deterritorialize, or nomadize, the human–animal interaction, so as to bypass the metaphysics of substance and its corollary, the dialectics of otherness (...) The posthuman in the sense of post-anthropocentrism displaces the dialectical scheme of opposition, replacing well established dualisms with the recognition of deep zoe-egalitarianism between humans and animals (Braidotti, 2013, p. 71).

The network of interrelations Agnes weaves with her animal surroundings is grounded in communication, a posthuman, interspecies language which she and only she among other humans can understand and produce:

When Agnes woke, she saw the prairie dog that had sung lullabies in her ear all night on its haunches, watching her with a question on its face. She rubbed her eyes and the dog recoiled but kept asking the question. “I’m Agnes,” she answered. “And yes, I belong here.” The dog cocked its head. Wrinkled its snout. “I do TOO belong here.” Agnes flicked a stone with her bony fingers at the dog, whose face scrunched in protest before it disappeared into its hole. The lullabies had been meant to haunt her dreams and scare her away, any dumb thing could figure that. Chittering and cooing to make a dreamer think her ear was being invaded by something awful. To feel unsafe. But they had soothed her. They were sounds she understood. (p. 139)

This different way of communicating implies not only a different episteme but a different

ontology, which is again communicated to the reader through food: although Agnes has nightmares of being forced to eat an animal whose song she liked killed by a foreign thing like a truck, she drools at the sight of the fat Newcomers, recently arrived from the city. The performativity innate in Agnes’ posture towards eating is therefore made clear: her eating, through the intra-actions that it establishes, shapes worlds and ontologies. Indeed, she appears as unable to distinguish between wanting to be fat like them and the impulse of eating them, impersonating one of the many predators of the Wilderness:

That truck followed her in dreams. Just before she woke, that truck had run over the prairie dog singing in her ear. Guts across the broken asphalt. Carl scraping it up and feeding it to her and the other children as dinner. She’d liked the singing and so would not eat it. They tried to make her. But she woke up before they pushed a tiny drumstick past her clenched lips. (p. 140)

They looked like they would not last long. With their fat stomachs and thighs. (...) Agnes could barely remember when they themselves had been that fat and *delicious-looking*. But she knew they had been. A line of *drool* fell out of her mouth and into the sand. (p. 163, emphasis mine)

The post-anthropocentric posture of Agnes concerning eating, which emerges from the aforementioned excerpts, mirrors and demonstrates her own post-anthropocentric and distinctively animal identity. She is often described through animal metaphors, “Like an animal, Agnes froze when fearful and bolted when endangered (...) Was Agnes behaving normally for her age, or was it possible she believed she was a wolf?” (p. 7-8); “Agnes was like a colt, bounding, curious” (p. 20). Although the Community itself shares Agnes’ context, this animality is not always regarded as a favorable quality in the eyes of the Community, and her mother especially: “Probably Agnes had been awake this whole time because it

postulated in it is the one on which I am mainly basing my analysis.

seemed like Agnes was always awake, attentive, watching. Bea nudged her hard with her foot. “Even animals sleep, you little spy,” she said under the covers” (p. 65). When Bea speaks ill about herself, she compares herself to animals: “Ranger Bob regarded her like a wild animal. He said cautiously, “Well, she just died . . . yesterday, you said?” He might as well have been saying, *Hey, bear, hey, bear* to calm a beast.” (p. 37) and again “She’d hated the feeling. So exposed, used, animal-like” (p. 4). This, according to Komsta and Atasoy, depends on the fact that “Cook’s narrative imbues Agnes the stray with the transformative potential, as Agnes’s mind, unlike Bea’s, is not yet molded by the Anthropocentric, hierarchical, and essentialist categories of the City.” (2022, p. 5).

Yet Agnes’ relationship to the animal world endows her with better survival chances: “But Agnes scampered along, certain of the feel of ruts below her feet. She saw them like an owl might see a mouse under a covering of leaves or a sheet of snow.” (p. 151) And, to the reader, it is clear that Agnes feels good in her animal identity: “She felt like an animal of few words but imperative work. She felt like the alpha.” (p. 152) Agnes feels at home in her food-based becoming, in the never-ending performances taking place in the Wilderness, and in the in-betweenness that characterises the whole Wilderness, although everybody wants to normalize, settle and define it, from the City to the Community itself. Agnes’ food-based relationships to the animals are thus framed as part of a network of intra-actions between the various agents inhabiting the Wilderness, comprising both human and non-human ones, and actually blurring the line between them. Thus overcoming the binary logic, Agnes manages to effectively break the boundary between human and non-human, recognising that her nourishment depends on animals as much as their material life depends on how humans treat their habitat.

Becoming-earth (Braidotti, 2013)

Agnes’ process of becoming-animal, analysed above, is however not limited at this recognition. This becoming-animal comes to

constitute part of her nomadic subjectivity – the adjective “nomadic” is here particularly accurate – which Braidotti describes as “(being) in love with zoe. It’s about the posthuman as becoming animal, becoming other, becoming insect—trespassing all metaphysical boundaries.” (Braidotti, 2008, p. 178). This multiplicity which is contained by the aforementioned becoming-animal comes to the fore gradually in the novel, as we understand that her becoming finally transcends all boundaries and strives to become a becoming-earth, “visualiz(ing) the subject as a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole, and to do so within an understandable language” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 82). In recognising the complex intra-actions (Barad, 2003) of eating and surviving in the Wilderness, Agnes’ becoming-with suggests the possibility of new relationships between human, animal and contexts: an attempt towards a neo-materialistic utopia.

