



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

in cotutela con Universidad de Oviedo

DOTTORATO DI RICERCA IN
LINGUE, LETTERATURE E CULTURE MODERNE: DIVERSITÀ ED INCLUSIONE

Ciclo 38

Settore Concorsuale: 10/L1 – Lingue, Letterature e Culture Inglese e Angloamericana

Settore Scientifico Disciplinare: L-LIN/10 – Letteratura Inglese

THE MAGICAL AGENCY OF MATTER
AN ECOTRANSFEMINIST READING OF CONTEMPORARY ANGLO-EUROPEAN FAIRY-TALE
RETELLINGS

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Esame finale anno 2026

“You are a born storyteller”, said the old lady. “You had the sense to see you were caught in a story, and the sense to see that you could change it to another one. And the special wisdom to recognise that you are under a curse – which is also a blessing – which makes the story more interesting to you than the things that make it up”.

A. S. BYATT, “THE STORY OF THE ELDEST PRINCESS”

We revise reality by altering our consensual agreements about what is real, what is just and fair. We can trans-shape reality by changing our perspectives and perceptions. By choosing a different future, we bring it into being.

GLORIA E. ANZALDÚA, *LUZ EN LO OSCURO/LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS*

When measured, [the particles in the two-slit experiment] emerge from some invisible, empty space. [...] This observation may sound fictive like Alice in Wonderland looking in the back of a mirror and seeing a whole world out there, instead of nothing, or an empty space.

SERPIL OPPERMAN, “QUANTUM PHYSICS AND LITERATURE”

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Abstract

This dissertation proposes an ecotransfeminist reading of the representation of magical and material agencies in contemporary Anglo-European retellings of the European folk- and fairy-tale archive. While some studies have recently started to deal with the ecotransfeminist approach, the latter has not been thoroughly scrutinised by contemporary feminist fairy-tale criticism yet. However, the ecocritical and queered investigation of fairy-tale material agencies and their transbiological and multispecies figurations becomes increasingly relevant nowadays in the field of fairy-tale studies and within the socio-cultural frame of the petrosexoracial capitalism (Preciado 2025) in which such literature is produced. Moving from Preciado's definition, this study will focus on the interconnection, in the Euro-Western context, between gender oppression and the human/non-human and nature/culture divide as heteropatriarchal and anthropocentric weapons to disenchant the body, the world, and the collective imagination, and to extract profit from silenced bodies. In such a disenchanted framework, the voices of matter and non-humanity need to be listened to in order to re-enchant the imaginary and to envision sustainable and intersectional worlds. To this end, the animistic dimension typical of the fairy-tale world, where matter is endowed with agency, is crucial for imagining speculative futures and re-enchanting the collective imagination.

The ecotransfeminist methodology proposed for reading the selected corpus refers to Anglo-European posthuman and new-materialist theoretical movements, with particular regard to the compostist turn proposed by Donna Haraway (2016a) and to Karen Barad's queer "spacetimemattering" (2007; 2011; 2017). Such approaches will be put in dialogue with the already queer and posthuman representations of non-human and material agencies offered by the European fairy-tale archive, which anticipates the theoretical movements emerging later in the Anglo-European academia from the 1990s. These representations proposed by the fairy tale genre echo the witch figure and the multispecies dimension of the witch's sabbath. Such imaginary has been prosecuted during the European witch-craze, at the dawn of the European modern age (15th-17th centuries). The aim of such prosecution was to disenchant the magical conceptions of the world and the body in order to silence non-human and women's agency and to orient them toward patriarchal and capitalist productivity. The magical agency of matter

underpinning the fairy-tale genre has been recovered by contemporary Anglo-European feminist retellings within their feminist emancipating projects, where the characters' heart's desires materialise in the fictional universe transforming the given reality.

The selected literary corpus includes fairy-tale retellings by Angela Carter (*The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, 1979), Tanith Lee ("Wolfland", 1983), Antonia Susan Byatt ("A Stone Woman", 2003), Margo Lanagan (*Tender Morsels*, 2008), Katherine Vaz ("What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone", 2010), and Sharon Blackie (*Foxfire, Wolfskin, and Other Stories of Shapeshifting Women*, 2019). In such works, women and non-human others are represented as sharing a similar condition of oppression within the Euro-Western patriarchal, anthropocentric and speciesist regime. This intersection emerges, along the selected tales, with particular regard to the representation of transbiological or shapeshifting bodies in-between the human the non-human; the representation of human/non-human alliances and the oddkin they generate; the reconfiguration of the spacetime mattering of the fictional universe proposed by such magical bodies and multispecies alliances.

In sum, this dissertation argues that contemporary feminist Anglo-European fairy-tale retellings: (a) recover non-human agencies and voices along with those of women as part of a shared project of emancipation from (hetero)patriarchal anthropocentrism; (b) propose a post-human point of view which fits within contemporary ecotransfeminist discourses, anticipating further theoretical elaborations; (c) envision re-enchanting imaginaries which suggest ecotransfeminist horizons of multispecies care.

Through the close reading of the literary corpus, this study highlights how the selected narratives function as speculative tools for re-enchanting a disenchanted world, suggesting sustainable horizons of ecotransfeminist multispecies co-existence to overcome the repressive (hetero)patriarchal narrative of the Anthropocene.

Introduction

The global context in which this dissertation sees the light is wasted by colonial and economical wars, climate crisis, racist violence, gender oppression, and capitalist extractionism. In recent years, the so-called Western “democracies” have silently witnessed one of the biggest colonial genocides of the last century while their own legislations have undergone an increasingly fascist take. People of color keep on being shot by the police while each day another woman or transgender person is killed by gender violence and transphobia, and while the anthropogenic global warming enhanced by capitalist and colonial extractionism causes eco-disasters worldwide. In this social, cultural, and political horizon, disenchantment often silences the agency of people.

Writing a dissertation on fairy tales might seem to be far away from the material context from which I write – which, despite the surrounding violence, is still that of a privileged white woman living in a Western country and having water coming out of her kitchen’s sink. Nonetheless, as fairy tales teach together with a “motley clutch of earth others” (as Haraway would say, 2016a: 137), the imagination has a deep subversive potential, especially when it is collectively drawn.¹ To this extent, re-enchanting a collective imaginary that has been disenchanted by the current petrosexoracial regime (Preciado 2025) is an act of speculative dissidence (Consigliere 2024).

¹ In this regard, I deem interesting to cite my collaboration with Associazione Senza Violenza (Bologna) as part of my PhD internship. The association works with men perpetrators of violence on women, holding groups where the abusers attend a transformative path toward the overcoming of the internalised gender violence. In such context, I had the chance to create a fairy-tale based pamphlet including various activities for the groups which move from fairy-tale narratives and retellings. In general, I have experienced the use of fairy-tale narratives and retellings in different kinds of workshops oriented toward the exercise of imagination, self-consciousness, and collective peer-education. I am convinced that narratives have not only a theoretical, but also a pragmatical function in stimulating the imagination of people and supporting them in worlding processes.

In the fall of this last year, I have seen many young people being put into jail because they have expressed their dissent, but I have also seen rivers of people invading the streets to stop the genocide in Palestine. In such contexts, I can see that fear is often followed by resistance when the collective imagination establishes that alternative paths must exist and is determined to generate them. Thereby, I am finishing to write this dissertation with the awareness that the freedom of the imagination may be followed by the freedom of the bodies. In a similar way, when recovering the voices that have been silenced by the patriarchal archive, feminist retellers of fairy tales affirm that such voices matter as well as the bodies they speak from. Overall, they state that the imagination is more powerful than the ruler of the archive, that cultural archives can be hacked, and that silenced voices can be unlocked. The voices emerging from these broken cages talk about gentler horizons of co-existence, worlds that suit their inhabitants, and odd alliances that can defy the violence of the present oppressive order.

Why fairy tales?

Along this dissertation, I consider fairy tales as cultural productions emerging from the social and cultural framework of disenchantment (Consigliere 2024, Federici 2019) caused by the petrosexoracial capitalism (Preciado 2025). Moving from Preciado's definition, I will particularly focus on the interconnection between gender oppression and the human/non-human and nature/culture divide as heteropatriarchal and anthropocentric weapons to disenchant the body and the world within the Euro-Western context² and to extract profit from "othered" bodies. Indeed, since the age of the European witch-hunting (15th-17th centuries) and at the dawn of European "modernity", the body and the world have undergone a process of disenchantment (Federici 2004) which has caused matter to become inanimate and therefore more suitable for patriarchal, colonial, speciesist and capitalist exploitation. During those centuries, the European fairy-tale archive has preserved the representation of the non-human as agential (even if it has often been oriented toward the interest of human characters), while

² I acknowledge that such process is not limited to the Euro-Western context; however, I have chosen to limit my investigation within this geographical/theoretical framework – whose borders I will further specify – to ensure the thoroughness of my analysis, which, if enlarged, would risk to be universalising.

this feature has been silenced and “witchified”³ by modern patriarchal and bourgeois *conte de fées*.⁴ In contemporary times, since the 1970s until the present days, Anglo-European feminist fairy-tale retellings have regained the trans-species and animist dimension intrinsic to the genre, uncovering the interconnection between gender and non-human oppression. The literary corpus this dissertation engages with shares a common interest for the representation of the alliance between the human and the non-human as a relevant insight for a feminist horizon which can no longer be understood, nowadays, as separated from its intersectional ties. Within the disenchanted context of contemporaneity, the alliance between the bodies reduced to the category of the “non-human” emerges as crucial for fighting the repressive force of heteropatriarchal anthropocentrism, as well as for generating sustainable horizons. The ecotransfeminist ethics of care underpinning the discussed retellings arises from the representation of female (but not only) characters which are in-between species (thereby also confusing the categories of heteropatriarchal gender roles), from their alliance with a multispecies and queer odd-kin, and from the reconfiguration of the fictional world which comes out of such generative alliances. Therefore, even if not all the selected tales encompass an explicit ecotransfeminist perspective, my argument is that they can all offer to such a reading, which may understand contemporary fairy-tale retellings as a narrative and imaginative resource for enhancing a variety of re-enchanting processes.

Contextualising the literary corpus within the Anglo-European framework

The literary works the present study engages with, ranging from very popular to less known works, pertain to the domain of contemporary anglophone Euro-Western⁵ retellings of the European fairy-tale archive, which share a common interest for the representation of non-human agencies. In addition, the authors of such texts are white women, often explicitly

³ I use the term “witchification” as a literal translation of the term “streghezzazione” proposed by Nicoletta Poidimani (2019), which will be further discussed.

⁴ By the term *conte de fées* I refer to the literary fairy tales which have emerged in Europe from the 16th-17th centuries onwards, initially in Italy and France. Some fairy-tale scholars argue that these tales come from previous oral folk tales. However, it is common opinion that oral and written fairy tales have kept influencing each other also after their affirmation as a literary genre (Zipes 2013: 3).

⁵ By “Euro-Western” literature, I intend literary productions originated in the European context and its colonies. By “Euro-Western” fairy tales I also intend fairy tales and fairy-tale retellings referring to the European cultural heritage.

defining themselves as “feminist”. Works by Angela Carter (*The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, 1979), Tanith Lee (“Wolfland”, 1983), A. S. Byatt (“A Stone Woman”, 2003), Margo Lanagan (*Tender Morsels*, 2008), Katherine Vaz (“What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone”, 2010), and Sharon Blackie (*Foxfire, Wolfskin, and Other Stories of Shapeshifting Women*, 2019) cover Anglo-European fairy-tale literary production from the late 1970s to the late 2010s, which is also a crucial period in the history of white Western feminisms. I borrow the term “Anglo-European” from Juanita Sundberg (2014), by which the author refers to “English-speaking white supremacist settler societies [...] bearers of [...] Eurocentric imaginaries” (34). I use this term to include cultural productions belonging to the Euro-Western anglosphere. In particular, works by Carter, Lee, Byatt and Blackie are produced in the UK, within the European anglosphere, while the others come from the anglophone white colonies: Margo Lanagan is based in Australia and Katherine Vaz in the U.S., although she has Portuguese roots.

Thereby, I do not aim at discussing fairy-tale retellings as a global genre, but rather at exploring their remediations from the point of view and the positioning of contemporary white Western literature and feminisms. To this end, I acknowledge the limits of these feminisms and feminist literary productions from an intersectional point of view, critically engaging with them to investigate to what extent they can answer some crucial questions of contemporaneity on a local and global scale. In particular, I aim to propose an ecotransfeminist reading of the selected works, engaging with the intersection between the representation of gender roles and non-humanity, and the queerization of binary categories of gender as well as of species. Through the ecotransfeminist perspective, I suggest to look at the speculative possibilities enhanced by these narratives, namely for what concerns their shared focus on the representation of: (1) transbiological bodies in-between the human and the non-human; (2) multispecies alliances and the oddkin they generate; (3) the reconfigurations of space, time, and matter proposed by such bodies and alliances. The magical trans-species bodies represented by contemporary feminist retellings seem to have an essential role in the re-definition of the tradition from which such stories come according to an ecotransfeminist perspective, as well as in answering some of the most urgent questions of contemporaneity, especially concerning the current climate crisis or planet “trouble” (Haraway 2016a).

Methodological purview

In addition to their recovering and retelling of a silenced archive of human/non-human alliances, the considered fairy-tale retellings anticipate and dialogue with the Anglo-European post-human and new-materialist discourse. Thereby, the critical methodology adopted for discussing the literary sources involves recent post-human theoretical discourses, with particular reference to the compostist turn proposed by Haraway (2016a). Namely, I propose to raise a dialogue between the post-human and ecotransfeminist framework to which the primary sources may be connected and the pre-European-modernity fairy-tale archive from which they genealogically descend. This dialogue is particularly fertile in the connection between the multispecies dimension of the witch's sabbath and the multispecies oddkin proposed by Haraway (2016a). As mentioned, the witch's sabbath has been prosecuted by the historical forces of patriarchy, anthropocentrism, and capitalism at the dawn of European "modernity", which is also a crucial period for the affirmation of the literary European *contes de fées*. At the same time, the multispecies oddkin proposed by Haraway in her vision of the "Chthulucene", the speculative geological era which might arise from the waste of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene (2016a), appears within the post-human and ecotransfeminist discourse to which, as I guess, contemporary fairy-tale transbiologies and multispeciesism pertain. The dialogue between magical fairy-tale agencies and the post-humanities reaches feminist new-materialist onto-epistemologies and Karen Barad's quantum physics (1996, 2007, 2011, 2017), where the notion of spacetime-mattering as a world-dimension in continuous reconfiguration helps delineating the transbiological body and the trans-species alliance as revolutionary forces capable of materially reconfiguring the whole structure of the universe. Eventually, this "efficacy of intentions" (Consigliere 2024) of fairy-tale figures upon the constitution of matter recalls to the magical vision of the world as a place that can be transformed according to the "heart's desire" (Lanagan 2010) of the situated body.

Chapters overview

The first chapter is devoted to the development of the theoretical and methodological background of the dissertation. Moving from the notions of dysphoria mundi and petrosexoracial regime (Preciado 2025), re-enchantment and disenchantment (Consigliere

2024, Federici 2004 and 2019), speculative fabulation, Chthulucene and oddkin (Haraway 2016a), I will draw on the need for re-enchanting the current disenchanted imaginary and for generating ecotransfeminist horizons of multispecies co-existence. The chapter will then present an overview of the state of the art of fairy-studies, with a particular attention to feminist criticism and the lack of queer and ecocritical readings. To this extent, the need for proposing an ecotransfeminist reading of the magical agency of matter in the fairy-tale will be argued. Eventually, the literary corpus will be presented, with regard to the contexts of production and reception of such works within the anglosphere.

The following chapters are devoted to the close reading of the corpus. The second chapter focuses on some feminist fairy-tale retellings representing trans-species alliances as a way to defy the representation of both women and non-human beings as deprived of agency or even as monstrous characters within the patriarchal and speciesist fairy-tale archive. The focal stories are contemporary revisions of “Little Red Riding Hood”, with particular regard to the figure of the (were)wolf (Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves”, 2006 [1979], and Tanith Lee’s “Wolfland”, 1983 [1980]), and the motif of the animal bridegroom, developed by “Beauty and the Beast” (Carter’s “The Tiger’s Bride”, 2006, [1979]) as well as by the figure of the *each-uisge* (Sharon Blackie’s “The Water-Horse”, 2019). The ecotransfeminist reading of these works will be rooted in the reappropriation of the witch figure and her acolytes in the sabbath, and in the representation of a post-human world. These two aspects will be put in dialogue through the selected tales and read in the light of an ecotransfeminist ethics of multispecies care which emerges from such narratives.

The third chapter elaborates on the human desire for a post-human existence, which reverses the typical desire of the Little Mermaid for obtaining a pair of legs and therefore a human soul. To this extent, attention will be paid to those stories which unveil the material agency of the non-human body and its silenced voice in its ability to defy the bias of the Euro-Western anthropocentric notion of “human” and the gender representations which are framed within it. The other-than-human condition emerges, from the narratives by Margo Lanagan (*Tender Morsels*, 2010 [2008]), Sharon Blackie (“Foxfire”, 2019), and Katherine Vaz (“What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone”, 2010), as a chance for defying the oppression of the heteropatriarchal and speciesist order, and for experiencing a more “tentacular” way of thinking (Meijer 2019, Despret 2021, Haraway 2016a).

The fourth and last chapter deals with the reconfiguration of the “spacetime-mattering” (Barad 2017) of the fictional universe through the material efficacy of the magical body. In “Wolf-Alice” by Angela Carter (2006 [1979]), *Tender Morsels* by Margo Lanagan (2010 [2008]), and “A Stone Woman” by Antonia Susan Byatt (2003), the magical and transbiological body comes out as capable of reconfiguring or rewriting not only itself within the fairy-tale unveiled archive, but also the coordinates of the whole space-time-matter which surrounds it. To this end, I conclude the discourse about re-enchantment opened in the first chapter, arguing that a re-enchanted or re-written body, especially when it allies with other marginalised critters, can determine the course of the story up to its very material constitution.

Chapter 1

The Ecotransfeminist Urge for Re-enchantment and the Anglo-European Fairy Tale

Theoretical Framework and Critical Methodologies

Folk and fairy tales⁶ have been studied over time through the lenses of several theories and methodologies. A particular interest in the fairy tale genre raised, in the Euro-Western context, around the 1970s, a crucial period both for fairy tale revisions in literature and the arts, and for fairy tale criticism. As Vanessa Joosen points out, the 1970s knew a “so-called fairy tale renaissance”, i.e. “a boom in the production of fairy-tale retellings and criticism”, particularly located in the German and English contexts (2011: 4). In this regard, Stephen Benson remarks the “extraordinary synchronicity, in the final decades of the twentieth century, of fiction and fairy-tale scholarship” (2008: 5), which kept influencing each other. Benson argues also that our understanding of the fairy tale from the 1970s onwards is “a creation jointly of writers and critics” (2008: 5). As it will be further analysed, those years were a crucial period for the rethinking of mythologies (Barthes 1957), within which fairy tales played an important role. Indeed, as Anne E. Duggan remarks, fairy tales are involved in the processes of “socialization”

⁶ In the present dissertation, the term “fairy tale” is used according to Anne E. Duggan’s definition as a “broad umbrella term for what more generally could be referred to as ‘wonder tale’, which encompasses but is not limited to texts that feature fairies, witches, enchanters, djinn, and other beings endowed with magical or supernatural powers; anthropomorphized animals; metamorphosis (humans transformed into animals or other objects and vice versa); magical objects; and otherworlds and liminal spaces. ‘Fairy tale’ also refers to texts that may not include any of these qualities but have been received as – that is, read or categorized as or are generally considered to be – a fairy tale” (2021: XIII).

both for children and for adults, contributing to the articulation of – among the others – issues of gender, class, and racialization (2021: XIV).⁷

The long-time interest in the genre has been and is still possible because the fairy tale has been able to evolve and fit into different contexts of socio-cultural, literary, and artistic production. As Andrew Teverson points out, the fairy tale is “a form of fiction that emerges in history, and reflects the cultural and ideological orientations of the societies and cultures that reshape and retell it” (2021: 16). Over the centuries, the genre underwent various metamorphoses. In contemporary times, fairy-tale revisions and remediations have implied its re-arrangement according to currently consumed genres, ranging from novels to movies to children’s books and cartoons. In fact, as Joosen acknowledges, in order to survive, “the genre of the fairy tale has adapted itself to the changing environments that it has been confronted with over the centuries”, especially by “mutat[ing] and absorb[ing] certain characteristics of other genres” (2011: 1-2). Because of their mutable nature, folk- and fairy-tale motifs, figurations, and narratives are particularly appropriate for laying as the structure for the story which needs to be heard according to different contexts and times. The process of retelling often involves, in addition, a critical inquiry shedding light upon the differences between traditional and retold motifs, enlightening the evolution and deconstruction of social tropes. This is the case, for instance, of feminist retellings, which are the object of the present study.

In this dissertation, I aim to propose an ecotransfeminist reading of the literary corpus, which includes a selection of contemporary Anglo-European feminist fairy-tale retellings. Through the ecotransfeminist perspective, I intend to discuss the re-enchanting possibilities enhanced by these tales, with particular regard to the representation of: transbiological or shapeshifting bodies; trans-species alliances and multispecies oddkin; the reconfiguration of spacetime mattering enacted by such bodies. By such features, contemporary Anglo-European feminist fairy-tale retellings seem to propose a re-enchantment of the imaginary from an ecotransfeminist perspective. In this regard, the first section of this chapter will move from Paul B. Preciado’s notion of “dysphoria mundi” as a consequence of the oppressions enacted

⁷ Instead of “racialization”, Duggan uses the expression “ethnic differences”, but I recall decolonial studies to deconstruct the colonial notion of “ethnics” and focus the attention on the construction of white and colonial concepts of both “ethnics” and “race”, which imply a discrimination-in-process and a form of socially/culturally constructed oppression, which is resumed by the word “racialization”.

by the “petrosexoracial regime” (2025), by which the author describes the contemporary global capitalist society. Preciado’s contextualisation of contemporaneity will pave the way for introducing the notions of disenchantment and re-enchantment (Consigliere 2020; Federici 2004, 2018, 2019; Anzaldúa 2015). I will then introduce Haraway’s notions of “compost” and “Chthulucene” (2016a) as ecotransfeminist suggestions to think-with the other-than-human and reactivate the collective imagination, through a post-human or compostist epistemology which is missing in the traditional Euro-Western cultural thinking to which my primary sources pertain.⁸ In the further sections, I will introduce the state of the art of fairy-tale studies and contemporary fairy-tale literature, gathering Pauline Greenhill’s and Leah Claire Allen’s suggestion that the European fairy-tale tradition has always represented post-human imaginaries, far before the raising of post-human studies in the Anglo-European scholarship throughout the 1990s (2018: 227). Thereby, I will interrogate the lack of post-human and ecotransfeminist approaches to Anglo-European fairy-tale studies, and I will suggest the importance of adding an ecocritical and queer lens to the study of feminist fairy-tale retellings. Indeed, as I will argue in the introduction to my primary corpus, the representation of transbiology and human-nonhuman relations is the focus of many contemporary feminist fairy tales, even though it has not been widely investigated by fairy-tale scholarship yet. Thereby, I will focus on the relevance of such aspects in contemporary Anglo-European fairy tales. I will discuss how they reclaim and re-shape at the same time the traditional European archive, and how they respond to contemporary social-ecological challenges on a planetary scale, thus fitting within the typical fluid and adapting behaviour of the fairy-tale genre.

⁸ As it will be further suggested, non-Western epistemologies have elaborated a way of thinking-with the non-human far before the rising of Anglo-European post-humanities (Sundberg 2014).

1.1 Theoretical framework: transbiology and multispecies alliances as re-enchanting fabulations

1.1.1 Disenchantment and the collective imagination: from “dysphoria mundi” to magical thinking as acts of resistance

The context of production of the literary works this dissertation engages with is that of the “petrosexoracial regime” (Preciado 2025). This regime, in the words of philosopher Paul B. Preciado, is

a mode of social organization and a set of technologies of government and representation that developed from the fifteenth century onwards with the expansion of colonial capitalism and the extension of racial and sexual epistemologies from Europe to the entire planet. For energy, the petrosexoracial mode of production depends on the burning of highly polluting fossil fuels that are responsible for global warming. The political infrastructure of these technologies of government is the social classification of living beings according to modern scientific taxonomies of species, race, gender and sexuality. These binary categories have served to legitimize the destruction of the ecosystem and the domination of some bodies over others. Without a large mass of subaltern living bodies divided by differences of species, sex, gender, class and race, neither fossil extractivism nor the organization of the capitalist world economy would have been possible. (2025: Ch. 1)⁹

The subalternisation¹⁰ produced by the petrosexoracial capitalism produces, according to Preciado, a feeling of “dysphoria mundi”, which is experienced by many people oppressed by the power structures of contemporaneity. Moving from the definition of “gender dysphoria” – understood not as a mental illness but rather as a form of political and aesthetic mismatch with the normative sexual and gender structure –, dysphoria mundi is not understood as a passive feeling. On the contrary, it holds a source of active resistance. Dysphoric conditions are

⁹ Throughout the dissertation, when I refer to works quoting the chapter and not the exact pages is because I am relying on ebook editions. Most of the works I am referring to in this dissertation have been produced outside of Italy and are very difficult to find in paper form, either in libraries or in bookshops.

¹⁰ This form of violence is grounded onto the destruction of ecosystems, on sexual and racial violence, on the consumption of fossil energy, and on industrial carnivorousness (2025: Ch. 1).

experienced by “forms of life that announce a new regime of knowledge and a new political and aesthetic order from which to think through the planetary transition” (Preciado 2025: Ch. 1). Dysphoria mundi is not understood as an individual disease to be treated, but rather as the symptom of a mismatch between the petrosexoracial regime and a new order to come that might be glimpsed in current “acts of criticism and political disobedience” (Preciado 2025: Ch. 1).

Dysphoria mundi brings forward the urge for an imaginative effort capable of envisioning a new epistemological order. Moving from a dysphoric feeling, acts of critique and disobedience against the petrosexoracial system need and look forward to visionary scenarios and the re-enchantment of collective imagination. As Gloria E. Anzaldúa states, “[d]ecolonizing reality consists of unlearning consensual ‘reality’ [...]. To change or reinvent reality, you engage the facultad of your imagination” (2015: 44). Anzaldúa recalls Joy Harjo, writing that “[t]he imagination [...] illumines us, speaks with us, sings with us” (Harjo in Anzaldúa 2015: 24). Likewise, according to anthropologist Stefania Consigliere (2024), the role of the imagination is essential toward the urging re-enchantment of the present disenchanted reality. It is through the re-activation of the collective imagination that breaches into the ordinary and oppressive world can be opened. Through these interstices, alternative worlds grounded on different orders may be foreseen.

Consigliere argues that, in contemporary Western capitalist societies, the collective imagination has been blocked by the sounds of the market, which managed to fill each aspect of life: “[o]f the market, in fact, we feel every gasp, its shivering reverberates inside us: we desire what it desires, we fear what it fears” (2024: 18). In this regard, Preciado remarks that, in the last five centuries, the petrosexoracial capitalism has built “a regime of sensory and cognitive saturation, of total capture of time and an expansive occupation of space” (2025: Ch. 1). Indeed, to Consigliere, the Western modern ratio speaks today only one language: that of progress, science and the market. This normative language has sterilized the collective imagination, working out a “barring of the imaginary” (Consigliere 2024: 16) and a “totalization of the existing” (11). This barring and totalizing echoes Mark Fisher’s perspective on capitalist realism, according to which “[c]apitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (2009: Ch. 1).

The consequence is that divergent ways of thinking become irrational: “[i]n dreams and in drunkenness there is no consciousness except unreason” (Consigliere 2024: 18). The Western modern ratio has built several borders to keep enchantment and the imagination outside of the domain of reality. Borders are not only geographical, but also “psychic, symbolic, oneiric, and narrative” (Consigliere 2024: 18). Stefania Consigliere and Claudia Baracchi argue that these “enclosures” of the imagination caused the dismantling of enchantment, mystery, and everything that exceeds us (2016: 7). Therefore, we can say that there is at work a disenchantment of the collective imagination. This disenchantment is performed by a ratio coinciding with Preciado’s description of the petrosexoracial regime.

According to an ecofeminist point of view (Federici 2004; Merchant 1990), what Preciado calls nowadays the petrosexoracial capitalism appears to have operated in the Euro-Western context, since its early stages, mainly via the disenchantment of two intertwined aspects of materiality: the (marginalised) body, and the (natural) world. Marxian feminist philosopher Silvia Federici argues that the body’s needs and desires, such as those for “[...] the sun, the wind, the sky, the need for touching, smelling, sleeping, making love, and being in the open air, instead of being surrounded by closed walls”, are “a powerful limit to the exploitation of labour” (2019: 190). This is why capitalism “had to wage a war against our body” since its earliest phases (190). The body became thus “a signifier for all that is limited, material, and opposed to reason” (190).¹¹

According to Federici, this war against the body had its major historical ground in the witch-craze that spread in Europe and the American colonies between the 15th and the 17th century.¹² In *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004),

¹¹ Thereby, reproductive labour has been seen by Marxian feminism as a possible “point zero” of revolution (Federici 2020). Reproductive labour is indeed “a qualitatively different experience than producing cars, as it requires a constant interaction with natural process whose modalities and timing we do not control. As such, reproductive work potentially generates a deeper understanding of the natural constraints within which we operate on this planet, which is essential to the re-enchantment of the world that I propose” (Federici 2019: 195).

¹² In regard of such geographical area, Federici remarks that, if Western historians have traditionally considered the phenomenon of witch-hunting as circumscribed to Europe and New England, the accusation of devil-worshipping was crucial also in the European colonization of American Indigenous people. Also in the so-called “New World”, witch-hunting was “a deliberate strategy used by the authorities to instil terror, destroy collective resistance, silence entire communities, and turn their members against each other” (Federici 2004: 220). In such a way, witch-hunting served to “justify enslavement and genocide”. However, when referring to the historical phenomenon of witch-hunting in the frame of my dissertation, I will mainly refer to the one that affected Europe

Federici reads the assault against witchcraft in Europe and against the European pre-modern¹³ magical conception of the body and the world¹⁴ as a crucial step for the rising of the capitalist system of production. Thereby, deprived of its “occult virtues” (which both “Natural Magic” and the popular superstition attributed to it), the body could be easily “caught in a system of subjection”, where it would be “calculated, organized, technically thought and invested of power relations” (Foucault in Federici 2004: 140). Once made understandable and controllable, the body can become a hyper-productive labour force. Within this framework, witch-hunting implied and was aimed at

the destruction of the magical conception of the body that had prevailed in the Middle Ages, which attributed to it powers that the capitalist class could not exploit, that were incompatible with the transformation of the labourers into work machines, and that could even enhance their resistance to it. (Federici 2018: Ch. 4)

In particular, eradicating magical practices was crucial to the capitalist system of production since “magic appeared as an illicit form of power and an instrument to *obtain what one wanted without work*, that is, a refusal of work in action” (Federici 2004: 142, original emphasis). According to Federici, witch-hunting depredated women of their economic independence and self-determination, and forced them into reproductive labour, which was needed in order to assure the reproduction of productive bodies to be exploited by capitalism.

As Carolyn Merchant argues, the new Euro-Western modern order implied the reassertion of “[t]he passivity of the female in the sphere of reproduction”, as well as the repression of sexuality and the removal of the “spirits [...] from nature” (1990: 148). Hence, as Consigliere remarks, the “barring of the imaginary” produced by the capitalist modern ratio caused the silencing of non-human voices: “trees, wolves, fountains, ghosts, windmills, stars, gods and

between the 15th and the 17th centuries, with a particular focus on its assault against women’s bodies. This is indeed the historical background that mainly deals with the (re)production of the European fairy-tale archive.

¹³ When I refer to “modern” or “pre-modern”, I always refer to the frame of my study, which is limited to the Euro-Western context. When referring to “modernity”, I mean the European understanding of it, which coincides with the settling of colonies in the American continent, and with the processes bringing to the raising of capitalism and the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions.

¹⁴ As Stephen Wilson argues, in pre-modern Europe “magic was part and parcel of everyday life and was practised or performed by ordinary people in the communal or religious or family context” (Wilson 2000: 385).

demons have ceased to speak” (2024: 18). In this regard, Anzaldúa argues that it is by listening to natural elements (such as the “[s]ea, wind, trees”) that “images, feelings, thoughts that I acknowledge as sacred” can be evoked (2015: 66). “Nature” – which includes the non-human, and all that is not productive, and that might be a source of enchantment – “allows my imagination to stir” (66). Thereby, the silencing of non-human and “non-rational” voices fits within the capitalist projection toward hyper-productivity.

