

Blackbeard and the Post- Anthropocene Humanoids: Tracing the Post/Transhuman in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy

Laura Giovannelli

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the meanings and phenomenologies of the simulacrum as a materialisation of a hybrid, liminal and nomadic ontology and as the result of biotechnological experiments that have redesigned the animal/human along post-anthropocentric lines. The analysis takes its cue from the post-apocalyptic setting of Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, with a final focus on the last book in the series. After the world population has been decimated by a pandemic unleashed by Crake, the creatures he has generated via transgenic technology emerge as the 'fittest' inheritors of the Earth. Toby, one of the few human survivors, is involved in training them in the Post-Anthropocene era. Attention will be paid to the Crakers' identity as humanoids hovering between an anthropological and a zoomorphic dimension. If capable of establishing bioegalitarian relationships with the ecosystem, such pseudo-primates also show uncanny and possibly transhuman features that progressively come to the fore through their leader Blackbeard.

Keywords

Margaret Atwood; *MaddAddam* trilogy; Humanoid; Posthuman ontologies; Transhumanism

Blackbeard and the Post-Anthropocene Humanoids: Tracing the Post/ Transhuman in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy

Laura Giovannelli

Introduction: Nomadic interdependencies

In a chapter entitled “Bodies”, included in a recent miscellaneous volume dealing with the relationships between literature and the posthuman, Manuela Rossini makes some interesting observations on the epistemological and ontological shifts impacting on what ‘being human’ might mean and imply today. Without taking anything away from the consequential topic of Artificial Intelligence and cyborg subjectivities, it is the following commentary on the organic crossing of species boundaries that better contributes to laying the groundwork for our analysis:

[The] latest research into animal cognition challenges the humanist assumption that “we” are special. Moreover, tissue and organ transfers between human beings and across species barriers destabilize apparently secure boundaries between self and other, making it more and more difficult to identify a core essence that constitutes “true” humanness [...]. In the dominant imaginary and increasingly in reality, bodies become infinitely malleable, plastic and liquid, to be performed and invented anew. (Rossini 2017: 153)

The points highlighted in this excerpt – neuroethology and animal thinking, regenerative-medicine xenotransplantation, transcorporeal porosity – are all informing principles critically addressed by Margaret Atwood in her acclaimed post-apocalyptic trilogy comprising *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013). While taking notice of Atwood’s blending of dystopian and utopian elements, together

with her positioning of those novels within the realm of 'speculative fiction' (as opposed to the outer-space ventures and contact with aliens allegedly marking out 'science fiction' *per se*), this paper intends to approach such works through the broader, genre-transcendent lens of contemporary posthuman perspectives. In other words, it draws on the notion of the situated, co-constituted features of humanity in the light of its mutual entanglements and multiple relationships with the organic as well as inorganic world. Ossified hierarchies, clear-cut dichotomies and absolutes have been increasingly dismantled by anti-essentialist views that refrain from granting human beings a privileged status. Plurality and transformation, hybridity and permeability are now frequently called upon to describe a sort of nomadic ontology of ambivalence that needs to be explored in various fields and across many scientific disciplines (be they theoretical, sociological, anthropological, biological).

As a participant in ecosystem processes of «co-habitation» and «co-evolution» (Rossini 2017: 154), the human element is said to be «knotted into interdependent networks that are both corporeal and discursive», in a constant intermingling «across machinic, animal, human, and microbial textures» (*ibid.*: 157, 165). Rather than being curtailed by applying a tight rational sieve, mutability, boundary-breaking and multiplicity are seen as opening up new spaces for engagement, thus inviting us to re-imagine a whole series of interrelations between humans and non-human actors. Hence the idea of a rhizomatic network of interspecies dependencies, characterised by a continuous flow of becoming which also implies a 'becoming with'. As underlined by Marco Revelli, posthuman paradigms lead to a dislocation and metamorphosis of behavioural codes whereby *Hybris* is to leave room for «*Aidos*, i.e. modesty and respect, in the awareness that humankind can hardly be self-sufficient in the world» (Revelli 2020: 96, my translation). Such an epistemic frame goes hand in hand with directions and responsibilities that look at a nature-culture or co-evolutionary continuum and a «fusion-contamination» dynamic (*ibid.*: 97, my translation), with a consequent decentralisation of the anthropic domain *vis-à-vis* other (non-human) Earthbound species.

From here, it is only a short step to tenets like multispecies eco-justice or, say, Donna J. Haraway's meditations on human-animal encounters, significant otherness and the material-semiotic bonds being consolidated among species. In particular, Haraway's «companion species» coinage refers

to the old co-constitutive link between dogs and people, where dogs have been actors and not just recipients of action. *Companion*

species also points to the sorts of being made possible at interfaces among different human communities of practice for whom “love of the breed” or “love of dogs” is a practical and ethical imperative in an *always* specific, historical context [...]. Further, *companion species* designates webbed bio-social-technical apparatuses of humans, animals, artifacts, and institutions in which particular ways of being emerge and are sustained. (Haraway 2008: 134)

Crucially, this coinage is cast as «less a category than a pointer to an ongoing “becoming with”» (*ibid.*: 16), the closing syntagm sounding like a mantra for a posthumanist worldview that distances itself from both self-centred individualism and defeatist, nihilistic attitudes. In this respect, it is of course hard to overestimate Rosi Braidotti’s advocacy for a non-dualistic, constructive understanding of the interactions between culture and nature, human and non-human entities. That is to say, for a momentous break with the Cartesian/Kantian legacy and an apparatus of exclusionary strategies that have long served as markers of normalcy. When speaking of the posthuman challenge, Braidotti stresses the fact that, if resting on the assumption of the historical decline of humanism, posthumanism aims to overcome the impasse gravitating around the human/anti-human binary. It actually goes further in «exploring alternatives, without sinking into the rhetoric of the crisis of Man. It works instead towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject» (Braidotti 2013: 37). In a nutshell, this discursive framework embraces an ethics of becoming that would take shape through flows of multilayered relations among non-unitary subjects and the establishment of *affirmative* bonds. Fatalistic views of our current predicament ought to give way to the more positive grounds of a supportive politics, joint activities and the search for creative opportunities to socially and morally reinvent ourselves. An enlarged sense of community, intergenerational as well as interspecies solidarity should be hailed as milestones along the highway to a truly sustainable future.

