Thinking Out of the Box in Literary and Cultural Studies

Proceedings of the XXIX AIA Conference

edited by
Rocco Coronato, Marilena Parlati and Alessandra Petrina

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VI. Contemporary Challenges

RETHINKING THE HUMAN: THE USE OF ANIMAL METAPHORS TO LANGUAGE THE UTOPIANISM OF THE BLACK QUEER EXISTENCE

Emilio Amideo

The human/animal divide has been theorised in most Western philosophical tradition as a difference involving the human capacity for *logos*, meant as the capacity to speak and, especially, of possessing reason; something that animals supposedly lack. Through this distinction, the human has been ontologically elevated to a privileged position – one that entails the subjugation of the animal – and the animal is reduced to an irrational, mere instinctual being. The historical construction of the Western *cogito* as the all-rationalist white Euro-American healthy and wealthy male as the privileged subject of knowledge has similarly relegated other subjects – thought of as less than human – to the same subordinate position. Therefore – associated with animals – women, queer and black people have often been thought of as irrational, as a way of justifying various forms of violence perpetrated against them, to include the attempt of depriving them of their rights. Bearing in mind that not only are bodies shaped by discourse but that their material reality can be changed by altering the discourse around them, and drawing on a methodological background influenced by Queer Studies, Critical Race Theory, Animal Studies and Metaphor Theory, this essay intends to explore how in her 2002 short story 'Shell' the Scottish writer Jackie Kay retrieves the legacy of the trope of the animalization of the black African in Western cultures and rewrites it as a way of conjuring up new modalities of human existence. The slow metamorphosis of the protagonist Doreen – a corpulent black lesbian woman and mother – into a tortoise enables her to reject the chrononormative order characteristic of Western contemporary racialised heteropatriarchy to give voice to otherwise silenced forms of the black queer existence. It is precisely her becoming-animal that enables Doreen to regain her right to the *logos* – meant not only as the capacity to recover her voice but, in a Derridean sense, of (re)writing her life – therefore showing the possibility of funding a new humanism based on different principles.

Jackie Kay; Animal Metaphors; Blackness; Queer Existence; Genres of the Human

> it is the very exception of blackness and queerness from the humanist standard that produces the possibility of imagining humanity otherwise.
> Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*

In an opinion piece appeared in *The New York Times* in 1979, the African American writer James Baldwin states: 'A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey'.[1] Baldwin reflects on the role that language plays in society, on how it unquestionably reveals the speaker and on the way it 'far more dubiously, is meant to define the other'.[2] While he explains that representation through language involves the inevitably biased description of the other through one's projections, he concurrently emphasizes how the very structure of language is often transformed in order to express a specific message or convey a particular experience. Language, as Baldwin suggests, is an important political tool that, to use Judith Butler's insight on the reiterative character of gender performativity,[3] does not only make real (and thus confirm) what is culturally created by the social system that produces it in the first place but can also be used to alter socio-culturally stratified perceptions. Language and power enter in fact into a dialogic relationship, since the discursive structures of language 'enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society'.[4] Based on the capacity to have access to a number of social resources (force, money, status, knowledge, public discourses and communication) certain groups can establish a more or less subtle control over the minds and actions of other groups.[5] When this control gets integrated into laws, norms, habits and even general consensus, it takes the form of a hegemony in Antonio Gramsci's terms: 'class domination, sexism, and racism are characteristic examples of such hegemony'.[6] Through this process, groups of people end up perceiving certain

[1] James Baldwin, 'If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?', in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), p. 780.
[2] Baldwin, p. 780.
[3] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 12.
[4] Teun A. van Dijk, 'Critical Discourse Analysis,' in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, eds. Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi Ehernberger Hamilton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 353.
[5] Van Dijk, pp. 334-5.
[6] Van Dijk, p. 335. See also Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg with Antonio Callari (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

beliefs, knowledge and opinions as natural, when in reality these are shaped by a specific sociocultural history.