As both Merchant and Federici agree, at their earliest phases, capitalism and European modernity moved a war against the magical conception of both the world and the body. This war was meant also against non-human spirits, which, in the pre-modern European world, were considered to be among the magical forces at work in the universe (Wilson 2000: 408). Spirits were “pre- or non-Christian beings, akin to the nymphs and fauns of Antiquity” (48). They could be associated to “the house and farm” or to wild places, such as “woods, rivers, marshes and lakes, or more broadly with earth, water and air” (48). In pre-modern Europe, this animist view was to be found also in “the world of witches”, which was “everywhere infused with spirits” (Merchant 1990: 140). In this conception of the world, “[e]very natural object, every animal, every tree contained a spirit whom the witch could summon, utilize, or commune with at will” (140). According to this view, every element (“herbs, plants, metals, and most of all the human body”) could potentially hid peculiar virtues and powers (Federici 2004: 142).

Thereby, the disenchantment of the world at the earliest phases of capitalism and European modernity needed to be supported by a changing in the collective image of the world, shifting from organicism to mechanism. Before the Scientific Revolution, European pre-capitalist and pre-modern visions understood the earth as a nursing mother. For instance, before sinking a mine, miners offered propitiation and ceremonial sacrifices to the deities of the soil, and observed strict cleanliness and sexual abstinence “before violating the sacredness of the living earth” (Merchant 1990: 4). After the Scientific Revolution, the world underwent a process of mechanization as well as the body, which was reduced to its productive functions as a labour force. Consequently, the earth became an inert object to be exploited and extracted¹⁵ with no

¹⁵ By the term extractivism (or extractionism), I mean, following Orlandini and Valisena, the human activity of removal and exploitation of huge amounts of natural resources (coming from animal, vegetal, or mineral sources). As the authors remark, even if this is one of the most ancient human activities, the expansion of capitalism and colonialism has increased the rhythm of extractivism, with devastating ecological consequences (2021: 57).

limits. Mechanism understood “nature as dead and matter as passive”, which allowed their exploitation (103). Under these conditions of exploitation and devastation, the environment ceased to be a source of enchantment for the collective imagination, becoming instead a source of “dysphoria”. Defying this dysphoria means to look for other sources of enchantment despite the “totalizing” kind of enchantment proposed by the showcase of the petrosexoracial capitalism.

The totalizing enchantment of the petrosexoracial capitalism recalls to Isabelle Stengers’s and Philippe Pignarre’s definition of capitalism as a “système sorcier” (“a bewitching system”, 2005: 58), a system that enchants by disenchanting other possible modes of existence. The sterilization of the collective imagination and imaginary, and the disenchantment and the subsumption of the world, the environment, space, time, and the body, make room for a “sorcellerie capitaliste” (“capitalist sorcery”, Pignarre and Stengers 2005). This capitalist sorcery enchants its users through “dreamlike images” to be enjoyed at a cheap price, such as “the semi-hypnotic state of clients in the supermarkets, the phantasmagoria of shop windows, the call of the touchscreens, the social prestige of cocaine, the widespread and immediate availability of doping supplements of every kind” (what Marx called “the aura of commodities”, Consigliere 2024: 35). Thereby, dysphoria mundi seems to be a way to escape from the spell of the capitalist sorcery, since it acknowledges the contradictions and violence implied in the glimmering store windows of the petrosexoracial capitalism.

However, the “spell” of capitalist sorcery, enhancing a disenchantment of the imagination, reduces one’s ability of being receptive. This capacity is crucial since, as Anzaldúa writes, only

[i]f I’m receptive, a new *conocimiento*/insight will flash up through the cracks of the unconscious, what I call *el cenote*, *la noria interior*, a subterranean reservoir of personal and collective knowledge. Its surge provokes a new clarity inspiring me to formulate ideas that may transform my daily existence. (2015: 66)

This transformation of reality, which is also advocated by Preciado’s notion of dysphoria mundi, is essential for surviving in the present troubled times, and crucially needs the re-enchantment of the collective imagination.

1.1.2 Composting in the Chthulucene: speculative fabulations as a mode of re-enchantment

In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016a), Donna Haraway proposes a post-anthropocentric and post-speciesist¹⁶ approach to the “trouble” of the present planet crisis. To face this trouble – Haraway claims – we have to learn to stay-with it. To this end, speculative fabulations offer a crucial help. They are understood by Haraway as generative narratives which implement collective thinking (2016a: 30). In such a way, they seem to respond to Consigliere’s invite for the re-enchantment of the collective imagination and imaginary.

Haraway argues that traditional motifs from Western philosophical and economical thinking have become “unthinkable”, or “not available to think with” (2016a: 30). To face those unsustainable ways of thinking, Haraway recalls Eva Hayward’s notion of “tentacularity” (Hayward in Haraway 2016a: 174), proposing to practice a “tentacular thinking” instead (2016a: 30). Tentacular thinking engages with the proliferation of alternative solutions to the Western anthropocentric binaries. Part of this project is the definition of the notion of “Chthulucene”. To Haraway, indeed, the notion of “Anthropocene”¹⁷ is no longer

¹⁶ With the term “post-speciesist” (or “anti-speciesist”, or “non-speciesist”), I mean a kind of thinking involved with the challenging of the speciesist binary. Michelle Westerlaken understands speciesism (following Singer 1975 and Horta 2010) as “the moral exclusion or discrimination of those who are not classified as belonging to a certain species” (2020). Massimo Filippi defines speciesism as a sacrificial structure at whose base there is animality. In Filippi’s words, speciesism is “la macchina antropologica che funziona grazie a dispositivi sacrificali che, a sua volta, (ri)produce” (“the anthropological machine which works through the sacrificial devices which it (re)produces in turn”, 2017: 15). Speciesism is also, according Massimo Filippi and Marco Reggio, “architettura sociale che si fonda sullo smembramento produttivo dei corpi” (“the social architecture grounded onto the productive dismembering of bodies”, 2014: 8). Such a dismembering is useful, Westerlaken argues, to produce consumption (farming, hunting), to generate entertainment (zoos, circuses, pets), and to carry out research (animal experiments) (2020). In a speciesist society, the construction of the human subject (as a patriarchal, bourgeois and Western construct) is the result of this sacrificial structure (Filippi 2017: 12). This notion of human must be deconstructed to experiment what Filippi and Reggio describe as a “forma-di-vita critica e creativa” (2014: 18, “a critical and creative form of life”), which is also that which speculative fabulations propose.

¹⁷ The term “Anthropocene” indicates the current geological era, whose increasing of CO₂ in the atmosphere and the consequent global warming is caused by human activities. The term has been coined by Eugene Steoermer in the 1980s referring to the “growing evidence for the transformative effects of human activities on the earth” (Haraway 2016a: 44). While scholars consider different times as the starting date of such a geological epoch, Anthropogenic changes are commonly dated back to the mid-18th century, with the exploding use of coal and the invention of the steam engine. However, Haraway herself criticises the notion of Anthropocene, suggesting that,

suitable for acknowledging the kind of narratives needed by the current times of crisis (2016a: 174). Another figure is needed to shift to “another, big-enough story” (52). The figure suggested by Haraway is a geological speculation she defines as the “Chthulucene”, which “entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages – including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus” (Haraway 2016a: 101).¹⁸ As well as Karen Barad’s notion of “spacetime-mattering” (2007; 2017) which will be further discussed, the Chthulucene is a speculative geological space-time era in-becoming, characterised by its own continuous remaking according to the continuous intra-actions produced within its composting dimension. Hence, the Chthulucene is “unfinished” and rooted onto the waste produced by the Anthropocene, as well as on the exterminism produced by the Capitalocene (Haraway 2016a: 157). By collecting up this trash, the Chthulucene “make[s] a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents and futures” (157). Thereby, it feeds on the ruins of the present to re-enchant the imagination and digest this trash into sustainable visions to live-with.

if we shall pick one word for these times, “it must be the Capitalocene” (47). It has not been “Species Man” indeed to shape the conditions for the Third Carbon Age or the Nuclear Age (47). To this end, the term “Anthropocene” suits wealthy classes and regions, but does not account for other stories, such as the relationship of Indigenous people with their lands (49). In general, we can agree that the term “Anthropocene” is also improper because of its Western-centrism. The capitalist system of production which has caused the current planet “trouble”, climate change and its consequent eco-disasters is a Western weapon, based on the extraction of value from the environment as well as from colonialism. The responsibility for the environmental crisis is not of humanity as a whole, but of the capitalist, extractionist, colonial Western regime. In this sense, another term for the Anthropocene/Capitalocene is “Plantationocene” (206), referring to the history of slavery underlying colonial capitalism. However, in the present dissertation, I will follow Haraway’s choice in using the word “Anthropocene” as a simplification and because of its popularity, implying by this term the Euro-Western, capitalist, extractionist and colonial causes of the current geological era.

¹⁸ Even if Haraway’s 2016 work tries to engage with and refer to non-Western epistemologies, this kind of more-than-human sensibility which is part of the project of the Anglo-European post-humanities often lacks taking account seriously of the non-Western epistemologies which have dealt with such topics well before the rising of post-human studies in the Anglo-European academy. Indigenous thinking from North America, for instance, is deeply rooted in a more-than-human epistemology which the white Western U.S. scholarship often erases from its post-human genealogies (see Todd 2016; Sundberg 2014; Simpson 2017). The post-human take I mostly engage with in this dissertation is tightly related to the Euro-Western context. It criticises the nature/culture binary upon which modern Western thinking is based since Descartes, and to which other forms of binary oppressions are related (concerning gender, “race”, ableism, class, sexuality, etc.). When discussing the deconstruction of the human/non-human binary, I broadly refer to Anglo-European post-human epistemologies since they are adequate to discuss Anglo-European cultural productions, namely the primary sources I engage with in this dissertation. At the same time, I acknowledge the limits of such Western epistemologies in accounting for human/non-human epistemologies on a broader scale.

Narratives are essential to Haraway's notion of Chthulucene: "ongoing multispecies stories" constitute this geological speculation, together with "practices of becoming-with" (55). Precarious times are faced in the Chthulucene through multispecies alliances and care, and a re-enchantment of the speculative imagination. As they are meant in Haraway's project, futurizing tales have the form of "SF" narratives: the acronym includes "speculative fabulation", "science-fiction", "science fact", "feminist speculation", and "string-figures" (2). From a literary point of view, SF narratives can be understood as part of the fantastic genre. They share with the fantastic the representation of "reals 'other' than the human" as well as of a world beyond the ordinary which enacts a "violation of dominant assumptions" that "threatens to subvert [...] rules and conventions taken to be normative" (Jackson 1981: 13-14). As Rosemary Jackson points out, subversion in the fantastic genre means reversing the order and bringing to the surface what lies beneath. At the same time, it involves a political envisioning of literature which, rather than responding to "escapism or a simple pleasure principle" (6), enlightens "historical, social, economic, political and sexual determinants" emerging in its context of production (3). Furthermore, as well as Haraway's Chthulucene and its SF narratives are built on the ruins of the present, therefore engaging with challenging aspects of reality re-shaped in a new form, fantasy "is not to do with inventing another non-human world" (8). On the contrary, fantasy inverts the elements of the present reality, "recombining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently 'new', absolutely 'other' and different" (8). Therefore, as it is understood by Jackson, fantastic literature has a transformative potential upon the real world it takes inspiration from. Haraway's SF narratives too are questioning and disturbing: they dig interstices in our world to suggest building new bounds and exploring abandoned terrains (Haraway in Vitale 2019: 28). In this sense, they answer Haraway's invite to "become more ontologically inventive and sensible within the bumptious holobiome that earth turns out to be" (2016a: 98). To be ontological inventive means to make kin with other species (all part of the earth as a "bumptious holobiome"), which helps worlding in the ruins of the present. Indeed, the SF mode is "a practice of worlding" (213), rooted in a feminist understanding of materiality. Matter is never a "mere" medium but is part of the "congress for worlding" (120), which is made of "compost".

In Haraway's understanding, which follows Rusten Hogness (Haraway 2016a: 32), compost replaces post-humanism: the notion of "human" included in "post-human" is replaced with "humus". The humus of compost, which is the primary condition of the Chthulucene, is a dimension characterised by "sympoiesis": the becoming-with, thinking-with, and making-with a trans-species "motley clutch of earth others" (137). As Anna Antonia Ferrante remarks, compost melts binary structures:

il compost sintetizza la materia e le dinamiche discorsive del potere, riprocessando le opposizioni natura/cultura, materiale/immateriale, ma anche genere/sexo fuori dalla dualità, ma anche dalla linearità gerarchica che sono proprie delle scienze tanto quanto del capitalismo, del patriarcato e dell'occidente.¹⁹ (2022: 61)

In the frame of this project aimed at facing the binary structures of power imposed by the petrosexoracial regime, transbiological narratives and practices reveal to be essential and functional. As well as transbiology is a central subject to the contemporary fairy-tale retellings which are the object of the present dissertation, it is also crucial to the speculative fabulation proposed at the end of Haraway's 2016 work. This fabulation, entitled "The Camille's Stories", was originally thought-with by Donna Haraway, Fabrizio Terranova and Vinciane Despret in the frame of Isabelle Stenger's colloquium around *les gestes spéculatifs* held in Cerisy in 2013. After Cerisy workshop, the "Camille's Stories" took different directions. Since the beginning, they were meant as "a pilot project, a model, a work and play object, for composing collective projects" (Haraway 2016a: 136). One of these directions is the one taken by Haraway's version as told in *Staying with the Trouble*. Camille – whose name is neutral since they are "a squirming child who had no truck with conventional genders or with human exceptionalism" (137) – is the name of five generations of "children of Compost", living in a Compost Community. These kids are "born for sympoiesis, for becoming-with and making-with" other species and earth beings (137). Through five generations, Camille becomes more and more sympoietic with their sym-species, the monarch butterfly, which is in danger of extinction. In

¹⁹ "compost synthesizes matter and discursive dynamics of power, reprocessing the oppositions nature/culture, material/unmaterial, but also gender/sex beyond duality as well as beyond hierarchic linearity which are typical of sciences as well as of capitalism, patriarchy, and the Western world" (my translation).

the compost communities of the Chthulucene, pregnant persons can choose a non-human symbiont for their children, with the aim of safeguarding endangered species. The ability for a generative mourning is crucial to compost communities: whenever the monarch butterflies will be extincted, Camille would have inscribed in their own bodies some of the butterflies' genetic components. "[R]ather than as human or nonhuman", this "oddkin" (a strange, queer, bizarre kinship), is understood as "humus" (140). The relation between the human and the non-human symbiont is one of reciprocal nurturing, which requires an ongoing invention of practices of care which can answer to the multispecies needs of those "symbiotic selves" (140).

The Chthulucene, with its Children of Compost's stories, might be understood as Haraway's speculative answer to the question suggested by Federici and Consigliere: the urge for re-enchanting the present times of crisis and disenchantment. Most peculiarly, Haraway's invite for enacting this rewriting of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene/Plantationocene (2016a: 99) involves SF speculative fabulations, which are among the possible tools for re-enchanting the disenchanted "facultad of [our] imagination" (Anzaldúa 2015: 44). Consigliere (2020), Federici (2004; 2018; 2019), and Anzaldúa (2015) insist on the importance of non-human voices for re-enchanting the imagination. Similarly, Haraway suggests that the speculative imagination is activated by and with an enchanted matter of earth others. Haraway's SF mode "works and plays only on earth, in the mud of cyborgs, dogs, acacia trees, ants, microbes, fungi, and all their kin and get" (2016a: 120). It reminds Deborah Bird Rose's definition of "earth language" as one which is "never monological, always relational", and which is "a call to enter into encounters, to be co-present and engaged" (2013: 107).

This composting with the kin and get of earth others is particularly relevant for the argument of my dissertation since, in Haraway's Chthulucene, monstrous figurations which are threatening and terrifying for current oppressive power structures (such as deep-sea creatures, tentacular figures like octopuses and spiders, or ancient female monstrous deities) are reappropriated and re-empowered. The Chthulucene is a reversal and a retelling of the present order. As Haraway argues, "I resignify and twist the stories" (2016a: 54). For instance, she considers the figure of Medusa acknowledging that the Greek word "Gorgon", which translates as "dreadful", is perhaps just an "astralized, patriarchal hearing" of stories and enactments which can generate different horizons (52-53). Thereby, what is represented as

monstrous by patriarchal and anthropocentric structures can be retold as empowering for those who aim at smashing those same systems.

1.2 Toward an ecotransfeminist approach to fairy-tale studies: state of the art

1.2.1 The 1970s fairy-tale renaissance: demythologising the fairy-tale archive

As other cultural archives, the archive of folk and fairy tales,²⁰ is not a neutral space, but is shaped by the power structures that host and collect its contents. As Carmen Maria Machado writes in her memoir *In the Dream House* (2019), which broadly refers to folk motifs,

[t]he word archive, Jacques Derrida tells us, comes from the ancient Greek ἀρχεῖον: arkheion, “the house of the ruler”. [...] What is placed in or left out of the archive is a political act, dictated by the archivist and the political context in which she lives. (Machado 2019: 2)

As Carolin Jesussek argues, Machado understands the institutional archive as a “haunted place”, a “biased, heteropatriarchal site” (2024: 190). Indeed, archives reflect and implement the systems of power they are part of, letting other experiences out of the domain of representation. The fairy-tale archive is a particular in-becoming archive, because of the already discussed fluid and adaptable nature of the genre: as social and cultural norms change, so does the fairy tale. If the fairy-tale archive has underwent the “haunting” of heteropatriarchy

²⁰ Archives of folk and fairy tales are various and different. A kind of archive is the collection of German fairy tales organised by the Brothers Grimm (1812). The Grimms claimed to have collected their stories from the voices of the German folk, even though it has been pointed out that they had few informants coming from the middle-class, besides strongly reworking the tales themselves as collectors (see Haase 2008: 579; Warner 1995: 188-193). Another kind of archive is the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* organised by Stith Thompson (1966), a six-volume “Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends”. Based on Antti Aarne’s index of European folk types (1910), Thompson’s index was published in the 1930s, re-edited in the 1950s, and eventually expanded by Hans-Jörg Uther in 2004 – known as the ATU (Aarne-Thompson-Uther) index of folk types. It is one of the biggest collections of folk motives, classified by numbered ‘types’ that refer to one or more specific tales. Other examples of fairytale archives include the institutional archive of the Folklore Society (<https://folklore.society.com/about/the-folklore-society-library-and-archives/>), or the open-source collection proposed by Heide Anne Heiner (<https://www.surlalunefairytales.com/books.php>).

and colonialism, it has also welcomed opposed readings and remediations. Contemporary times have seen an increasing of literary, artistic productions, and critical works engaged with the fairy tale since the 1970s. These approaches have tried to deconstruct the oppressive layers sedimented in the archive of the genre, pursuing new readings ranging from postcolonialism to feminism. Andrew Teverson remarks how the raising theoretical perspectives across the 20th century (such as psychoanalysis, anticolonial movements, formalism and structuralism) contributed to the revaluation of the fairy tale “as a form of expression that could speak to readers in profound ways, about identity, politics, society, and art” (2021: 3). It is also important to acknowledge that, since their mentioned crucial role in the processes of socialization, fairy tales “cannot be separated from questions of *power* and ideology” (Duggan 2021: XIV). Thereby, due to their crucial role in the reflexion and definition of social and cultural values, fairy tales have been politically used and instrumentalised by several forms of power – from German nazis to democratic humanism (Zipes in Teverson 2021: 5).

On the literary side, the fairy tale had such a crucial influence on the fiction of the late 20th and early 21st century, that a group of writers emerging between the 1960s and the 1970s – including Angela Carter, Antonia Susan Byatt, Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, and Robert Coover – whose “fictional projects are intimately and variously tied to tales and tale-telling”, was named “the fairy tale generation” (Benson 2008: 2-3). In particular, as Amy Greenhough points out, this cluster of authors shared the intention of “reshap[ing] the genre to reflect current ideological concerns regarding social inequality” (2021: 99), an interest that coincided with a move towards postmodernism and post-structuralism. In this regard, since the late 1970s, scholars have investigated how the fairy tale deals with “contemporary preoccupations and ideologies concerning class, gender, race, and sexuality” (Greenhough 2021: 94). In the same period, the emerging popularity of fairy-tale literature fits into a widespread need to discuss and rethink mythologies, with the raising of deconstructionism, post-structuralism, and feminist thinking, and the publication of works such as Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957). In Barthes’ work, myths are understood as processes which naturalize ideological discourses, by inscribing them repeatedly in “powerful and persuasive popular representations” (Teverson 2021: 18). Teverson remarks the influence of Barthes’ work on further scholars who argued how traditional stories – such as myths, folk and fairy tales – naturalize and make invisible ideological discourses about “gender, race, class, age, disability, and sexuality” (2021: 18).

Angela Carter, one of the most influent fairy-tale writers of the last century,²¹ seems to have been responding to this urgency by famously stating, concerning her fairy tale revisionism: “I’m in the demythologising business” (1997: 38). As Anna Pasolini remarks, Carter understands myths as “false universals” encouraging women to explain their underprivileged position in society by the identification with mythical female models (2016: 22). This attitude can be found among many contemporary fairy tale retellings and revisions, aimed at deconstructing and demythologising established norms that traditional narratives contribute to reinforce over time. As Pasolini argues, Carter plays with the conventions of fairy tales by making them recognizable as well as disrupting them for political or “demythologising” purposes, thus transforming them (2016: 21).

1.2.2 Feminism and fairy-tale studies: a tight interconnection

Carter’s project toward the demythologising of patriarchal stereotypes in the fairy-tale archive was supported and brought forward both by other fairy-tale authors engaged with gender and/or feminist issues,²² and by the emerging current of feminist fairy-tale studies. Teverson (2012: 17) argues that a critical premise to the currents of fairy-tale studies emerging around and beyond the 1970s was established by Simone De Beauvoir’s argument around fairy tales exposed in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949). In this work, De Beauvoir argues that fairy tales are part of a wider spectre of patriarchal dominant narratives contributing to the determination of oppressive gender roles. Agreeing around this theoretical premise, feminist fairy-tale revisions and criticism found their place within the “fairy tale renaissance”. From the 1970s, both criticism and literary authors claimed for fairy-tale revisions showing that female characters are not just as passive as the patriarchal archive of the fairy tale represents them, but that they can be subjects of agency and desire. Of course, fairy-tale revisionism was present in the work

²¹ Angela Carter is considered to have opened the path toward fairy-tale revisionism in the 1970s. Carter’s work was so influent upon other fairy-tale revisions that the so-called fairy-tale generation was also named after her “the Carter generation”. As Benson acknowledges, “Carter’s extensive work on the traditions of the fairy tale [...] was preeminently influential in establishing a late-twentieth-century conception of the tales, the influence of which had continued into the new millennium” (2008: 2).

²² As Pasolini remarks, even if Angela Carter called herself “a feminist”, the definition of her work as feminist has been the object of a critical debate, since “on no account must Carter’s work be reduced to a coherent political agenda” (2016: 19).

of women novelists also before the 1970s. For example, the intertextual role of classic tales such as “Cinderella” has been studied by feminist scholars in the work of 19th century women writers (Haase 2000: 32). However, the 1970s feminist movements marked a crucial step for feminist fairy-tale literature and criticism. As Jeana Jorgensen remarks, by the advent of movements oriented toward the emancipation of women and their sexuality, their representation in fairy tales have also changed (2021: 69). Movements such as the so-called “second-wave feminism”²³ had a direct impact on fairy-tale retellings (Jorgensen 2021: 73).

As Donald Haase acknowledges, the projects and ambitions of both feminist scholarship and fairy-tale revisions in general shared the same interest in asking “important questions about sociocultural institutions and the process of socialization” (2000: 41), which were at the centre of the contemporary debate. The debate between feminism and the fairy tale begins in the early 1970s and, from then on, has been one of the main focuses of fairy-tale studies, which were conceived within specific ideological affiliations (Benson 2008: 6). Feminism is acknowledged indeed as one of the most important approaches to the fairy tale along the 20th century, both on the side of literature and on that of criticism (Joosen 2011: 7). The intersection of feminism and fairy-tale studies has also affected, as Haase argues, the whole production, reception, study, and teaching of fairy tales (2000: 21).

From the 1970s, early feminist literary criticism has been mainly devoted to exposing the sexual stereotyping of women in literature and in criticism, considering the role of literature as a social institution in reinforcing social asymmetries, and the inadequacy of established critical schools to deal with women’s works (Kolodny 1980: 21-22). It also invoked for a “radical rethinking” of literary studies, beginning from the radical revision of the “accepted theoretical assumption about reading and writing that have been based entirely on male literary experiences” (Showalter 1985: 8). Similarly, since their emergence in the 1970s – with the debate between Alison Lurie (1970) and Marcia R. Lieberman (1972) – feminist fairy-tale studies have been interrogating the role of fairy tales in the construction of gender stereotypes and the “female subject”, pointing either to the emancipatory functions of fairy tales as well

²³ Despite the expression “second-wave feminism” is widely criticised, Jorgensen argues that it “still provides some useful ways to correlate major historical events to cultural developments that [...] impact the formation of fairy tales” (Jorgensen 2021: 73). However, it is crucial to remark that the term refers to the history of Euro-Western white feminisms and cannot be understood as an umbrella for other feminisms and their history, which is much more complex.

as to their contribution in perpetrating oppressive gender assumptions (Haase 2000: 15-16). For instance, in *Woman Hating* (1974), Andrea Dworkin blames the depiction of women in fairy tales as “wicked, beautiful and passive, while portraying men, in absolute contrast, as good, active and heroic” (Haase 2000: 17). Similarly, in *Gin/Ecology* (1978), Mary Daly assumes that fairy tales generally carry “toxic patriarchal myths that are used to deceive women” (Haase 2000: 17).

Feminist fairy-tale criticism has also been devoted to the recovery of female voices in the fairy-tale production and of alternative fairy-tale narratives, questioning the role of male authors in the determination of fairy-tale gender roles. It has also focused on the reception of fairy tales and their influence on the processes of socialization within the patriarchal system (Haase 2000: 16). This drive fits within the agenda of feminist literary criticism, engaged with returning to circulation lost or ignored works by women writers which can stand as a “female countertradition”, by which male writers are subjected to a new feminist scrutiny (Kolodny 1980: 22). The role of the Grimms’ tales, for instance, was eagerly studied by feminist scholars (Haase 2000: 23). As a result, “the inscription of patriarchal values in the classic fairy tale” was laid bare, such as the appropriation of the genre by male editors and collector, or the stereotypical representation of female voices in the Grimm’s collection (Haase 2000: 27). This critical revision led to looking for “narratives and characters that resisted the Grimm stereotype” (279), followed by the attention paid by early feminist fairy-tale criticism to the 20th century retellings by women writers (33).

1.2.3 Queering fairy-tale studies

However, early feminist fairy-tale revisions and criticism almost completely lacked a non-heterosexual and non-cisgender insight. Both feminist revisions and criticism were mainly based on heterosexual and gender-binary perspectives which reflected the white feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s, from which non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities were generally excluded (Jorgensen 2021: 81-82). Discussing the construction of the cultural archive, Machado recalls José Esteban Muñoz’s claim that “queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence”, pointing out that queer experiences are gatekept out of representation by straight culture, which prevents queer people to be able to find information

about and representations of themselves (Machado 2020: 3). The archive of fairy-tale retellings and studies is not an exception to Muñoz's point. Indeed, as Jorgensen remarks, explicit queer fairy-tale revisions "have been slower to appear than those that simply question heteronormative gender roles", even if some of them might "lend themselves to queer readings" (2021: 82). Only from the 1990s onwards, literary revisions including explicit non-heterosexual perspectives begin to emerge, such as Emma Donoghue's queered fairy-tale collection *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997). Nonetheless, Jorgensen claims that contemporary fairy-tale literature continues to exclude "many of the most marginalized identities around gender and sexuality – people who are transgender, asexual, aromantic, and so on" (2021: 87). In fact, if recent years have seen the literary exploration of gender roles within a cisgender assumption, characters who defy the gender binary (trans, agender, non-binary identities) have not had the same fortune (Jorgensen 2021: 87). Jorgensen remarks that those kinds of revisions are still finding representations mainly "on the margins" of cultural production, for example as posts on social media (2021: 88).

The same lack can be found amongst feminist fairy-tale criticism (Joosen in Jorgensen 2021: 82). As Jennifer Orme points out, "queer subjectivity has not been [...] deeply investigated in fairy-tale studies" (2008: 145). Only in the last decade, queer fairy-tale scholarship has tried to fill this gap (Jorgensen 2021: 82), while queer readings have been long lacking in fairy-tale criticism. Kay Turner's and Pauline Greenhill's publication *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (2012) has been an attempt to fill this gap. This critical work explores specifics of the fairy-tale world, such as "queer, lesbian, homosexual, transgender and transbiological" features, for "their function not only as fantastical creations but also as incarnations calling for sustained and informed inquiry" (Turner and Greenhill 2012: 3). In particular, the application of queer lenses to the reading of fairy tales allows to shift the focus "from normative sexual dynamics [...] to the tales' internal struggles, suggestive of multiple and more complex desires and their perversely performative nature" (3). Turner and Greenhill define the fairy tale as "queer" according to the 19th century meaning of the term, thereby as an "odd, strange making, eccentric, different, and yet attractive" genre (4). The fairy tale's queerness is also envisioned by the authors in the own form of the fairy tale, where the acceptance of the magical world allows for "eccentricity and strange making", and invites "ambiguity and ambivalence", which is also how sex and gender are often represented in the

genre (6). In this sense, in addition to problematizing sex and gender, queerness might be intended as addressing general “concerns about marginalization, oddity, and not fitting into society generally”, thus involving “various unspeakable and unspoken desires” (11).

1.2.4 Transbiology, trans-species alliances, and the agency of matter in the fairy tale

The domain of queerness involves also, as mentioned, the question of transbiology. Furthermore, in the fairy tale, transbiology overcomes the domain of gender and sexuality, to include

animals or humans who masquerade as or transform into another species (in whole or in part) and/or who otherwise mess with hard-and-fast distinction between species, including between human and non-human. (Turner and Greenhill 2012: 6)

According to Turner and Greenhill, transbiology helps demonstrating “the awkward knottiness/naughtiness of the boundary between human and non-human” (12), challenging not only the gender binary, but also that of species.

In addition to the emergence of queer perspectives in fairy-tale studies only in recent years, fairy-tale scholarship has also long lacked ecocritical, ecofeminist, and animal-studies approaches. Those perspectives are still not very common to fairy-tale studies, even if some research has begun to emerge recently. This lacking is odd, since, as Pauline Greenhill and Leah Claire Allen remark, fairy tales have a “topical relevance to the interdiscipline of animal studies” (2018: 225). Even the critical approaches to non-humanity in the works of Angela Carter have been mainly informed by a post-structural lens, without acknowledging the “complexities of human—animal relations” her work investigates (Greenhough 2021: 101). The relevance of such complexities needs to be better acknowledged by critical studies. As Greenhough argues, the representation of human-animal relations is among the “revolutionary aspect[s] of her narratives” (2021: 101). The “ecocritical relevance” of Carter’s fiction is acknowledged also by Shadi S. Neimneh and Halla A. Shureteh, who share Greenhough’s concerns around the lack of critical examinations for this aspect of her narrative (2020: 5).

Indeed, criticism has mostly focused on a reading of non-humanity and animality in Carter's work as a representation of female sexuality acting towards empowerment and emancipation from patriarchal roles. Despite the undeniable importance of these aspects, an "engagement with non-human existence" that goes beyond the role of a metaphor for female sexuality can also be found and needs to be acknowledged in Carter's work (Greenhough 2021: 101). Greenhough insists for instance on Carter's descriptions of "plants and fungi growing slowly", and on the "watchful woodland" of her tales, where "non-human, material agencies" emerge "as alive with animism" (101). Namely, Greenhough argues that "Carter's phantasmagorical depictions of the sometimes-intangible lines between the human and non-human" might have "the potential for a radical destabilization of the conception of what it is to be human and the primacy of that role" (99). The portrayal of non-humanity which follows this destabilization disrupts not only the patriarchal construction of gender roles, but also human centrality (100).

The general dismissal of non-human agency and non-human centrality in fairy-tale studies is remarked also by Greenhill and Allen (2018). The authors question the incoherency between the fairy tale's repletion with non-human animal protagonists that "consistently disrupt conventional notions of proper species relations", and the habit of fairy-tale scholarship to often use "human-centered categories to describe these stories" (2018: 226). The agency of non-human matter is rather envisioned by Greenhough as an essential feature of the fairy-tale tradition that needs to be acknowledged, since "the birds, the flowers, and the climate take on their own characterization irrespective of their non-human manifestation" (2021: 100).