However, a sharp dividing line stands out against this fluid backdrop. Namely, posthumanism’s resistance to win a secure niche for *Homo sapiens* and the unrelenting pursuit of his enhancement through science, prosthetic implants, computerised technology and a futuristic agenda that even encompasses cryonics and mind uploading. In fact, the paradigm of superhuman ‘augmented’ subjects properly falls within the province of transhumanism, alongside the goals of perpetual emancipation, techno-mediated transcendence, and evolutionary overreaching. In contrast with the post-anthropocentric, ontologically inclusive horizon of posthumanism, transhumanist

ideologies look forward to increasing human capacities and self-direction by virtue of «science and technology, in all their variables», with an emphasis on rational thinking and progress that suggests how transhumanism still «roots itself in the Enlightenment» (Ferrando 2013: 27).

A 'humanimalised' world

The theoretical bulwark of transhumanism, which ultimately clings to the androcentric axiom of Man as the measure of all things, could not be farther from Braidotti's conception of the self-organising force and autopoietic structure of living matter as such. In addition to this, some of her reflections concerning animals provide insights into the post-cataclysmic scenario of Atwood's speculative novels, where new kinships across the human/animal divide are provocatively envisaged both in the wake of rampant genetic manipulations and thanks to a more positive process of radical repositioning and alliances forged in the post-plague phase. While warning against the perils of adopting a blindly utilitarian approach to animal ontologies, Braidotti lifts the veil on the material repercussions of a «zoo-proletariat» notion that has brought with itself a full-scale, centuries-old exploitation of animals for hard labour, edible resources, scientific experiments and various sectors of the economy:

Animals like pigs and mice are genetically modified to produce organs for humans in xeno-transplantation experiments. [...] In advanced capitalism, animals of all categories and species have been turned into tradable disposable bodies, inscribed in a global market of post-anthropocentric exploitation [...] traffic in animals constitutes the third largest illegal trade in the world today. (Braidotti 2013: 70)

As it happens, posthuman biogenetic capital and its profitable marketing is one of the key issues tackled by Atwood in her half-tragic, half-sardonic portrayal of a globalised, hypertechnological and post-national society which, starting from *Oryx and Crake*, eerily projects the reader into a not-too-distant possible future. Needless to say, this is a future where the environmental 'doomsday clock' has finally struck, showing the nightmarish consequences of ecological disaster, irreversible climate change, Western overconsumption and the reckless depletion of planetary resources. This is also a world in which ruthless consumerism joins ranks with an advanced, sprawling form of capitalism and financial systems controlled by megacorporations. Apparently nothing is immune to the imperative of

a rapacious neoliberal market that serves the interests of a leading corporatocracy. If the steady march of digital technologies and media seems unstoppable, so is the vicious grip of a political power that draws lymph from income inequality and the massive gap between an elite plutocracy, living in fortified compounds, and the poor masses, confined in the violence-ridden, unwholesome pleeblands.

Not surprisingly, medical science and the healthcare system are similarly swallowed up by such a monopolistic, business-minded network, from the money-spinner incentivisation of cosmetics, wellness services and plastic surgery to the appalling schemes of HelthWyzer. This big pharmaceutical corporation has gone so far as to spread new diseases by implanting them in vitamin pills and other medications with the aim of keeping demand high and ensuring the sale of up-to-date cures at inflated prices. The bleak logic of this bio/necropolitics ends by sanctioning a downright commodification of life via cutting-edge genetic engineering projects that, again, place brand, visibility and the boosting of revenue, rather than health protection, on top of their priority list. And here is where the motifs of biogenetic capital, xeno-transplantation and disposable bodies are gradually brought to the fore.

As if silyly compensating for the void left by species gone extinct or deemed vulnerable – oryxes being among them, namely the *Oryx dammah* and *Oryx leucoryx* – companies like OrganInc have been recruiting brilliant scientists to carry out experiments in cross-species gene splicing. From the proliferation of invasive, self-reproducing transgenic plants to a population of bizarre animal hybrids, the possible world conjured up by Atwood calls to mind a creolised zoo or park, to the point that it might be read along the lines of «biopunk dystopia», a recent subgenre in the canon of «genetically engineered posthuman sf» (Schmeink 2016: 10)¹. Market-driven and disturbingly extravagant in the same breath, these specimens challenge the constitutive levels of the biosphere and the working principles of nat-

¹ Lars Schmeink further clarifies: «I believe that the rise of biology as the driving force of scientific progress, the mainstream attention given to genetic engineering in the wake of the Human Genome Project, the changing sociological view of liquid modernity, and the shifting discourses on the posthuman form a historical nexus that produces the cultural formation of biopunk [...]. Biopunk makes use of current posthumanist conceptions in order to criticize liquid modern realities as already dystopian, warning that a future will only get worse, and that society needs to reverse its path, or else destroy all life on this planet» (Schmeink 2016: 14).