One of the most salient ways in which power relations are expressed in and naturalized through language is the process of metaphorization. Metaphors are pervasive in everyday life and, far from being mere rhetorical phenomena, they enable individuals to conceptualize and make sense of their experiences.[7] As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson maintain,

> Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies.[8]

It is exactly this potential for naturalization (the self-fulfilling prophecy) and the fact that certain pervasive conceptual metaphors (e.g., 'time is money', 'good is up', 'bad is down', 'communication is sending', etc.) produce other metaphors and concepts, thus fundamentally structuring human experience, that enable 'people in power […] to impose their metaphors'.[9] As types of framing devices, metaphors contribute to our interpretation of the world and to the creation and dissemination of what Arran Stibbe calls the 'stories we live by', that is to say the stories shared by multiple individuals within a culture that, being influenced by dominant discourses, often perpetuate sexist, homophobic, racist, classist, anthropocentric and generally anti-ecological worldviews.[10]

Numerous metaphors are in fact used by dominant groups as a way of discriminating against marginal ones (e.g., women, queer people, black people, immigrants, etc.). These metaphors often involve the animalization of the others or their association with nature, as a way of degrading them according, as I will investigate in the course of this essay, to a Cartesian worldview that reproduces and reinforces dualistic assumptions through 'the separation of male and female, nature and culture, mind

[7] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 3.
[8] Lakoff and Johnson, p. 156.
[9] Lakoff and Johnson, p. 157.
[10] Stibbe's concept of 'stories we live by' draws both on Lakoff and Johnson and on Mary Midgley. See Arran Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (New York: Routledge, 2003). On metaphors as framing devices see also Elena Semino, *Metaphor in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

from body, emotion from reason and intuition from fact'.[11] As Tzeporah Berman notes, 'this cultural polarization leads to a devaluation of one side of the dualism and the distortion of both' and, as such, legitimates a logic of domination.[12]

Bearing in mind that not only are bodies shaped by discourse but that their material reality can be changed by altering the discourse around them, the aim of this essay is to investigate how the Scottish writer Jackie Kay, as a representative of a wider tradition of contemporary black queer writers, retrieves the legacy of the trope of the animalization of the black African in Western cultures and rewrites it as a way of conjuring up new modalities of human existence. In other words, her use of animal metaphors becomes an instrument to voice the otherwise silenced experience of black queer people in contemporary racialized and classed heteropatriarchy,[13] and eventually a means to establish a new humanism. This creation of new genres of the human, in Sylvia Wynters's words,[14] extends as a horizon of possibilities, a utopianist then and there, that enables one to escape the racism and the homophobia of the here and the now.[15]

The essay develops according to a trajectory that begins with an investigation of the concept of parahumanity (explored in the first theoretical section that draws on the long tradition of mythmaking and animal metaphors as strategies of resistance within the black diaspora) and continues with an exploration of Jackie Kay's 2002 short story 'Shell', to then conclude with the potential inherent in the postulation of a posthumanist future.

[11] Tzeporah Berman, 'The Rape of Mother Nature? Women in the Language of Environmental Discourse,' in *The Ecolinguistics Reader: Language, Ecology and Environment*, eds. Alwin Fill and Peter Mühlhäusler (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 259.

[12] Berman, p. 261.

[13] Jafari S. Allen, 'Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture,' *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 18, 2-3 (2012): pp. 212-48, p. 220.

[14] See, among the others, Sylvia Wynter, 'On Disenchanting Discourse: "Minority" Literary Criticism and Beyond,' *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987): pp. 207-44; Wynter, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – an Argument,' *The New Centennial Review* 3, 3 (2003): pp. 257-337; and Greg Thomas, 'Proud Flesh Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter,' *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness* 4 (2006): pp. 1-35.

[15] I am here referring to José Esteban Muñoz's conception of queer utopianism. See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

1. Parahuman tales or the stories we (should not) live by

In the very first pages of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes:

> decolonization is quite simply the substitution of one 'species' of mankind by another [...] Decolonization is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: the 'thing' colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation.[16]

According to Fanon, who writes these words in a chapter devoted to the violence of colonialism, the process of liberation, of decolonization, necessarily involves the recognition of the humanity of the colonized, since the enfranchisement from the brutality of slavery and colonialism can only be achieved through the passage from an objectified position ('thing') to a subjective one ('man', as in human being).

There is a long tradition in Western cultures that links colonized people with objects, commodities and even animals, as a way of depriving them of their ontological status as humans; something that, as previously noted, is manifest through a number of metaphors deeply engrained in language use. The historical construction of the Western *cogito* as the embodiment of 'ideals of rationality, consciousness, moral and cognitive universalism' that was 'modeled on ideals of whiteness, masculinity, normality, youth and health', inevitably pathologized and defined as not normal, anomalous or even monstrous all other modes of embodiment (i.e., nonwhite, nonmasculine, nonhealthy, but also zoomorphic, disabled, or malformed).[17] Therefore, associated with animals, colonized people – but also women and both black and queer people – have often been thought of as irrational, mere instinctual beings as a way of justifying various forms of violence perpetrated against them, to include the attempt of depriving them of their rights. Well known is, for example, the positing of the masculine as disembodied universality against a feminine constructed as disavowed corporeality, reflecting the equation according

[16] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp. 1-2.