Greenhough recalls Marina Warner to discuss the representation of the agential capacity of matter in fairy tales. Warner argues that this capacity is strengthened by magic and magical agencies: "even when a tree has been cut down and turned into a table or a spindle, its wood is still alive with the currents of power that charge the forest where it came from" (Warner in Greenhough 2021: 100). To this end, Greenhill and Allen acknowledge that, despite the lack in criticism, and far before the rise of posthuman and queer studies, "[f]airy tales are already species-queer, posthuman, and transbiological; their stories and characters destabilize and upend normative species relations" (2018: 227). The prevalence of non-human characters in the fairy tale (Duggan 2021: XIV), together with its characterization as "a genre in which species and materials are fluid and in flux" (Greenhough 2021: 94), makes the fairy-tale genre particularly appropriate for the exploration of the mentioned topics. Because of its fluid,

transbiological, post-human fictional world, the fairy-tale genre allows for “the exploration of the boundaries between the human and the non-human, as well as between what is considered normal and monsters or the monstrous” (Duggan 2021: XIV). Therefore, the fairy tale is an ideal field to explore the relations between the human and the non-human and to investigate issues concerning post-human and animal studies. At the same time, those theoretical currents are ideal tools to study the fairy tale in the light of the current socio-cultural and environmental issues, as outlined in the theoretical premises (§ 1.1).

It is only from the 1990s that, with the emerging of ecocriticism in the panorama of literary studies (Heise in Greenhough 2021: 103) and the growing environmental concerns of the period, authors of fairy-tale revisions have begun to emphasize the role of non-humanity, thereby “creating alternative perspectives and opening up further discussions about anthropocentrism” (Greenhough 2021: 103). This growing interest for a challenging representation of non-humanity and human/non-human relations coincided with the recent spreading, in Anglo-European scholarship, of ecocritical, object-oriented, new materialist, and posthuman theoretical movements. The changes in the representation of non-humanity in the contemporary fairy tale reflect the current changes in the cultural and theoretical approach to anthropocentrism, the complexities of human/non-human debates, and the challenges of anthropocentric thought (Greenhough 2021: 94-95).

If in the late 20th century, the representation of non-humanity tended to be used as a tool for emphasising issues of gender, “race”, class, and sexuality, the 21st century has placed fairy-tale writers face to face with intersectional thinking and the consequences of the planet crisis caused by (a part of) humanity (Greenhough 2021: 106). Therefore, the representation of non-humanity in contemporary fairy tales has ceased to be centred around humanity and has moved toward an understanding of it as “part of an interconnecting web of experience” (106). As Greenhough concludes, the contemporary fairy-tale representation of materiality and the non-human world as changing, changeable, and transformable (Birke in Greenhough 2021: 101) – which is how those are represented in the fairy-tale tradition itself – might “enable us to reimagine our ways of knowing and being in the world” (101). Thereby, an agential representation of matter and non-humanity in the contemporary fairy tale seems to respond to Haraway’s invite (2016: 52) for the proliferation of alternative narratives to the dominant

narrative of the Anthropocene. Representing non-humanity as agential offers creative ways outside the binary oppressive structures of speciesism and anthropocentric thinking.

1.3 Objectives and methodology: an ecotransfeminist reading of fairy-tale magical agencies

The state of the art of fairy-tale studies has showed that a queered and ecocritical perspective taking account of the complexities of human-nonhuman relations and the representation of the agency of matter seems to be particularly lacking in Western feminist fairy-tale studies nowadays. The present dissertation aims at contributing to this field of research with an ecotransfeminist approach, which may keep together the urgences raised by the challenges of contemporaneity. An ecotransfeminist approach will take account of feminist theoretical genealogies through an intersectional and queered lens, which is also capable of intertwining gender oppressions with environmental issues and the violence caused by the extractionist device enacted by the petrosexoracial regime.

To fit into the ecotransfeminist approach, the textual analysis proposed by the present dissertation will consider the representation of the agency of matter and non-humanity in Anglo-European fairy-tale retellings. Through transbiological figurations, trans-species alliances, and the reconfiguration of spacetimemattering carried out by these intra-actions, the representation of the agency of matter comes out as a crucial topic to face contemporary disenchantment and to generate speculative material horizons which may exceed the norms produced by oppressive power structures.

The peculiarity of the fairy tale is that its representation of the agency of matter emerges through fairy-tale magic and through the typical queerness of its fictional world. As Ruth Bottigheimer points out, fairy-tale magic fits into the category of “perceived magic”, which differs from kinds of “learned magic” (such as astrology, alchemy, ritual magic, etc.) that the classic European fairy tale does not usually imply (2014: 6). Perceived magic is what is perceived by the characters to “break natural law” or to “exist above natural law”, therefore belonging to the realm of the “supernatural” (7). Marina Warner considers the role of enchantment to be so “pivotal” in the genre that the fairy tale may be better called “magic tale” (2018: Ch. 2). This permeating presence of magic implies a continuous intercommunication

between “visible and invisible beings” (Ch. 2). Tales are located in “an animist landscape in which everything is animated – animals speak, stones move of their own accord” (Ch. 2). Invisible forces “moved by magical beings” permeate fairy-tale reality, creating “unforeseeable effects which contradict the laws of physics, logic, and probability” (Ch. 2). Matter is endowed with a voice and agency through the magic it is permeated with. Thereby, magic emerges as an agential force which moves in synchronicity with the fairy realm of the non-human.

According to Warner, fairy-tale magic implies several principles of “magical thinking”, such as “animist vitality”, “animal metamorphosis and changeable bodies” (2018: Ch. 2), which makes shapeshifting, transmogrifications, and agential matters very common to the fairy-tale world. Warner remarks that the animist vitality of fairy tales endows with active power not only non-human living bodies but even inert objects. Not only “[a]nimals speak”, but also “no one [...] is taken aback when rock and trees and streams and waterfalls act under their own volition or shapeshift from one form to another” (Ch. 2) Thereby, magical forces flow through natural phenomena and living bodies, providing an agency to non-human animals, magical and shapeshifting beings (“enchanters, cannibal witches and ogres, elves, gnomes, nixies, or water sprites”) as well as to ordinary and inorganic things (objects, stones, rivers...) (Ch. 2). The sense that “invisible powers exist around us” is deepened by the “uncanny activity” of fairy-tale magic (Ch. 2).

The animist²⁴ reading of human/non-human relations which is typical of the European fairy-tale genre evokes an organicist vision of the world that has not been “silenced” yet (Consigliere 2024) by the disenchantment operated by neoliberalism and the petrosexoracial regime. The publication into the written form of some of the most relevant modern collections

²⁴ When I refer to the animist dimension of the European fairy-tale tradition as a crucial insight to be accounted in the framework of the contemporary global crisis and the widespread disenchantment, I refer to the European fairy tale as a genre which has always been particularly attentive to the representation of non-human agencies and trans-species relations in respect of the general silencing of such agencies in the Euro-Western modern cultural discourse. At the same time, I acknowledge that animistic views are intrinsic to non-Western epistemologies far before the raising of Euro-Western ecofeminist, new materialist and post-humanist thinking (see Rose 2013 for the animistic reach of Western ecofeminisms). For Indigenous animism and relational ontology, see, among the others, Simpson 2017, Rivera Andía 2018, Yunkaporta 2019, O’Chin 2024.

of European classic fairy tales, which are immersed in patriarchal and bourgeois values,²⁵ occurred in the same centuries of the witch-craze, which, as discussed, produced the disenchantment of the magical conception of the world and the body. While the dynamics of the transition from orality to literature and the origins of fairy tales are still debated and controversial topics in fairy-tale studies,²⁶ it is common opinion that the European fairy-tale archive reflects the habits and costumes of early-modern Europe that witnessed its last oral/first written phases. In particular, for what concerns the representation of magic in the European fairy tale, Warner points out that it “reflects a vision of organic correspondences that developed in early modern society” (2018: Ch. 2). In European history, as discussed, this organic vision coincides with a pre-witch-craze period in which the world was still “everywhere infused with spirits” (Merchant 1990: 140). These “organic” and animist features antecedent to the processes of disenchantment at work in European modernity seem to have been recovered by the contemporary Anglo-European feminist fairy-tale production, which shows a relevant sensibility for the connection between gender oppression and the exploitation of the earth. Even though modern literary versions of fairy tales have often tried to represent the non-human as irrational, or as a lower ontological state to humanness (often linked to the patriarchal representation of gender roles), such versions have not managed to completely silence the representation of non-human agencies in the genre, which remains permeated by animist and magical material agencies. The representation of matter as agential seems to be particularly dear to contemporary Anglo-European feminist retellings, whose interest for the topic emerges in the same period that has witnessed the emergence of environmental thinking in the Anglo-European humanities. The animistic kinship invoked by Euro-Western

²⁵ Considering that fairy tales have oral origins, Zipes argues that their transposition into print (from the 16th century onwards) helped spreading the social and cultural values of their literary authors (considered to be bourgeois and patriarchal). Such works include, among the others, those by Marie-Catherine D’Aulnoy and Charles Perrault (end of the 17th century), and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (second half of the 18th century). However, Zipes acknowledges that, despite this attempt, fairy tales still remained a very fluid genre and refused to be *totally* subsumed by the socio-cultural values of their literary authors (see Zipes 1979).

²⁶ It is common opinion among folklorists that fairy tales originated and were initially disseminated orally (see Zipes 2013: 2; 21). However, early-2000s debates have brought up the hypothesis of a print-only path for fairy-tale origins, dissemination and tradition (see Bottigheimer 2006; 2007). In general, folklorists agree on the difficulty of defining a specific history for the fairy-tale origins and tradition, since “together, oral and literary tales form one immense and complex genre because they are inextricably dependent on one another” (Zipes 2013: 3).

ecofeminisms and post-humanisms – represented for instance by Val Plumwood’s “earth kindred” (Rose 2013: 98), or by Haraway’s notion of oddkin (2016a) – recalls the representation of human-animal relations already present in the European fairy-tale archive. If post-human thinking has tried, since the 1990s, to repair the Western modern split between human/non-human and nature/culture, the Euro-Western fairy tale seems to have never ceased to imagine the two as deeply interconnected and interchangeable, even if the “ruler” of the fairy-tale archive has tried to silence non-human voices along the last centuries. Contemporary Anglo-European feminist retellings seem to be particularly interested in recovering non-human agencies and in representing human/non-human relations, thereby acknowledging the interconnection between the silencing of non-human voices and that of female characters in the patriarchal versions of the tales written or collected by modern authors.

In addition to transbiology and trans-species alliances, fairy-tale magic emerges, in the considered corpus, also with regard to the reconfiguration of the fictional world and its space-time-matter. This feature is linked to that which has been acknowledged as the fairy-tale “queerness”. As already discussed, the fairy tale can be understood as an intrinsic queer genre (Turner and Greenhill 2012: 4). Turner and Greenhill argue that the whole “deep structure” of the fairy tale is based on a queer functioning of space and time:

[i]f straight time acts more like a straitjacket, the queer time of fairy tales invites participation in the realm of enchantment. The experience of enchantment knocks out previously binding temporalities and dominances; it refreshes potentiality. The fairy-tale surface story may be moralistic, socially restrictive, and gender/sexuality normative, but the fairy tale’s deep structure, represented by the realm of enchantment, is antimoralistic, agency oriented, and gender/sexuality expressive in terms that challenge normativity. (2012: 6)

The queerness of fairy-tale spatialities and temporalities depends on the enchanted dimension of the fairy-tale magical world. As Warner points out, magic ensures that the fairy-tale world “does not operate as we know it: time and space shrink and stretch” (2018: Ch. 1). Such queerness of space-time-matter recalls to the “queer” dimension of the quantum realm. The subatomic landscape is described by Serpil Opperman as a “weird domain of non-causal correlations”, a “queer field of instantly vanishing certainties” (2015: 87-88). In this regard,

feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad asks “[w]hat could be more queer than an atom?”, suggesting that the very nature of an atom is “indeterminacy” (2011: 136). This indeterminacy is particularly evident in the two-slit experiment, where quanta sent through a two-slit device behave once as matter, once as waves. The role of the observer has been proved crucial for determining the behaviour of quantum matter as waves or as particles, showing that the instances of measurement have an influence on what is being measured (see Merten 2021). If the fairy-tale magical world operates beyond the laws of reality we are used to, so does the quantum realm. In the quantum world too, space, time, and matter are not “simply ‘there’”, but they are continuously reconstituted and re-made “through the intra-active performances of the world” (Barad 2011: 157). By the term “spacetime-mattering”, Barad understands the processes of space-time materialisation of the universe. The concept marks the inseparability of space, time, and matter, and the verb form signals “the dynamic (re)making of spacetime-mattering through the iterative sedimentation of intra-actions” (Barad 2017: 111). Therefore, spacetime-mattering continuously remakes itself according to the interferences of matters and phenomena.

The queerness of the quantum world is echoed by the fairy-tale magical world, both for its shrinking-and-stretching space-time coordinates, and for its animist representation of matter as agential. If modern patriarchal literary versions of the fairy tales have tried to silence the queer voices of such fictional world, from that of women to that of the non-human, contemporary Anglo-European feminist fairy tales recover the agential aspects of fairy-tale magical matter with an approach that can be understood as ecotransfeminist. This occurs in particular through the representation of transbiological bodies, trans-species alliances, and their reconfiguration of the material world, whereas the post-human condition often emerges – in the context of the planet “trouble” – as a more desirable condition than the human one, thereby reversing the typical desire of the “Little Mermaid” for escaping non-humanity and reaching the human condition.

1.4 Ecotransfeminist genealogies in contemporary Anglo-European fairy-tale retellings: introduction to the corpus

Considering the discussed emergence of the representation of non-humanity in feminist retellings, in this section I will introduce the literary corpus that is the object of the present study. The selected texts belong to the corpus of contemporary Anglo-European revisions of the European fairy-tale tradition. Most of them belongs also to the domain of feminist retellings, even though not all of them show explicit ecotransfeminist approaches. Actually, most tales display heterosexual and cisgender biases, while, as I will argue, their depiction of trans-species alliances and transbiological bodies contradicts such very biases. Indeed, my study would aim to prove that it is possible to read these texts from an ecotransfeminist point of view because of their explicit or implicit acknowledgment of the interconnection between gender and non-human oppression and exploitation in the light of the “trouble” featuring contemporary global society. I consider the ecotransfeminist lens appropriate for reading such tales since, as discussed, the post-human approach is intrinsic to the fairy-tale genre way before the raising of post-human theoretical movements within the Euro-Western discourse.

The selected texts share an interest for transbiology, human/non-human relations, material agencies, and the capacity of the magical body to reconfigure the material world. These aspects are in several cases recovered from a (silenced) fairy-tale heritage. The corpus covers fifty years of Anglo-European women’s fairy-tale literature, showing a transversal and intergenerational cut which moves from the backbones of the 1970s fairy-tale renaissance and reaches less known 2000s-2010s authors and texts. More or less popular, all these texts prove the capacity of fairy tales to adapt to different socio-historical contexts and ideological discourses, to always speak to contemporary readers even if the deep structure of the tale is basically the same since many centuries, and especially their ability to give back a voice to those bodies that are silenced in the oppressive regime of contemporaneity.

In this section, I will introduce the selected authors and tales considering their socio-historical context of production, with a particular attention to their interconnection with feminist and post-human discourses and movements within the Anglo-European sphere.

1.4.1 The 1970s-80s: animality as women's (sexual) empowerment

Among the fairy-tale production of the “fairy-tale renaissance” and the upcoming years, I will focus on the works by Angela Carter and Tanith Lee. Both British authors, the works by Carter and Lee intertwine with each other especially for what concerns their fairy-tale writings. Lee's collection *Red as Blood or Tales from the Sisters Grimmer* (1983) echoes the gothic and dark dimensions of Carter's famous collection *The Bloody Chambers and Other Stories* (1979). Benson defines *The Bloody Chamber* “the urtext of contemporary tale-telling” (2008: 2), for the undeniable influence it had, and still has, on further fairy-tale retellings, especially for what concerns women's and feminist literature. Carter's collection had a crucial role in the growing interest in the fairy tale, with a genealogy including, among the others, the fiction of Tanith Lee (Benson 2001: 49). Lee's writing is deeply inspired to Carter's writing, as Lee mentioned herself (Edgerton 2012). Critics such as Sarah Lefanu have pointed out Lee's interconnection to Carter's work especially regarding Lee's “position as a woman writing science fiction and fantasy, her unusual deployment of the ‘traditions of romance fiction’ and her deeply nonconformist interpretations of vampire and fairy tales and traditions of words and sorcery” (Haut 2001: 2).

Both collections retell traditional fairy tales and engage with that which editors and critics acknowledge as “adult fairy tale fiction” (Hine 2024). Thereby, they both shed light on the macabre and explicit features of the tales, such as violence, murder, eroticism, rape and incest. Hence, they recover the fairy tale from being a literary genre devoted to children, as it was wished by the 17th century authors who collected and published the literary tales that Carter's and Lee's collections retell (see Zipes 1984).²⁷

Discussing both collections, I will focus on some of the short stories where the intersection between women's liberation and animality emerges: Carter's “The Tiger's Bride” (a retelling of “Beauty and the Beast”), two tales from Carter's wolf-trilogy (“The Company of Wolves” and “Wolf-Alice”) and Lee's “Wolfland”. Both Carter's wolf-trilogy and Lee's “Wolfland” retell the “Little Red Riding Hood” fairy tale, while “Wolf-Alice” engages also with Lewis

²⁷ However, it must be acknowledged that those kinds of adult contents are to be found also in the literary tales written by Italian 16th and 17th authors, like Giambattista Basile's *Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634) and Giovanni Francesco Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* (1550-56). Basile's and Straparola's works precede the classical collections upon which the tale-telling of the further centuries is mainly based.

Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871). As well as dealing with gender issues and the reappropriation of women's agency that is neglected by patriarchal fairy tales, both Carter's and Lee's collections engage with the dimension of non-humanity and the narrow boundaries separating it from the human dimension. They both stage transbiological, shapeshifting, transmogrifying characters whose magical bodies are able to defy the laws of the oppressive structures of contemporary societies in which they are produced as literary tropes. Criticism has mostly argued that, in doing so, they aim at engaging with the deconstruction of patriarchy, whereas the instinctuality and ferality of the animal form is a tool for women's empowerment. However, as I will further argue, their transbiological bodies and trans-species alliances question also anthropocentrism and the speciesist construction which informs patriarchal discourse in a row. By representing the magical, transbiological body, Carter's and Lee's tales point out to multispecies horizons of co-existence.

1.4.1.1 Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979): the "urtext" of fairy-tale retellings

Angela Carter (1940-1992) is among the most important English authors of the last century. She published novels, short-stories collections and poems, and she was also a journalist. Her books have won awards and have been translated into various languages. Many of her works are inspired to fairy tales and engage with the world of the fantastic. She also engages a lot with the topic of sexuality, especially from a feminist point of view, as it emerges in her essay *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (1979), which has been published the same year of *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. The two works are tightly intertwined: Carter's ideological project toward women's sexual empowerment, exposed in *The Sadeian Woman*, is fictionally developed in her fairy tales. Lorna Sage argues that both texts aim at reclaiming "women's creative role" (1998: 58), especially regarding the self-determination of their (sexual) identity. The lack of an agential representation of women within patriarchal discourse is the central insight of *The Sadeian Woman*. Drawing on the writings of 18th-19th

century French author Marquis De Sade,²⁸ Carter argues that, in patriarchal discourse, women are left only with two possible representations: Justine, or the submissive woman, and Juliette, her wicked and hypersexualised sister. Justine is “the prototype of two centuries of women who find the world was not, as they have been promised, made for them and who do not have, because they have not been given, the existential tools to remake the world for themselves” (Carter 1979: 57). However, neither Juliette, “who appropriates masculine traits and is thus constrained into the opposite role of the martyr Justine, namely that of the whore” (Pasolini 2016: 45), is an emancipated woman. Indeed, there is no patriarchal role which can guarantee women’s emancipation. As Carter firmly argues, “[a] free woman in an unfree society will be a monster” (1979: 27).

Through the same lens Carter reads and retells fairy tales. Sage points out that fairy tales, “in their multiple reflections on each other” and in the layerings of interpretations they offer to, “exemplify and unravel something of the process by which meanings get written on bodies” (1998: 60). Carter works upon this dialogical feature of the fairy tale, remodelling the patriarchal layers inscribed upon it, and enacting the empowerment of her female protagonists. Sage argues that Carters’ retellings are “performative” in the sense proposed by Judith Butler (1993), since they remodel the meanings inscribed within the fairy tale producing “alternative modalities of power” (Butler in Sage 1998: 59). Bacchilega argues that Carter “explodes the stereotype of the fairy tale as a static and ‘closed system’” (1997: 53), enacting a postmodern revolution of the genre which will place her as one of the pioneers of the “fairy-tale generation” or “Carter generation” (Benson 2008: 2). By subverting the notion of the work of art as a closed and autonomous object, which is crucial to the postmodern approach (Hutcheon 1988: 125), Carter’s postmodern collection gives back a space to the “many ‘voices’ of fairy tales” (Bacchilega 1997: 50).

The Bloody Chamber retells ten classic fairy tales, mainly inspired to Charles Perrault’s 17th century’s *contes de fées*, which Carter has also translated from French to English (Carter [1977] 2008). As Bacchilega points out, the tales collected in *The Bloody Chamber* can be understood as an organic narrative oriented toward an increasing emancipation of female characters, “almost in linear progression towards some sexual and narrative liberation” (1997:

²⁸ References to De Sade occur in *The Bloody Chamber*. The title story features for instance a sadistic “Marquis” while retelling the figure of Bluebeard. The figure of the ogre-husband recurs throughout the collection.

141). Central to the collection is the representation of animality, which entwines with the topic of sexuality. As Caroline Webb and Helen Hopcroft point out, Carter's stories associate the animal with sexuality, whether it represents "male sexuality unconstrained by civilization or, as Merja Makinen suggests, 'the projections of a feminine libido'" (2017: 322). By this representation, Webb and Hopcroft argue that *The Bloody Chamber* suggests the "acceptance of the animal as natural and away from the highly rationalized and codified" (2017: 321). The image of the animal "beast" represents, in Carter's collection, "not just Otherness but specifically the Otherness of the instinctual human body, repressed and feared by its Enlightenment opposite, the rational mind" (Webb and Hopcroft 2017: 320). Margaret Atwood suggests that, by representing the encounter between "animal" sexualities from different angles, Carter's tales try to find "ways in which the tiger and the lamb [...] can reach some sort of accommodation", while criticising Sade's position according to which "women can escape sacrificial lambhood [...] only by adopting tigerhood" (Atwood 2007: 134-136). Indeed, if a story such as "The Tiger's Bride" (a variant of "Beauty and the Beast") represents women's sexual liberation through the transmogrification into the tiger form, it also re-dimensions the "tigerhood" of the Tiger-Beast himself, by showing his vulnerability as marginalised Otherness, a condition which the female protagonist shares. Otherwise, stories such as "The Company of Wolves" and "Wolf-Alice" represent the agential capacity of women to self-determine their female adulthood and sexuality even if they find themselves in an embodied condition which can be traced back to that of the "lamb". The protagonist of "The Company of Wolves" is a retold Riding Hood facing the sexual threaten of the werewolf, which she dismantles by choosing to appropriate the "otherness" of female libido. At the same time, Wolf-Alice is a girl who believes to be a wolf, but eventually realises that she is neither the one nor the other, and her self-determination occurs by choosing the liminal, problematic position which is typical of "witch" figures (sorceresses, monsters, beasts, demonic acolytes, shapeshifting creatures, etc.) in the European fairy-tale tradition. In all those tales, the encounter with non-human otherness and the acknowledgment of its agency exceeding patriarchal-anthropocentric norms is a chance for the protagonists to recognise their own condition of oppression and to generate trans-species alliances which allow them both to emancipate. At the same time, the non-human is recognised the agential ontological status that dominant culture would deprive it of: in women-animal peer alliances, "othered" beings

recognise each other and the shared oppression of patriarchal speciesism. In this post-human awareness, multispecies horizons of resistance/existence are envisioned.

1.4.1.2 Tanith Lee's "Wolfland" (1980-1983): refusing the binding vow of marriage through the trans-species alliance

Tanith Lee (1947-2015) is a well-known author in the anglosphere. She has written hundreds of short stories and almost a hundred of novels, especially in the genre of fantasy, horror, gothic, weird and science fiction, addressed both to young and adult readers. She has published her works in England and the US, receiving many awards, but also many rejections. Her collection *Red as Blood or Tales from the Sisters Grimmer* (1983) retells nine European fairy tales with a focus on gender roles. The collection has been published by DAW Books, an US publisher based in New York, who published others of her works. Some of the tales from *Red as Blood* were previously published in anthologies and magazines. The collection is not Lee's best-selling work, but the title tale was nominated for the Nebula Award. *Red as Blood* has been republished in 2014 including Lee's tale "The Waters of Sorrow", appeared in 2011 in the US literary magazine "Weird Tales". Cristina Bacchilega argues that "Lee's collection [...] ambitiously transforms the fairy tale to foreground women and their desires" (1997: 86). She points out that *Red as Blood* "historicizes the representation of women in fairy tales":

by ordering her tales chronologically from the "Last Century B.C." to "The Future," she portrays fairy tale heroines like Cinderella or Little Red Riding Hood to parallel the way women were treated in a certain period. "Beauty" is the last tale in the collection and its futuristic setting assumes a Utopian dimension when read in contrast to the earlier tales. (Bacchilega 1995: 172)

The construction of Lee's collection seems thus to echo that of *The Bloody Chamber*: in both works, the representation of women's agency and empowerment follows a linear progression.

In the present dissertation, I will focus on the sixth tale from Lee's collection: "Wolfland", The tale appeared firstly in the US magazine "Fantasy & Science Fiction" published by Mercury Press in 1980, which was among the leading magazines in the fields of fantasy and science fiction and which published well-known stories and authors. "Wolfland" retells "Little Red Riding Hood" focusing on the figure of the werewolf, which traces back to the oral "Conte

de grand-mère” (“The Story of Grandmother”), and which disappears in further literary versions by Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers to be replaced with a simple wolf (see §2.1). The figure of the werewolf recalls also to Carter’s *Bloody Chamber* versions, especially “The Werewolf”, where the grandmother is a werewolf herself, and “The Company of Wolves”, where the wolf harassing Riding Hood on her way to granny’s is a lycanthrope.

The werewolf figure appears also in Lee’s novel *Lycanthia* (1990). As Lilian M. Heldreth argues, werewolf stories from the 20th century are usually influenced by the image of the werewolf derived from Hollywood cinema. In this representation, the werewolf is shaped with “the wolf-phobia of mass culture”; it is a creature which “lust[s] for the kill”, is “dangerous to any unarmed human being” and “must be exterminated” (Heldreth 1989: 15). Nonetheless, Lee’s versions (both *Lycanthia* and “Wolfland”) reverse this negative representation of the werewolf as a monster. In “Wolfland”, the grandmother is a werewolf, but she is not a negative character; on the contrary, her wolfishness is necessary to overcome the sexual violence to which she is constrained because of “the irrevocable marriage vow that binds you forever to a monster” (Lee 1983: 117). To this lycanthropic nature, Anna will initiate her granddaughter Lisel (Lee’s Riding Hood). Indeed, as Heldreth points out, in Lee’s tale “the grandmother is a werewolf whose desire is to *empower* her red-cloaked granddaughter” (1989: 17). “Wolfland” does not follow the Hollywoodian imaginary where the werewolf stands for toxic virility and male violence, which also pervades traditional versions of the tale, from the *Conte* to Perrault’s and the Grimms’ tales. Rather, as well as in Carter’s discussed variants, the wolf animal-shape represents a chance for female emancipation, which occurs together with the liberation of actual wolves from the oppression of men’s hunting. “Wolfland”’s wolf-spirit who allows for the women’s transmogrification is “female and empowering, rather than masculine and overpowering” (Heldreth 1989: 17). In line with the 1980s orientation of feminist criticism, Heldreth argues how the wolf transmogrification “gives to women the strength to overcome the males who oppress them, the power to live individual lives” (1989: 17). However, what emerges from the women’s processes of metamorphosis in Lee’s tale is more like an alliance that allows both the liminal creatures involved in the transmogrification (the wolf and the woman) to emancipate from men’s patriarchal control and violence, thereby suiting the ecotransfeminist reading I aim to propose.

1.4.2 The new millennium: post-human sensibilities

As discussed in the state of the art, the 1990s and the new millennium have seen, in the Euro-Western context, the growing interest for fictions referring to a post-anthropocentric sensibility, to which the Anglo-European fairy-tale production is no exception. To this end, Anglo-European fairy-tale retellings see the proliferation of stories where the representation of the agency of the non-human emerges with a critical eye upon anthropocentric humanism. This is particularly evident in Byatt's "A Stone Woman" (2003) and emerges also quite plainly in Vaz's "What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone" (2010). Lanagan's novel *Tender Morsels* (2008), as a longer thus more complex story if compared to the other tales discussed in this study, offers a post-speciesist insight on metamorphosis and gender representation, while it faces several other topics at the same time, in particular concerning the figure of the witch and her magical body (which is connected to the representation of non-humanity). Blackie's collection *Foxfire, Wolfskin, and Other Stories of Shapeshifting Women* (2019) is deeply rooted in an ecofeminist perspective, while it seems paradoxically closer to the 1970s-80s feminist retellings for the essentialising representation of women the author is likely to draw. However, as I will discuss, Blackie's representation of transbiological bodies and encounters implicitly defies biological essentialism, offering the collection to an ecotransfeminist reading as well as the other discussed works.

1.4.2.1 Antonia Susan Byatt's "A Stone Woman" (2003): destabilizing the anthropocentric notions of *bios* and *geos*

Antonia Susan Byatt (1936-2023) is a very well-known English author, whose work has been translated into many languages. She is another key writer of the so-called "fairy-tale generation". However, her fairy-tale production appears later if compared to the explosion of fairy-tale writings during the 1970s fairy-tale renaissance. Her novel *Possession: A Romance*, which engages with the folk tale of Mélusine and includes two original fairy tales narrated by the novel's characters, has been published in 1990. Byatt has engaged with folk and fairy tales (retold or invented) in many other forms, especially with short-stories collections such as *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994), *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998), and *The Little Black Book of Stories* (2003).

Byatt's engagement with nature writing, eco-fiction, and a broad rethinking of the anthropocentric standpoint has been pointed out by recent criticism. Alexandra Cheira remarks that Byatt's work, both fictional and critical, is "shaped by environmental concerns" (2023: 45). Focusing on some of Byatt's works (in particular *Ragnarok: The End of Gods*, "Sea Story" and "Thoughts on Myth"), Cheira argues that her literary production is suitable for an affective-ecocritical reading (2023: 46). This allows to examine Byatt's articulation of "an overwhelming sense of environmental loss with [...] sorrow and distress for that state of affairs", together with her suggestion of "a course of action that might stop" what Byatt herself defines "a kind of grief for the earth" (Cheira 2023: 46). Other critics have pointed out Byatt's interest for the "human knowledge and understanding [...] of the natural world" (Sturrock 2002/2003: 94), and her broad engagement with the representation of "posthuman subjects" (Wazelak 2022). Wazelak has also highlighted the intersection of Byatt's engagement with the environment to her engagement with gender issues, referring in particular to "A Stone Woman", which seems to express "a wish to escape the biological as well as the cultural fate of women" (Wazelak 2018: 111). This ecofeminist sensibility has been pointed out also by Tan Feng (2022) concerning Byatt's novel *Possession*, whose "feminist consciousness" has been widely recognised.

The short story "A Stone Woman" fits within this post-human sensibility expressed by Byatt's writing. The tale appears on "The New Yorker" in 2003 and is collected in the *Little Black Book of Stories* along the same year. The collection includes four other short stories, among which "The Thing in the Forest" shows a particular post-human sensibility that is quite likely to the one expressed by "A Stone Woman".

"A Stone Woman" is inspired to Icelandic myths and fairy tales, with particular reference to the folk tale "Trunt, trunt, and the trolls in the fells" (see Simpson 1972), featuring a man who gets kidnapped by a female troll in the mountains and progressively transforms into a troll himself. Byatt's tale features a woman, Ines, who, after the death of her beloved mother, slowly transmogrifies into a stone woman. Her friendship with the Icelandic stonecutter Thorsteinn Hallmundursson is decisive for the development of the plot. By this alliance between different "othered" beings – an Icelandic stonecutter living in a milder country during the harsh Icelandic winter, and a half-stone woman – Ines will eventually find the kind she belongs to and her place in the world. The recognition of her in-between condition and the

post-anthropocentric potential of it questions the human belief that matter cannot be agential and dismantles the dualism between *bios* and *geos*. A crucial role is also played in the tale by the Icelandic folkloric imaginary, suggesting the re-enchanting potential of magic tales.