ural selection by concurring with a man-made economy that interlocks sheer utilitarianism with surreal, flamboyant transmutations. This is the case with creatures like green phosphorescent bunnies (not exactly fantasy-like, though, as confirmed by artist Eduardo Kac's conception of an albino rabbit in 2000), butterflies equipped with shocking-pink wings, or Mo'Hair sheep, growing long colourful hair as a reservoir of hair extensions for humans. But there is also a darker side to these weird mutants, roaming free in a landscape reminiscent of H.G. Wells's *Island of Doctor Moreau*, in which acts of 'biological blasphemy' notoriously lie at the door of the eponymous, deranged vivisectionist. In Atwood's novels geneticists are similarly intrigued by the idea of 'playing God', not unrarely getting a kick out of their monstrous concoctions and having no deontological scruples about the drawbacks and possibly unintended consequences of their experiments. Quite scarily, in fact, «the new transgenic species» will manage to adapt «to life beyond their preconceived functions» (Schmeink 2016: 88) and anthropological purposes. Among the most blatant cases are beings whose compound nature is encapsulated in their very names, consisting in portmanteau terms and puns, as if retrieved with a vengeance from Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland*. This hybrid offspring includes snats (snakes-plus-rats), bobkittens (a genetic merger of bobcats and cats), wolvogs (a blending of wolves and dogs), and liobams (a lion-sheep splice).

Before too long, the propagation of such garish variants coupled with mankind's lack of foresight turns into a catalyst for fear and anxiety, as the progeny of a coarsened Frankenstein-like community of biogeeks starts causing disruption and, as happens with wolvogs and liobams, violently attacks people. What is more, in this brave 'humanimalised world', a major step forward (or backwards?) is marked when Jimmy/Snowman's father and other genetic engineers at the OrganInc Farms Compound succeed in moulding a very special kind of uplifted tribe, bearing similarities with Wells's Beast Folk in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and George Orwell's intelligent swine in *Animal Farm*, to mention two classic hypotexts. That is the tribe of pigoons, a lexical blend deriving from 'pig' and 'balloon' and referring to their stoutness. The elephantine dimension of such pigs is due to their being designed as organ donors for humans. In other words, pigoons are raised to house a foolproof assortment of spare organs for xeno-transplantation²: their gene pool has been progressively adjusted by splicing in

² Atwood's prediction became real in September 2021, when the first investigational transplant of a kidney from a genetically engineered pig into a brain-

sequences of human DNA, including neo-cortex tissue, so as to manufacture serviceable host animals. Unintended consequences will not be long in coming, however, as clever pigeons provided with enhanced porcine brain evolve into a well-trained legion of 'post-animals'.

Tough and aggressive, smarter but less sociable than their already skilful natural cousins, they will make life difficult for the HelthWyzer system by escaping from the laboratories and continuing to develop problem-solving capacities and complex modes of interaction. Understandably enough, throughout *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, pigeons are seen as wasting no chance to retaliate. Afraid of being tracked, trampled or eaten by these crafty hybrids, humans must consequently adopt tactics of defence and counterattack, with the most sensitive people beginning to recoil from the 'cannibalistic' idea of having pork products on their tables.

There is no missing how this nefarious kind of boundary crossing and physiological fluidity paradoxically frustrates sound practices of cooperation and ontological relationality. Braidotti would identify it as a «reactive bond of vulnerability» (Braidotti 2013: 50), a negative unity fuelled by common threats and an interdependence imbricated into the texture of contemporary biogenetic capitalism. Interestingly, though, this is only half the story. As Atwood ushers in the motley community of *MaddAddam*, one could turn again to Braidotti's line of reasoning and observe how the enforced, asphyctic confluences mentioned above are eventually overshadowed by kinetic re-significations taking place «on terms that are no longer hierarchical or self-evident. They are fast-evolving and need to be renegotiated accordingly» (Braidotti 2009: 528).

In the post-apocalyptic wilderness, where a condition of radical immanence and precarious survival is dramatically literalised, the «anthropological machinery of humanism» cannot but subside and grapple with the situatedness of «post-history» (Agamben 2019: 35, 19, my translation). From this point of view, with reference to the mobile framework of *MaddAddam*, our suspension of disbelief is put to the test when learning that most of the few human survivors are entering into dialogue with the once

dead human was completed by Robert Montgomery's team at NYU Langone Transplant Institute. The pig was raised at Revivicor Inc., a subsidiary of United Therapeutics Corporation, a biotech company based in Maryland. More recently, on 7 January 2022, a gene-edited pig heart provided by the same company was successfully transferred into a living man. Research on xenografts and heterologous transplant has been in development for years, and there is little doubt that Atwood was keen on annotating its progress.

demonised pigoons. In post-historical times, these creatures are in fact no longer approached as freely disposable bodies or antagonists, but as worthy, equal members of a companion species (hence, in the trilogy's third book, the frequent use of the upper case in 'Pigoons' and their subsequent recognition as 'Pig Ones'). They will be working together with a part of the human circle in an effort to make a stand against *other* enemies, that is, the brutalised fringe of *humanitas* embodied by two former convicts who continue to wreak havoc by raping, killing and committing acts of cannibalism. These released inmates are the Painballers, a label stemming from the savage reality game that, before the outbreak of the pandemic, death prisoners were allowed to play against each other in exchange for freedom, in an atmosphere thrillingly reminiscent of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*.