[17] Rosi Braidotti, 'Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others,' *PMLA* 124, 2 (2009): pp. 526-32, p. 526. See also Braidotti, 'On Putting the Active Back into Activism,' *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 68 (2009): p. 47; Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p. 123; Carmen Dell'Aversano, 'The Love Whose Name Cannot Be Spoken: Queering the Human-Animal Bond,' *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 8, 1-2 (2010): pp. 93-6.

to which women 'are' their bodies.[18] Metaphors that reflect a patriarchal language-system (e.g., 'woman is nature' or 'woman is animal'),[19] but also other common expressions such as 'rape of the land', 'virgin forest', or 'Mother Earth', by associating women with nature and opposing them to men and culture, reinforce dualistic modes of representation that perpetuate the objectification and devaluation of both women and nature.[20] A similar discourse applies to queer people, and also to black people, the latter usually considered commodities or beasts of burden under slavery and colonialism.[21]

During colonialism slaves were in fact classed as property akin to animals, yet, as Monique Allewaert notes, one crucial thing distinguished them from animals: the details of their punishment (including amputations of body parts) needed to be encoded in law.[22] To define this condition of being akin to animals yet not completely so, Allewaert suggests the use of the term 'parahuman' and explains how, 'whereas the animal body was posited as an organic body, the punishments of disfigurement and amputation made the slave body, an always potentially dismembered body'.[23] The fragmentation of the body and identity, a sort of epidermalization, is something that Fanon offers as a re-theorization of the condition of the colonized, especially in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he maintains that the colonized lacked the phanta-

[18] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 17.

[19] See Katherine Russo, 'Turning Turtle and the In/visibility of Ecofeminist Metaphors in Italian Translations of Katherine Mansfield's At the Bay,' *Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in Translation and Gender Studies*, eds. Eleonora Federici and Vanessa Leonardi (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p. 152. See also, among others, Caitlin Hines 'Foxy Chicks and Playboy Bunnies: A Case Study in Metaphorical Lexicalization,' in *Cultural, Typological and Psychological Perspectives on Cognitive Linguistics*, eds. M.K. Hiraga, C. Sinha and S. Wilcox (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999), pp. 9-23; and Sara Gesuato and Fabienne H. Baider, 'Masculinist Metaphors, Feminist Research,' *Metaphorik* 5 (2003): pp. 6-35.

[20] Berman, p. 258. See also, among others, Eva Feder Kittay, 'Woman as Metaphor,' *Hypatia* 3, 2 (1988): pp. 63-86; and Meryl Altman, 'How Not to Do Things with Metaphors We Live By,' *College English* 52, 5 (1990): pp. 495-506.

[21] See, among others, Dana Luciano and Mel Chen, 'Introduction: Has the Queer ever Been Human?,' *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 21, 2-3 (2015): pp. 183-207; and Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

[22] As Allewaert explains, both the Barbados Slave Code (1661) and the French Code Noir (1685), for example, stipulated that the mutilation of slave persons, including the amputation of body parts, was an appropriate punishment for disobedience and rebellion. Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 90.

[23] Allewaert, p. 90.

sy (both in the sense of mental image and of illusion of something unattainable) of the whole organic body.[24] Since, according to Lacan, the organic body is necessary for the dialectical formation of a subjectivity (i.e., the mirror stage), it results that the latter remained a prerogative of the Western *cogito*.

If Fanon's account is to a certain extent Manichaean, inasmuch as he envisions the possibility to possess a subjectivity only as a result of decolonization (when he states 'the "thing" colonized becomes a man'),[25] a conception of the two elements coexisting (i.e., parahumanity) has always been present in the Afro-diasporic tradition as an instrument of resistance against colonial powers. In this tradition, there are in fact numerous stories featuring bodily fragmentation, severed heads, and human beings in relation to animal life across sources like animal folktales and trickster stories, where power structures between master and slaves were usually subverted.[26] These stories are instances of what Édouard Glissant terms practices of diversion, that is to say 'diasporic African's strategic redirection of colonial power dynamics through circumlocutionary styles of speech, story, and action' which were 'partly an effort to avoid confronting colonizers in unwinnable head-on conflicts'.[27] Diversion is also called indirection in other contexts and includes also the encoding of geographic locations, such as 'heaven', 'the river', and 'home', in spirituals sung on plantations as a way of providing directions for meeting points from where to plan revolts or escapes to the North, or simple acts of sabotage such as lying to the master or pretending to misunderstand his orders, cheating, stealing from him, self-mutilation in order to escape work, and are even manifest nowadays in the extreme simplification of Creole or black American speech which, precisely for their simplicity, increase ambiguity and misdirection.[28]