1.4.2.2 Katherine Vaz's "What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone" (2010): longing for the other-than-human condition

Katherine Vaz (1955) is a Portuguese-American author born in the US. Her novels and short-stories collections have received prizes and recognitions, especially in the field of Portuguese-American writings. "What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone" is part of a fairy-tale collection edited by Kate Bernheimer (scholar, writer and editor broadly engaging with fairy tales), entitled *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me* (2010). The anthology collects "forty new fairy tales" written by authors such as Aimee Bender, Michael Cunningham, Neil Gaiman, Kelly Link, Joyce Carol Oates and many others. However, Bernheimer's choice of authors for this anthology was not limited to those who are widely known, but, as she points out, "I sought out writers whose work had suggested 'fairy tale' to me, whether in obvious or subtle ways" (2010: XXI). Published by Penguin Books, Bernheimer's bestselling collection won the World Fantasy Award for Best Anthology and is dedicated to Angela Carter, whose crucial influence upon fairy-tale authors and retellers proves once again to reach our days. Angela Carter is also quoted in the epigraph of the anthology, featuring her famous statement about the fluid nature of fairy tales: "[...] [i]s there a definitive recipe for potato soup? [...] This is how *I* make potato soup" (Carter in Bernheimer 2010: XVI, original emphasis). The fairy tales included in the anthology are mainly retellings of classic tales, and the link between the old and the new tale is explicated in the index. However, such few summary lines reveal that these 21st century tales differ a lot from their traditional variants.

When explaining the backstage of her edited collection, Bernheimer states something that is particularly interesting for the purposes of our discourse:

I have a sense that a proliferation of magical stories, especially fairy tales, is correlated to a growing awareness of human separation from the wild and natural world. In fairy tales, the human and animal worlds are equal and mutually dependent. The violence, suffering, and beauty

are shared. Those drawn to fairy tales, perhaps, wish for a world that might live “forever after”.

My work as a preservationist of fairy tales is entwined with all kinds of extinction. (2010: XIX)

Bernheimer’s words recall the urge for re-enchantment needed in the current times of “trouble”, pointing namely to the fairy-tale representation of the human and the non-human worlds as connected with each other. This aspect emerges along the anthology, and Katherine Vaz’s short story is no exception.

In “What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone”, Vaz retells Hans Christian Andersen’s “Little Mermaid” (first published in 1937), questioning its Christian background and the following separation of the “tactile human love” from “God’s love” (Vaz 2010: 218) or “what we think to call holy” (220). The Christian perspective underpinning the traditional tale pushes the Little Mermaid to desire, by the means of shapeshifting into the human form and loving a human prince, to obtain a soul – which is not allowed to non-human beings. On the contrary, in Vaz’s tale, it is the human protagonist (Meredith) to desire for the other-than-human condition, and for the “modesty of the soul” taught by the water. By this subverted perspective, Meredith reverses also the violent silencing of Andersen’s female protagonist into a desire for silencing the complexities of human existence, with its uncomfortable detachment from the body and its pursuing “of a beautiful idea” (Vaz 2010: 219) instead of a true embodied love.

The realist story of Meredith, immersed in contemporary urban life, entwines not only with Andersen’s tale, but also with the figure of Annette Kellerman, a real professional swimmer and performer known as the Million-Dollar Mermaid. Vaz writes that she is “madly in love” with Kellerman (2010: 219) and her character Meredith equals this passion. Meredith is passionate for freediving and Annette Kellerman is her watery heroine, the mermaid she looks at wishing to become a body suspended in the waters. Meredith’s desire for a post-human watery condition intertwines with her desire for emancipating from the heaviness of human communication and its separation from the embodied dimension of love, which her husband seems to lose when he leaves Meredith for another woman – as well as the Prince does in Andersen’s tale. The “modesty of the soul” taught by water that Annette Kellerman acknowledges seems to invite to a tentacular, post-human thinking which listens more to the material body than to a rationalising humanism which suggests to de-evaluate matter if

compared to the mind or to the Christian soul. To this end, in Vaz's tale, non-human agencies are represented as having a lot to teach to humans.

1.4.2.3 Sharon Blackie's *Foxfire, Wolfskin, and Other Stories of Shapeshifting Women* (2019): the subversion of the transbiological oddkin

Sharon Blackie (1961) is an English author, born from a Scottish father and a British/Irish mother, whose cultural backgrounds have influenced her mythological and folkloric imaginary.²⁹ Blackie has a formation in psychology and in mythology which informs her literary writing. She has used fairy tales also in her clinical work, recognising to them a crucial role in stimulating her patients' imagination.³⁰ She describes her work as springing from "an intense connection to the land" and its ecology, which she understands as an act of "re-enchantment"³¹. She has published both fiction and nonfiction, with a focus on the challenging of myths and the construction of the female identity.

In the collection of short-stories *Foxfire, Wolfskin, and Other Stories of Shapeshifting Women* (2019), Blackie moves from folk, fairy tales, and legends, whose connection with her own stories is made explicit in the appendix. Her revisions of the European archive of folklore is grounded onto an ecofeminist background, which aims at recovering female agency through the animal shapeshifting. She chooses to focus on shapeshifting also because, as she states, "animals do have a particular wisdom" that humans lack, and which humans can listen to in order to learn "different ways of being" and approach the troubles of contemporary times.³² Thereby, despite its very recent publication, Blackie's collection is deeply tied to a similar feminist cultural background to that of Carter's and Lee's works. In this regard, her work may seem somehow anachronistic, representing a female identity which is likely to be essentialising. With a problematic reference to feminine archetypes and new-age spiritualism, some forms of ecofeminism incur the risk of biologically essentialising the category of "woman" while excluding non-cisgender identities. Hence, although the ecofeminist message

²⁹ <https://sharonblackie.net/about/>.

³⁰ <https://vimeo.com/367246310?fl=pl&fe=sh>. The video is available on Blackie's website, <https://sharonblackie.net/foxfire-wolfskin/>.

³¹ <https://sharonblackie.net/about/>.

³² <https://vimeo.com/367246310?fl=pl&fe=sh>.

of Blackie's work plainly proposes the dismantling of patriarchal norms together with anthropocentric ones, and even if her characters present transbiological features which, as I will further argue, offer to an ecotransfeminist reading, the author has expressed transphobic positions, which contradict the transbiological focus of her fairy-tale production.³³ As Jade Visos-Ely argues in their master thesis, insisting on the importance of "reclaiming the shapeshifter's queerness" (2024: 97), the shapeshifting woman not only represents a "feminine ideal", but also opens a discussion around "the queer potential of the shapeshifter" (2024: 81). Indeed, as Greenhill and Allen remark, queer scholarship pays much attention, nowadays, to fairy tales which involve "animal prosthetics and/or partly animal bodies" (2018: 231). One of the most famous fairy tales representing transbiology, Andersen's "Little Mermaid" has been read according to transgender approaches for how the protagonist transforms her body "to fit the person she feels she is" (2018: 231), even though this was not the author's intent when representing transbiology. To this end, I would like to approach Blackie's collection starting from her transbiological representations, which, in addition to being mythical archetypes for women's empowerment as meant by the author, they also defy, by their own hybrid nature, binary norms, including those of species as well as those of gender.

Among the short-stories contained in *Foxfire, Wolfskin*, I will focus on the title story "Foxfire" and on "The Water-Horse". Both tales recall to North-European myths: that of the *huldra* (a woman-fox shapeshifter) and that of the *each-uisge* (a water monster disguised in the shape of a handsome young man). Both tales feature trans-species alliances which allow the protagonists to emancipate from their oppressed conditions as women and humans. In "The Water-Horse", the liminality of the transbiological condition offers to the female protagonist a way out of her repressed destiny as a woman, drawing on the imaginative potential opened by the in-between horizons which do not fit given normative roles. In "Foxfire", the trans-species friendship between a woman and a *huldra* awakes the woman's desire for the post-

³³ Heater Gorse makes reference to such transphobic positions in an open letter to Sharon Blackie on her blog (<https://heathergorse.com/post/699134762728718336/an-open-letter-to-sharon-blackie>). The episode 13 of Sharon Blackie's podcast "This Mythic Life", where, as Gorse writes, Blackie refers to trans women not as women but as a "third sex", has been cancelled from SoundCloud (<https://soundcloud.com/thismythiclife/ian-mckenzie>). Readers of Blackie's *Hagitude: Reimagining the Second Half of Life* (2022) have also reviewed the book expressing disgust for the "TERF-y" (an acronym for "Trans Excluding Radical Feminist") discourses Blackie carries up in this work.

human embodied condition, recognising, as well as in Vaz's tale, the freedom this condition offers. In both tales, the demonisation of the shapeshifter is deconstructed, thereby dismantling the demonisation of non-conforming bodies which includes other forms of transbiology, such as trans-genderism and trans-sexuality, proving the material and semantic untenability of the transphobic approach. By featuring in-between characters, Blackie's tales echo Carter's *Bloody Chamber*, where liminality is often represented not as a temporary status to be overcome, but rather as a full identity to be explored.

1.4.2.4 The fairy-tale novel: Margo Lanagan's *Tender Morsels* (2008)

Margo Lanagan (1960) is an Australian white author. She has written junior, young adult, teenage fictions, as well as short stories and romances, mostly based on the realm of fantasy, engaging also with folk and fairy tales. Her work has mainly spread within Australia and has also been recognised Australian literary awards. Her novel *Tender Morsels* (2008) retells the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale "Snow-White and Rose-Red", which was published at the beginning of the 19th century, and which is deeply rooted in patriarchal culture. As Jeff Vandermeer has observed (2008), the legacy of Angela Carter can be recognised also in Lanagan's fairy-tale world.³⁴ *Tender Morsels* intertwines the fairy world of the Grimms' tale with a brutal patriarchal reality where young female protagonists have to face sexual harassment and violence even from the members of their family. The apparent flatness of the traditional fairy-tale world and characters is questioned together with its given heteropatriarchal layers and the traditional passivity of the Grimms' female characters. Lanagan's revision gives centrality to women's agency through the focus on their "heart's desires" and the efficacy of them upon the material world of the novel.

In *Tender Morsels*, the Grimms' characters of Snow-White and Rose-Red are retold as two girls named Branza and Urdda. They live with their mother (Liga) in a cottage in the woods in a parallel enchanted world, where the forest is a safe place, wild animals are their friends, and town people are always kind to them. This world was created by Liga when she was sixteen: she tried to kill herself and her first daughter after having endured daily rapes from her father and a gang rape from a group of town boys, but she was saved by a "moonish matter"

³⁴ https://clarkesworldmagazine.com/lanagan_interview/.

or “moon baby” (Lanagan 2010: 58)³⁵ who sent her into the world of her “heart’s desire”. By this expedient, Lanagan explains the safe fairy-world represented in the Grimms’ tale.

The title of the novel recalls a phrase from the Grimms’ tale, where the dwarf – an evil character – is about to be eaten by a bear, but begs him to rather eat the girls, who are more “tender morsels” than him (Grimm 1986: 521). The episode appears also in Lanagan’s novel, where the dwarf (who becomes a short man Collaby Dought) tries to convince the bear that “There is nothing of me but a scrap of leather! Please, my lord, have these! [...] So plump, so tender! Full of juice and fat! They will make a fine meal for you!” (Lanagan 2010: 189). The definition of the girls as “tender morsels” recalls the association between men’s gaze on women and carnivorism in patriarchal culture, which has been widely investigated by (eco)feminist theoretical discourses (see Adams 1990; Adams and Donovan 1995). The understanding of women’s bodies as meat to be (sexually) exploited is explored along Lanagan’s novel. The female protagonists forge friendships with non-human animals and show a particular sensibility for the condition of oppression endured by animals, recognising its similarity with their own. As Lanagan says, all the women in her novel “are tender morsels, at the mercy of the men’s beastlier instincts as well as being protected and prized by them”, and “every horse, dog, sheep and goat that comes under the control of a human being” joins them “in their vulnerability to abuse” (Lanagan in Vandermeer 2008).

Therefore, *Tender Morsels* displays a post-human sensibility which acknowledges the intersection between non-human animals’ and women’s oppression. The reappropriation of the agency of the tale’s female protagonists goes along with the emerging of a desire for the other-than-human condition which echoes Vaz’s and Blackie’s stories, as well as regaining the carterian legacy of the shapeshifter and its in-between, transbiological emancipatory potential. By the representation of post-human or magical witchy bodies, Lanagan exposes the repressive action of gender binary roles – both masculine and feminine – as they are constructed by the heteropatriarchal discourse. By setting into the scene the witch figure (which is a broad umbrella for the other-than-human and liminal being), *Tender Morsels* draws on the capacity of the magical body to rewrite not only its own story, but that of the whole world it lives in.

³⁵ The magical moon-baby overlaps with the beautiful child from the Grimm’s tale – an “angel” protector of good children – who saves Snow-White and Rose-Red when they fall asleep in the forest near to the edge of a cliff (“[...] they saw a beautiful child in a white, glistening garment sitting near them”, Grimm 1987: 517).

Spacetime mattering is questioned and retold by Lanagan's characters, and the shapeshifting of the body entwines with that of the world, opening to the revolutionary potential of re-enchanting narratives.

Chapter 2

Oddkin and the Sabbath

An Ecotransfeminist Ethics of Care

As discussed in § Chapter 1, the entwinement of animality and female empowerment is a central focus to feminist fairy-tale retellings, especially, but not limited, to the 1970s and 1980s production. However, despite the broad use of non-human figurations to bring forward a discourse around female emancipation, such tales involve a more-or-less implicit post-anthropocentric and post-speciesist³⁶ approach to the representation of non-humanity, delineating what I am going to define as an ecotransfeminist ethics of care. To this end, I understand “care” in the sense proposed by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, therefore as “everything that is done to maintain, continue, and repair ‘the world’ so that all can live in it as well as possible” (2017: 161).

In their introduction to *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics: A Reader* (2007),³⁷ Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan draw on the interconnection between the feminist ethic-of-care tradition and animal ethics. As they summon it, the feminist ethic-of-care theory moves from Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982), where women’s morality is identified as concerned with care, responsibility and relationship, and as opposed to men’s morality based on “rights”, thus on separation rather than on connection (Adams and Donovan 2007:

³⁶ See § 1.1.2.

³⁷ The publication, a collection of leading essays in the field of feminist and animal studies, is an expansion of the previous publication edited by Adams and Donovan, *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Caring Ethic from the Treatment of Animals* (1996).

1-2). While this approach may seem binary-biased, it actually takes account of the different cultural socialisation to which people are faced according to the gender they are assigned at birth. Gilligan's women's caring ethics has been followed and discussed by further works (Noddings 1984, Ruddick 1989, Kittay and Meyers 1987 among the others). In this genealogy, the feminist care ethics favours the context, allowing to understand each situation in its uniqueness. Therefore, feminist care theory "resists hierarchical dominative dualisms" (Adams and Donovan 2007: 2). Donovan and Adams highlight that such dualisms, moving from patriarchy to speciesism, bring forward a representation of non-human animals as mere things (2007: 2), deprived of agency. At the same time, they shed light on how the feminist ethic of care regards non-human animals as "individuals who do have feelings, who can communicate those feelings, and to whom therefore humans have moral obligations" (2-3). Moreover, ethic-of-care theory insists on the need to address the system causing the oppression of non-human animals (3). To this extent, not only animal individualities are acknowledged, but this acknowledgement occurs within a more comprehensive analysis of their situations according to the dualistic systems of economic, political, and cultural power.

Hereby, Adams and Donovan recall the genealogy of Anglo-American "animal ethics", which has received a renewed attention in the last quarter of the 20th century. The authors argue that animal ethics include animal rights theory (such as Regan 1983, Singer 1975) as well as deep ecology (such as Devall and Sessions 1984, Nash 1989) and other theoretical movements, to which I link also post-human and new materialist thinking, which are also entwined with feminist theories. Radical Anglo-American feminists have also underlined the connection between the oppression of women and that of animals under the patriarchal regime of domination (Adams 1990, Collard 1988, Kappeler 1995, Benney 1983). Such approaches insist on the need to claim freedom not only for women but also for "the creatures which share the planet with us" (Benney 1983 in Adams and Donovan 2007: 10), delineating an ethic of care which is not just feminist but also post-speciesist and post-anthropocentric.

In this dissertation, with the expression "ecotransfeminist ethics of care", I mean an ethic of care which accounts for the feminist care ethics tradition and for animal ethics, while suggesting a queerization of the dualistic binaries which they both challenge. The ecotransfeminist ethics of care defies binaries and the "stregghizzazione" (literally

“witchification”)³⁸ of othered beings through multispecies alliances that challenge gender and species separations. To this end, multispecies horizons are generated within an ecotransfeminist ethics-of-care project, echoing Haraway’s proposal described in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). As Michelle Westerlaken argues, multispeciesism is a concept opposed to speciesism that also “fits with a feminist idea of plurality, as well as the formulation of a relational ethics of ‘care’” (2020). Being connected to feminist care ethics, multispeciesism means that multiple species “are involved with the making of worlds, without assigning any particular order, direction or hierarchy” (2020).³⁹ A multispecies and ecotransfeminist horizon of care emerges when oppressed bodies meet and recognise their shared condition, and ally with each other to build alternative worlds to the one proposed by the heteropatriarchal speciesist order. In such a way, they enact what Val Plumwood defines as an “ethics and politics of mutuality” (1993: 2),⁴⁰ where bodies oppressed by cultural norms care for each other beyond the oppressive layers of a power structure where they are marginalised and exploited. In addition, their alliance represents a threaten to the heteropatriarchal order since the oddkin⁴¹ they generate defies heteropatriarchal reproduction. This is particularly evident since many of the trans-species alliances discussed in this chapter occur within a heterosexual framework. While they do not defy the heterosexual bias yet (which is questioned in further discussed retellings), their defiance of heteropatriarchal reproduction intrinsic to the trans-species relation they represent queerizes such relations, thereby establishing a threaten to the power structure by which they are oppressed. In such a way, allied trans-species bodies come to echo the witch figure and her shapeshifting acolytes who threaten the heteropatriarchal lineage in the magical space of the sabbath, and who were prosecuted for this reason during the European witch-craze.

³⁸ As Nicoletta Poidimani (2019) understands it, the term “streghezzazione” (“witchification”) is a process by which the power regime demonises and emarginates “otherness”.

³⁹ However, as it will be further discussed in the next chapters – in particular in § 4.3 in regard of Byatt’s “A Stone Woman” –, multispeciesism can be further expanded beyond the domain of living beings, to involve also non-living entities.

⁴⁰ I deem it necessary to point out that Adams and Donovan (2007: 13) criticises Plumwood (2002) for her anti-vegetarian approach, which is shared by other ecofeminists (such as Karen J. Warren 1987, 1990). They also compare this ecofeminist approach with that which they consider more “consistent with an ethic of care”, such as the work by Lori Gruen and Greta Gaard.

⁴¹ Oddkin is Haraway’s term for a strange, queer, bizarre multispecies kinship. See § 1.1.2.

In the current chapter, I will focus on two relevant and popular motifs of the European fairy-tale archive suggesting ecotransfeminist care horizons through the engagement with the representation of trans-species encounters. The first is the “Little Red Riding Hood” tale, to which the folkloric figure of the werewolf is linked. The second is the motif of the animal bridegroom (ATU 400 and 425), which I will explore with particular reference to the “Beauty and the Beast” tale which belongs to it. As I am going to discuss, the traditional versions of these tales (Perrault’s and the Grimms’ “Little Red Riding Hood”, Mme de Villeneuve and Mme de Beaumont’s “Beauty and the Beast”, as well as traditional developments of the animal-bridegroom motif such as the *each-uisge* figure) are deeply rooted into patriarchal, anthropocentric and speciesist backgrounds. Thereby, they propose a representation of non-humanity as “otherness” which recovers that of women, who are represented as passive objects deprived of agency. Tales such as Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves” and “The Tiger’s Bride” (1979), Tanith Lee’s “Wolfland” (1980/83), and Sharon Blackie’s “The Water-Horse” (2019) challenge those representations. From the 1970s to the late 2010s, they offer counter-representations of agential female and non-human characters, demonstrating the relevance of defying traditional motifs which are inscribed in the Euro-Western culture until the present days.

However, it must be acknowledged that the tales discussed in this chapter (except for “Wolfland”) are still very much inscribed into a heterosexual imagery, where the trans-species alliance occurs within a heterosexual and romantic encounter. Despite this image recalls the traditional fairy-tale representation of male subjects as “saviours” of the female heroine, it must also be recognised that the female protagonists of these tales are not submitting, in any way, to the will of their male companions. In Euro-Western white feminist movements of the 1970s-80s, to which early feminist Anglo-European fairy-tale retellings are related, female empowerment was mainly claimed as connected to sexual liberation from patriarchal impositions. This aspect is crucial to Carter’s collection, one of whose revolutionary insights from the ecotransfeminist point of view I aim to propose is its challenging of the heterosexual reproductivity. Questioning the speciesist binary, Carter’s tales, as well as Blackie’s one, engage with romantic heterosexuality in a way that defies the classical fairy-tale representations of the saviour-Prince. Such representations are much more alike to the relationship between the witch and her familiar animal: a relationship which has been

persecuted during witch-hunting, since it represented a threaten to heteropatriarchal reproduction. However, it is essential to remark that these representations of trans-species encounters are not exhaustive. In tales such as Lee's "Wolfland", as well as in most of the narratives considered in the further chapters, trans-species alliances built to defy the patriarchal speciesist order exceed heterosexuality, and are rather constructed around odd-genealogies.⁴² Nonetheless, I deem it essential to start from such heterosexual representations where female characters have, after many centuries of patriarchal fairy-tale tradition, the chance to regain their agency and sexual determination through trans-speciesism, since they have been among the first Euro-Western feminist attempts to the rewriting of the European fairy-tale archive and its representation of non-humanity in its link with female (sexual) empowerment. The relevance of these stories must acknowledge, however, their contextual limits.

In the first two sections of this chapter, I will deal with the investigation of the selected traditional tales and motifs, and with the introduction of contemporary Anglo-European feminist variants which involve a more-or-less implicit post-human and ecotransfeminist approach. In these two sections, one devoted to "Little Red Riding Hood" and the werewolf figure, and the other to the animal-bridegroom motif, I will mainly deal with the reversal and subversion of patriarchal gender roles through multispecies alliances proposed by the selected retellings within a feminist agenda. At the same time, I will stress how the representation of the trans-species encounter is not only useful to women's liberation, but it also offers post-anthropocentric perspectives envisioning a multispecies horizon of co-existence, alliance, and care which is necessary also to the liberation of non-human bodies. To this end, the acknowledgement of a shared condition of oppression between women and non-human agencies, as well as the need for an alliance between them to defy the common oppressor, emerges in all the discussed tales.

In the third section of this chapter, I will delve into the proposal of ecotransfeminist tools to read the representations of non-humanity, transbiology, and trans-speciesism in the tales. I will refer namely to three categories which fit the ecotransfeminist reading of the tales' figurations: the sabbath as liminality, the figure of the witch's familiar animal, and Haraway's

⁴² I use the term "odd" in the sense proposed by Donna Haraway concerning her notion of "oddkin" (2016a).

compostist oddkin. Through such historical-theoretical figures, I will propose to link the representation of the witch figure to Anglo-European posthuman theoretical discourses and to contemporary Anglo-European fairy-tale retellings. On the one hand, the witch figure is crucial to the imaginary of the selected tales both from the point of view of the historical context of the tales' production – the same of the European witch-hunting – and for its broad use as a category apt at the “witchification” of Otherness, starting from the connection between women and animals as “othered” beings. On the other hand, post-human categories are relevant when coming to the representation of trans-speciesism in the fairy tale because of the cultural-historical closeness between the raising of Euro-Western post-human thinking and contemporary Anglo-European fairy-tale retellings questioning the category of “human”. Post-human theoretical movements challenge the Western divide between nature/culture and human/non-human, which is linked to the heteropatriarchal construction of gender roles, as European fairy tales intrinsically do by their own nature (as discussed in § Chapter 1). Thereby, when coming to the reading of contemporary retellings of traditional tales, it is relevant to challenge the intersection between the cultural frameworks where both narratives (the traditional and the retold) originate. At the same time, a post-human, ecotransfeminist, and sabbathic reading of the tales allows to shed light on the intersection and inseparability between the liberation of women and non-humans from the oppressive layers of the patriarchal and anthropocentric cultural framework. By the reappropriation of the witch figure and the notion of “Otherness” brought forward by the selected tales, a horizon of ecotransfeminist care arises, where the alliance between oppressed bodies allows to defy the common oppressor.

2.1 Little Red Riding Hood and the Werewolf

In this section, I will introduce the “Little Red Riding Hood” (LRRH) tale in some of its variants across several centuries and socio-cultural contexts. The tale usually reaches the contemporary reading public in the version proposed by the Grimm Brothers (1812-1857), which is, in turn, a revision of Charles Perrault's first literary version proposed as “Le chaperon rouge” (1697). Both versions are rooted in a patriarchal culture where the girl is blamed for the (sexual) violence she suffers at the hand of the wolf (a non-human, male aggressor who embodies the tale's villain). She could only be saved by another male figure: the hunter, who,

in this case, is a human character, and who appears only in the Grimms' version. However, Perrault's and the Grimms' literary tales originate from oral tales that have been handed down from generation to generation, from Europe to Asia (Eberhard 1989). While it is difficult to assert which version comes first, scholars generally agree that the folk variants at the basis of Perrault's "Le chaperon rouge" spread in the rural mountain area between the South of France and the North of Italy, during the same centuries of the European witch-craze. The tale which is agreed to have been the ground for the traditional European literary versions is known as "Le conte de Grandmère" ("The Story of Grandmother") and paves the way for the 1970s-80s feminist reversals of the patriarchal versions by Perrault and the Grimms. In such contemporary tales, not only Riding Hood, but also the wolf figure meets an important revision.

In this section, I will mainly deal with the close reading of two 1970s-80s retellings of LRRH: Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves" (*The Bloody Chamber*, 1979) and Tanith Lee's "Wolfland" (*Red as Blood*, 1980/83). I will also briefly consider another LRRH variant proposed by Carter in *The Bloody Chamber* ("The Werewolf"), while the third tale from Carter's wolf-trilogy ("Wolf-Alice") will be discussed in § Chapter 4. In this section, I will mainly focus on the feminist representation of transbiology and trans-species alliances in both Lee's and Carter's tales, with a particular reference to their investigation of the werewolf figure and their reliance upon the pre-perraultian oral tale ("Le conte de Grandmère"), which subverts the patriarchal speciesist narratives offered by Perrault's and the Grimms' popular variants. In doing so, the textual analysis developed in this section will be mainly devoted to observing the historical Euro-Western feminist perspectives expressed in Carter's and Lee's tales and how they imply a subversion of the wolf figure as a villain. I will also suggest the ecotransfeminist implications of their representations of human-nonhuman encounters beyond patriarchal speciesism (upon which I will further elaborate in section § 2.3).

2.1.1. Witch-hunting, werewolf trials, and the belief in lycanthropy behind "Little Red Riding Hood" and Angela Carter's variants

The "Little Red Riding Hood" tale is rooted, in both its literary and oral variants, in the popular motif of lycanthropy, which is resumed by both Angela Carter's and Tanith Lee's versions.

The belief in lycanthropy was popular in the period and area in which the oral tale originated. Treatises about the psycho-physical disease of lycanthropy proliferated, and werewolf trials were frequent in the frame of witch-hunting.

Carter's "The Company of Wolves"⁴³ opens by telling some legends about lycanthropy. Since the beginning, the reader is plunged in the realm of fantasies and beliefs about shapeshifters. The story is set in "midwinter" (Carter 2006: 132), when the "malign door of the solstice still swings upon its hinges" (Carter 2006: 133). The winter solstice opens the doors of darkness: days are shorter, and the darkness featuring this period of the year is the ideal moment for meeting fantastic creatures, monsters, and other magical individuals that generally hide in the darkness. The first story to be told is about a hunter who traps a wolf in a pit, but when he jumps down to slit his throat and cut off his paws, "then no wolf at all lay in front of the hunter but the bloody trunk of a man, headless, footless, dying, dead" (Carter 2006: 131). Then it comes the story of a witch who transforms the members of an entire wedding party into wolves because the groom chose another bride instead of her. Another story is about a young woman who marries a man who disappears on the first wedding night. He comes back years later, and when he discovers that she has re-married and given birth to two kids, he shapeshifts into a wolf and tears off the foot of one of the boys. After that, the populace kills him with a hatchet, but the dead body laying in front of them is not that of a wolf, but of a man (Carter 2006: 131-132).

In this folkloric introduction, Carter draws upon the wolf's melancholy. This melancholy – "infinite as the forest, endless as these long nights of winter" – is traced back to the despair the wolf feels for his own wolf-condition, "as if the beasts would love to be less beastly if only they knew how and never cease to mourn their own condition" (131). In some early modern treatises which considered "witchcraft" as a mental illness,⁴⁴ melancholy was considered to have similar causes to lycanthropy. Both melancholy and lycanthropy were associated to an

⁴³ The tale retells LRRH following the traditional plot but reversing the ending. Furthermore, the wolf is actually a werewolf who appears to the girl disguised as a handsome hunter. He dares the girl with the traditional challenge, arrives first at granny's house and eats her. However, when he asks the girl to join him in bed, the girl accepts the sexual invite and lays happily with him.

⁴⁴ Matteoni (2009) relies on works such as Pierre de Lancre, *Tableau de l'inconstance des Mauvais anges et demons*, (1612); Johann Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum* (1563); Reginald Scott, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584).

imbalance of the four humours which were believed by ancient medicine to rule the body (Long 2021: 139; Matteoni 2009: 103). Other authors, such as Pietro Pamponazzi (1556), considered that lycanthropy was caused by “an alteration of the physiognomic features of humans who lived in the manner of animals” (Matteoni 2009: 103).

In “The Company of Wolves”, the narrator insists that the wolf’s despair is not enough for moving a (human) heart to redemption, but an “external mediator” is needed for expiating the sin – which is why “the beast will look as if he half welcomes the knife that despatches him” (Carter 2006: 131). This also recalls witch-trials in the European witch-craze period (15th-17th centuries), when werewolves trials were also quite common, especially in the area between the North of Italy and the South of France. Sometimes the alleged werewolves happened to be lynched by the people themselves, without the actual sentence of a trial – which often happened also to those who were accused of sorcery – while the local authorities silently approved (Schulte 2015: 41-42). In other cases, they were sent to official trials. According to the Christian belief (promoted by the Church and by the sorcery treatises of the period), lycanthropy was caused by the hand of the Devil. The association between lycanthropy and the Devil is recalled in Carter’s “Company of Wolves”, where the narrative voice reports folklores narrating that the Devil “was born feet first and had a wolf for his father and his torso is a man’s but his legs and genitals are a wolf’s. And he has a wolf’s heart” (Carter 2006: 132).

If some considered lycanthropy to be a physical disease, others, such as Jean de Nynauld (1615), suggested that metamorphosis did not have a physical basis but was caused by a diabolical delusion, consisting in a salve to put on the body which made the acolyte hallucinating a metamorphosis (Matteoni 2009: 103). This belief is recalled in Carter’s tale, where peasants believe that “there’s an ointment the Devil gives you that turns you into a wolf the minute you rub it on” (Carter 2006: 132). Similarly, in Tanith Lee’s “Wolfland”, the transmogrification happens by digesting some yellow flowers containing the power of lycanthropy. In other cases, the metamorphosis happens by wearing a wolfskin, as in the case of Jean Grenier, a thirteen-years-old boy accused of lycanthropy (Matteoni 2009: 104).

The connection between the belief in lycanthropy, the belief in witchcraft, and the historical phenomenon of witch-hunting is evoked by Angela Carter also in “The Werewolf”.⁴⁵ Set in a

⁴⁵ In this LRRH variant, the girl discovers that the wolf is actually her grandmother, who gets lynched by the peasants as a witch.

northern cold country where people live a hard kind of life, the tale recalls legends and beliefs about the Devil's relations with the witches. In this remote place, "the Devil is as real as you or I. More so", since "they have not seen us" but "the Devil they glimpse often in the graveyards" (Carter 2006: 126). At midnight, the Devil holds there picnics and "invites the witches; then they dig up fresh corpses, and eat them" (126). The truth of such legends is, as said, more real than "you or I": "Anyone will tell you that" (126). Witch-hunting is evoked too, highlighting its typical features in popular beliefs. The witch is "some old woman whose cheeses ripen when her neighbours' do not, another old woman whose black cat, oh, sinister!, *follows her about all the time*" (126, original emphasis). Then, as according to the typical process of witch-prosecution, "they strip the crone, search for her marks, for the supernumerary nipple her familiar sucks", and stone her until she dies (2006: 126).