If, on the one hand, Atwood's discourse hardly makes a clean break with questions of violence and obdurate self-affirmation, on the other it does not stand at odds with the trend of critical posthumanism that «sees the human as a congeries, whose origins are multispecies and whose very survival is founded on symbiotic relations with numerous forms of life on earth» (Nayar 2014: 9). This intriguing ambivalence is all the more evident when taking into account a crucial missing link between mankind and upgraded pigs: an offshoot of post-Anthropocene humanoids, «animal-human hybrids» from our «biotech century» (Johnston 2019: 1) who might be described as organic simulacra or avatars of an imaginary pre-*Homo sapiens* species. Genetically engineered to be 'primitive' and somewhat pre-human rather than cybernetic hyperhumans – as one would expect in the age of biotechnology – these are the Crakers, so named after 'Crake', the nickname of Glenn, a hallucinating, megalomaniac biologist and their demiurgic creator.

Fluctuating between the human and non-human poles, this lab-grown, artificially resurrected family of hominids seems to incorporate, in a Deleuzian sense, a passage from iconic resemblance to a simulacral semblance built on osmotic permutations and a seamless internalisation of difference. Owing to their astoundingly diversified genetic makeup, the Crakers are not comparable to clones of a preexistent unified model. On the contrary, they challenge and overturn any endorsed prototype or monolithic identity. They are, literally, multispecies and one is tempted to cast them as a hyperbolic, fictionalised reification of what Giorgio Agamben calls the last political task of post-historical civilisation, boiling down to the «'integral management' of biological life» and the domain of physiology (Agamben 2019: 80, my translation).

Children of hope and despair. An overview of the Crakers

In the *MaddAddam* trilogy, the concept of an integral management of biological life is tinged with 'ustopian' (utopian/dystopian) overtones, as Atwood herself would say. As can be gathered from our remarks so far, dystopia runs wild in most of the narrative, starting from the pre-plague period – epitomised by a postmodern technophilic society succumbing to alienation and corruption, dismayingly falling short when it comes to moral values and affective ties – up to the Waterless Flood, a debased version of the biblical Great Flood. As befits a condition of ethical impasse and irrevocable decadence – no matter the stunning technological advancements – the redemptive watery chaos ordained by Jahweh in the Book of Genesis has now shrunk to the confines of a man-made catastrophe. In this dismal scenario, the determination to eradicate human corruption and make a new covenant with a selection of blameless survivors does not emanate from an omnipotent and righteous God. It is Glenn/Crake, a third-millennium hypostasis of the 'mad scientist', who, disgusted with mankind's meanness and incurable faults, takes it upon himself to wipe it out and save a few chosen ones, so as to perpetuate life along a different trajectory. The Noah-like figure that he decides to spare is Jimmy, his childhood friend from the affluent compounds. A selfish, weak-willed copywriter and former arts student, Jimmy is clearly an implausible stand-in for the Old Testament's predestined patriarch. At the same time, he does suffer the blow of the tragic demise of humanity, a horrifying event which transforms him into the spectre of a Shelleyian Last Man, a flickering I who is to adopt the moniker 'Snowman', in a sad nod to the Yeti, the 'Abominable Snowman' of Himalayan folklore. Under the sway of the post-apocalyptic plight, he painstakingly works through trauma and memories while fancying himself as the sole survivor of an ape-like species, an atavistic relic helplessly languishing at the meta-anthropological 'zero hour' of the end of the world.

Nevertheless, Atwood does not allow crippling trauma and despair to totally pervade her narrative, which unfolds according to a propagating network of polyphonic, open-ended and boldly imaginative possibilities. In a panoply of semantic slippages and contradictions, a feeling of hope too is to be found in Crake's plans, which pave the way for both a global genocide – an «accumulation of sorrow» climaxing in «ecological grief» and «a lament for a species» (Harland 2016: 587, 589) – and the thriving of

a race of posthumans conceived as a viable alternative to *Homo sapiens*. His transgenic humanoid children – the Crakers – are in fact better equipped to engage in a Darwinian struggle for existence on a planet where adaptation and the battle against the elements have gone through an imperilling change of paradigm for decades. Well before Crake's mass murder, and even prior to the corporations' scams and the biogeeks' crazy interpolations, mankind was caught up in its own strangling net: namely, the Anthropocene, the geological epoch when human activities proved a huge driving force negatively affecting the ecosystems and biodiversity of the Earth. By precipitating a planetary disaster, Crake might be said to have punished our eco-sins and sped up a looming transition to a post-Anthropocene era, a new order of things where the centrality of *Anthropo* is blotted out in favour of hybrid and rhizomatic ontologies.

Let us briefly look at the tangled connotations associated with this *mise en scène* of the fall of our contemporary world. Beginning with the semantic field of despair and its dreadful outcomes, it cannot be ignored that Crake opens the door to his innocent, peaceful and herbivorous replacements for humanity through a heinous act of bioterrorism. Indeed, he masterminds a pandemic by injecting a bioengineered killer virus inside a pill enticingly called 'BlyssPluss', a wonder drug that he distributes worldwide with the unwitting complicity of Jimmy. Advertised as an anti-ageing treatment, a contraceptive and aphrodisiac, this 'poisoned chalice' is to cause lethal haemorrhage and an accelerated decomposition of internal organs. Such is the miserable fate in store for mankind and which the leader of the ecoreligious cult of the God's Gardeners, Adam One, had foretold in terms of the 'Waterless Flood', a dry pandemic wave capable of gnawing away at the human body from the inside.