[24] See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; and Allewaert, pp. 103-6.
[25] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 2.
[26] In animal folktales and trickster stories weaker animals (e.g., the rabbit or the monkey) symbolizing the slaves are actually able to outwit stronger ones (e.g., the lion or the fox), which represent the plantation master or his associates. Among the numerous collections of black diasporic animal folktales and trickster stories see Frederik Hetmann, *Märchen des schwarzen Amerika* (Berlin: Fisher, 1974); Roger D. Abrahams, ed., *African American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Maria Tatar, eds., *The Annotated African American Folktales* (New York: Liverlight, 2018).
[27] Allewaert, p. 107.
[28] E. Patrick Johnson, 'Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures,' in *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, eds. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006), p. 452.

Both physical dismemberment and psychological fragmentation become in these stories instrument of resistance inasmuch as, by being also integrated into/and re-signified by the Obeah practices of slaves and maroons,[29] they enable the imagination of life otherwise. As Tavia Nyong'o writes with reference to the African slaves: 'bought and sold, killed and quartered, collateralized and securitized, used, impregnated, aborted, discarded. Bodies that were speculated in became speculative bodies', through a process that he terms 'afro-fabulation'.[30] He explains:

> Acts of afro-fabulation operate as a queer hack of the codes of an anti-black world, and rely for their success on a vernacular awareness of, and confrontation with, the manner in which gender and sexual norms operate to reproduce systems of racial hierarchy.[31]

By drawing on the affective, pre-cognitive character of Bergsonian 'fabulation' (also translated as 'mythmaking function') and on Saidiya Hartman's and Donna Haraway's conceptions of 'critical' and 'speculative' fabulation respectively,[32] Nyong'o elucidates how the black (queer) experiential knowledge (i.e., the 'vernacular awareness'), through affects such as belief, emotion and attachment, manages to open up the road to creativity, to the possibility of imagining life otherwise while embroiled in an anti-black and anti-queer world.

In their capacity to re-shape our reality and to enable the emergence of new concepts, both (animal) metaphors and the fragmentation of body and identity play a pivotal role in the way a number of contemporary black queer writers not only envision a different reality from the one they live in but are also able to articulate their experience and make it legible in a society still affected by systemic racism and homophobia.[33] It

[29] See Allewaert, p. 95.

[30] Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), p. 101.

[31] Nyong'o, p. 4.

[32] See Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and William Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts,' *Small Axe* 12, 2 (2008): pp. 1-14; and Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

[33] Examples of such works, both fictional and theoretical, include Thomas Glave's parallelism between black queer people in Jamaica with the figure of the octopus, and Shani Mootoo's speculation on the way queer people learn to live in heteronormative societies through a sideways movement that simulates the advancing of a crab. See Thomas Glave, 'Jamaican, Octopus,' in *Among the Bloodpeople: Politics and Flesh* (New York: Akashic Books, 2013), pp. 91-105; Shani Mootoo, *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2014); Emilio Amideo, *Queer*

is through the proposal of a series of speculative arguments in the form of the subjunctive, as a mood that opens up to doubts and possibilities,[34] that afro-fabulations may stretch the limits of the historical archive, which is otherwise made of accurately selected and transmitted 'facts', in order to undo its violence.[35]

2. Afro-fabulations in Jackie Kay's 'Shell'

Born of a white Scottish mother and a black Nigerian father, and adopted by a white Glaswegian couple, Jackie Kay has always tried to give equal visibility to both her Scottish and her Nigerian heritage in her artistic production: 'I feel strongly Scottish and strongly Nigerian', she declared in a recent interview.[36] A commitment that she continues to pursue through her role as Scots Makar, since her nomination in 2016, by highlighting the multi-ethnic and multi-language character of contemporary Scottish society: 'my ambition is to reflect the true face of today's Scotland. Syrian refugees, Doric Scots, Nigerian Scots, Muslim Scots, Gaelic Scots… We're all Scots and poetry can help bring us together'.[37]

In her short story 'Shell', from the 2002 collection of short stories *Why Don't You Stop Talking*, Kay recovers the trope of the animalization of both black Africans and women in Western culture and rewrites it in order to create an alternative reality capable of shattering unitary conceptions of subjectivity (as represented by the Western *cogito*) through a figurative transformation from human into animal.[38]

Tidalectics: Linguistic and Sexual Fluidity in Contemporary Black Diasporic Literature (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021).