In fact, the City’s scientists blindly go on trying to impose their short-sighted analytical method to quantify life in the Wilderness, and finally determine that the experiment was a failure because humans turn out to invariably affect the context they are in: ““The Wilderness State is changing. It has a new mandate. No one can be here.” Agnes scoffed. “How can you have a Wilderness without any people?” The Boss answered. “The study has clearly shown that you can’t have a Wilderness with people” (p. 355). Agnes is the only one that stubbornly opposes the city’s epistemology, as she understands that it is actually impossible to live in any context without changing and being changed by it. This perfectly channels Braidotti’s definition of becoming-earth: “In the age of Anthropocene, the phenomenon known as ‘geo-morphism’ is usually expressed in negative terms, as environmental crisis, climate change and ecological sustainability. Yet, there is also a more positive dimension to it in the sense of reconfiguring the relationship to our complex habitat, which we used to call ‘nature’.” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 81). Her behaviour is also resonant of Tsing’s description of the wilderness as something that may actually profit from human intervention, just as much as humans need the influence of their natural

surroundings in their lives: “As an American tutored in wilderness sensibilities, I thought forests were best at restoring themselves. Kato-san disagreed: If you want matsutake in Japan, he explained, you must have pine, and if you want pine, you must have human disturbance.” (2015, p. 151)

For this reason, where the City sees the failure of the Wilderness, as it was designed to keep humans and nature in two separate spheres, Agnes can see something more, thanks to the ability to do what Tsing would define as living on a damaged planet. This capacity to live on – and to be part of – the Earth is perfectly embodied by Agnes’ continuous insistence that it is possible to live, survive and eat in the Wilderness while acknowledging the intra-actions between human and non-human on which this eating/surviving potentiality is based, outside of the rationalistic logos that underlies the rules imposed from the City, and refusing any sort of hierarchy between species. Notwithstanding the tragic end of the novel, Agnes’ epistemology can be interpreted as the utopian opening of an otherwise extremely bleak novel, prospecting a sort of neo-materialistic utopia through her running away from the Rangers. While the Utopia of the Community, the Private Lands, turn out to be a place only for the ultra-rich, built on the outskirts of the Wilderness itself, Agnes wants to recreate her utopia within such Wilderness, as her way of surviving, meaning her way of creating food-based performative intra-actions with the non-humans of the Wilderness, has deeply changed her and has created an entanglement which cannot be severed: “The ones who remained, Agnes saw herself in their eyes. She was too wild, something uncontrollable and wholly selfish, and while that had served them well in the past, now her survival instinct seemed to disgust them” (p. 362). Her private, enclosed utopia is born when she cuts all ties with everybody else in the Community, ever her mother, as everybody mistake her post-anthropocentrism with selfishness: they always want more and do not understand Agnes’ reluctance to leave the Wilderness, her contentedness with eating and surviving among her fellow animals. For this reason, Agnes runs away and for three years she will survive on her own with her adopted

daughter, aptly named Fern. Fern, whose becoming-earth is already symbolised by her name, accepts death just as Agnes did, having witnessed the death of her mother and sister. The two girls, through their alliance, finally merge with the surrounding nature, recreating their own nomadic utopia – the actualisation of the unnamed X on Fern’s map, where “Everything good” is to be found (p. 378).

Conclusions

The final aim of this paper was to analyse one of the most interesting feminist dystopias of the last years in order to underline how the symbolism conveyed by real, matter-of-fact objects within the genre of the feminist dystopia could be the locus of a resistant, critical capacity which the reader can bring forward in his own, extraliterary world. Within a wide array of realistic objects, I identified food as a specific class of objects which not only is extremely pervasive within feminist dystopias but can also be interpreted in a distinct neo-materialistic sense as something which is capable to dismantle the binaries which lie at the basis of many feminist dystopias. Indeed, the chosen novel, *The New Wilderness*, being an example of Anthropocene fiction, offered a peculiar analytical angle: food was not only highlighted as the hinge of the relationships between human and non-human, but also as a class of objects that can drive the protagonist through her process of becoming, following Braidotti’s (2013) categories of becoming-animal and becoming-earth.

For this reason, such thematic and metaphoric recurrence of the theme of food, which was, up to now, not closely analysed within the field of feminist dystopias specifically, does not only strive to dismantle the fixed binaries that characterise the oppressive systems of dystopias, but can also be interpreted as a significant neo-materialistic tool to resemantize a material context by entwining women’s bodies with their non-human contexts, framing food as “demonstrat(ing) and perform(ing) the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters” (Haraway, 2016, p. 2). Food can thus be used to resemantize women’s different politics of location both within and outside the literary text and create not only new, posthuman relationships but also a posthuman female

identity, which can serve as the basis to build the prospect of a neo-materialistic critical Utopia in the sense outlined by Dillon at the beginning of this paper: although in the novel Agnes will not, eventually, manage to make her and Fern's private post-anthropocentric Utopia last, the scope of the novel transcends the ending of the novel, and can be arguably said to reside in the rekindling in the readers of the possibility of building one's own Utopia starting from one's own material, immediate context. In order to do so, the symbolism of food was pointed out as a powerful vector of performative meaning, capable of bringing neo-materialistic

philosophies to life as a concrete, transformative practice through literature.

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