On top of this, Crake takes advantage of his prominent position as a member of the science class to tamper with the corporation-financed floor models, which cover a customised variety of genetic modifications that parents might be willing to order (and buy) for children tailored to their expectations. Qualities such as a healthy growth and resistance to environmental hazards are part of the package, quite in tune with the ironically evocative name of the compound involved in the experiment: 'RejoovenEsense', a word blend whose graphematic eccentricity is bound to captivate purchasers like clever adspcak. The research conducted at RejoovenEsense provides a springboard for Crake to start focusing on his Paradise Project. This is a venture that sneers at the religious myth of an earthly Paradise, which the atheistic biologist challenges with a gesture that smacks of a profane roll of the dice (as hinted by the invented spelling of 'Paradice'). Striking another

dark note is the fact that Glenn, the gifted, introverted science student, shall quickly go by the alias 'Crake', a term literally referring to an animal (the *Rallina tricolor*, a waterbird) but also a codename borrowed from Extinctathon, an online videogame he used to play with Jimmy when they spent their leisure time together, smoking weed and watching violent videos. Such a game tests the player's knowledge (and subversive thoughts) concerning extinct species, and it is no accident that the young misanthropic scientist should become a grandmaster at it. The motif of the roll of the dice, of gambling with life and death, creeps back and is possibly encrypted in the red-necked crake itself. Curiously, this secretive bird has so far escaped the net of detailed studies and its conservation status currently lingers on the brink between a worrying loss of habitat in the Australian areas and a condition of 'least concern' in several other regions of the world.

The rosier strand of Atwood's kaleidoscopic story comes to the surface when attention is drawn to Crake's commitment to preserving life via his gene-spliced children. While getting ready to unleash the Waterless Flood across the planet, he keeps his creatures sheltered in the 'Paradise dome' laboratory, a futuristic, sanitised Garden of Eden where this small tribe is raised like a circle of noble savages or Wellsian Eloi. Supposed to repopulate the Earth, the Crakers must remain firmly anchored to a state of innocence. This is why Crake makes sure that his girlfriend Oryx and, later on, Jimmy might take care of them and monitor their mental growth by means of suitable explanations and origin stories. Supplied with a genomic sequence that conflates segments of human and animal DNA, the Crakers are engineered as an ecosustainable species and hope is thus kindled through a daring feat which, as it were, pivots on «imagineering» singular-plural bodies «for the posthuman future» (Rossini 2017: 164).

From this perspective, Crake's identity-morphing progeny vividly testifies to an embodied process of co-essence and 'becoming animal'. Their genotypes and increase in physical stamina make them fitter to survive in a posthuman environment. For example, their skin is UV-resistant and capable of repelling insects by giving off a citrus smell; their digestive system is similar to that of a rabbit, so that they can easily assimilate raw plant materials, such as leaves, roots, grass and berries. Further traits include luminous green eyes, the habit of marking their territory with chemically bolstered urine and a sort of therapeutic purring for wound healing. Like many other mammals, they come into heat at regular intervals and mate in polygynandrous groups, having sexual intercourse only when women are in estrus (during ovulation, females emit a pheromone odour and their backside turns blue, as do male genitalia).

Although their lifespan does not rise above the threshold of thirty years, the Crakers can boast numerous metabolic advantages over *Homo sapiens*. Designed to establish bioegalitarian relationships with one another and the ecosystem, they are 'meek and mild' vegans flawlessly adjusted to the post-Anthropocene habitat. Their refashioned neural complexes have apparently freed them from the burden of reclaiming territory or producing clothing, tools, and weapons. Neither hunting nor farming is indispensable to their survival, to say nothing of industrial manufacturing. Jealousy and competitiveness, dominance and racism seem to have been genetically nipped in the bud in these pseudo-primates with a tamed reptilian brain and a thwarted mammalian neocortex.

On the other hand, as one infers from these descriptions, the Crakers are living proof of a juggled genetic blueprint that goes in tandem with their quirky creator's selective breeding. Docile, friendly and disarmingly childlike, they occupy a blurry midregion between prehistoric or aboriginal man³ and the mentally retarded adult. Or, in a more politically correct phrase, they are impaired by a form of 'intellectual disability' that their maker has programmed through a systematic curbing of their logical/symbolic thinking and emotional responsiveness (i.e., passion, feelings, humour). Even the «fear of death is edited out of the emotive and cognitive circuit» (Chen 2018: 188) of these naked beautiful humanoids and their «stupendous naïveté» (*ibid.*: 190).

Some of the most significant semantic slippages in Atwood's trilogy revolve around the Crakers' identity, role, and potentialities in the long term. As the post-apocalyptic dreariness dissolves to make way for cautious optimism – with «the disappearance or fading of the concept of the 'human' into posthumanist, multispecies alliance» (Yates 2020: 413) – one wonders if Crake's artificial moulding of primeval indigeneity might be a fair premise to begin history anew. True, as happens with J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos*, the *MaddAddam* trilogy

³ As Paul W. Harland perceptively observes: «We witness the reverse of the takeover of Neanderthals by *H. sapiens*. Here the gentle giants supplant the clever but rapacious humans. In essence, Atwood performs an inversion of what we experience in reading William Golding's *The Inheritors*» (Harland 2016: 591). Other critics, such as Mohr (2017: 54-62), lay emphasis on Atwood's ideal of multispecies justice and her cultural background, from Northrop Frye's seminal theories to Canadian animal stories. The main difference between our conclusions and Mohr's rests on the signifying power of the Crakers, about whom Mohr does not tease out clues that might look back at the singularity of 'old humanness'.

seems to «propose animalization – going back to the beast – not as a regression but as an evolution, an overcoming of man’s limits and disharmony with the world», towards the envisioning of «the ultimate utopia in an ecological, properly posthuman perspective» (Micali 2019: 81-82). Nonetheless, living in the context of this odd Neolithic Age requires other efforts, intermediations and crossings of the line that complicate the picture.