In this setting, as according to the LRRH plot, "The Werewolf" tells of a girl who is sent to visit her sick grandmother. Right on cue, she meets a wolf in the woods. But she is not naïf as Perrault's girl: she slashes off the wolf's paw, and he runs away into the woods. When the girl comes to her grandmother's house, she finds her deeply sick. At the same time, she realises that the wolf's paw she was carrying in her basket has become a woman's hand, with a wedding ring and "a wart on the index finger" (Carter 2006: 128). By that, she recognises her grandmother's hand. Suddenly, she finds a bloody stump instead of a hand on her grandmother's body. She cries so loud that the neighbours come, acknowledge the woman's wart as a witch's nipple, and beat her until she dies. Thereby, the girl prosperously lives in her grandmother's house hereafter.

As mentioned, the connection between the folkloric background of "Little Red Riding Hood" – since its oral variants –, lycanthropy, and witch-hunting is quite tight. Werewolves were among the many monstrous figures that were believed to participate in the sabbaths. Werewolf trials were quite common in the French-Italian Alps region in the period where the oral versions of LRRH and its variants originated (15th-17th centuries), which is why it has been acknowledged that the tale was probably influenced by those beliefs. To this end, scholarship acknowledges that the LRRH villain himself was, since the first French folk lores, not only a wolf – as it is in further variants by Perrault and the Grimms – but namely a werewolf (Zipes 1983: 2; Bartra 2024: 118). Thereby, the oral version upon which Perrault's tale is supposed to be based ("Le conte de Grandmère") refers to a "*bzou*", the French name

for “werewolf”. In Perrault’s version, this character is simply referred to as a “wolf” who transvestites as a human to trick the girl (Bartra 2024: 118). In this regard, as Zipes suggests, the oral *Conte* was probably a “warning tale”, a common genre in Medieval Europe which included “hostile forces threatening children who were without protection” (1983: 4). With particular reference to the gender of the tale’s protagonists, and to the moral aim of Perrault’s tale, it might be relevant to notice that werewolves’ aggressions directed toward little girls or young women were always implicitly connected to sexual aggressions (Bartra 2024: 117). The erotic tones of the werewolf myth grew in Europe during the 17th century, which coincides with the period of the publication of Perrault’s “Chaperon rouge” (Bartra 2024: 118).

Men and women accused of lycanthropy were also believed to transmogrify into wolves to commit violent acts, such as killing and eating children. As well as the witches and other early modern “monsters”, werewolves were scapegoats for explaining human violences and jealousies:

Little children were attacked and killed by animals and grown-ups in the woods and fields. Hunger often drove people to commit atrocious acts. In the 15th and 16th centuries, violence was difficult to explain on rational grounds. There was a strong superstitious belief in werewolves and witches, uncontrollable magical forces of nature [...]. (Zipes 1983: 6-7)

The association of violence to the wolf figure makes sense if it is considered in the frame of the geographical area where both werewolf trials were mostly common and where the LRRH motif originated. This was a mainly mountain area, where wolves were very common. Because of the frequent famines striking those centuries, wolves happened to reach human villages to feed on their food and cattle. Carter’s “Company of Wolves” is set in a “region of mountain and forest” too (2006: 129). When winter comes and the weather gets cold, “there is [...] nothing for the wolves to eat” (2006: 129). Wolves were so hideous to the human population of the area, that they were increasingly associated with the Devil and his sabbaths (Milin 1997: 56-59). The fortune of the half human-half wolf figuration probably comes also from the wolf’s ambiguous nature: close to humans because of its smartness, the wolf became to them a sort of peer enemy. Wolves stroke flocks as brigands did, and the humans hunting them did not aim at eating them, but at defying them. As Yvonne Verdier argues, they wanted the wolf’s

skin (2015: 63-64). However, until the influence of demonology treatises in the 16th and 17th centuries, lycanthropy was not regarded as a crime, but werewolves were understood as victims of a maleficium (Milin 1997: 28).

Hannah Priest explains the raising popularity of werewolf stories among European and Euro-American popular cultures because of the ancestral relationship humans have, since pre-history, with the wolf. Feared, worshipped, hatred, and even beloved as a companion (whose genealogy reaches today's pet dogs), the wolf has become ever since a protagonist of folk stories and mythologies, which are inherited by contemporary werewolf narratives (Priest 2015: 1). Priest points out that the werewolf figure was produced mainly in societies based on male property ownership and economic independence. In these contexts, the wolf and the werewolf are threatening figures to the primal male hunter as well as to the male landowner, becoming a symptom of the "anxiety of property ownership and status" (Priest 2015: 4). Thereby, a connection can be foreseen between the emergence of church tracts, Inquisition handbooks and folktales about lycanthropy – which were the main means of werewolf narratives in the Medieval and Early Modern Age in the European context – and the raising of capitalism. Since its earliest phase, capitalism has shaped its enemy in the animal form, which represents the devastating force of unproductivity. Therefore, the revision of the figure of the lycanthrope is nowadays a means to revise the understanding of wildness as an enemy to reason, and the opposite construction of the reason/unreason binary with its association of oppressed human bodies (according to categories of gender/sexuality/"race"/etc.) with nature and the unreason.

2.1.2 "The Company of Wolves" by Angela Carter (1979): Riding Hood's sabbath and the reappropriation of sexuality

The heritage of the witch-craze informing Carter's "The Werewolf" is somehow subverted in "The Company of Wolves", which assumes 'heretic' features. The tale questions both the patriarchal and the Christian heritage carried forward by Perrault's 17th-century version.

The plot of "The Company of Wolves" follows the development of the traditional tale. A girl is sent alone into the woods to visit her sick grandmother. She knows that the woods are haunted by the wolf, but, on the edge of adulthood, and in the company of her father's knife,

she feels safe. On her way, she meets a handsome hunter. With a flirty attitude, he challenges her to get to granny's house faster than him. If she loses the bet, she will owe him a kiss. When the girl gets to granny's house, the hunter, who is actually a werewolf, has already arrived and eaten the old woman. Lying in granny's bed, he invites the girl to join him with a threatening attitude, following the traditional back-and-forth questions. The girl is not scared at all, but she enjoys the erotic playing. Telling him that she is "nobody's meat", she decides to join him in bed as a form of reappropriation of her sexuality and gives him the kiss that she owes him.

This erotic trans-species encounter has demonic features, recalling to the witch figure and the Devil's sabbath. The werewolf is represented as a heretic figure, to whom the grandmother figure, a "pious old woman" (Carter 2006: 135), is opposed. Grandmother always has "her Bible for company" (135), but the holy book is not strong enough to save her from the demonic force of the werewolf: "you can hurl your Bible at him and your apron after, granny, you thought that as a sure prophylactic against these infernal vermin... now you call on Christ and his mother and all the angels in heaven to protect you but it won't do any good" (135-136). Indeed, when the girl gets to granny's house after the wolf, she finds that "for the first time she'd seen it so, the Bible lay closed on the table" (137). At the same time, the wolf's eyes are "full of Greek fire, diabolic phosphorescence" (137), and reveal the connection between the werewolf and the Devil.

The subversion of the Christian dimension emerges in other aspects of the tale. It is the night before Christmas, almost midnight, and, outside of the window, the howling of a multitude of wolves raises, replacing the holy carols ("Who has come to sing us carols?", asks the girl, 137). In addition, when the clock strikes midnight, "Christmas Day" no longer means the birth of Christ, but is reversed as "the werewolves' birthday" (139). On that day, "the door of the solstice stands wide open" as it was the door of Hell, through which, the narrator pleads, "let them all sink" (139).

It is on that Christmas night, which becomes a pagan rite for the solstice, that a "savage marriage ceremony" (139) is celebrated between the girl and the wolf. When the wolf, traditionally disguised as granny, asks the girl to lie in bed with him, the scene takes an erotic turn, differing from Perrault's version, where, as Cristina Bacchilega argues, "her elaborate strip-tease is reduced to the simple statement that she 'undressed'" (1997: 56). In Carter's tale instead, the encounter between the girl and the wolf is carried to an explicit erotic level,

recalling to the plot of the “Conte de Grandmère”. In addition, the sexual encounter happens outside of the marriage vow and with a stranger.

In the popular imaginary, the werewolf is a character associated with feral sexuality. If the witch-craze imaginary around lycanthropy has shaped the traditional versions of LRRH, in the 20th-century mass culture influenced by Hollywood’s iconography, the werewolf image comes to represent the uncontrollability of (male) sexual impulses. As Lilian M. Heldreth highlights, the werewolf figure refers in particular to “the horrors of male, adolescent changes – the sprouting of hair, the increased strength, the powerful impulses toward sex and violence” (1989: 15). In Carter’s tale too, the werewolf is described as a figure with explicit sexual connotations. The feral traits of the werewolf are described under an erotic light, such as his “flash of white teeth” and “a faint trace of blood on his chin” revealing that “he has been snacking on his catch” (Carter 2006: 135). “His genitals” are also described as “huge” (136), underlying the over-developed sexuality of the werewolf.

Since their first encounter, the girl’s perception of the stranger she meets in the woods is of “a very handsome young one” (134). She acknowledges that “she’d never seen such a fine fellow before” (134). Their encounter is shaped by a flirting and erotic atmosphere: he “made her a comic yet flattering little bow” (134); when he proposes her to bet on who would arrive earlier to granny’s house, he asks what she would give him in exchange. “What would you like?” she asks in return, and he answers: “A kiss”, to which “she lowered her eyes and blushed” (135). This episode delineates, as the narrator comments, the “[c]ommonplaces of a rustic seduction” (135).

Therefore, when the werewolf asks her to lie in bed with him, the girl takes off her clothes and throws them into the fire as he bids her, remaining “clothed only in her untouched integument of flesh” (138) – by which the narrator insists on the fact that she has not been initiated to sexual life yet. After unclothing herself, she takes off the man-wolf’s clothes too, uncovering his wolfy body, “in whose unkempt mane the lice moved” (138). She “unbuttoned the collar of his shirt”, remarking “What big arms you have”, as he replies, – carrying on the typical back-and-forth game of the tale – “All the better to hug you with” (138). When she mentions his big teeth and he replies “All the better to eat you with”, the girl turns around the traditional plot: she “burst out laughing” since “she knew she was nobody’s meat” (138). She flings his shirt into the fire, while “[t]he flames danced like dead souls on Walpurgisnacht” –

the night on which bonfires were lighted up to keep witches and spirits away – “and the old bones under the bed [that of granny] set up a terrible clattering” (138). In their sexual encounter beyond the rules of the Christian marriage, demonic forces are haunting granny’s house, and clothes are thrown into a fire that recalls Hell’s flames. A sort of sabbath is having place at the pious granny’s house, represented as a path of sexual self-determination for the protagonist. The “forest’s Liebestod” could be heard as “[e]very wolf in the world [...] howled a prothalamion outside the window” when she kisses him with “the kiss she owed him” (138). The celebration of this savage marriage ceremony ends with the image of the girl “sweet and sound [...] sleep[ing] in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf” (139).⁴⁶

Thereby, Carter’s protagonist gets out of the traditional heterosexual marriage path, defying patriarchal, heteronormative, and Christian rules. She can be understood indeed as a witch-figure. Firstly, as mentioned, she “marries” outside of the Church, in a pagan, heretic, and even parodic context. Secondly, the sexual encounter occurs with a demonic critter, as it was believed to happen in the sabbaths, where witches had sexual encounters with the Devil in its multiple forms. Furthermore, the lover is half a man, half a wolf: thereby, she also defies the laws of species and anthropocentrism, blurring the boundaries between the human/non-human divide. This sexual encounter also recalls the figure of the witch’s familiar, the animal companion believed to have sexual relationships with the witch thus threatening patriarchal reproduction (to be further investigated in § 2.3.2). It is also relevant that, unlike most human hearts, who, according to folk legends, do not empathize with the wolf’s melancholy, the girl is moved by the melancholic howling of the wolves: “It is very cold, poor things, she said; no wonder they howl so” (Carter 2006: 137). An empathetic connection is established between her and non-human animals. Eventually, unlike in the traditional literary tale, the protagonist self-determines her own sexuality and desire. She is “nobody’s meat”⁴⁷, but she is the one who takes control of her own desire, taking off her clothes and those of her lover.

During the European witch-craze, the women who decided to self-determine their own sexuality and desire, and to get rid of the canonical marriage, were often accused of sorcery.

⁴⁶ This episode evokes also the motif of the animal bridegroom, which will be further investigated in section 2.2.

⁴⁷ For an anti-speciesist reading of the reduction to “meat” shared by women’s and non-human animals’ bodies, see Adams 1990 and Benney 1983. The topic will also be further investigated in section § 2.2 and in § Chapter 3.

Since the beginning of the tale, the reader gets to know the protagonist as a girl who has just started to menstruate: “she has just started her woman’s bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month” (Carter 2006: 133). The girl’s body is described as changing: “[h]er breasts have just begun to swell” (133). As in Perrault’s tale, she wears a red shawl, symbolising that she is in a transitory phase between childhood and the sexual maturity of adulthood, ready to explore her own sexuality and desire. The red shawl “has the ominous if brilliant look of blood on snow” (Carter 2006: 133): an omen to both her growth as a young woman, and to her upcoming encounter with the bloody wolf. Carter describes the girl as not already sexually mature. She might be a bit naïve because of that, but not in a dumb way, rather curious and a bit malicious:

she stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. [...] she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing. (Carter 2006: 133)

This aspect of the girl’s nature is crucial. In Perrault’s “Chaperon rouge”, naivety is the main trait of the girl, who is blamed for being assaulted by a stranger in the woods (the wolf). In Perrault’s tale, the woods assume their typical fairy-tale connotation: a dangerous place where bad things happen and where good girls should not go. In Carter’s tale too, the forest and the night are pervaded by “teeming perils”, such as “ghosts, hobgoblins, ogres that grill babies upon gridirons, witches that fatten their captives in cages for cannibal tables” and also the wolf, who is the “worst for he cannot listen to reason” (2006: 130). Thereby, in Carter’s tale too, “[y]ou are always in danger in the forest, where no people are” (130) and the girl who goes late through the woods is unwise (129). However, Carter’s protagonist is demanded to traverse the dangers of the forest. The girl needs to go into the woods to discover and reappropriate her sexuality beyond patriarchal normativity. Carter’s ending differs from that of Perrault, whose moral suggests that a girl should never navigate the woods and the depths of her desire alone. Otherwise, she would be assaulted, eaten or raped, and killed. Therefore, the girl’s naivety is not blamed in “The Company of Wolves”, but it is rather exalted as a

healthy curiosity and a needed step to discover herself and emancipate from patriarchal norms forcing her sexuality into the path of the heteropatriarchal marriage.

At the same time, by the reappropriation of the sabbath ritual as a space for growth and transformation beyond the patriarchal layers, the witch's non-human acolytes are represented as allies. By the recognition of his likely condition of marginalisation to that of women, the (were)wolf ceases to be the tale's villain and becomes a crucial ally in the fight against oppressive norms. The "Otherness" of both women and non-humans is celebrated in Carter's tale, under a light that recovers the space of the sabbath as generative of multispecies horizons namely because of its intrinsic opposition to heterosexual reproductivity. The sexual union between the girl and the werewolf occurs outside of patriarchal marriage and reproduction, establishing an oddkin which is based on a different kind of kinship: not bloodline and property lineage, but chosen affinity. This aspect will be further deepened in section §2.3, through a comparative reading of the three other contemporary retellings considered in this chapter.

2.1.3 "Le conte de grand-mère": female agency in the pre-Perrault oral tradition

The representation of Riding Hood as a smart and agential character ready to enter adulthood can be found, far before the 1970s-80s feminist retellings, in the oral "Conte de Grandmère". The representation of the girl as an agential character in the pre-perraultian tradition proves that further literary *contes de fées* (initiated by Perrault) have manipulated the tale in order to offer a repressive representation of women.

The "Conte" appears in the "Bulletin folklorique de l'Ile de France" in 1956. French folklorist Paul Delarue wrote the tale down as part of a wider project for the realization of an archive of the *conte populaire français*. Delarue's version comes from a 19th century transcription collected in 1884-1885 by French poet Achille Millien, directly from the mouth of the brothers Louis and François Briffaut, in Montigny-Aux-Amonges (Nièvre). In his research project, Delarue collected thirty-five variants of the tale: some are oral and independent tales, others are partially influenced by the literary variants. One of the most relevant features of Delarue's research is that the independent or half oral/half written variants come from the same area, located between the South of France and the North of Italy (an area which includes the Loire basin, the northern half of the Alps and the Tyrol). Beyond this area,

the tale's variants "are very altered or come from the tale of Perrault, directly or through the intermediary of the version of the Grimm Brothers" (Delarue 1989: 17). Therefore, such area proves to be the place where the LRRH tale developed, before being revised and transposed into the literary form by Charles Perrault. As folklorists such as Marianne Rumpft and Marc Soriano argue, Perrault's tale derives from werewolf lores diffused in the Touraine, the region where his mother grew up, and which the author encountered through the oral tradition (Zipes 1983: 4). It is relevant to notice that oral variants differ substantially from the ones by Perrault and the Grimms, especially for what concerns the representation of the protagonist. In the oral variants, the girl is an agential character who self-determines her growth outside of the patriarchal framework, while in Perrault's and the Grimms' versions she is a passive victim to be blamed for the harassment she suffers. For instance, Zipes points out that the feature of the red manteau was not present in the "Conte" yet. It has been added later by Perrault as part of the bourgeois custom and as a symbol of carnal sin (1983).

In the "Conte", as in the most well-known written versions, the girl is sent through the woods to visit her sick grandma. Along the way, she meets a wolf, who asks her: "What road are you taking, [...] the Needles Road or the Pins Road?" (Delarue 1989: 15). The wolf arrives earlier at granny's house, eats her and leaves a pantry with her flesh and a bottle of her blood on a shelf. When the girl arrives, she is invited to "eat the meat" and drink the "wine" (15). Then, the wolf asks her to undress, throw her clothes in the fire, and come to sleep next to him. However, the girl is not naïve and guesses the trick: she pretends she needs to go outside to relieve herself, manages to escape, and runs back home. As a smart character, the protagonist of the "Conte" knows the woods and how to save herself without any male intervention.

According to Yvonne Verdier's reading – and as it emerges also in Carter's variants –, the tale represents the girl's transition from childhood to adulthood. The "Conte" is an initiation tale, whose protagonist overcomes some of the typical steps of women's growth in the rural area from which the tale comes, proving to be ready for adulthood. In this regard, the symbology of the "Conte" is rich of meanings.

Firstly, in Perrault's version, the path of the pins and the path of the needles disappear. According to Marc Soriano, this happens because Perrault thought that such feature would not have been understood by adults, even though it could have been funny for children (Verdier 2015: 25). Nonetheless, Verdier stresses that the pins-and-needles feature had an important

role in the ethnographic rural context from which oral versions come, where sewing was a relevant stage in the education of young girls. In some villages, when they turned fifteen, girls were sent to spend the winter at a tailor's house (Verdier 2015: 37). Moreover, pins and needles have a specific symbology concerning female sexual growth into adulthood. On the one hand, pins were used by the girls to dress up and were thrown in a fountain to assure a lover, symbolising the age of courtship. On the other hand, the needle's eye symbolises the sexual intercourse, which is a further step in sexual growth (Verdier 2015: 37-38). In addition, the needle is a work tool, while the pin serves only to dress up and has a more precarious function. The pin-needle symbology is relevant since, following Verdier, the tailor's folklore language was common in all the areas where the oral versions of the tale have been collected.

Secondly, the symbology of the "Conte" features cannibalism, which occurs when the wolf invites the girl to eat her grandma's flesh and drink her blood. Cannibalism was a common trope in folklore when the LRRH oral variants originated, as well as in the pre-perraultian written fairy-tale tradition (see Basile 2013; Straparola 2000). Actually, the cannibalistic act had different meanings in European folklore and history. In the European colonial travel writings of the 16th century, for instance, cannibalism was represented as enacted by Indigenous people as a sign of victory. In such a way Hans Staden (1557) describes the Tupinamba people he meets in the Brazilian Portuguese colony (Staden in Golinelli 2007: 87-90). In the frame of the European colonization of America, cannibalism was among the other "abominations" (such as sodomy, incest, cross dressing) that Indigenous people, portrayed as "filthy" and "demonic" beings according to the witch-hunting paradigm,⁴⁸ were accused to perpetrate to justify their genocide at the hand of the European "conquerors" (Federici 2004: 221-222). To this end, Federici argues that the figure of the cannibal was invented by European colonisers to justify the oppression and extermination of Indigenous people: "[d]efining the aboriginal American populations as cannibals, devil-worshippers, and sodomites, supported the fiction that the Conquest was not an unabashed quest for gold and silver but was a converting mission" (221).

⁴⁸ The witch-hunting paradigm was exported from Europe to the colonies. Federici remarks for instance that, in the 16th century, the "struggle against the devil consisted mainly bonfires of local 'idols', even though many political and religious leaders from central Mexico were put on trial and burned at the stake by the Franciscan father Juan de Zuamarraga, in the years between 1536 (when the Inquisition was introduced in South America) and 1543" (2004: 221).

However, cannibalism was not only a taboo to be associated with the “savage” representation of the colonised Other, but it was also perpetrated throughout Europe. One of its main usages was for therapeutic purposes. In regard of this, Federici remarks that the cannibalistic rituals which were represented with “repulsion” by the records of the colonisers were probably not too different from the medical practices which were common in Europe in that same period (222). For instance, 17th-century medical doctors suggested to eat parts of the human body to treat maladies such as epilepsy (Tartabini in Golinelli 2007: 91). As Louise Noble points out, medicinal cannibalism, or “the medical circulation and consumption of the human body”, was broadly practiced in early-modern England (2011: 1). Human flesh and excretions coming from mummified corpses were a “crucial commodity in the business of health” (2). Corpses came from ancient Middle East mummies as well as from the bodies of executed criminals or socially disenfranchised people (2-3). Many of these traffics were illegal, reminding the colonial and capitalist global trafficking of human organs and body parts still ongoing in the contemporary world (1). The tenet of this use of mummies in early-modern England is, according to Noble, “the perception that the human body contains a mysterious healing power that is transmitted in ingested matter” (2).

Such belief in a “mysterious power” contained in the human body reaches the LRRH early oral variant of the “Conte de Grandmère”. Yvonne Verdier argues that, in the oral tale, cannibalism recalls other insights of the plot concerning the initiation to adulthood. By ingesting grandmother’s blood and flesh, the girl digests the “mysterious power” of womanhood (as that was meant in the coeval time) and is ready to begin her adult and sexual life. In this way, a female genealogy is drawn, implying the replacement of the eldest woman of the family with the youngest in the cycle of biological transformations. Grandma (or, in other variants, her mother) needs to die to make space for the girl to step into adulthood. This feature is recalled in Carter’s “The Werewolf”, where, by the death of her grandmother, the girl gets a house wherein to live (Aktari Sevgi 2014: 163). In “The Company of Wolves” too, grandma’s death as well as the ingestion of her flesh and blood allows the girl to have her first sexual encounter and counter-marry her wolf companion outside of the heteropatriarchal norm.

Sexual initiation is another relevant aspect of the initiation to adulthood represented by the “Conte”. The girl’s “strip-tease” is described in detail, as it happens in “The Company of

Wolves”. By such unclothing, the protagonist is initiated to sexual life, which comes together with the embodiment and replacement of her grandmother. Concerning sexual initiation, it is also relevant to acknowledge that grandma’s house is represented, in some oral variants, as a dark place, sometimes as a cave with a difficult entrance (in a version, grandma’s guts are hanging upon the door, Verdier 2015: 73). The entrance in the house in the woods symbolises in such cases the initiation to a path towards female growth into adulthood, stepping through sewing, the kitchen (cooking language around cannibalism evokes, according to Verdier, the killing and cooking of pork as in a typical Breton dish, 2015: 48), sexuality, and genealogical replacement.

According to Verdier’s reading, the importance of female functions in peasant communities emerges clearly in the “Conte”, whereas in the literary versions the focus is on the wolf’s seduction and the girl’s naivety (Verdier 2015: 81). Carter’s and Lee’s retellings seem to be more connected to the oral “Conte” than to Perrault’s or the Grimms’ tale, regaining in particular the aspects of self-determination against patriarchal rules and violence. Thereby, a genealogy can be delineated between the European pre-modern folk tradition and the instances brought forward by contemporary Anglo-European feminist retellings. However, as I am going to further analyse in section § 2.3, the relevance of Carter’s and Lee’s retellings is not limited to their reversal of heteropatriarchal narratives, but it challenges also their anthropocentrism as it opens speculative spaces oriented toward a horizon of posthuman multispecies co-existence.

2.1.4 “Wolfland” by Tanith Lee (1980-83): female genealogies, she-wolves, and multispecies alliances against men’s violence

As mentioned, Tanith Lee’s “Wolfland” is deeply rooted in the “Conte de Grand-mère”. As Carter’s “Company of Wolves”, Lee’s “Wolfland” subverts Perrault’s and the Grimms’ tales. Unlike the patriarchal variants, where she is named by the clothe she wears and her personality is passive and ingenuous, Lee’s protagonist has a name (Lisel), together with a strong personality. In Carter’s “The Company of Wolves”, on the contrary, the protagonist does not have a name (as it happens in several tales from *The Bloody Chamber*), but she is often addressed with the second person singular. In this way, the reader is directly involved,

suggesting her likeness with the character, so that the (female) reader is invited to self-determine her body beyond patriarchal norms as the young protagonist does.

As well as “The Company of Wolves”, Lee’s tale goes beyond the human/non-human divide which occurs both in Perrault’s, the Grimms’, and even the “Conte” variants. In the “Conte” too, indeed, the wolf is represented as the tale’s villain, reflecting the witch-hunting attitudes of the period and areas where the tale was told. On the contrary, Lisel builds an alliance both with her female genealogy (her bizarre grandmother, Anna the Matriarch) and with the oppressed category of the non-human, embodied by the wolf figure. In “Wolfland”, wolves are not represented as “others” to the protagonists, rather they are one and the same with the women protagonists of the tale.

Tanith Lee’s tale has a specific focus on gender violence and its overcoming, which is addressed by stressing the importance of female alliances. For its feminist aim, “Wolfland” relies on some symbolological features from the “Conte” (see Aktari Sevgi 2015), which are contextualised in the frame of domestic abuse. Female genealogy and initiation to adulthood occur in “Wolfland” too, though not in the terms of patriarchal gender roles (informing the socio-cultural context in which the “Conte” originates), but rather proposing to overcome patriarchal gender roles. The “Conte”’s genealogical replacement occurs in “Wolfland” too: as Selen Aktari Sevgi argues, “by focusing on the symbolic replacement of the grandmother by the little girl with a feminist agenda [...] Lee celebrate[s] the matriarchal roots observed in the oral tradition, ‘The Story of Grandmother’” (2015: 154).

In Lee’s variant, it is Lisel’s grandmother, Anna the Matriarch, the one who invites her granddaughter to her castle in the Scandinavian woods. Thereby, grandma is not represented as a sick and weak old woman at the mercy of the villain wolf or the hunter’s rescue. As Aktari Sevgi remarks instead, the grandmother’s name “explicitly indicat[es] that she has thrown down the patriarchal ideology her husband represents and she does not conform to the rules of the symbolic order any longer” (Aktari Sevgi 2015: 163). Anna feels that she will not stay alive for long, and she wants to transmit to her granddaughter the power of lycanthropy. The transmission of lycanthropy is a gift but also a compulsory choice. Anna must handover the gift of lycanthropy or her soul will never be freed from the bond with the Wolf-Goddess. At the same time, this transition will allow Lisel to take the agential control upon her life, without

being constricted into marriage and patriarchal gender roles. As in Carter's tales, and as in the "Conte", grandma's death is necessary to the girl's growth into adulthood.

Like in the "Conte", genealogical replacement occurs with an embodiment, in this case not of grandmother's guts, but of a liquor excerpted from some yellow flowers growing in the woods around grandma's castle. These flowers contain the "wolf-magic": the power of transmutation, which is also the tale's means for female self-determination. However, the liquor is not simply a magical poison: it awakens something that is already present in Lisel. As Anna says to her,

I put nothing on you that was not already yours. Look in a mirror. Look at your hair and your eyes and your beautiful teeth. Haven't you always preferred the night to the day, staying up till the morning, lying abed till noon? Don't you love the cold forest? Doesn't the howl of the wolf thrill you through with fearful delight? (Lee 1983: 134)

The topic of sexual initiation, as it is narrated in the "Conte", in Perrault's, the Grimms' and also in Carter's variants, is deeply reversed in "Wolfland". There is no male wolf to be the medium for sexual initiation, but the self-determination of sexuality passes through a female genealogy. It is grandma to teach Lisel how to self-determine her gendered identity and sexual life beyond the domain of heteropatriarchal violence. As Heldreth argues, "[w]hereas in the original story the wolf eats the grandmother and then impersonates her in order to devour Red Riding Hood, in Lee's story the grandmother is a werewolf whose desire is to empower her red-cloaked granddaughter" (1989: 17).

In Lee's tale, women's alliances allow the protagonists to overcome gender violence. Anna's husband was a violent man, who repeatedly abused and beat her. Anna's life – and that of her daughter, Lisel's mother – is saved through the intervention of a maid, who tells Anna about the power of the yellow flowers (while telling that, the maid shows off her teeth and "for an instant her face was just like a wolf's", Lee 1983: 130). The yellow flowers scared Anna's husband, who ordered to burn them. He was also scared by wolves, so that once "he organised a wolf hunt [...] and cleared quite a few of the brutes off his land. The area about the chateau has been silent for many nights" (Lee 1983: 132). The opposition between the patriarchal attitude – represented by Anna's husband – towards women (Anna), magic (the

yellow flowers) and non-human animals (the wolves), and what all such oppressed categories might do when they ally with each other is among the main relevant aspects of the tale. The intersection of women, magic, and nonhumanity is exacerbated by the witch-figure. Anna's abusive husband burning the magic flowers, beating his wife, and killing the wolves reminds the attempt of the European witch-hunting to exterminate the threatening power of women's economic independence, their non-reproductivity, and the consideration of non-human beings and the earth as agential, which limited capitalist extractionism. In the witch-hunting frame, men deprive women and non-human beings of agency since they are afraid they might gain power, a power they reach through magical practices and by forging alliances with each other.

The potential of this multispecies sabbath is represented in "Wolfland" as a tool, for the allied oppressed bodies, to re-appropriate of themselves. Thanks to the power of transmogrification, Anna, in the body of a wolf, can eventually kill her husband, and guarantee her own survivance and that of her daughter. Anna wishes to gift her granddaughter this agential emancipation. As she tells her: "You see what it is to be a woman, Lisel. Is that what you want? The irrevocable marriage vow that binds you forever to a monster?" (117). In this regard, the concept of 'monstrous' traditionally associated to the werewolf in the LRRH tales, switches, in "Wolfland", onto the category of 'man'. By reversing the notion of monstrosity, Lee's tale sheds light on the contradictions of patriarchal society, the speciesism intrinsic to it, and the normalization of its monstrosity. Moreover, the rejection of the marriage vow resonates with the key feature of the female werewolf figure as a "threat to domesticity" (Priest 2015: 13). Defined by a hypersexualisation since the Victorian Age fiction, the she-wolf struggles with getting pregnant. As typical to the witch figure, the she-wolf too is a threat to patriarchy and capitalism, since it threatens the reproductive role of women.⁴⁹

The she-wolf is an interesting character in the European archive of folklore. Historically, she-wolf figures who transmogrify by wearing a wolfskin are represented since 17th century trials. It is the case, for instance, of the 1617 Kiviloo trial (Estonia), where a woman confessed to have killed some animals, and then boiled and ate them after she and her companions took off their own wolfskins (Bartra 2024: 114). However, as Hannah Priest acknowledges, narratives about female werewolves are difficult to find in European literature between their

⁴⁹ The witch's threaten to reproduction will be further investigated in section 2.3

first occurrence in Gerald of Wale's 12th century *Topographia Hiberniae* and Frederick Marrat's 1839 *The Phantom Ship* (2015: 7). In the in-between time, she-wolves were diffused in other kinds of cultural productions, especially church tracts, Inquisition handbooks and folktales (Priest 2015: 7). Werewolves were generally represented as men. Features such as being a hunter or being capable of savagery and aggressiveness have always been more commonly associated with stereotypical masculinity in European cultural history (Priest 2015: 3). Therefore, the female werewolf is a secondary character, quite obscured by its male counterpart. Relevantly, the diffusion of the she-wolf changes according to different historical contexts. Contexts more rooted into matrilinearity – where the position of women in society was more important than in other parts of Europe – saw a more important diffusion of she-wolf tales (Bartra 2024: 114). Merili Metsvahi's research has proved, for instance, the predominance of she-wolf narratives in Estonian folklore. Metsvahi explains this predominance because of the higher position of women in Estonia before the arrival of Christianity (Bartra 2024: 114). The figure of the she-wolf is thus suitable for tales about women's emancipation, such as it happens in the case of Lee's "Wolfland". In addition, because of their smaller diffusion if compared to that of male werewolves, she-wolf narratives have the chance to develop differently from the traditional male werewolf motifs, as Priest acknowledges (2015). Therefore, she-wolves may be characterised not (only) by the typical aggressiveness of male werewolves, but they might also bring about instances of female agency and emancipation, within the framework of a utopic horizon. To this end, they become crucial for the reversal of gender roles in the European folk and fairy tale tradition.