[34] Hartman, p. 11.

[35] Nyong'o draws also on Gilles Deleuze who intends fabulation as the artistic practice of inventing a people to come. In Deleuze's words: 'Utopia isn't the right concept: it's more a question of "fabulation" in which a people and art both share. We ought to take up Bergson's notion of fabulation and give it a political meaning'. Gilles Deleuze, 'Control and Becoming,' in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 174. On Deleuze's conception of 'fabulation' see also Ronald Bogue, 'Fabulation,' *The Deleuze Dictionary*, ed. Adrian Parr (2010), http://deleuze.enacademic.com/61/fabulation.

[36] 'Scotland's Makar – Jackie Kay', *The Scots Magazine*, 2019, https://www.scotsmagazine.com/articles/jackie-kay.

[37] 'Scotland's Makar – Jackie Kay'.

[38] Jackie Kay, 'Shell', in *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (London: Picador, 2002), pp. 137-58. All further references are to this edition quoted in the text as 'Shell'. Kay is not new to these kinds of experimentation through language also with reference to queer sexualities (e.g., the parallelism between the bandages used to bind his breasts by the transgender character Joss Moody in her debut novel *Trumpet* and the shed skin of a snake as a metaphor for change and renewal, or the

The short story narrates the vicissitudes of a corpulent black woman called Doreen who goes through a slow process of, perhaps physical, certainly psychical, transformation that culminates in her metamorphosis into a tortoise, with the title 'Shell' reflecting the carapace she develops on her back. Doreen's transmutation from woman into tortoise (from one 'species' to another, in a reversal of Fanon's idea of decolonization as shifting from object to human being) is triggered by the tears she sheds over her 'failed' relationship with her fourteen-year-old son Louis: 'It was during a big weeping session that her shell suddenly appeared on her back' ('Shell', p. 153). The tears are in fact only the initial stage of the transformation and, together with other signs that slowly begin to emerge (e.g., she starts feeding herself only lettuce that she eats straight from a bowl, her tongue starts feeling hard, her skin begins to get dry and crack, her urine to turn white, not to mention that she slowly drives a green Citroen Bamboo whose shape and colour recall that of a tortoise), inevitably associate her with the chelonian.

Doreen's transformation seems thus to be connected with her 'failure' to embody the role of the good nurturing mother for her son, a prescriptive social role for women that is dictated by what Elizabeth Freeman terms 'chrononormativity', that is the institutionalized regulation of time meant to preserve the state apparatus and its heteronormativity.[39] Naturalized through repetition, chrononormativity compels individuals toward maximum productivity through the organization of their lifetime, literally, and expectations: birth, health preservation, wealth accumulation, reproduction, and death.[40] The fact that chelonians are not generally social creatures and that 'no species of turtle nurtures their young' reinforces Doreen's association with the tortoise through her refusal of socially prescribed maternal/nurturing roles.[41] Yet, although the difficult relationship with her son triggers the transformation, Doreen's failure to follow a chrononormative path is not limited to the mother-son relationship. As her body metamorphoses (her back becomes rock hard,

owl as a metaphor for the special bond between two lesbian women in the short story 'Owl'). See Kay, *Trumpet* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998) and Kay, 'Owl,' in *Reality, Reality* (London: Picador, 2012), pp. 161-9.

[39] See Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[40] Freeman, p. 3.

[41] Alina Bradford, 'Turtle Facts,' *LiveScience*, 2 October 2015, https://www.livescience.com/52361-turtle-facts.html.

her voice hoarse, and her conduct lethargic) she eventually stops going to work, caring for the house, and generally becomes indolent:

> It is not like her to be indolent or lazy. Normally she is at it the whole time: washing, ironing, cleaning, cooking; never stops, never has a minute. Just recently, something has been happening to her body; her lower back is in agony and she feels heavy, like a crate full of goods, lethargic and exhausted ('Shell', p. 144).