As mankind makes its final exit in parallel with the already mentioned process of radical repositioning and alliances, the Crakers emerge as variably *less* and *more* than humans. This is due not only to Crake’s pedigree selection, but also – and more perturbingly – to the *unintended* or latent consequences of his genetic manipulations. In *MaddAddam*, the fact that his creatures, with their leader Blackbeard in the forefront, should gradually follow the ‘forbidden path’ of symbolic thought and affectivity casts doubt on the power and tenability of scientific jurisdiction. And this, in turn, begs the question of whether a primordial core of humanity might reveal itself as too deeply ingrained for any clever geneticist to splice it out once and for all.

‘Little humanoids grow up’: Blackbeard’s agency

Like its two forerunners, *MaddAddam* is a volume of several hundred pages whose diegetic palimpsest hinges on a post-pandemic present imbued with references to the near past. Interspersed with lengthy flashbacks, the narrative stores up personal and collective memories which help to assess and make sense of an unfathomable contemporaneity. Yet, while *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* work as twin novels with coalescing epilogues and focusing on different groups of characters in a virtually simultaneous way, *MaddAddam* brings together all survivors, from humans to transgenic animals and humanoids. When looked from within, this choreography is more lively than one might suppose, in a typically Atwoodian «combination of the frightening with the humorous» (Northover 2017: 122) and a vivid rendering of everyday challenges.

Besides the pigoons, Painballers, Jimmy and the Crakers, such a sundry social mix includes former pleeblanders and God’s Gardeners’ adepts – with a paramount role played by Toby, a forbearing and trustworthy woman – alongside ex-associates of the MaddAddam clique. The latter, whose palindromic denomination adds fuel to the ‘mad Adam’ isotopy (the idea of mankind gone insane), were a splinter underground group of God’s Gardeners bent on sabotaging corporatised governance and infra-

structures. Their still-living leader is Zeb, Adam One's brother, a tough mountain man whose brave exploits and family roots are among the topics that inform the narrative tapestry of *MaddAddam*. Zeb is another son of the sadistic founder of the Church of PetrOleum and might be cast as the originator of a complementary storyline bifurcating from Adam One's eco-spiritual mission and its pre-eminence in *The Year of the Flood*. *MaddAddam* expands on the half-forgotten brother's adventurous past, especially his ordeals in the north and his killing and eating a bear to ward off death. Here, Zeb and Toby become confidants, allies and lovers, and given that Toby herself is the main (heterodiegetic) narrative focaliser, her partner's deeds contribute to adding flavour to her performances as a witness and *raconteur*. Her audience – and enthusiastic pupils – are none other than the Crakers, who enjoy listening and are eager to learn, like curious children who cannot help interrupting their teacher's discursive flow by posing literal questions or intoning songs. Having taken over from Jimmy as their mentor and origin-stories fabulist, Toby must harness all her patience, discernment and communication skills to wrestle with their ill-timed interferences and soothe them through softened elucidations.

These question-time/training sessions will produce astonishing results. They attest how the Children of Crake can actually depart from the geneticist's planned course and familiarise with an epistemology coterminous with symbolic thinking and theological beliefs, cosmogonical visions and written codes, *mythos* as well as *logos*. Also thanks to only-too-human Jimmy and Toby – who circumvent the deceased scientist's will and paradoxically convert him and Oryx into creator deities to be glorified – the Crakers are encouraged to implement their cognitive armoury beyond the sense of smell, songs and telepathic connection with genetically-engineered animals. After internalising rules and rituals and fabricating effigies, they will succeed in deciphering symbols and setting up a mythology for themselves. In many ways, then, the law of Crake-the-Father is broken by his own 'freakish offspring', who is definitely more mutable and resourceful than he had self-complacently surmised. As argued by Michaela Keck, «[d]espite all the contemporary bioengineering and splicing, Atwood's post-humans bear a striking resemblance to the tall, strong, and supple inhabitants of the ancient Blessed Isles» (Keck 2018: 31) celebrated by Hesiod and Diodorus. Yet again, as a tantalising afterthought, one might speculate what is likely to happen when this coterie of Mowgli-like *bon sauvage* (re-) enters civilisation and a Rousseauvian circuit of social contracts.

With its constellation of stories, stories-within-stories and journal recordings, *MaddAddam* stands at a junction between a post-apocalyptic sur-

vival narrative and a mock-heroic saga where finding ways to coexist as an 'interspecies tribe' cannot be limited to neutralising the degenerate Painbal-lers or guarding an outpost. Such variegated bioforms are to shape a policy of co-habitation and identity-construction as a people, and this goal is seen as gathering impetus through a befitting dialogue with the past, via story-telling and *epos*. An active weaver of this post-pandemic web is of course Toby, whose Egg story – announced by the over-explicative title "The Story of the Egg, and of Oryx and Crake, and how they made People and Animals; and of the Chaos; and of Snowman-the-Jimmy; and of the Smelly Bone and the coming of the Two Bad Men" – opens the text as a Genesis account conveyed to the Crakers in very simple words. Innumerable tales follow and overlap throughout the fourteen macrosections preceded by "Egg", along a chronological arc culminating with the Great Rearrangement enacted by "good, kind Crake" in order to clear away anthropocentric chaos.

If the flame of remembrance is kept alive by human mentors, the Crakers are more than passive recipients or mimickers. One notices a progressive dampening of their guileless exuberance – typically punctuated by an interjecting 'Oh', reminding of Friday's ejaculatory 'O' in *Robinson Crusoe* – and a dawning awareness personified by one of these humanoids, named Blackbeard. As Atwood claimed in an interview, with a dash of baffling irony, there is a «big question» (Atwood 2013) inherent in Blackbeard's acumen and agency.

Introduced at about one-quarter of the way into *MaddAddam*, Blackbeard is a keen, precocious boy who develops a particular attachment with Toby:

"What's your name?" she says to the little boy.