In Lee's tale, the trans-species alliance between wolves and women is not only useful to the female protagonists, but also to their non-human companions, as it will be further developed in § 2.3. Indeed, "Wolfland" is also the name of the land where Anna lives, called so because "it was the wolves' country before every men set foot on it with their piffling little roads and tracks, their carriages and foolish frightened walls" (Lee 1983: 116). The land "is theirs [of the wolves] by right" (116). The death of Anna's violent husband also signs the death of the wolf hunter: Wolfland returns to the wolves thanks to their alliance with women. A trans-species ethics of care – caring both for the wolves' and for women's existence – emerges from Lee's transbiological metamorphoses.

As we are going to further analyse in the final section of this chapter, multispecies mutual care is a crucial aspect of the fight against heteropatriarchal norms in both Carter's and Lee's tales. The desire for a posthuman kind of existence might arise from a need (fighting back gender violence) but also from the understanding of the similarity between women's condition and that of non-human animals. Both oppressed by patriarchal anthropocentrism and speciesism, non-conforming bodies find in their reciprocal alliance a way to resist and to draw their own spaces of freedom. The motif of the animal bridegroom, as it is represented by Angela Carter's and Sharon Blackie's tales which are analysed in the following section, recalls this same need and desire for an ecotransfeminist ethics of care.

2.2 The Motif of the Animal Bridegrooms: A Shared Condition of Oppression

In this section, I will deal with the animal-bridegroom motif and tradition, and with a selection of contemporary retellings focusing on the emergence of feminist emancipation through transbiology or the trans-species encounter. I will also suggest prompts for an ecotransfeminist and post-speciesist reading of the tales, which will be further deepened in section § 2.3.

The folk motif of the animal bridegrooms is related to the ATU⁵⁰ tale type 400, "The Man on a Quest for His Lost Wife", which is paired, with genders reverse, by the ATU 425, "The Search for The Lost Husband" (Tatar 2017: XIV – XVI).⁵¹ Both tale types imply a romantic relationship between a human and a non-human animal. The trope of the beastly mate, as Maria Tatar points out (2017: XVI), challenges humans' anthropocentric perspective, suggesting the possibility of a scandalous interspecies companionship. One of the main tale motifs recalling to the ATU 425 is the "Beauty and the Beast" tale (Bacchilega 1997: 72), which, in its several variants, implicate hybridity and shapeshifting (Tatar 2017: XXI), while challenging the mind/body dualism as well as the human/non-human divide. Tales pertaining

⁵⁰ The ATU (Aarne-Thomson-Uter) index is one of the most used catalogues of folk types and motifs in folklore studies.

⁵¹ Maria Tatar points out the intrinsic misogyny of the motifs' titles, which deprive women of agency, and suggests to rename them as "The Woman in Search of Her Lost Husband" and "The Man in Search of His Lost Wife" to appair gender inequalities (2017: XV):

to this type allow the readers, as Tatar points out, to think through human relationship to “otherness”, as well as the point of encounter between nature and culture (2017: XXVII).

Despite its re-enchanting potential remarked by Tatar, since its written appearance in 1756 by the hand of Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont – based, on its turn, upon Gabrielle-Susanne de Villeneuve’s 1740 extensive baroque literary version – the “Beauty and the Beast” story has been meant as a moral tale for young girls. As well as Perrault’s “Le chaperon rouge” taught girls to beware of strangers and to feel guilty if they were sexually harassed, Mme de Beaumont’s story intended to “promote good manners in the young” (Tatar 2017: XII). In particular, de Beaumont’s tale stresses the virtue of good girls, which coincides with self-sacrifice (Beauty happily sacrifices herself for her father’s good) and with a patient resignation to their female destiny. Namely, girls had to resign to the custom of arranged marriages, where husbands were often seen as “monsters” (Tatar 2017: XII-XIII). As Cristina Bacchilega points out, in the traditional “Beauty and the beast” story, only a “virtuous, insightful, determined woman” has the power to change a beast into a handsome young man (1997: 78).

Nonetheless, according to the reading suggested in the present dissertation, the current relevance of the “Beauty and the Beast” story and of the animal bridegroom tale type has to do with both the overcoming and subversion of the heteropatriarchal moral, as well as with the focus on the human/non-human encounter and interspecies alliance. In feminist contemporary revisions of the animal bridegroom motif, the sexual/romantic encounter with a non-human lover might light up, in the human protagonist, the desire for reaching a non-human dimension. Through this alliance, the human protagonist looks for emancipation from her oppressed sexual and social condition, while the non-human “beast” ceases, at the same time, to be represented as the tale’s villain until the good girl will transform him in a handsome prince. Othered beings recognise each other and refuse the “othering” they suffer as well as their “witchification”. Through the oddkin they generate, they establish a multispecies alternative to the patriarchal speciesist regime. This case is represented by the two tales that will be further analysed: Angela Carter’s “The Tiger’s Bride” (a retelling of the “Beauty and the Beast”) and Sharon Blackie’s “The Water-Horse” (working on the folk figure of the *each-uisge* or water-horse).

2.2.1 “The Tiger’s Bride” by Angela Carter (1979)

Unlike in the traditional variants of “Beauty and the Beast”, in Carter’s “The Tiger’s Bride”, the happy ending does not coincide with the metamorphosis of the Beast into a handsome prince thanks to Beauty’s virtue.⁵² Carter’s Beauty does not decide to sacrifice herself to the Beast to help her beloved father. Instead, she is lost by her father at card game, placing the tale since the beginning in a patriarchal framework where women are exchanged as commodities. The mysterious Milord – a Tiger who disguises himself in the shape of a man – asks the protagonist only one favour: if she will let him see her naked, he will give her back to her father. The girl refuses this offer, but her perspective changes when the Tiger shows her his own nudity. After seeing the beastly nature of the Tiger and recognising in his non-human “Otherness” the same condition of oppression she has to face as a woman, the girl decides to show herself to the Tiger in her unclothed nature. In doing so, and through their encounter as naked bodies, layers of “a life in the world” are erased from her female body. Her body unveils in the shape of a tiger which replaces her previous human form. Thereby, the happy ending is reversed with Beauty’s metamorphosis into a beast as an act of defiance of patriarchal and speciesist norms. The “disturbing potential of the animal”, which, as Caroline Webb and Helen Hopcroft point out, is repressed in both Villeneuve’s and Beaumont’s stories (2017: 319), becomes the focus of Carter’s retelling. Hence, the protagonist acknowledges the Beast’s “animality” and the profound similarity between them. This recognition leads her to reconfigure her notion of “otherness”. The relationship between the young woman and the non-human being is represented as a liberating alliance, even if it is still framed within a heteropatriarchal arrangement. Through the understanding of the similarity between her own condition of oppression and that of the non-human, the protagonist’s transmogrification liberates her from her own understanding of herself as “Otherness” (Bacchilega 1997: 98) (she has come to “other” her own self as a consequence of the patriarchal representation of the female gender in her social context). At the same time, the recognition of her condition of oppression allows her to question the notion of “Otherness” all-round, and to recognise other forms of oppression such as the one endured by non-human beings. This is the same process

⁵² The traditional ending is recalled in the other version of “Beauty and the Beast” collected in *The Bloody Chamber*, “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” (1979).

by which (white) feminisms encounter the “eco” in “ecofeminisms” from the 1970s onwards: recognising the oppression and exploitation of the earth and non-human others as coming from the same matrix which causes their own oppression and exploitation under the patriarchal regime. By such shifting, Euro-Western feminisms turn to the post-human as a source of intersectional liberation from a common kind of oppression.

The protagonist of the tale learns that, in the Anglo-Euro-Western framework of the tale’s world, both women and non-human animals share a common condition of oppression, devaluation, and de-humanization. As she figures out, they are connected by a similar condition of hiding and repressing. As women must repress their agency to play their part in the patriarchal society, thus the Beast must self-impose to himself a sort of restraint, “as if fighting a battle with himself to remain upright when he would far rather drop down on all fours” (Carter 2006: 58). As Webb and Hopcroft remark, in many of Carter’s *Bloody Chamber* fairy tales, the representation of the animal as beast signifies “not just Otherness but specifically the Otherness of the instinctual human body” (2017: 319), which is opposed to and feared by the patriarchal and anthropocentric view of rationality.

As they are understood in the social-cultural framework of the tale, shapeshifters, non-human critters, and beasts are represented, at the beginning of the tale, as monsters. As it often happens in folk- and fairy-tale retellings (Carter 2006; Blackie 2019), the main story comes along with secondary ones. For instance, cautionary tales about tiger-men are told to young girls, along with other stories of shapeshifters and hybrid sexual encounters, such as those the protagonist’s nurse tells her when she is a little girl:

If you don’t stop plaguing the nurse-maids, my beauty, the tiger-man will come and take you away. (Carter 2006: 61)

The wondering peasants once brought my father a skull with horns four inches long of either side of it [which had] the jaw-bone of a *man*. (62, original emphasis)

[The waggoner’s daughter’s belly] swelled amid the cruel mockery of the ostlers and her son was born of a bear, they whispered. Born with a full pelt and teeth; that proved it. (62)

In “The Tiger’s Bride”, non-humanity features not only Milord, the tiger-man, but also his whole courtship. As his valet says to the protagonist, “Nothing human lives here”: “We have

dispensed with servants” and “surround ourselves, instead, for utility and pleasure, with simulacra and find it no less convenient than do most gentlemen” (66). The castle is inhabited by the wind (which is let in everywhere by “[g]aping doors and broken windows”, 63), the mysterious Beast (who will reveal to be the tiger-man, but who initially always wears mask, gloves, and scented perfumes), his “simian” valet (70), and other weird creatures, such as the robotic soubrette the protagonist is gifted to “assuage [her] loneliness” (66).

While the young woman initially refuses to face the inhumanity of the Beast (Bacchilega 1997: 71-102), she progressively recognises the similar condition of oppression they share. Since the beginning, she is deeply aware (with a brilliance that, as Webb and Hopcroft point out, recalls that of de Beaumont’s *Beauty*, 2017: 322) that women’s bodies are constantly exposed to the patriarchal marketplace of female flesh. The topic of the selling of women bodies as a form of affirmation of men’s power is found along the whole story. Firstly, the protagonist is sold by her father to the Beast after his defeat at cards game. Indeed, the protagonist’s father has lost everything at gambling “[e]xcept the girl” (Carter 2006: 59), who is offered to the Beast as a commodity. Secondly, the Beast offers the young woman to buy her own freedom with her body: if she will let him see her naked, she will be given back to her father, with all the goods he lost at gambling plus other precious gifts. The protagonist feels like the value of her body is increased by her virginity and she is strongly aware of her submitted position as a woman: “I wished I’d rolled in the hay with every lad on my father’s farm, to disqualify myself from this humiliating bargain” (271). As Webb and Hopcroft highlights, the protagonist’s feeling reflects how, in the 20th century context of the tale, women who exhibited their body for work were seen as “socially and sexually degraded” (2017: 328). If the protagonist is ready to ply herself to the “elegant prostitution of marriage”, she is not to be reduced to a mere image, therefore to be deprived of the only role left to women within the patriarchal order: being sexual objects but at least participating in the continuation of property lines (Webb and Hopcroft 2017: 328). Sadly deluded by the girl’s refusal (Carter 2006: 65; 68), the Beast imposes her the sight of his feral body, without any mask or clothe. When she sees his huge tiger-body, the young woman realises that “Nothing about him reminded me of humanity” (71). Acknowledging his difference from “the world of utility and commodity in which she had been raised” (Webb and Hopcroft 2017: 329), she freely chooses to unclothe herself and show her nakedness to the Beast. This way, she feels “at liberty for the first time

in my life” (72). As Bacchilega points out, the girl’s sight of the tiger and the tiger’s sight of her liberate her from “her own otherness” (1997: 98). In their shared othering she recognises their likeness. As she is segregated in the object-role patriarchy forces her into, so is the Beast in the segregation to which he is forced by the human patriarchal and speciesist society. In such a way, the marginalisation of their common otherness offers the justification for their oppression and exploitation. Therefore, the protagonist acknowledges her closer likeness to the “wild beasts” dwelling in Milord’s palace, than with the logic she had done until her father abandoned her for “human carelessness” (70).

I was a young girl, a virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to all those who were not exactly like themselves, in all their unreason. If I could see not one single soul in that wilderness of desolation all around me, then the six of us – mounts and riders, both – could boast amongst us not one soul, either, since all the best religions in the world state categorically that no beasts nor women were equipped with the flimsy, insubstantial things when the good Lord opened the gates of Eden and let Eve and her familiars tumble out. (Carter 2006: 70)

The likeness between “women” and “beasts”, both oppressed and deprived of reason and soul by the “unreason” of men, clarifies in the protagonist’s mind. She meditates “on the nature of my own state, how I had been bought and sold, passed from hand to hand” (70). She acknowledges that her robotic damsel, the “clockwork girl” is not so different from her too: “had I not been allotted only the same kind of imitative life amongst men that the doll-maker had given her?” (70). Bodies are now understood by the young woman as artificially built, and a map of her condition begins to intersect with that of the other “others”: the Beast, the clockwork girl, all the other-than-humans, the non-human others.

The understanding of this likeness allows Beauty to emancipate from the cultural stratification that imposes to her to fear Otherness (embodied by the tiger-man), and to defy other binary constructions such as that of species. She eventually finds in the transbiological metamorphosis in the tiger form a way to fully express her identity, desire, and self-determination outside of the patriarchal regime. After that she has exposed her naked body to Milord, he offers her to go back to her father, as according to his initial offer. Nonetheless, she refuses to go back to her previous life, where she was unfree either. The freedom given to the

young woman by the agential take on her own body breaks the chains which kept her under the patriarchal law. She acknowledges now that her clockwork maid's face, who continues "bonnily to beam", "was no longer the spite of my own" (73). She does no longer perceive herself as artificially built for the pleasure and utility of men. It is the artificial clockwork girl, instead, that "I will dress [...] in my own clothes, wind her up, send her back to perform the part of my father's daughter" (73).

In the wake of this reappropriation of agency, the protagonist begins to take off her clothes. Layer by layer, her social role comes down with her clothes:

I was so unused to my own skin that to take off all my clothes involved a kind of flaying. [...] I felt as much atrocious pain as if I was stripping off my own underpelt and the smiling girl stood poised in the oblivion of her balked simulation of life, watching me peel down to the cold, white meat of contract and, if she did not see me, then so much more like the market place, where the eyes that watch you take no account of your existence. (Carter 2006: 74)

Unlike at the patriarchal marketplace, the protagonist takes control upon her own flesh, deciding who could have it and how. When she shows up naked at the Tiger's room, she finds out that he has abandoned too "[t]he empty house of his appearance" (74) – all the clothes, gloves, and perfumes he used to cover his beastly appearance. She lets the Tiger rip off the remains of her human skin. Behind that, a reappropriated body appears, which can now freely meet her own kin:

And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drop off my beautiful fur. (Carter 2006: 75)

The alliance between the female and the non-human body in the young woman's transbiology offers to her what Anna Pasolini defines "another nature which is free from [...] power, hierarchies, and obeys another law" (2016: 89). As Webb and Hopcroft argues, Carter writes not only beyond gender roles, but also, in her defiance of binaries, "across the species barrier" (2017: 332). In addition, it is crucial to remark that Carter never definitely chooses one body form over another. Rather, Carter's transbiologies and interspecies encounters celebrate the

state of metamorphosis itself (Atwood 2007: 138), and the porosity⁵³ of the body's boundaries. In Carter's metamorphoses there is not a tension toward a new finite form, but rather the intention to stay in the between, which is the critical condition of the witch-figure too, as it is going to be argued in the further section (§ 2.3). In Carter's transbiological metamorphoses, the non-human dimension and the in-between status are longed for since they open up a better social horizon for oppressed bodies. At the same time, as I am going to argue more in details in § 2.3), the alliance between oppressed figures, such as women and non-human critters, allows to define an ecotransfeminist ethics of care. Indeed, as Webb and Hopcroft point out, the "dance of the main characters' relationship" in "The Tiger's Bride" foreshadows that which – some years after the publication of *The Bloody Chamber* – Val Plumwood would have called the "ethics and politics of mutuality" between "human and nature" in the light of an environmental ethics (Webb and Hopcroft 2018: 333).

To this end, what seems to be crucial nowadays from an ecotransfeminist point of view, is not limited to women's emancipation as early feminist criticism insisted when reading trans-species encounters in the fairy tale, but to the empowerment of non-human subjects as well, of the Earth as a whole and of all the oppressed social categories which, as well as that of "woman", undergo the etiquette of "non-human".

2.2.2 "The Water-Horse" by Sharon Blackie (2019)

The motif of the animal bridegroom occurs also in Sharon Blackie's "The Water-Horse". The short story is a retelling of the Scottish and Irish folk myth of the *each-uisge* (Blackie 2019: 223), a water-horse haunting the sea and the lochs (Briggs 1976: 115). He shapeshifts from the horse form to that of a handsome young man, sometimes also to that of a gigantic bird (Briggs 1976: 116). There are many folk tales concerning the figure of the *each-uisge*. Katharine Briggs suggests a possibly cautionary origins, addressed to young girls (Briggs 1976: 116). The function is similar to that of "Little Red Riding Hood": young women are discouraged to hang out alone and trust handsome strangers, behind whom a *each-uisge* might be hiding, waiting to seduce them and carry them down to the waters.

⁵³ Around the notion of porosity, see Tuana 2008.

As well as in Carter's "The Tiger's Bride", in Blackie's tale too there is an acknowledgement of the shared condition of oppression women and non-human beings have to face within the patriarchal and anthropocentric regime. "The Water-Horse" reverses the myth of the *each-uisge* in a very similar way to how Carter's "Tiger's Bride" reverses "Beauty and the Beast". The girl protagonist is unhappy with her female social condition, and the encounter with the water-horse, rather than being a threaten to her, offers to her the possibility of a life outside the patriarchal norm.

Since the beginning, the protagonist of Blackie's tale manifests symptoms of impatience and dissatisfaction with regard to her social condition as a woman. She enjoys reading and dreaming, which her mother dissuades her to do, because "[i]t would make her want too many things that she couldn't have" and "[t]here is no point in holding on to dreams that you can never fulfil" (Blackie 2019: 89). As a young girl of seventeen, she must acknowledge "what was ahead of her":

Marriage to a man who didn't know how to navigate the soft maps of a woman's body, to excavate the deep caves of a woman's heart. A baby each year [...]. Cancer growing slowly from exposure to the sheep-dip. [...] [T]o look after her ailing mother. She'd have no time for reading, not that girl. No time for dreaming. [...] Yes, she would end up like her mother, she knew. (Blackie 2019: 85)

Her mother, indeed, is part of that kind of women who "were not supposed to cry", nor "to read poetry" or "believe in mermaids" (Blackie 2019: 85-86). Recalling Stefania Consigliere (2020: 33), it seems like, in the tale-world, women's imaginary is blocked: they have no space for dreaming and imagining alternative horizons. But "that girl" wants "something different, she wanted something more" (Blackie 2019: 89). Which is why she "loved the moor", the wildness, the freedom, and the solitude which are allowed to her when, during summer, together with other women and children, she is sent to the shielings to take care of the animals in the pastures. There in the shielings, women and children could "escap[e] for a while from the tight-lipped oversight of the men" (81).

In the fictional world of "The Water-Horse" (as well in that of "The Tiger's Bride"), girls are told cautionary tales which discourage them to venture alone out in the moor, in the

wildness of the mountains, and beyond the borders of the pastures. Among these narratives, there is the tale of the *each-uisge*: a monster disguised as a handsome young man who comes out of the moor to take the girls down into the water with him, and then marries or eats them. The *each-uisge* is represented by the protagonists' fellow villagers as an evil liar. Nonetheless, the protagonist's approach to this legend is different. Her perspective is shared by the narrator, an old woman living in her same village who has a trans-species relationship with a selkie.⁵⁴ The narrator, dismissing the speciesist culture which marginalises Otherness into the category of the "monster", understands the *each-uisge* as an ally: a good, perhaps heroic figure "who helped to save the day [and] give birth to these islands" (95). The girl too sees the folk figure of the *each-uisge* as "the local hero she had been looking for all her life" (95). As well as in Carter's "The Tiger's Bride", the protagonist comes to see the "monster" she has been told as such as a product of the anthropocentric and patriarchal culture. She understands that, rather than threatening her, the *each-uisge* is othered as she is, thereby he shares her condition of oppression and may rather be an ally than a villain. Understanding this condition, she comes to look for an alliance.

The water-horse asks the girl to come with him "down through the deep waters of the loch" to "another world", telling her that he could "change her" and "transform her into a creature just like him" (95). Hence, the girl figures out that this "was the choice of her life, and the only real choice she would ever have" (95). The protagonist is scared and confused: she does not know what it would mean to become a water-horse and being carried to another world. She goes to the old woman who is also the narrator to ask for advice, and she suggests:

'The thing to do [...] is to take your life in your own hands.' This island will chew you up, if you let it. This island, and the stories they tell about how it is supposed to be. 'Make your own story,' I said to that girl. 'Make your own ending. Whatever story you choose, make it your choice – not theirs.' (99)

By this expedient, the voice of the author emerges, pointing out to the importance of retelling given stories beyond the oppressive layers of the patriarchal folkloric archive. The girl is called

⁵⁴ The selkie is a shapeshifting figure from Northern-European folklore who can change from the human to the seal form.

by the narrator to retell and reclaim the narrative of which she is the protagonist. She is invited to “break the magic spell” (Zipes 1984) of an archive which is enchanted by oppressive power structures, and to reclaim her own voice and agency, together with those of other oppressed subjects. Given the choice between the social oppression of women in a patriarchal society that she knows very well, and the unknown world the *each-uisge* offers to her, the girl eventually chooses the unknown, which is also open to utopic imagination, creative thinking, and speculative fabulation. As the narrator says, no one will ever know if the *each-uisge* married her, or drowned her, or ate her, but what matters is that “she went back to him of her own accord” (99). By retelling the tale’s plot, the girl is the one who chooses her own destiny, without letting the oppressive norm to do so for her. She chooses the non-human form instead of her construction as “Otherness” and “objecthood” within the patriarchal framework, as well as instead of a “patriarchally constructed subjectivity”, like the protagonist of “The Tiger’s Bride” does (Webb and Hopcroft 2017: 332).

By acknowledging the undesirability of the mere form of patriarchal subjectivity allowed to women (the reproductive role), both Carter’s and Blackie’s protagonists refuse this form of “humanness” and choose to embrace the unknown, yet-to-be-written post-human shape. Furthermore, by “choosing the animal in herself”, both protagonists locate the transformation into the animal form as an end, and not as a means, as it often happens within the context of folk and fairy tales (Webb and Hopcroft 2017: 332). To this end, even if human-animal transformations are often depicted in European folk and fairy tales, those events often carry an “instrumental view of animals” (Webb and Hopcroft 2017: 316). Non-human animals are “used” in European folk and fairy tales as well as they were used, in both the peasant and aristocratic cultures where these traditional tales saw the light, for all the essentials of living (“food, clothing, plowing, and transport”, Webb and Hopcroft 2017: 316). At the same time, their image is often “used” in these tales as a metaphor for human development and growth. Therefore, despite the widespread presence of animal figures and animal transformations in the genre, they are often understood as means for the utility of humans. Metamorphosis, for instance, is often represented as a temporary stage to gain a better, perfectionated, status of humanness in which the protagonist reaches its self-realisation (Webb and Hopcroft 2017: 317). On the contrary, in both Carter’s and Blackie’s tales, the animal transformation becomes an end, which allows both women and non-human beings to reach a stage of subjectivity which

defies and overcomes the patriarchal and anthropocentric notion of it. A new horizon of trans-species alliance and post-human subjectivity takes shape, which I will discuss in the further section.

2.3 Transbiology and Multispecies Alliances: Rewriting the Sabbath as Oddkin

Carter's "The Company of Wolves" and "The Tiger's Bride", Lee's "Wolfland", and Blackie's "The Water-Horse", they all draw on transbiology and/or trans-species alliances as part of a speculative multispecies horizon which refers both to the sabbathic imaginary (reappropriated from an ecotransfeminist point of view) and to Haraway's multispecies oddkin.⁵⁵ In this section, I will compare and develop the ecotransfeminist reach of the discussed tales and motifs through three figurations: the sabbath's liminality, the witch's familiar animal, and Haraway's compostist oddkin. I will propose to read the selected fairy-tale retellings from a critical approach that keeps together their feminist intent, their intrinsic queerization of binary categories of gender and species, and their agential representation of non-humanity.

2.3.1 The sabbath's liminal space and the witch's familiar: defying the common oppression and threatening heteropatriarchal reproduction

The encounter between women and non-human wild beasts represented in the selected tales recalls the dimension of the witch's sabbath. In the sabbath, according to demonic treatises from the witch-craze centuries, the witches were believed to be in the company of "filthy" animals and demons. They were believed to have intimate relationships and to copulate with such companions (Matteoni 2009: 36) as well as with their familiar animals. Read in the framework of the sabbathic imaginary, Carter's, Blackie's, and Lee's tales offer a multispecies purview on the relationship between the witch figure, her acolytes in the sabbath, and her animal familiar, and on the belief in the witch's ability to transmogrify. All those elements,

⁵⁵ Haraway herself calls her chthulucenic figurations "demon familiar[s]" (2016a: 31).

which have been prosecuted during the historical witch-craze and demonised in the traditional versions of the folk/fairy tales, emerge in the selected contemporary retellings in a new light. They are reversed from an empowering point of view which defies the repressive patriarchal approach to the sabbathic imaginary.

The case of the werewolf is emblematic. As discussed, people accused of lycanthropy were prosecuted together with the alleged “witches” during the centuries of the European witch-craze, which correspond to the period in which the “Conte de Grandmère” probably originated. The “Little Red Riding Hood” retellings by Angela Carter and Tanith Lee – by directly recalling to the patriarchal and anthropocentric environment of witch-hunting, but at the same time subverting its notion of monstrosity – envision a horizon where the oppressed categories might ally with each other to regain the agency upon their own bodies and desires. In addition to their representation of an emancipated female sexuality and self-determined identity, which gives a new agency to the traditional passive and naive figure of Riding Hood, both tales challenge the binaries of species from an intersectional point of view, suggesting, by the transbiological metamorphosis or the trans-species encounter, an ecotransfeminist and post-human ethics of care.

The association between the witch and the werewolf has many features. Adriana Madej-Stang enlightens the empowering potential of the female lycanthrope: “[w]itches as werewolves stand for the true nature of witches, who embracing their wildness and amorality negate limitations imposed on women by the patriarchal world” (2015: XI). She also stresses that wolves and witches share a similar “borderline rol[e]” (213). Like the witch, the werewolf is a “creature between two worlds, not utterly belonging to the world of demons and devils, but also not entirely a member of human society, sitting on the fence, meaning being somewhere in between and belonging nowhere” (214). This description might apply to the werewolf as well as to Carter’s Tiger and Blackie’s Water-Horse: half human, half non-human, they all live in a liminal dimension, challenging any fixed definition of ‘human’ and ‘otherness’.

Liminality characterises also the space of the sabbath. The sabbath is a “borderline place”, often situated in “marginal” and “extreme” zones, such as the top of mountains or islands (Matteoni 2009: 39). The sabbath also takes place in a borderline time, that of the night (39).

According to Robin Briggs, the sabbath was also believed by the populace to be the “gateway to the land of the dead” (Matteoni 2009: 39): a place in-between life and death.

The place in-between, “el lugar entre medio” (Anzaldúa 2015: 28), is also how Gloria E. Anzaldúa defines the space of the *nepantla*. The genealogy of the “*nepantla*” comes from the Nahuatl word for “an in-between space” (Anzaldúa a 2015: 28). “*Nepantla*” is “palabra indígena”, an Indigenous word referring to a “lugar-no-lugar” (28). It may also represent the afterlife, as in the murals of Teotihuacan (28). Bridge between the material and the immaterial, point of contact between ordinary and spirit realities (28), the *nepantla* melts borders, which become flexible (Satta 2022: 32). It is the space of transformation, a space of possibility which allows to generate “alternative roads” as well as “new topographies and geographies of hybrid selves who transcend binaries and de-polarize potential allies” (Anzaldúa 2015: 82). It is where multiple realities might be experienced (Anzaldúa 2015: 82).⁵⁶ If understood as a liminal space in the terms suggested by Anzaldúa for the “*nepantla*”, the sabbath becomes a site where new horizons might be envisioned. Not completely human, nor completely non-human, fairy tale’s trans-species shapeshifters challenge the binaries and suggest a not-yet-experienced multispecies co-existence where an ecotransfeminist, other-than-human ethics of care may see the light.

The relationship between the tale’s protagonists and their non-human companions reminds also the role of the witch’s familiar. In the period of witch-hunting, various animals (goats, cats, dogs, hares, and frogs among the others) were associated to sabbath rituals and were believed to be demonic helpers of the witch (Federici 2004: 194). Wolves too appeared occasionally in the guise of the witch’s helpers (Madej-Stang 2015: 213). As Silvia Federici remarks, the presence of animal companions in the period of witch-hunting was a potential reason of suspicion (Federici 2018: Ch. 3). The witch’s familiar animals were considered demonic creatures proving the witch’s deal with the Devil. It was widespread the belief that the Devil offered helpers to his acolytes in the guise of pet animals. According to Federici, they represented “the embodiment of that uncontrollable instinctuality that capitalism had to curb to produce a disciplined worker” (2018: Ch. 3).

⁵⁶ The *nepantla* refers to the condition of the “mestizas”, who have to “negotiate the cracks between worlds, to accommodate contradictory identity positions and mutually exclusive, inconsistent worlds”, and who also “are not constrained by one culture or world” (Anzaldúa 2015: 82). *Nepantleras* experience multiplicity.

Familiars had vampirical traits: they were believed to be connected to the witch through her blood, which they sucked, leaving marks on her body (birthmarks, scars, a third nipple). Theological treatises from the witch-craze period considered the familiar's marks as removals of the sacrament of baptism, therefore they were used as evidence of guilt in witch trials (Matteoni 2024: 72). The familiar was also believed to have sexual intercourses with the witch. Again, the figure of the familiar is connected to the repression of women's sexuality. As it is acknowledged by Federici, women's emancipated sexuality was feared by both patriarchy and capitalism, since it took women off from reproductive labour (Federici 2004). Therefore, it is not surprising that a non-conventional (to patriarchal standards) sexuality was one of the most relevant reasons for the prosecution of women accused of sorcery. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English argue that the accusation of having sexual encounters with the Devil was considered as the starting point of the witch career (2024: 38). The threaten perpetrated by the witch's sexuality was so frightening that "witches" were also believed to cause sexual disorders. In the *Malleus Maleficarum*,⁵⁷ witches were described as capable of magicking sexual encounters to make men impotent, to make their genital organs disappear, to destroy women's fertility, and to provide abortions (Ehrenreich and English 2024: 38). In other words, witches were accused of threatening reproduction and reproductive labour in all their forms. The fairy-tale trope of the animal bridegroom reminds the "marriage" between the witch and her familiar (Federici 2004: 194). Animal sexual companions represented "the worst human instincts", and the copulation with a beast challenged the "ontological foundations of a human nature" (Federici 2004: 194) as it was increasingly represented by the Scientific Revolution and the age of Reason raising in Europe in the same period of the witch-craze. As non-reproductive, thus "non-productive" forms of sexuality, human-animal sexual intercourses were prosecuted by witch trials as well as homosexuality, sex between different generations or different social classes, anal sex, sex "from behind", sexual dances, and collective sexuality (Federici 2004: 194).

⁵⁷ The *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*), written in 1486 by the Catholic clergymen Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, is a demonology compendium which explicates the contemporary belief in sorcery as heresy and recommends its prosecution, also by suggesting to use torture. The Inquisition trials and procedures were mainly based upon the *Malleus*.

The figure of the witch's familiar recalls also to the topic of transbiology or shapeshifting. Shapeshifting was believed to be one of the more fantastical abilities of the witch, who could change her bodily form to that of an animal (often a cat or a hare), both to attend the sabbath or to intrude into people's houses at night to suck their blood (Matteoni 2009: 101). During the witch-craze, there was some confusion regarding the separate nature of the witch and her familiar (Matteoni 2024: 117). Matteoni recalls for instance the 1712 trial of Jane Wenham. Wenham was accused of sorcery, and the alleged victims witnessed that they had been persecuted by her cats, one of whom had the woman's face. Therefore, it was unclear if the familiar was the witch's pet animal or rather herself in an external form (Matteoni 2024: 117).