Indolence, delaying, deferring are all concepts that somehow bear a negative connotation in Western cultures. According to Sigmund Freud, delay represents a key component of perversion since any lingering, any deferring (as in a prolonged contact), with any part of the body not strictly designated for the sexual intercourse, or with a sexual object in a way that postpones the sexual aim, is a perversion.[42] Similarly, in Western cultures any diversion from chrononormativity is still unconsciously perceived as a perversion. In fact, we tend to experience time as a natural progression, thus failing to recognize its construction,[43] and we often find ourselves frustrated by delays and satisfied by punctuality, or we might feel guilty about leisure and happy with a busy working schedule.[44]

Contrary to this linear perception of time and resulting account of development and growth, Doreen's story proposes an alternative model where delay, lingering, and irregularity prevail, as emphasized also by the repetition of the word 'slow', and its synonyms, throughout the short story. Her behaviour follows a queer way of 'growing sideways', to use Katheryn Stockton's expression,[45] that, by rejecting the coercive politics of productive and 'reproductive futurism',[46] has a radical disruptive potential. Through her transformation into a tortoise, Doreen in fact refuses the metaphors that associate women with maternity, mothering or nurturing,[47] in order to recover other forms of embodiment and self-expression, unrestricted by normative roles imposed on women by society.

[42] Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (London: Global Grey, 2018), p. 19.
[43] See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992).
[44] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
[45] See Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
[46] See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); and Michael O'Rourke, 'The Afterlives of Queer Theory,' *continent* 1, 2 (2011): pp. 102-16.
[47] Altman, p. 501.

As her transformation acquires more visibility – at least to her since her son does not seem to notice anything different in her – Doreen feels different but good, as she embraces abjection: 'She was horrified. But she was also amazed at herself' ('Shell': 156). Her transformation into an animal involves in fact a recognition of otherwise abject parts of herself; for instance, she becomes insistently curious about her faeces and in her urine which she describes in meticulous details:

> That night she runs herself a bath. […] Moments pass slowly, peacefully, till she surprises herself by feeling something come out of her. The heat of the water has brought it against her will. She looks at her own turd floating in the water. […] it is quite curious, quite involving. A very long and thin, ribbony turd floating as if it had not a care in the world […]. As if to keep it company, a piss arrives, too, with a hiss and a sigh. It is that thick white again ('Shell', pp. 151-2).

Doreen's curiosity and involvement in her excreta reflect her interest in the process of transformation she is experiencing, especially in relation to the new subjectivity such process is enabling to emerge. In *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980), Julia Kristeva uses the term 'abjection' in order to define the processes of exclusion and boundary setting involved in subject formation.[48] For Kristeva, abjection refers to the human reactions of horror and nausea caused by a breakdown in meaning when facing the loss of distinction between the subject and the object, or between the self and the other.[49] The permeability of the body represented by its fluids and excreta (e.g., faeces, blood, sweat, sperm), and especially the decomposition inherent in the corpse, epitomize the abject for Kristeva:

> A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit, are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.[50]

[48] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
[49] Dino Felluga, 'Modules on Kristeva: On the Abject,' *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory* (Purdue University, 2011), http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html.
[50] Kristeva, p. 3.

Through a casting off of the abject, which is neither subject nor object, the 'I' establishes and consolidates the contours of its subjectivity in order to emerge. As Kristeva stresses: 'it is [...] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.[51] It is exactly through the transgression of the borders that regulate sexist ideals of women behaviour that Doreen becomes abject: she is excluded from the social body that thus proceeds to consolidate hegemonic identities.[52] Since in a racist society black people learn to live in or as abjection by physically internalizing the legacy of racist discourse,[53] Doreen is similarly abjected by her skin colour and, at a certain point in the narrative, by her desire for another woman:

> Perhaps a new lover could come along and wake up her rolls of flesh. Maybe a tongue could lick under her folds. A lover could reach parts of herself she hasn't been able to find. It would be nice to have a woman lover, Doreen thinks. A big round soft woman like herself. With a big belly and big breasts. [...] She could trust a big fat woman not to lie to her ('Shell', p. 148).