"My name is Blackbeard," says the child gravely. Blackbeard, the notorious murdering pirate? This sweet child? A child who will never have a beard when he grows up because Crake did away with body hair in his new species. A lot of the Crakers have odd names. According to Zeb, Crake named them – Crake, with his warped sense of humour. Though why shouldn't their names be odd, to go with their general oddity?

"I am very happy to meet you, Oh Blackbeard," she says.

"Do you eat your droppings, Oh Toby?" says Blackbeard. "As we do? To digest our leaves better?"

What droppings? Edible poo? No one warned her about this! "It is time to go and see your mother, Oh Blackbeard," says Toby. "She must be worried about you." (Atwood 2014: 112-113)

This faltering and awkward dialogue, where Toby's first reactions teeter between sincere puzzlement and a patronising dismissal, functions as a rough prelude to a fruitful relationship. Blackbeard will collaborate as an intermediary (literally, as an interpreter and translator of the pigeons' messages to humans), a writing assistant and, ultimately, a chronicler and mythologiser himself. The following passage testifies to his having taken a special interest in Toby's authoring a diary:

"Oh Toby, what have you been writing?" says Blackbeard, who's come into her cobb-house cubicle – unannounced, as usual – and is now standing at her elbow. *He's peering into her face with his large, green, luminous, uncanny eyes.*

How had Crake devised those eyes? How do they light up from within like that? [...] "I am writing the story," she says. "The story of you, and me, and the Pigeons, and everyone [...]."

"There," says Blackbeard. "Telling the story is hard, and writing the story must be more hard. Oh Toby, when you are too tired to do it, *next time I will write the story.* I will be your helper." (Atwood 2014: 456, my italics)

This fast-growing boy's habit of coming unannounced and peering into his human guide's face could in itself be an index of a disquieting presence. Alerting us further is the stress on his wide gleaming eyes, reinforced through the use of a hyperconnoted adjective such as 'uncanny'. A final touch to this depiction is given by Blackbeard's hinting at Toby's exhaustion and thus grabbing a chance to launch his offer to cooperate. Over the course of *MaddAddam*, this transfer of authority will gain so much ground as to transform the helper into a homodiegetic narrator, a bard and proto-historian.

As if redeeming Susan Barton's less successful efforts to teach voiceless Friday to write, in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Toby proceeds to instruct her talkative pupil on how to make ink, use leaves as paper, hold a pen and draw letters as signifiers related to sounds, objects, and the dynamics of communication. As pointed out by Eduardo Marks de Marques in his illuminating article, Blackbeard's expanding his preconceived niche seals «the official entry of the Crakers into the symbolic world (or return to it, if we consider the Crakers as posthumans who are, actually, pre-humans)» (Marques 2015: 143). In the face of Jimmy's and Toby's imminent death, Blackbeard assumes control as the keeper of an oral as well as written tradition. He sets out to canonise a 'Craker mythology' by claiming the celebrant's role that

was once of his human proxies and which places him on top of a hierarchical order. His donning the Red Sox cap – the «hat of Snowman-the-Jimmy» (Atwood 2014: 435) – and performing a symbolic fish-eating rite, surrounded by a circle of fervid listeners, are accompanied by his authoring a Book, which occupies the last ten or so pages of the eponymous closing section of the novel. Here, the quick learner recovers Toby's journal and begins to insert his own appendage, with a view to ensuring a continuity from «cosmogony to autonomous mythology to history» (Marques 2015: 144). If still rudimentary, his vocabulary is now richer and his style more nuanced, capable of toning down the 'worst answers' and highlighting those he decides to endorse, such as an allegorical interpretation of Toby's death as a magic reunion with Zeb, both of them morphed into bears.

Blackbeard's Book (un)closes with a few compelling glimpses into the present and near future, where the flow of 'becoming with' is further hybridised by the approaching of a new human-Craker population (the children of Ren, Amanda, and Swift Fox):

Then Swift Fox told us that she was pregnant again and soon there would be another baby. And the fourfathers were Abraham Lincoln and Napoleon and Picasso and me, Blackbeard [...].

This is the end of the Story of Toby. I have written it in this Book. And I have put my name here – Blackbeard – the way Toby first showed me when I was a child. It says that I was the one who set down these words.

Thank you.

Now we will sing. (Atwood 2014: 474)

The assertive epilogue of *MaddAddam* patently belies Crake's schemes and heightens our sensibility to the autopoietic, self-regenerating thrust of biological networks. Correspondingly, the Crakers' re-humanisation risks to undermine trans-species ontology by letting an anthropological (transhuman?) culturosphere sneak in by the back door. Differently put, if the «discursive projects» relating to posthumanism «aim to decenter the human by terminally disrupting the scripts of humanism» (Clarke 2017: 141), then the trilogy's last book piquingly resists closure⁴.