Was she herself a shapeshifter, or had she unconventional encounters with non-human others, the witch was prosecuted, anyway, for her connection to non-humanity, and to all that was associated to animality, otherness, the wild. Negatively depicted by patriarchal narratives, the trans-species alliance between the witch and the familiar animal is often celebrated by feminist revisions of the witch figure. Indeed, as Matteoni argues, the witch's alliance with non-human others is a way to defy the marginalisation they both encounter in the patriarchal-anthropocentric society:

[...] in questa solitudine tesse amicizie eccezionali con spiriti, presenze ibride fra l'animale e il mostruoso, compagni invisibili al suo vicinato. Nella solitudine cerca, come ogni essere vivente, un conforto, apre spazi che conducano altrove, via dalla disperazione. [...] Gli incontri fra streghe e famigli travalicano la ricerca storica ed entrano nella realtà poetica per parlarci di alleanze di corpi sovversivi, che abitano le soglie e sfuggono ai ruoli stabiliti di donna, madre, anziana silenziosa, di animale domestico, di creatura reclusa nell'invisibile. (Matteoni 2024: 19)⁵⁸

In the considered tales, the representation of the alliance between women and non-human animals or shapeshifters recovers the relationship between the witch and the familiar animal as well as the sabbathic imaginary from its misrepresentation as an evil dimension. Because

⁵⁸ “[...] in her solitude, she knits up outstanding friendships with spirits, hybrid critters in-between animality and the monstrous: unpopular companions to her neighbours. In her solitude, as every living being, she looks for solace, and she opens up rooms leading to somewhere else, far away from despair. [...] The encounter between the witch and her familiar transcends historical research: it enters poetic reality and talks about the alliance between subversive bodies, which live on the thresholds and escape the established roles of woman, mother, silent old woman, domestic animal, invisibilised critter” (my translation).

of its threaten to the patriarchal order and reproduction, the alliance between women and non-human characters in the selected tales generate trans-species horizons where the binary laws of species and gender enhanced by traditional tales are defied. In “Wolfland”, the alliance between women and wolves allows the former to emancipate from men’s marital control and abuse, and the latter to take back their native land which has been stolen from them by men’s hunting, aimed at eliminating the presence of animal predators to take control of the land. In this way, the multispecies sabbath (which occurs through the use of a potion made of magical herbs, as typical of the witch figure) generates an alternative narrative world, where women and wolves can be free thanks to the magical power of their alliance.

In “The Company of Wolves”, too, (were)wolves and women ally with each other and reappropriate of the threaten their independent existence constitutes for the patriarchal speciesist order. The wolf ceases to be the tale’s villain as well as Riding Hood ceases to be the ingenuous girl to be either punished or rescued by some man. Their threatening trans-species alliance shakes the bones of the poor pious granny, while it shakes the whole constitution of a patriarchal and speciesist order which gets defied.

Similarly, in “The Tiger’s Bride”, the alliance between the oppressed Tiger and the oppressed woman frees both of them from the layers of a life in the (patriarchal and speciesist) world, and in their reciprocal acknowledgment of each other they can exist outside of the boundaries of gender and species. Similar is the plot of “The Water-Horse”, as it follows the same traditional motif of the animal bridegroom. In all the tales, speculative multispecies worlds emerge from the retold narratives.

2.3.2 Hybrids, cyborgs, and shapeshifters: the sabbath as an ecotransfeminist multispecies oddkin

As reconfigured in the retold tales, the sabbathic dimension of women/non-human encounters within the dimension of magic and metamorphosis acquires the shape of the post-human – or rather compostist – oddkin. As understood by Donna Haraway, oddkin is another way of making kin (or an addition) to godkin, genealogical, and biogenetic families (Haraway 2016a: 2). Oddkin is generative (Haraway 2016a: 3): it is a worlding practice that generates new paradigms and horizons. Oddkin is where the oppressed bodies might encounter and ally with

each other, to generate chances of living and caring, “to learn to live collectively in intimate and worldly caretaking symbiosis” (Haraway 2016a: 146). It means “unexpected collaborations and combinations” (Haraway 2016a: 4), whereas copresence is what allows mutual care and survivance. This caretaking symbiosis is understood by Haraway as a practice of “repairing damaged places and making flourishing multispecies futures” (146). This approach may be foreseen within the retold tales, where not only damaged places get repaired (as it is in the case of Wolfland, the land of wolves in Lee’s tale), but also marginalised bodies. The flourishing multispecies future might be understood as a horizon of resistance/existence for those who are excluded from the category of “human” – a category which their same alliance is aimed at troubling, challenging, deconstructing.

The notion of oddkin, echoing the slogan “Making Kin not Babies” (Haraway 2016a: 216) also questions the centrality of reproduction in the practice of kin-making, recalling to the witch’s threaten to heteropatriarchal sexuality. Indeed, as well as the relationship between the witch and her familiar, oddkin challenges the role of women as reproductive bodies, threatening the patriarchal order. Denying the centrality of reproduction in the process of family-making, oddkin is a deep threaten to heteropatriarchy as all the interspecies relationships between the female protagonists of the considered fairy tales and their non-human companions. The witchy bodies represented by Carter, Lee, and Blackie threaten the patriarchal-capitalist market of women’s flesh as tools for reproducing the labour force. Indeed, the trans-species alliance shapes a multispecies universe where genealogy is not defined by the blood line but rather by a reciprocal choice. By subtracting themselves to the category of “human”, the protagonists of the tale also subtract to the patriarchal law and acknowledge the patriarchal-driven definition of humanity. Under this lens, the considered texts by Carter, Lee, and Blackie threaten at the same time the reproduction of both the heteropatriarchal and the anthropocentric order (which are eventually one and the same).

The transbiological bodies represented by Carter, Lee, and Blackie resonate with Haraway’s posthuman figurations, from the cyborg to the compost or the queer litter. Since the *Cyborg Manifesto* (2016b [1985]) Haraway points out the transgression of the boundary between “human” and “animal”, which is exemplified by the cyborg myth (Haraway 2016b: 11). The cyborg is a “hybrid”, an “imaginative resource” for “mapping our social and bodily reality” which sustains the “pleasure” inscribed in the “confusion of boundaries” and our

“responsibility in their construction” (Haraway 2016b: 5-7). The fairy-tale transbiological bodies share this “hybridity”, which comes to be understood, in a post-human or compostist perspective, as an imaginative resource where the confusion of boundaries allows the growth of a speculative thinking, which interrogates the possible ontological and relational states beyond those boundaries. The cyborg approach does not try to solve contradictions, but rather suggests to live within them (Haraway 2003a: 11). This approach dialogues with fairy-tale transbiology. Since Angela Carter, the representation of metamorphosis in (feminist) fairy-tale literature suggests to stay with(in) the liminal dimension, the in-between, the borderline condition which is a feature of the hybrid as well as of the witch figure, whom Pasolini and Vallorani define “figur[a] sul confine” (“borderline figur[e]”, 2020: 116). In this way, fairy-tale ecotransfeminist transbiologies and trans-species encounters dialogue with the post-human approach, expressing their common orientation toward the reappropriation of liminality.

Haraway’s cyborg is the ancestor to the compost figuration, whose genealogy passes through that of the companion species. In the *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), Haraway proposes companion species as the new figuration for coping with the violent mechanisms of contemporary society. Companion species can be pet animals but also cyborgs or the microorganisms living within our bodies, as well as other humans (Haraway 2003b: 317). If shifted to the sabbathic imaginary, companion animals overlap with the witch’s familiar, who, as Matteoni points out, were not only domestic animals, but they could also be fairy spirits, spectral presences, or diabolic creatures (Matteoni 2024: 24), collecting each kind of companionship beyond the boundaries of species.

Moving from the cyborg to companion species and to the compost, Haraway draws on the notion of “sympoiesis”⁵⁹ in order to envision the multispecies co-existence and alliances needed by Chthulucene, to “stay with the trouble” of the present time of crisis. Haraway’s sympoiesis is rooted in Lynn Margulis’ definition of symbiogenesis (1998). According to Margulis, symbiogenesis is the evolutionary process which generates a holobiont. A holobiont is a system constituted by the interactions of multiple species which behave as one. In Margulis’ symbiogenetic perspective, “critters do not precede their relatings” (Haraway

⁵⁹ See §1.1.2.

2016a: 60); they are not individuals but ensembles interacting with other ensembles (or holobionts). Thereby, holobionts are “symbiotic assemblages” (Haraway 2016a: 60). Holobionts do not host their symbionts, but rather the ensemble of symbionts generates the holobiont. In the process of symbiogenesis, a species gets so close to and becomes so interdependent to another (or more), that they come to form together a third being: the holobiont. An example of holobiont is the symbiosis between the flatworm *Roscoffensis Convoluta* and the green algae *Platymonas*. The algae lives inside the worm, so that they could feed each one through the other. The *Platymonas* feeds through photosynthesis (which is possible since the flatworm is transparent) and through the *Roscoffensis*’s excrements, while the flatworm feeds on the nutrients produced by the algae through photosynthesis. The two “are so intimate that it is difficult, without very high-power microscopy, to say where the animal ends and the algae begins” (Margulis 1998: 10). Symbiogenesis reminds the condition of the trans-species encounters and transmogrifications of the considered fairy tales. In the investigated case studies, survivance is supported by the collaboration between different species, as it happens in the case of the *Roscoffensis-Platymonas* symbiogenesis. The tiger and the young woman, the werewolf and Riding Hood, wolves and women, the girl and the water-horse collaborate with each other and feed each other to assure their reciprocal survivance in and beyond the heteropatriarchal speciesist framework.

Conclusions

As Margulis suggests, our future as a terrane species requires “our reorientation toward the fusions and mergers of the planetmates that have preceded us in the microcosm” (Margulis 1998: 12). This is necessary both in the terms of the present “trouble” or planet crisis, as well as in that of the social crisis and that of the collective imagination. Imagining speculative multispecies ways of co-existence generates the horizon of an ecotransfeminist ethics of care which is crucial to re-enchant the disenchanted horizon and fight back dysphoria mundi.

Understanding Riding Hood and the Wolf as possible companions against the common threaten they suffer by the male/human – as hunter or aggressor – is crucial to rethink the possibility of our future. Understanding Beauty and the Beast as trans-species companions, refusing the patriarchal-made notion of humanity, allows to fight back the market of non-

human flesh. As well as the choice of Blackie's protagonist to challenge the notion of monstrosity and try the hybrid, more-than-human life the water-horse offers to her defies the patriarchal and speciesist norms.

As mentioned in the first chapter, folk and fairy tales are not innocent. They reflect and keep on generating or reinforcing socio-cultural norms at the same time. Rethinking relations through fairy tales within a compostist dimension is a possible step to challenge the Euro-Western notion of "human" generated by patriarchal and speciesist norms, which fits within the petrosexoracial discourse. Revising the European folk- and fairy-tale archive offers ways to re-enchant the collective imaginary which is dried by the Western separation of nature/culture, human/non-human, exported through colonialism to silence also non-Western epistemologies.

While contemporary Anglo-European feminist retellings challenge the patriarchal speciesism intrinsic to the fairy-tale archive as it has been set in the literary form during and beyond the age of witch-hunting, they recover at the same time the agency of the witch figure and her sabbathic acolytes to generate alternative ecotransfeminist horizons. An ecotransfeminist ethics of care emerges from the alliance between oppressed bodies: a contemporary sabbath which takes the shape of a worlding multispecies oddkin.

Chapter 3

The Little Mermaid's Reversed Desire

Embodied Thinking, Trans-Species Alliances, and the Pleasure of the Non-Human Body

The tales from Angela Carter and Sharon Blackie discussed in the previous chapter are undeniably framed within a heterosexual background, where female emancipation passes through sexuality and the intervention of male (even if not-completely-human) characters. Different is the case of Tanith Lee's "Wolfland", where female empowerment is grounded onto a feminist genealogy – but still linked to bloodline. In the present chapter, I am going to investigate other forms of emancipation and trans-species encounter which do not necessarily involve (hetero)sexuality nor bloodline, but which move through a post-speciesist sensibility, trans-species friendship and oddkin, as well as through an other-than-human, post-anthropocentric longing which has much more to do with the longing for *euphoria mundi* than with sexual desire.

As discussed in the previous chapters, the representation of the non-human in the European fairy tale, even if it is a mainstay of the genre, is often functional to the growth and self-determination of human characters. However, some contemporary retellings – from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) onwards – have begun to shift the anthropocentric gaze intrinsic to the European fairy-tale animism, and to represent non-human characters, hybrids and metamorphic bodies which are of value as themselves, in their in-between condition, and not as means for the utility of human characters. Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Little Mermaid" (1837) is among the main popular fairy tales which elaborate on the

representation of the non-human as an ontological status to be overcome. Indeed, the tale is based on the mermaid's desire for becoming human. The stories discussed in the current chapter reverse this desire for humanness and put into discussion the primacy of the human upon other species. Katherine Vaz's retelling of "The Little Mermaid", developed in the short story "What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone" (2010), asks a crucial question: what if it is not the mermaid to desire a human life, but the human to long for the non-humanness of watery beings?

The question of the other-than-human longing experienced by human characters is not only the focus of Vaz's tale, but also of other contemporary narratives that I am going to consider from an ecotransfeminist perspective. In the first section of this chapter, I will draw on the human-bear transmogrifications represented by Margo Lanagan in *Tender Morsels* (2008). By retelling the Grimm's fairy tale "Snow-White and Rose-Red", Lanagan re-imagines the psychological implications of living in a bear-body. Drawing on Prats-de-Mollo's *journée de l'ours* – a French town feast where men are disguised in bear costumes – Lanagan elaborates on the predatory masculinity featuring the patriarchal and speciesist culture ruling in the social framework of the story. The human experience in bear-bodies enhances the protagonists' desire for living outside of patriarchal pressures.

In the second section, such violent patriarchal speciesist framework is questioned by the friendship between Branza and her animal companion Wolf, through which Branza gets the strength to "bite back" her aggressors, who are the same men who harm non-human animals. Branza's desire to get back to a past world where men's violence did not exist overlaps with the desire experienced by the protagonist of "Foxfire" by Sharon Blackie (2019) for the freedom allowed by non-human life, which she foresees in her fox companion. Her post-human longing intersects with her need to find again a meaning to her (embodied) existence, which she lost after discovering that her body is unable to reproduce. The representation of non-human and in-between critters as evil and harmful is reversed, and they become the subject of important alliances for their human companions. Both Lanagan's and Blackie's trans-species friendships echo the representation of the witch's familiar as oddkin, but, unlike in the tales discussed in the previous chapter, they become relevant because of their independence from (hetero)sexuality. Empowerment becomes a question of trans-species friendships and companionships beyond the gender binary, defying the relational hierarchy

typical of heteropatriarchal structures. The characters represented by Blackie and Lanagan seem to find in their non-human encounters or transmogrifications a gentler multispecies co-living, outside of the violent framework of patriarchal and speciesist culture.

In the third section, the character's nostalgic other-than-human longing will be explored under the lenses of solastalgia (Albrecht 2005) and utopian desire (Muñoz 2009), with a particular focus on Branza's "backward glance" (Muñoz 2009: 4) toward her lost safe world. A nostalgic other-than-human longing also describes the desire of Meredith from "What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone" (Vaz 2010) for a watery way of communicating love and care. Retelling Andersen's "The Little Mermaid", Vaz questions the anthropocentric and patriarchal representation of silence, especially when concerning female characters, as she investigates its other-than-human implications and qualities. Moving from some speculative fictions representing compost communities (Despret 2021), embodied (tentacular) thinking will be discussed from Haraway 2016a to Vaz 2010. Other-than-human longings and the pleasure of the non-human body become ways to fight back the "unlivable" (Grebowicz 2017) conditions of contemporary (petrosexoracial) society. Overall, these experiences are not lived as means to gain a perfectionated human status, but rather they bring the characters into a liminal dimension, in-between one world and another (Vaz 2010), questioning the boundaries separating humanness and non-humanness.

3.1 "It seemed much more preferable [...] to be a bear": post-speciesist awareness and the pleasure of the non-human body in *Tender Morsels* by Margo Lanagan (2008)

In Margo Lanagan's *Tender Morsels* (2008), the bad magicking of Annie Bywell, a clumsy town witch from St Olafred – with the collaboration of her accomplice Collaby Dought – causes the opening of some holes between the real world and Liga's haven (the novel's fairyland), which interfere with the balance between the two worlds.⁶⁰ One of the

⁶⁰ Liga is the mother of Branza (Snow-White) and Urdda (Rose-Red). After enduring sexual traumas as a teenager, she tries to kill herself and her first daughter (Branza), who is just a newborn, while she is also unknowingly pregnant of Urdda. When she is about to jump off a cliff, she is saved by a "moon-baby", who sends her and Branza to a parallel dimension. This world, the place of Liga's "heart's desire" is similar to the real world

consequences is that two young men disguised in bear costumes, Davit Ramstrong and Teasel Wurledge, during two different year editions of a town feast called “Bear Day”, accidentally fall into one of the holes. In this way, they cross into Liga’s world, where they find themselves completely transmogrified into the bear form. Some years later, during another Bear Day, three young bear-masked men (Bullock, Filip, and Noer) get close to the same hole: they do not cross into Liga’s world, but their slow and progressive metamorphosis into the bear form occurs in the real world.

Tender Morsels is a retelling of the Grimm’s fairy tale “Snow-White and Rose-Red”. In the traditional fairy tale, a human-bear transmogrification occurs too, but, as it is typical of traditional fairy tales, the psyche of the bear-man is not investigated. The transmogrification is depicted as a curse: an evil dwarf transforms a prince in a bear in order to steal his treasures. The aim of the bear-prince is, in the Grimm’s tale, to get back into his human form. On the contrary, in Lanagan’s retelling, the pleasure and complexity of bear-life is further investigated. What if the prince did not want to get back into his human form, but found bear-life more suitable to his desires of freedom beyond social pressure and gender stereotypes?

3.1.1 Bear Day or the *journée de l’ours*

In *Tender Morsels*, Bear Day is a feast where some young town boys approaching maturity are chosen to masquerade as bears and to run across the village and soil girl’s bodies with the black paint of their costumes. As Margo Lanagan explains, St Olafred’s Bear Day is inspired to the *journée de l’ours* held in February in Prats-de-Mollo-la-Preste, a town in the French Pyrenées (Lanagan 2010: 488). During this day, “the last of the bears of Costabonne comes down into the town”, in the body of some young men – chosen by former bears – who are “[b]lackened from soot, oil and sweat” and hang around the town “biting and clawing at

but everything in it that has caused Liga’s suffering has been erased. The two worlds go on in their independent existences for many years, until the clumsy witch Annie Bywell unwillingly opens a passage to Liga’s haven while trying to reach the place of Dought’s heart’s desire. Since Annie’s opening of the breach, elements from the real world begin to occasionally interfere with and get into Liga’s heaven. The question of the double-world constitution of *Tender Morsels* will be further investigated in § 4.3.

everything in [their] path”.⁶¹ The young men are chosen because of their good shape, and they are demanded to invest people, push them on the ground, and soil them with their soot.

Prats-de-Mollo’s feast is inspired to a legend about a shepherdess who fainted when she met a bear who was the Devil in disguise,⁶² and who tried to take advantage of her fainting to sexually abuse her. According to the legend, however, the damsel prayed to Notre Dame du Coral (a nearby chapel), so that the bear-Devil was unable to approach her. On the ninth day of her imprisonment, the *jour de la Chandeleur* (the Candlemas Day),⁶³ some woodcutters heard her cries and rescued her. The bear was eventually found by the hermit of the Notre Dame du Coral, who tricked him to death.⁶⁴

During Prats-de-Mollo’s feast, the bears run across the town followed by some hunters and by the *hommes en blanc* (“men in white”) or “barbiers”, who eventually chain them up, shave and wash them to “civilise” and “humanise” them. The enactment of the bear legend in Prats-de-Mollo shows the typical European folklore feature where wild beasts are represented as monsters to be civilised, as it happens in the case of the traditional variants of “Beauty and the Beast” (see § 2.2). Moreover, during Prats-the-Mollo’s *journée de l’ours*, the “beasts” are covered in black, and the “saviours” in white, uncovering the racializing aspects of the de-humanisation of racialised people. The blackening of the bear-men’s skin in soot and oil reminds the practice of the “blackface”. As Ayanna Thompson points out, the “blackface” is a performative genre implying “the application of any prosthetic—makeup, soot, burnt cork, minerals, masks, etc.—to imitate the complexion of another race” (Thompson 2021).⁶⁵ Blackface minstrelsy was a particularly popular performance genre in early 19th century U.S., which implied the supposed imitation of enslaved or recently freed Black people (Thompson 2021). However, blackface is a typical feature of English dramas since the early modern and

⁶¹ “Fete de l’Ours – Bear Festival, Prats de Mollo”, *P-O Life*, <https://anglophone-direct.com/event/fete-de-lours-prats-de-mollo/>.

⁶² The connection between the bear and the Devil is a common feature in European middle-age folklore. In Europe, humans masquerade as bears since, at least, the Medieval Age (Corvino 2013: 195). The Christian Church considered this masquerading as a sin, since the dark fur of the bear resembles that of the Devil (192).

⁶³ Claudio Corvino points out that a joke was made in French with the term *Chandeleur* (coming from *chandelier*, “candle”) and the word *ours* (“bear”). *Chandeleur* became indeed *Chandel-ours* (Corvino 2013: 196).

⁶⁴ “Fete de l’Ours – Bear Festival, Prats de Mollo”, *P-O Life*, <https://anglophone-direct.com/event/fete-de-lours-prats-de-mollo/>.

⁶⁵ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/blackface-older-you-think-180977618/>.

medieval age, when it was particularly used to represent demonic features. As Anthony Gerard Barthelemy points out, the association of blackness with evil dates, for what concerns the English stage, back to early medieval drama, where the devils “were represented by actors painted black” (Barthelemy 1987: 3-4). Even if the blackface existed on English stages before Black people arrived in England (probably at the half of the 16th century), their representation begun, in the 16th and 17th centuries, to reflect not only historical, literary, and Christian traditions, but also the direct experience of people (Barthelemy 1987: 1-2). The “blackface”, however, is not only connected to evil, but, as Robert Hornback points out, it also represents, in blackface comedy, “degradation, irrationality, prideful lack of self-knowledge, transgression, and [...] folly” (2007: 47).

The blackening of the bear-men during the *journées de l'ours* can be related to the “blackface” tradition. We might see how the “blackface” practice links the oppression of racialised people and that of non-human animals, who are connected by the demonic roots of the skin-blackening. Indeed, as Barthelemy points out, in the early modern context, Black people were not only thought to be “sinful”, but also to be “bestial” (1987: 4). By their connection to devilish creatures, racialised Black people are linked also to the witch figure: under the “witch” etiquette we can find all the de-humanised social categories. As Nicoletta Poidimani (2019) argues, all prosecuted and oppressed people, such as migrants nowadays, undergo a process of “*streghezzazione*” (“witchification”): an efficient dispositive of governance by which the power demonises, disciplines and marginalises otherness.

Not only in Prats-de-Mollo, the *journées de l'ours* are celebrated in many towns in the Eastern Pyrenées and across Eurasian countries (Corvino 2013: 196). In the village of Arles-sur-Tech, the *journée de l'ours* has sexual connotations as it happens in *Tender Morsels*: the bear-man harasses girls on his way, and he eventually has a simulated sexual intercourse with Roseta, a man dressed as a woman.

As mentioned, the *journée de l'ours* takes place in February and is associated to the *Chandeleur*, the Candlemas Day (the 2nd of February), which is considered to mark the end of winter (Corvino 2013: 190). The Candlemas Day is also associated to the Carnival and the approaching of spring: a period of fertility featured by an abundance of everything, from meat and food to words and sex (Corvino 2013: 201). Behind the bear-masquerading, there is a fertility ritual recovering the bears’ “death” during winter – when they go into lethargy – and

their resurfacing in spring (Corvino 2013: 191). As Claudio Corvino points out, bear's masks represent death and rebirth (2013: 192). The lampblack by which bear-men are covered in such feasts reminds the carbon black produced by hell flames, meaning their connection to the otherworld (Corvino 2013: 198). Being soiled by the bear-man is believed to bring good luck: it is a sign of fertility; which is why, in feasts such as those in Prats-de-Mollo or in Saint-Laurent-de-Cerdans, people – especially girls, because of the (hetero)sexual connotation of the feast – are glad to be soiled by the bears (Corvino 2013: 198-200). Through the bear-ritual, nature is magically stimulated to encourage fertility (208).

All the *journées de l'ours* described by Corvino end with the bear being captured by the human community, chained, and obliged to stay at the *trappeurs'* wills - sometimes to dance, as in Sartriano de Lucania, Italy (Corvino 2013: 202-204), sometimes to make a show around the city, as in some towns in Romania and Moldovia (207) – or he is shaved, cleaned, and “civilised”. In this regard, the background of the *journées de l'ours* always shows speciesist traits, where the “wild beast” is eventually to be tamed by the humans. Bears are represented as the irrational, and their free will is not considered by their chasers. As Sarat Colling points out, depriving non-human animals of their freedom in order to exploit them is framed within the mindset of the colonizer (as well as to the capitalist structure), to which “all the ‘wild things’ are available to consume, control and exploit” (Colling 2021: 22). This is also, in part, the reason why modern racial theories depict non-white/non-European humans “as animal like and closer to nature”, justifying their enslavement, destruction or deportation by “an ideology that present[s] them as ‘less than human’” (Colling 2021: 22).

The taming of the bears, or their “civilisation” through the shaving, is part of a process of domestication which is aimed at suppressing animal resistance. As Colling investigates, non-human animals often rebel against captivity (either for food, clothing, or entertainment). Therefore, domestication must occur in a violent form, since animals do not wish to be tamed and controlled (Colling 2021: 19). Their rebellion – when animals refuse, struggle, or escape their coercive conditions of captivity – is a form of resistance understood as “an animal's struggle and bid for freedom against their captive or other oppressive conditions”, which goes beyond the element of intentionality that we often associate with resistance (Colling 2021: 12). To this end, even if this resistance does not include “strategy or self-reflection”, it reveals

“an underlying desire and drive for liberation” (Colling 2021: 12) proving that non-human animals are agential subjects as well as humans.

3.1.2 Davit Ramstrong: predatory masculinity and the patriarchal pressure of Bear Day

In *Tender Morsels*, issues about other-than-humanness intersect with gender issues. Christopher Van Eecke reads *Tender Morsels*’ Bear Day as a representation of toxic masculinity taking place in the frame of a patriarchal fertility rite (2021: 68). This is the way in which Lanagan depicts the raising of young men in the patriarchal culture of St Olafred, from which Liga’s abusive father and her other abusers come. Liga’s creation of a parallel fairy world is the response to the several sexual traumas she has suffered, first at the hand of her father, then at the hand of a boy gang from St Olafred. When about to kill herself and her daughter Branza (born from her father’s rape), Liga is saved by a “moonish creature” who sends her to her heaven: a copy of the real world, but where Liga’s heart’s desire is fulfilled. In this parallel world, men are not harmful to women, and wild animals are friends to Liga and her daughters, Branza and Urdda (the latter is born from the gang rape). By this insight, Lanagan explicates the fairy dimension of the Grimm’s tale: Snow-White, Rose-Red and their mother live in a safe, peaceful, and joyful place because this place is the projection of the mother’s heart desire of living outside from the patriarchal violence.

The violent structure of St Olafred’s patriarchal culture is suffered by Davit Ramstrong too, the first young man disguised in bear that the readers meet. To Davit Ramstrong, the non-human animal form is both a liberation and an escape from the cultural expectations (Van Eecke 2021: 69) of the patriarchal world from which he comes. If the cultural framework of the real world wants him to express the violent side of its masculinity by considering women as sexual objects, Davit feels released from this pressure when he accidentally transmogrifies into bear form and finds himself in Liga’s world:

it seemed to me to have been a much stronger pleasure [...] to be bear and solitary in the wild, than it was to be man and celebrated in the town. [...] I wanted nothing more than to fly back to [that existence], and leave this place of gab and gossip and ale and embarrassment for ever. (Lanagan 2010: 155)

Davit Ramstrong is among the few men despising the violent, predatory culture of the world he inhabits. Because of that, he is surprised to be chosen as one of the four bears for Bear Day. He is both “honoured and shamed” (Lanagan 2010: 129) by this chance. On the one hand, he rejects the violent, patriarchal hypersexualisation young men are encouraged to perform during the feast. On the other hand, he acknowledges the social prestige of being chosen as a bear, since the honour is only got by the “best of young men [...], the strongest and the handsomest” (Lanagan 2010: 128). The day is indeed a crucial festivity in St Olafred: the young men “would remember this day all [their] lives and such” (132).

Like in the real *journées de l'ours*, in St Olafred too the bears are supposed to represent “everything that is spring [...]: strong, wild, mebbe a little dangerous, fulla juice and roar” (Lanagan 2010: 129). Another similarity between the real and the fictional Bear Day is that Lanagan’s Bears too are dressed-up with “oil-and-soot”; their hands are blackened “[g]ood and heavy, so I can mark many and well” (130). As Van Eecke acknowledges, however, Bear Day not only marks the transition from winter to spring, but also the transition from boyhood to manhood, resulting in a celebration of virility (2021: 69). As for the case of the werewolf discussed in § 2.1.2, the bear – as a wild, untamed, non-human “beast” – is suited to represent young male sexuality and its uncontrollability. Of course, the representation of virility and male sexuality is accorded to the patriarchal culture of St Olafred. In this respect, Davit is only relieved by the social pressure put on him by Bear Day – the expectations of the men around him to catch the girls as if they were anything but sexual objects – when he feels like fitting within the bear costume: “I was not myself any more; I was one of the four Bears. I cannot tell you the relief” (133). As Van Eecke points out, Davit experiences his transformation as “a liberation and an escape from the cultural expectations that Bear Day projects onto him” (2021: 69).

As the other bear-boys, Davit completely fits into the character he shall represent. The bear-boys “roared and clawed the air and ran back and forth along the battlement [...], leaning out fierce and threatening” (Lanagan 2010: 133). In such disguise, Davit feels like he and his companions are “the real Bears that children wanted to be, to terrify the world and bring spring” (133). As a bear, Davit’s human rationality is gone: “Being a Bear had done with my thinking” (136). Davit is completely “gone from [him]self”, and plays the role he is required,

picking women coming at him and “paint[ing] a black kiss on them” (133). He feels within himself “the force of spring” and gets aware that the other men “wanted to be so tall and furred as me, so disguised, and turn the season, and be so free” (134). However, he also feels “prisoner” in the costume (134): although he is tired and sweating, he is forced to “run, and kiss and roar and paw and smash”; otherwise, he would be “derided” (135).

It is while running down through a twitten in his bear costume that Davit accidentally falls into a hole leading to Liga’s haven. Suddenly, when on the other side, he figures out that his costume is very tight on him, and even the fur bonnet is straight on his head (137). He tries to take the bearskin off, but it does not come out. It takes him some time to acknowledge that not only he has crossed into another world, where the spring of Bear Day has left room to a harsh winter, but also that he has been adhering so much to the bear figure, that he has become an actual bear. His hands “felt so clawed and furred” that he initially thinks that “[t]he sweat had frozen the soot to them” (137). But when he tries to talk to Liga and her daughters, his “voice came out growls into the room, though it were words in my head and on my lips, wherever they were” (138). His costume “had changed and thickened”, the bonnet “extended as a mask down [his] face”. His eyes “[h]ad changed too, and the mind that translated what they saw” (140). However, it is only when Branza and Urdda (who, at this moment of the story, are little girls) start to brush the wet and mud out of his fur, that Davit eventually acknowledges his metamorphoses:

The feeling of being a man inside a bear inside their brushing had my whole skin and brain busy. They were brushing a bear into existence from my matter – I began to sense and then to see that I had claws, that I had paws, as they did their delicate work upon them. (141)

As opposed to what happens during the traditional *journées de l’ours*, the brushing and cleaning of the bear-man is not followed by his “civilisation” – i.e. the resurfacing of the man hidden behind – but rather the cleaning seals his bearish, non-human nature.

Furthermore, non-human animal life seems more desirable to Davit than his human one. As a bear, he finds in Liga’s home a refuge of tenderness, where no one pretends from him the typical machismo and sexualisation of women that he was expected in St Olafred. Liga and the girls rest against him and clamber on him, and he could feel their affection “blamelessly

and without embarrassment”: he is “so comfortable” as it could have never happened in man shape (145).