Doreen's transformation, her becoming-animal to draw on Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's theorization,[54] enables her to claim alternative forms of existence, as her attention to and sudden awareness of parts of her body that she experiences in pieces (as *agencement*) allows her to deconstruct the common unitary conception of identity and subjectivity and to dwell in the experience of a cluster of capabilities and sensations that deviates from commonly known forms of embodiment pertaining to contemporary racialized heteropatriarchy. Here, again, we encounter the fragmentation of the colonized body (in this case colonized by a patriarchal language-system, by phallogocentrism) which becomes an instrument of resistance inasmuch as it enables a subversion of power dynamics. In fact, the transformation into animal enables Doreen to venture beyond prescribed ways of how women, black women and

[51] Kristeva, p. 3.
[52] See Iris Marion Young, 'Abjection and Oppression: Dynamics of Unconscious Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia,' in *Crisis in Continental Philosophy*, eds. Arleen B. Dallery *et al.* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), pp. 201-14; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 170.
[53] Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjections: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), pp. 13-17.
[54] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

mothers should act, and 'to explore the senses, the indiscipline, the sexual raucousness' of the animal.[55] Her embracing of abjection concurrently enables her to think about a woman lover licking under the folds of her skin, and as such of exploring the intensity of queer forms of relationality inscribed in the responsive/receptive singularity of the flesh, rather than in the unity of the body, and once precluded to her.[56]

In psychoanalytic thinking animals usually signify repressed or disavowed aspects of one's remembered experience, and represent the 'too much', an intensity that – just like any form of flight from chrononormativity – is perceived as pathological, if it remains untamed.[57] Braidotti explains:

> 'Too much' here means excessive levels of affectivity that transgress, upset, or [...] explode the boundaries of the body. Being 'beside oneself' with emotion, passion, grief, pleasure or all of these combined is in fact considered unhealthy and potentially pathological. These are unsustainable states, which one had better avoid, or dose with care.[58]

Doreen's transformation into tortoise brings her closer to her body, to an affective corporeality that escapes the hyper-rationalization of perceived experiences. Passion has the same etymological root as pathology, both reflecting in Western culture the association with a sort of disease capable of shattering the balance and unity of the subject, and in fact animal drives have to be processed (i.e., linguistically interpreted) and tamed in order to be made tolerable, digestible.[59] The policing of the defining borders of the subject in the form of prescribed forms of behaviour remains in fact essential to access social order. In this context, it is interesting to notice how, for example, eighteenth-century biologists and scientists naturalized racist discourses by associating moral degeneracy (to include excessive passion and indolence) with tropical climates; according to this pseudoscientific discourse, a combination of heat and humidity apparently left Creole people 'susceptible

[55] Braidotti, 'Becoming-Dog: Pinka/Orlando, Vita & Virginia,' in *Sense of Smell*, eds. Marcel van Brakel, Wander Eikelboom and Frederik Duerinck (Breda: The Eriskay Connection, 2014), p. 177.
[56] On this issue see Gerald Bruns' discussion of Deleuze's and Guattari's conception of 'becoming-animal' in relation to Georges Bataille's notion of the 'heterogeneous'. Gerald L. Bruns, 'Becoming-Animal (Some Simple Ways),' *New Literary History* 38, 4 (2007): pp. 706-8.
[57] Braidotti, 'Met(r)amorphoses: Becoming Woman/Animal/Insect,' in *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (London: Polity Press, 2002), p. 140.
[58] Braidotti, 'Met(r)amorphoses', p. 141.
[59] Braidotti, 'Met(r)amorphoses', pp. 140-1.

to supernatural belief and incapable of sustained rational thought'.[60] The intensity of Doreen's affective perception (as opposed to an otherwise preferred moderation) continues to build up in the narrative as her transformation progresses:

> She bends down and eats the buttercups, one after another, even the stems. Some buttercups are really quite tasty. […] The old greed is still there, but now it is a pure *boterbloeme* greed. The pleasure she gets from these ample gold-cupped flowers is more intense than any she can remember. ('Shell', pp. 153-4)

Her ingestion of flowers is described in this passage as an old greed resurfacing and now taking a different shape, a greed and a pleasure of an intensity that she has never experienced before. In fact, the more she metamorphoses into a tortoise, into the animal, the more she becomes acutely aware of her senses, until she realizes that 'a moment has a smell, a taste, a sound' ('Shell', p. 153) that she does experiences affectively, that is to say prior to (and beyond) cognition. The overwhelming centrality and intensity of these affective perceptions are finally and completely accounted for at the end of the story when her transformation into a tortoise is complete:

> she got down on her knees and crawled to the garden. It was much easier an all four, a huge relief. She felt herself shrink and shrink. […] It was a glorious feeling of relief, close to euphoria. It was as if she was turned inside out. She felt fantastically good ('Shell', p. 157).