⁴ The multifaceted quality of Atwood's imaginary has however prompted different responses. See for instance Simona Micali's optimistic approach: «The third book of the trilogy, *MaddAddam* (2013), has all the survivors converging, Jim-

To conclude, while the context of *MaddAddam* continues to be «thoroughly posthuman in biological terms» (Heise 2009: 508), it is difficult to downplay the significance of Blackbeard's acquisition of consciousness and his somewhat high-handed attitude. Moreover, in spite of its oddity and various spellings in the novel, his name does raise the spectre of the infamous murdering pirate mentioned by Toby, i.e. Edward Teach (ca. 1680-1718), whose notoriety in the Anglo-American world was of a piece with his shrewdness, frightful appearance, and predatory drives. When thinking of the red baseball hat that Atwood's character wears at topical moments, our mind instinctively goes to the real-life pirate's habit of tying lighted slow matches under his smoking hat⁵. The connection might be far-fetched, and yet some lingering doubts persist. In order to lay that spectre to rest, we could only hope that the fictional Blackbeard's 'craking' should not veer too much towards – or back to – cunning human eloquence.

my included, and the establishment of new relationships of trade and solidarity among them. The Crakers will teach humans to enjoy sex more freely, to dismiss individualism and to communicate with other animal species; the humans will pass onto the Crakers an embryonic form of culture, which essentially consists of the ability to understand and respect the subjectivity of others and to tell stories [...] by assuming the right to authorship, Blackbeard has transformed the *narrative of the posthuman* into a proper *posthuman narrative*» (Micali 2019: 210, 212).

⁵ In a further twist, Atwood might be winking at contemporary sportswear products such as *Edward Teach "Blackbeard" Trucker Cap* (KM Paracord, UK), or *Blackbeard Pirate Flag Trucker Head* (Surf, Wind and Fire, North Carolina, whose logo incidentally features a surfing pig), which literally capitalise on Blackbeard's myth and, at the same time, demean it through large-scale commodification. With reference to onomastics, I am thankful to Alessandro Fambrini for bringing home to me the context and titular character of Brian Aldiss's *Greybeard* (1964), a sci-fi novel which, similarly to *MaddAddam*, deals with a devastated Earth and entrusts a well judged witness – Greybeard himself – with the role of storyteller and guardian of historical memory.

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio, *L'aperto. L'uomo e l'animale* (2002), Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2019.
- Atwood, Margaret, "Margaret Atwood on her New Novel *MaddAddam*", interview by Jennifer Hunter, *Toronto Star*, 23.08.2013, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2013/08/23/the_curious_mind_of_margaret_atwood.html, online (last accessed 28/12/2021).
- Ead., *MaddAddam* (2013), London, Virago, 2014.
- Braidotti, Rosi, "Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others", *PMLA*, 124.2 (2009): 526-532.
- Ead., *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Polity, 2013.
- Chen, Chien-Hung, "Subjectal Scale and Micro-biopolitics at the End of the Anthropocene: Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy", *Mosaic*, 51.3 (2018): 179-198.
- Clarke, Bruce, "The Nonhuman", *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, Eds. Bruce Clarke - Manuela Rossini, Cambridge, CUP, 2017: 141-152.
- Ferrando, Francesca, "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations", *Existenz: An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts*, 8.2 (2013): 26-32.
- Haraway, Donna J., *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis-London, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Harland, Paul W., "Ecological Grief and Therapeutic Storytelling in Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* Trilogy", *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 23.3 (2016): 583-602.
- Heise, Ursula K., "The Android and the Animal", *PMLA*, 124.2 (2009): 503-510.
- Johnston, Justin Omar, *Posthuman Capital and Biotechnology in Contemporary Novels*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Keck, Michaela, "Paradise Retold: Revisionist Mythmaking in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy", *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, 9.2 (2018): 23-40.
- Marques, Eduardo Marks de, "Children of Oryx, Children of Crake, Children of Men: Redefining the Post/Transhuman in Margaret Atwood's 'Utopian' *MaddAddam* Trilogy", *Aletria: Revista de Estudos de Literatura*, 25.3 (2015): 133-146.
- Micali, Simona, *Towards a Posthuman Imagination in Literature and Media: Monsters, Mutants, Aliens, Artificial Beings*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2019.

- Mohr, Dunja M., “‘When Species Meet’: Beyond Posthuman Boundaries and Interspeciesism – Social Justice and Canadian Speculative Fiction”, *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien*, 37 (2017): 40-64.
- Nayar, Pramod K., *Posthumanism*, Cambridge, Polity, 2014.
- Northover, Alan, “Strangers in Strange Worlds: Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* Trilogy”, *Journal of Literary Studies*, 33.1 (2017): 121-137.
- Revelli, Marco, *Umano Inumano Postumano. Le sfide del presente*, Torino, Einaudi, 2020.
- Rossini, Manuela, “Bodies”, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, Eds. Bruce Clarke - Manuela Rossini, Cambridge, CUP, 2017: 153-169.
- Schmeink, Lars, *Biopunk Dystopias: Genetic Engineering, Society, and Science Fiction*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2016.
- Yates, Julian, “Improbable Shepherds: Multispecies Politics and the Afterlife of Pastoral in Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* Trilogy”, *Criticism*, 62.3 (2020): 411-432.

The Author

Laura Giovannelli

Laura Giovannelli is Associate Professor of English Literature in the Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics, University of Pisa. She co-edits the scientific journal *Synergies. A Journal of English Literatures and Cultures* and is a founding member of the Italian Oscar Wilde Society. Her research fields cover British Aestheticism, Anglo-American Modernism, Postmodernism, Ecocriticism, postcolonial and contemporary literature in English. Among her recent books are *Interconnecting Music and the Literary Word* (2018, co-edited with F. Ciompi and R. Ferrari) and “*A Green Thought in a Green Shade*”: *Immaginario letterario e ambiente* (2020, co-edited with R. Ferrari).

Email: laura.giovannelli@unipi.it

The Article

Date sent: 31/03/2022

Date accepted: 31/07/2022

Date published: 30/11/2022

How to cite this article

Giovannelli, Laura, "Blackbeard and the Post-Anthropocene Humanoids: Tracing the Post/Transhuman in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy", *Entering the Simulacra World*, Eds. A. Ghezzani - L. Giovannelli - F. Rossi - C. Savettieri, *Between*, XII.24 (2022): 291-312, www.betweenjournal.it