As her transformation is complete, Doreen clearly experiences emotions and affective states with an intensity (as suggested by the use of the adjectives 'glorious' and 'fantastically' with the sensations of relief and wellbeing, and by the noun 'euphoria') that would be considered close to pathological in Western cultures. Her becoming-animal, to include the recognition of abjected parts of herself, frees Doreen from her 'enslavement to a linguistic model of development, based in the power of signification',[61] and opens up the road for the imagination of a different life for herself. This appears clear especially in the final lines when she gradually blocks out her son's voice calling her, and she imaginatively shrinks

[60] Chris Iannini, *Fatal Revolutions: Natural History, West Indian Slavery and the Routes of American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), pp. 233-4, quoted in Allewaert, p. 5.
[61] Braidotti, 'Met(r)amorphoses', p. 124.

and moves, 'surprisingly quickly' ('Shell', p. 157), to rush off toward the bushes ('Shell', p. 158), away from him and her past life.

Her final refusal to listen to or to take care of her son, as well as her distancing herself from other forms of human life, reflect how the process of becoming-animal 'throws open the doors of perception toward impersonal, uncaring, dangerous, violent forces'.[62] More specifically, hers is a refusal to be objectified by both being confined to the nurturing, caring and giving role traditionally associated with women through motherhood in Western patriarchal and capitalist society (a role that is unpaid and as such undervalued),[63] and serving as 'metaphorisation in the conceptual organization of man's experience'.[64]

3. Posthuman futures, or the stories we (must conjure up to) live by

By appropriating and reinscribing one of the myths of Western philosophy – that is to say the association of black people (but also of women, of queer people, etc.) with instinctiveness, sometimes animality, surely the body – Kay retrieves the trope of animalization in her short story 'Shell' in order to deconstruct the figuration of Man (or Western *cogito*) via 'the incorporation of the colonial and racialist histories of the modern incantations of the human',[65] and rewrites the black queer experience in the process.

Through the metaphorical transformation of the protagonist Doreen into animal, that is to say via the crossing of the sociogenic border between human and animal, mind and body, Kay imagines the possibility that something new, something different might emerge.[66] Metaphors in fact do not only possess an 'emotive charge' enabling them to carry several meaning at once, but have also the 'capacity to provide untranslatable information and accordingly [...] to yield some true insight about reality, linguistically as well as existentially'.[67]

[62] Braidotti, 'Met(r)amorphoses', p. 141.
[63] Berman, pp. 261, 263.
[64] Feder Kittay, p. 64.
[65] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Bipolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 21.
[66] On Wynter's discussion of Fanon's concept of sociogeny see Wynter, 'Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be "Black",' in *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, eds. Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 30-66.
[67] Jacqueline de Weever, *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 61.

By undoing the rational episteme of the Western *cogito* with its dominant, unitary conception of subjectivity, Kay rebuffs a monolithic, auto-referential and, as such, necessarily violent conception of subjectivity and identity. Her search for genres of the human not based on reductive and violent binarisms, but produced through a different language-system (as a mode of signification), necessarily causes her to rethink what it means to be human, and to rethink culturally stratified expressions of gender and sexuality in the process. As Nyong'o words in the opening epigraph to this essay suggest, it is exactly the exclusion of black and queer forms of existence from the conception of the human as Man that engenders the production of new modalities of existence refusing to be categorized and represented by a language-system governed by anti-queerness and anti-blackness.[68] This is exactly what Kay does in her short story, and in fact, when narrating Doreen's reflection about her transformation, she writes: 'Eventually, she might end up being a different person altogether, with a different life, another past entirely' ('Shell', p. 150), indeed capable of imagining humanity otherwise.

The transformation through abjection, the retrieval of the corporeal dimension, thus hints at the creation of a new genre of the human in a posthumanism that moves beyond the 'humanist subject' towards a more open, disseminated, uncentred, less appropriating, and as such less violent, form of subjectivity and the human.[69] It marks the emergence of a minoritarian discourse capable of accelerating the conceptual erasure of the figure of Man and to 'bring closure to our present order of discourse'.[70] As Nyong'o suggests, rather than emerging from capitalist development or biological evolution and conforming to ideals of the human as modelled to conform to the global idea of race and sexuality, 'afro-fabulation "anarranges" the development and linear timeline of history' and 'insists that we do not yet know what a human outside an anti-black world could be, do, or look like',[71] yet continuous critical investigation remains necessary to think out of the box of contemporary racialized heteropatriarchy and eventually dismantle it.

[68] Nyong'o, p. 25.
[69] Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 26.
[70] Wynter, 'On Disenchanting Discourse,' p. 209.
[71] Nyong'o, p. 26.

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