Bear-life is described in the wonderfulness of its simplicity – a kind of life out of language, over-thinking, and cultural and gender expectations: “All that day I spent in bear-business, which was very simple and very wonderful” (143). Being a non-human animal shifts the human focus around rationality: in bear-shape, “I thought of nothing; all I did was look, and heed the tumbling of scents through my sensitive nose, and accustom myself to the new way of hearing, and propel my new body through the forest” (144). Perceptions and senses change and adjust to the new bodily form. Senses are amplified in spite of the resizing of thinking:

The scents of these three were so distinct, though they were clearly a family: the dark girl more savoury and the golden-haired one more honeylike and the woman sweetest of all – I could not place what flower it was she recalled to me, or perhaps what sweetmeat. The three scents together, they busied and dizzied the air around, and I were continually snuffling at it, reading their flashes of mood and interest. (145)

Therefore, there is “much more sensation in being animal” (145): everything is “so fast and instinctual” that “I enjoyed myself, no doubt of it, but I hardly realized I was enjoying” (144). Animal form is so instinctual, to Davit, that there is not a rationalizing of the happiness and simplicity of its condition. Insofar, “it seemed much preferable [...] to be a bear” (156). Davit prefers a life of sensations rather than the rough masculinity to which he is destined in human patriarchal culture. Bear-life is so preferable that, when Davit accidentally gets back into reality and recovers his previous human form, he tries desperately to get back to Liga’s place:

I went to the twitten and lingered there, hoping. I walked down it; tried running; tried to get up the same sweated panic that had drove me the first time; tried to discern, as I ran, the exact point where it had happened, where my feet had left the ground and I had taken flight. (156)

As Van Eecke points out, when back into human life, Davit “feels like an outcast”, because he “cannot fit into the sexual mores of his hometown”, especially after that “he has experienced an alternative way of life in the other world” (2021: 70). However, now Liga’s place has faded away. Davit remains alone with his desire to getting back into bear-form: the only chance he

had ever known to get out of the patriarchal paths of gender roles, where men are predators and women their preys. In his transbiology, Davit has found a way to escape gender-imposed norms, which emerge again as tied to the anthropocentric gaze.

3.1.3 A post-speciesist awareness: Bullock Oxman and the bear hunt

In *Tender Morsels*, a relevant narrative refers to what we might understand as a non-speciesist or post-speciesist sensibility, which is brought up by the means of transbiology, or the non-human metamorphosis. This feature emerges in particular in the context of a bear-hunting episode. Bear-hunting, which is a typical moment of the real *journées de l'ours*, is not part of the folklore of St Olafred's Bear Day. However, a bear hunt occurs in the novel not as part of the town's folklore, but as the hunting of a real bear. The episode is represented from a critical perspective, which might lead to a non-speciesist reading. Indeed, some of the bear-men, as a consequence of their metamorphoses, acquire a sensibility and empathy for the life of non-human animals.

The episode of bear-hunting occurs through the second half of the novel. The focalisation is on Bullock Oxman, another young man chosen to be a Bear some years after Davit. Unlike Davit, Bullock does not cross into Liga's world, but his transmogrification occurs, slowly, in the real world, as it happens at the same time to his two bear-colleagues: Noer and Filip. As readers meet him at the beginning of his first-person account, Bullock is not as ashamed of patriarchal culture and its objectification of women as Davit is. Being a Bear is to him just a great honour. While he races through St Olafred's lanes, he chases the girls, whom he considers "slutty" (Lanagan 2010: 261), and whose screaming, when they find themselves trapped in front of the Bear-men, he describes as "it was like uncovering a nest full of rat-babbies all squeerming and squeaking" (262). Suddenly, in the middle of his running and chasing, Bullock feels a "silvery flash" and screams, as Filip and Noer do, apparently feeling the same flash (262). This happens in the twitten behind the Eelsisters, the same place where Davit Ramstrong fell into the hole "that Dought made through my old world", as Urdda acknowledges later (289). When, the day after Bear Day, Bullock tries to take off his bear-hat and costume, he cannot, neither can Filip and Noer. "Have they stitched our bear-bonnets on us in the night? [...] Have they glued them?" (265), Bullock asks to his bear companions. They try to help

each other unclothing, but, except for Dench (the fourth Bear) who easily managed to take off his costume – he was not with them at the twitten –, the three other boys cannot. “What of they *done*?” cries Bullock, nearly weeping, “Oh, they have sewn it into my very bones!” (265). Like Davit, the boys are initially scared, and, in their bearskin, they feel “in prison, in chains” (268).

The three bear-boys go to Annie Bywell, the town witch, asking for help, as she suggests them to operate a bear-related sacrifice (276). Erroneously, she guesses that their transmogrification happened because of some infraction they made (however, as the bear-boys reply “the whole of Bear Day is for lawlessness [...]. We had been being improper on girls and women many hours by then; it were expected”, 274), so they need an appeasement, which may occur through a bear sacrifice. Following the ungrounded instructions of the clumsy witch, the boys go into the woods with some hunters, looking for a bear to sacrifice in order to – supposedly – free themselves. However, when they eventually find a she-bear, something they did not expected occurs. The three bear-boys fall in love with the she-bear. As Bullock recounts, “A scent filled my head, filled my body, filled the clearing, that was all the green and brown of the world – all the blood, all the bone, all the wild water. [...] All I wanted was to see her closer, to bury my face and fingers in her fur, to have her enfold me” (277). As the she-bear moves,

New suggestions and flourishments of her scent flowed over me as her limbs and folds opened and closed passing near. I put out my hand, and the brush of her passing flank was coarse fur only, but it left on my fingertips some oil or paint of enchantment, and I did not know – Should I put it to my mouth? Or rub it on my skin? Which would be the more delicious? (278)

The young men feel there is “magic at work” (279), that the she-bear is a “magic-bear” (278), and they are getting “enchanted” (279). When Noer and Filip get very close to the she-bear, Bullock, trying to protect his human-thinking with much effort, thinks: “Part of me felt great alarm, and part said to myself, Of course! This is the way it *should* be between man and beast. Certainly between man and bear, for we are twins in being separate from the general run of creation [...]” (279, original emphasis).

When Bullock tries to discourage his companions to be that close to the bear, and he acknowledges that it is only because they are bear-skinned if their minds are so obnubilated, Noer says “but we do, we *do* have these skins. We are bear like her. We are the same creature now” (279, original emphasis). While Bullock is still enmeshed in his human perspective, firmly trying to keep the influences of his non-human body out of him, Noer acknowledges and accepts their transmutation. Interestingly, while they are all in an in-between status – not completely human, nor totally bear –, none of them seems to acknowledge this liminal condition. Still very immersed in a dualistic vision, as according to the culture in which they have been raised, the boys believe that they must be either man or bear.

Eventually, Bullock manages to “rescue” Filip, whether he admits “I am in love with her! In love with a bear!” (281). The two boys try then to rescue Noer, who is still with the she-bear (which they are very jealous of). But when Bullock tells his plan to Filip, involving hitting the she-bear with a stick and then having Noer shoot her, so as to “pull these skins off ourselves, and everything that goes with them, such as the love of bears”, Filip is confused. He tells Bullock: “It sounds so daft when you say it, but the love of *this* bear, and only this one, to whom I would gladly... wed myself?” (282, original emphasis). In that moment, a hunter, mistaking Filip for a real bear – “he looked *just* like a bear!” (283, original emphasis), as he says later – shoots him dead. As Noer said indeed, the young men and the bear have become by now the same thing: the borders between species have blurred, and it is very difficult to discern the one from the other. Rather than being bear *or* man, the boys are both at the same time, inhabiting thus the liminal space which is typical of the witch figure, of non-conforming, transbiological, and shapeshifting beings.

In the meanwhile, Noer and the she-bear disappear together into the forest: as Bullock acknowledges, Noer has not only been abducted, but “*he have eloped with her. It is love. For no one who had not breathed the stars and the dew of that woman-bear would believe me*” (284, original emphasis).

In the following days, Bullock’s transmutation goes further. The day after the bear hunt, he acknowledges that “My arms were much thicker-haired than yesterday, my fingers shorter, and my fingernails a little longer. And my face [...] more than bearded, it was coated – cheeks and chin, forehead and all – with short, soft hair” (284-285). The more he gets bearish, the more Bullock understands the impossibility of shooting a(nother) bear: a new post-

human, non-speciesist sensibility grows into him, as it did into the other bear-boys. As he says to Annie Bywell,

To kill one [...] I don't see how that is possible, the glamour they cast upon our minds. I know I could not have done what you bid us, had we caught her: eat the parts of her, boil the bones. You might as well ask me to eat my own mother. Or my wife, if I had one, would be closer. (288-289)

Once experienced life into the bearskin, Bullock feels like there is not an actual difference between the human man and the non-human bear. His previous belief that he and the bear-boys should get rid of their bear-senses and behave as the human-men they truly are leaves room to a new post-speciesist awareness, which comes out in the liminality of the half bear-half human condition.

Eventually, the she-bear is killed by the hunters and Noer is rescued. This happens at the same time when Miss Dance (a much more powerful and expert witch than Annie) adjusts the “key-joint” of time and space that Annie broke, bringing Branza and Liga back into reality. When Liga is no longer there, the haven of her heart's desire ceases to exist, and the bear-boys too come back into their human form. Since the moment coincides with the “sacrifice” of the she-bear, town people believe that the boys get back into the human shape because of the successful bear hunt (323). However, the un-bearishness of the boys does not mean that they lose their post-human empathy. On the contrary, when discovering about “the feast of bear-meat, of hunted she-bear meat” that will take place that same night, Bullock thinks “Oh goodness, how could we ever join in that? Ever again, unspelled or no?” (334). As if, once passed through bear experience, the human status is regained outside of its dualistic anthropocentrism.

To this end, the fact of having being “rescued” from the she-bear drives Noer mad. He gets mad, though, not for having risked to be eaten by the she-bear for almost a week, but, as Bullock figures out,

He is mad from having been *between her paws* and being there no longer. He is mad of being ‘rescued’. He is mad of grief and rage, of breathing town-air and house-air, people-farts and the

breath of bedding and cold ashes. Yesterday he were in the forest, with the sky and leaves overhead and greenness all around, the tree-trunks holding up the canopy so that bird and breeze might be free to fly through. Yesterday he were *between her paws*, spelled by her amber eyes, and now she is dead, and she have taken his mind with her. (335, original emphasis)

Not only Noer is mad for having lost his mate, but also because he has been extirpated from his bear-life. Noer's nostalgic – and angry – desire for the other-than-human life he has lost is understood only by Bullock, who has shared the same experience. When Bullock goes visiting Noer, he finds him still half-bearish. He still wears the bear costume, not because it does not come off, but because he does not want to take it off. He also does not allow anyone to get close to him. Moreover, his family has prisoned him in a hut in the backyard, keeping him chained because, as his father says, “He have been wild. I thought he would knock the structure down, chains or no chains. [...] He is strong as a bear, just as he's dressed like one” (336). Noer's father also dissuades Bullock to go into the hut, saying that “He will tear you up; he is quite wild, and angry at everyone”, but Bullock knows that it is because “[t]hey have crossbowed his wife [...]! Who would not be wild after that?” (336, original emphasis).

Imprisoned in the hut, Noer lives in poor conditions, surrounded by a “sweaty skin-dirt” smell – “How can he breathe in there?”, Bullock asks (337). As well as bear-masks in the *journées de l'ours*, Noer has been captured and imprisoned by the human community, and brought to his family “all bound up”, even if “for his own safety” (337). Now he is kept in chains in a small and stinky locked hut, where he goes mad and struggles for freedom and mourns for his killed bear companion. His conditions remind those of non-human animals in zoos, circuses, fairs, and cattle farms. In her article “Thinking Like a Chicken: Farm Animals and the Feminine Connection” (1995), Karen Davis describes the condition of farm animals, speaking in first-person, as if she was a battery hen⁶⁶. In her chicken-speak, Davis enlightens the harsh conditions of hen batteries, and the irremediable desire those non-human animals have for freedom.

⁶⁶ Davis's aim is to challenge J. Baird Callicott's supposition of the moral superiority of wild animals upon farm animals exposed in *Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair*, 1980.

I am a battery hen. I live in a cage so small I cannot stretch my wings. I am forced to stand night and day on a sloping wire mesh floor that painfully cuts into my feet. The cage walls tear my feathers, forming blood blisters that never heal. The air is so full of ammonia that my lungs hurt and my eyes burn and I think I am going blind. [...] Free, I would have ranged my ancestral jungles and fields with my mates, devouring plants, earth-worms, and insects from sunrise to dusk. I would have exercised my body and expressed my nature, and I would have given, and received, pleasure as a whole being. (Davis 1995: 200).

The hen's condition described by Davis recalls that of Noer, deprived of freedom, of his she-bear mate, and kept in unbreathable conditions.⁶⁷ The coercive behavior that his family and the community of St Olafred enact upon him sheds light on the pervasiveness of the speciesist gaze. In his bearskin, Noer is no longer received as a beloved member of the family, but is rejected and marginalised in a cage, as Otherness.

The only one to recognise Noer as a subject is Bullock. Thanks to Bullock's sympathy, Noer gets calmer, and, in front of his scandalised family, the young men firmly state they will not go to the bear-meat feast. However, they "could not help but breathe her" and the smell of her flesh being cooked in the close hall (340). The one who suffers more is Noer. Bullock spends the whole night trying to console him in the "little malodorous refuge" (340) that Noer is unable to leave. Bullock tries to "hol[d] him back from losing himself in his own mind" (341). He is indeed "the only man in the world who can intimate" what Noer is enduring (341). Even if they are now back in their human form, their lives, as Bullock tells Noer, "had been tumbled like a half-keg of salt-herring rolled down a hill, and now we lay unpacked and dizzied at the bottom" (343). Once gone through the transmogrification, the young men have reached a post-speciesist sensibility and knowledge that cannot be undone, even if they are now back in their human form. A form which, however, is no longer "fully" human, since the post-human bear experience cannot be erased, and will shape their perspective with liminality from now on.

⁶⁷ The question of "unbreathability" will be further discussed in § 3.2.3 and § 3.3.3 (with reference to Vaz 2010 and Gumbs 2020).

3.2 Longing for trans-species friendships beyond the heterosexual sabbath

Post-human longing may also be fostered by the encounter with non-human companions. Meeting a fox in the woods, the protagonist of Sharon Blackie's "Foxfire" (2019) discovers a more desirable condition of existence. As to Davit Ramstrong "[i]t seemed much more preferable [...] to be a bear", the encounter with the fox opens for the protagonist of "Foxfire" the possibility of a new, embodied, much more lively way of living. Similarly, Branza from *Tender Morsels* builds a trans-species friendship with a wolf, who, when she unwillingly gets back to reality, becomes to her the symbol of the safe world she lost. However, those trans-species friendships are not only nostalgic longings, but they are to both characters also means of self-determination and resistance to the violence of reality. On the one hand, these alliances are needed from both parts in order to survive. On the other hand, they enhance the acknowledgement of a similar condition of oppression and shared liminality, by which a post-speciesist empathy is fostered. The liminal condition of women characters and their non-human friends is empowered by their alliance, which helps in turn the development of a post-speciesist empathy beyond their difference.

Above all, in the cases discussed in the following sections, the recognition of a shared oppression does not come throughout heterosexual encounters (as in the "Beauty and the Beast" kind of stories), but rather through a beyond-species friendship, which makes these alliances deeply relevant for their deconstruction of the heteropatriarchal reproductive order.

3.2.1 "She lived fully, my fox, and I envied her with all my heart": "Foxfire" by Sharon Blackie (2019), unproductive female bodies, and the *Hulder* Folk

As though Lanagan's bear-boys long for bear-life or non-human companionship, Sharon Blackie's short story "Foxfire" (2019) depicts another condition of post-human longing. The protagonist, a woman coming out of a depressive period after three miscarriages, meets a fox in the woods, and is fascinated by her freedom and aliveness. When she meets the fox the first time, her "heart sprang suddenly to life again and almost burst": she has never seen such a beautiful thing, and she looks at the fox as "[t]he epitome of all that was wild and free"

(Blackie 2019: 39). The fox is a “flash of red” on the white of the snow, looking like “lifeblood”, which means also that she appears very much “alive” (39).

The woman gets back to the woods day after day. She follows the fox around, into the woods and down to the hills and the wide plains, and feels “content but weary”, because “it had been a long time since I’d pushed my body so far” (39). Indeed, as she acknowledges, the protagonist had forgotten “what breathlessness felt like, or the bite of winter wind whipping up a storm in my hair”; in other words, she had “forgotten what it was to be alive” (39-40). For many months, she has been disconnected from “who [she] was” (40), spending her days “sitting alone and still, enshrouded in the dark mustiness of the small, neat bedroom” which was destined to the children she and her husband were supposed to have (41). The aliveness of the fox strikes the woman so much, for the contrast with her own condition, that she “wanted to be her. Longed for it, as I had never longed for anything in my life” (40). This feeling reminds Davit’s longing for bear life: Blackie’s protagonist acknowledges too that, unlike herself, the fox “lived fully [...], and [she] envied her with all [her] heart” (41).

The woman longs to be like the fox, “sleek and fast; to be beautiful and fierce, feral and unconstrained. To run wherever I wanted to run, to make my dark home in the belly of the fecund earth, to hunt at dawn in the wildness of a moonlit wood” (40). Not only she longs for the aliveness and agility of the fox’s non-human body, but she also acknowledges that it is “very long since I had wanted anything” at all (40). In other words, not only the fox fosters the woman’s longing for freedom and aliveness, but she also fosters her general ability to desire, which, in the impoverished condition of the life she was leading, was lost. Meanwhile, the dangers and pains of wildlife do not seem to scare the protagonist, since she knows that “some chances must be taken, if you want to live fully” (40).

Like Davit Ramstrong in *Tender Morsels*, Blackie’s protagonist finds relief and new stimula in the non-human form, whereas a life lived bodily is far from the pain and misery of human cultural expectations. Once again it is possible to find another analogy between Blackie’s protagonist’s and Davit’s feelings in regard of the gender expectations they are pushed to perform. In addition to having a personal desire for motherhood, I also suppose that Blackie’s character might be feeling like she is not fulfilling her expected social role as a woman: reproduction and motherhood. Cultural expectations about the gender binary system seem to put pressure on both Lanagan’s and Blackie’s characters, pushing them to long for a less

cultural constructed way of living, especially for what concerns the relationship with their body. Defying the binaries of species means for both of them also to have the chance to defy the (heteropatriarchal) gender binary and its consequent socially imposed roles. In the non-human form, they both find a relief from gender social pressure. As discussed above, in *Tender Morsels* this aspect is quite explicit, and has already been acknowledged by criticism (as in Van Eecke 2021). On the other hand, in “Foxfire” the topic is more complex. The tale is not explicit about the uneasiness that gender roles bring about. With no doubt, in the whole collection by Sharon Blackie there is an evident critique of the patriarchal representation of women, and the wish to retell from a female-empowered perspective those folk tales which do not represent female characters as subjects of agency and empowerment. At the same time, there is not a critique of the gender binary per se, but, as I suggest, it is possible to give an ecotransfeminist reading to the tale by moving from its representation of trans-species friendships and companionships.

In this regard, it can be noticed that, at the beginning of the tale, the protagonist identifies very much with the heteropatriarchal representation of women’s identity as based on reproduction. To this end, since her body is not able to reproduce, she recounts that she has lost her own identity: “After my last miscarriage – the third – the laughter had bled right out of me along with the dead fetus. With every child lost over the years, I’d lost more of myself. [...] I didn’t know who I was any more. I didn’t even know why I should care” (40). Not only she suffers because she lost the possibility of having children – which is a crucial desire to her – but she also seems not to find any meaning to her own self outside of reproduction. Even though the tale does not explicitly investigate the issue of women’s reproduction, a possible reading of the fact that she “lost more of [her]self” might depend on her inability to fill the patriarchal expectations for women’s social roles – which must identify with reproduction and motherhood. Indeed, it is through a non-reproductive and non-heterosexual relationship that she finds again a meaning to her own life. Through the trans-species friendship with the fox, not only she finds a meaning to her body just for its ability to be alive and enjoy the pleasure of it, but she also overcomes heteropatriarchal relationships and the centrality of the heterosexual couple in giving a meaning to a woman’s life. In this regard, as we are going to see, her friendship with the fox will become more meaningful to her than the relationship with her husband.

By being close to the fox, and spending increasingly more time in the woods, the protagonist undergoes a guise of metamorphosis herself. She gets “flushed cheeks and bright eyes”, for her senses “were slowly beginning to come alive again” (41). Her sense of smell gets sharper: she recognises the smell of her husband hidden among the trees – “I lifted my nose and sniffed, caught the faint scent of the pine resin which always permeated his clothes” (42). One day, indeed, her husband, suspicious for her wife’s sudden desire to go out, follows her in the woods and meets the fox, who, seeing the man, runs away. However, the man gets back to look for the fox the day after, and the protagonist, hidden to spy the scene, sees the fox transforming into a beautiful woman, and laying together with her husband in a cabin in the woods. Therefore, she acknowledges that the fox is a *huldra*: a half-woman, half-fox spirit who, as fairy tales tell, seduces men and kills those who do not satisfy her (43). As the story tells, the *huldra* also has her back carved out: her body cavity is empty and she has no heart (43).

Sharon Blackie takes the *huldra* figure from the Scandinavian tradition, as she explains herself (222). She describes the *huldra* as a warden of the forest, and acknowledges that, according to the Norwegian tradition, she may have a cow’s tale, while in Sweden she has that of a fox, and that *huldrefolk* appears also in Icelandic folklore (222).

In *A Field Guide to the Little People* (1977), Nancy Arrowsmith and George Moorsee consider the Huldre Folk (referred to the Norwegian tradition) as part of the wider group of the Mound Folk, who are “Trolls” or Scandinavian wood or lake elves. The authors describe the Mound Folk as “tall, thin elves of great age and even greater skill” (Arrowsmith and Moorsee 1977: 109). They acknowledge that the Mound Folk are also believed to “desire to sicken, murder and cheat human beings” (109). “Foxfire”’s protagonist believes too that the *huldra* is a “devilish creature” who “wishes to do harm” (Blackie 2019: 44). Arrowsmith and Moorsee describe the Mound Folk also as great workers, especially of iron and metals, who also love dancing (1977: 109-110). They live by night, because the sunlight changes them to stone (109-110). Most relevantly, the Mound Women are described as “exceptionally beautiful” (110), as Blackie’s fox-woman is portrayed as “[a] beautiful woman with red-gold hair, eyes amber as the fossilised heart of a tree” (2019: 42).

As it comes out from the work by Arrowsmith and Moorsee, the *huldra* figure intersects with that of the *Skogsrå* – wood trolls or wood elves from Sweden and the Baltic coast, who are

parented with the Mound Folk. The *huldra* is represented as a spirit of the forest in “Foxfire” too, where the protagonist, when sitting by her hut’s fire and sipping a broth the *huldra* offers to her, feels like she is “drinking down the spirit of the forest itself” (Blackie 2019: 45). In their female form (*Skogsjungfru*), the *Skogsrå* share the same features of the *huldra* regained in Blackie’s tale. In fact, the *Skogsjungfru* is particularly dangerous for men venturing in the woods: she gains control over them by having them answer “yes” to her questions, especially after having slept with them (Arrowsmith and Moorse 1977: 200). The *Skogsjungfru* women appear in the form of “beautiful, seductive creatures with sweet voices, long breasts and flowing hair”, but they “always keep their backs hidden”, since they hide there a cow’s tail and “they have no back” but “a transparent hollow” (200), as well as Blackie’s fox-woman.

Furthermore, as Gunnar W. Knutsen and Anne Irene Riisøy acknowledge, *hulder* folk, as well as trolls – who, according to some folklorists, are the same things, while to others they are different beings coming from the same stock – are related to witchcraft and pagan traditions, which have been demonized by Christian authorities (2017: 69). The authors point out that, in some Scandinavian languages (Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish), the word “troll” and the word “witch” come from the same root: *trolldom* stood indeed for “witchcraft” (2017: 32). Referring in particular to Norwegian folklore, the authors acknowledge that the *hulder* has the troll feature – which is also associated to historical witchcraft – of stealing human children and replacing them with troll ones. This could be avoided only by baptising children as soon as possible (Knutsen and Riisøy 2017: 44). Other troll-features of the *hulder* include “taking people prisoners in mountains” and hating church bells (55). In this regard, Arrowsmith and Moorse acknowledge how a man prisoner of a *Skogsrå* could free himself only at the sound of church bells (1977: 200). All these features – referred to Norwegian folklore – may be included, as Knutsen and Riisøy point out, in people’s perception of the sabbath, where the witches’ feast with Satan and his demons is replaced by their feasting with the trolls (2017: 55). Trolls were indeed considered by the post-Reformation clergy as “fallen demons who had landed in forests, on hills or mountains, and who now trapped humans inside the mountains”, as Hans Lauridsen reported in 1587 (Knutsen and Riisøy 2017: 55). The authors conclude that

the trolls and their consorts which were remnants of paganism to the Catholic missionaries and earliest Norwegian bishops and priests during Norway's first change of religion were demons and witches to the Protestants who replaced them after the second change of religion. (56)

It is also interesting to mention that the fox – one of the shapes the *huldra* can take – is often represented, in folklore, as a powerful sorcerer, because of its cleverness (together with the jackal, Sax 2001: 116). Blackie's fox-woman, by the clever trick she seems to play on the woman protagonist, can be linked also to the trickster feature which is typical of the fox figure in folklore (from Mesopotamian to Babylonian to Ancient Greek fables; Sax 2001: 117). The *huldra*, as described in Scandinavian folklore as well as in "Foxfire", shares with the witch figure also the shapeshifting feature. We can see, therefore, how shapeshifting and trickster beings might be quite often connected to the witch figure and to the prosecution of non-conforming identities. The *huldra* from Scandinavian folklore, as it is also represented in "Foxfire", is connected to the witch's trans-species oddkin – from the lycanthrope and its twin half human-half non-human critters (such as the bear-man, or the water-horse), to the Beast, to the she-wolf, and the mermaid (which we are going to discuss in § 3.3.2).

Moreover, "Foxfire"'s fox-woman or *huldra* shares with the witch-figure also the feature of being hypersexualised. This kind of sexuality is, on the one hand, threatening to men, and, on the other hand, it is very distant from that of the tale's female protagonist as she is represented in the first part of the novel (i.e. as connected only to reproduction, the non-realisation of which causes a lot of suffering). After the encounter with the fox, as we are going to discuss in a while, also the sexuality of the protagonist will shift from one which is only connected to reproduction, to one that is closer to how Angela Carter too understands female sexuality in her tales, which is as a tool for women's empowerment.

However, if the *huldra* is generally depicted in folklore as a demonic figure (as in the retellings considered in § Chapter 2), Blackie's representation rewrites her demonised nature. The protagonist of "Foxfire" will have indeed to deconstruct her prejudices around the *huldra* figure and to recognise the "monstrous" nature of herself instead. Influenced by the folkloric prejudices around the *huldra* – convinced that her back is empty, that she has no heart, and that she wants to harm her husband – the protagonist of "Foxfire" goes to the fox-woman's cabin in the woods and expresses her anger to her, mourning their lost friendship – "the fox I

had love – the fox I had thought of as my only friend” – more than mourning her own marriage (44). As we might see, the traditional heteropatriarchal monogamous hierarchy that places romantic relationships on top of the relationship scale – in traditional fairy tales too – is reversed. (Trans-species) friendship is to the protagonist stronger and more affectively relevant than the relationship with her husband. To this end, the oddkin she built with the fox gives her back the capacity to revitalise her body and feeling herself alive as well as the capacity to desire. Replying to the woman, the fox-woman says – in spite of her prejudices – “You shouldn’t believe all the fairy stories you’re told”, thus revealing a perfectly whole back, while showing to the protagonist that her back is hollow (44-45). It might be understood that, rather than indicating the hollowness of her uterus, unable to bring a child, this emptiness is the sign both of the void carved out by depression, and of how much the woman was trying to identify herself with a social gender projection stating that her inability to reproduce was making her less of a whole person. In addition, the relationship with the fox brings about issues of multispecies ecojustice and composting community-making. As if replying to the already mentioned ecofeminist slogan “Make Kin, Not Babies” (Haraway 2016a: 102), kin-making is eventually produced, in Blackie’s tale, from a trans-species and female genealogy.

In “Foxfire”, as in the other discussed stories, the narrative of the non-human critter as a monster deprived of the soul is revised too. The non-human is narrated instead as the one who shows vitality, cultural emancipation, and freedom to the human protagonist. It is through the encounter with the non-human that the protagonist acknowledges the misery of her hollow (human) condition:

I wept for the children who were lost to me, for the empty years I’d wasted and the strong, healthy body I’d shunned. For the desolate woman I’d become, with her hollow centre and closed-down heart, and the husband whose clumsy but loving efforts at comfort I’d always turned aside. I wept for both of us, each locked into our own fatal sorrow, trapped inside our own lonely skins. It had taken a fox to show us what we needed. To show us what we were missing, and how very much we had lost. (Blackie 2019: 46)

A fox was needed to enlighten her human condition: the encounter with the non-human fosters the protagonist’s desire for a life “lived fully”, for an other-than-human condition where to be free and live an embodied life. “Learning to become full again” passes through the body: going

to the forest each day and “roll[ing] among leaves on the damp, mossy floor”, or “burrow[ing] into root balls and talk[ing] to trees” (46).

As in the “Beauty and the Beast”/animal bridegrooms retellings, the interspecies friendship helps the human character to set free, empower, and self-determine herself, while through a developed trans-species perspective, the speciesist and anthropocentric narrative around the non-human is deconstructed. The *huldra*’s emptiness is questioned, and the human’s fullness too: by reconsidering the anthropocentric standpoint through trans-species relationships, binaries are defied, and a beyond-boundaries, sympoietic liminality is chosen.

3.2.2 “Biting back” men’s violence against women and animals: Branza and Wolf in Margo Lanagan’s *Tender Morsels* (2008)⁶⁸

As well as the relationship between the woman and the fox fosters a seeming, soft and partial metamorphosis in the protagonist of “Foxfire”, Branza’s relationship with her companion Wolf in *Tender Morsels* influences and shapes her behavior. Unlike the bears, the wolf is not a character from the traditional Grimm’s fairy tale “Snow-White and Rose-Red”. However, we could consider him as pertaining to the general atmosphere of smooth human/non-human trans-species relations intrinsic to the tale, where the girls live in perfect harmony with the wild animals inhabiting the woods. This feature, which is typical of the fairy-tale animistic dimension, is justified by Lanagan in her contemporary novel as pertaining to Liga’s safe dream-world, where – differently from the reality where she experienced her traumas – nothing could harm her and her daughters.

As discussed in § Chapter 2, companion animals can be related to the figure of the witch’s familiar. They might indicate, therefore, that their human companion is a witchy character: a non-conforming, liminal figure beyond the binaries of species and, sometimes, that of gender – if considering how witches have been prosecuted for their non-conformation, among other things, to women’s gender role in the heteropatriarchal and capitalist society (see § 2.1.1). In this regard, in “Foxfire”, we encounter a woman who is unable to reproduce: bringing several miscarriages is to her a reason of suffering, which is in part personal and affective, and in part

⁶⁸ The title of this section is inspired to Christopher Van Eecke’s article “Biting Back: Safe Space and Animal Desire in Margo Lanagan’s *Tender Morsels* (2008)” (2021).

cultural and dysphoric. She will regain her wholeness only by defying the pressure of gender roles when approaching trans-species relationships and non-human experience. She has, moreover, other witchy features: she communicates with non-human animals, she lives in the woods, and she hangs out there without fearing its depths.

Branza from *Tender Morsels* shares some features with the witch-figure too. She lives in a hut in the woods alone with her mother, after her sister's departure.⁶⁹ She is sexually mature, but she does not have a sexual-romantic partner. Her genealogy is totally feminine: she does not know any males being part of their family and bloodline. She is at ease in the woods, animals are her friends (as to her mother and sister), and she communicates with them, especially with bears (who, as discussed, are actual men coming from St Olafred and transmogrified into the bear shape) and a wolf.

Like the witch in Francesca Matteoni's description (§ 2.3.2), Branza finds her companion animal to relieve her solitude after Urdda's departure.⁷⁰ Wolf is to Branza a second companion animal. The first was the "second-Bear": Teasel Wurledge from St Olafred transmogrified in bear form, who eventually disappears as Urdda did.⁷¹ Branza finds Wolf as a cub, "starving and staggering in the forest" with his sibling, who dies soon (256). Since Branza too has lost her sister and her previous companion animal, this likely condition of loneliness gets her closer to the wolf-cub (257). When she brings Wolf to the village, other people "greeted him as if he were as much a person as Branza herself", so that Branza "grew to think of him as" (258). However, Branza acknowledges that Wolf is not "nearly as close a spirit or as complex a companion as Urdda", nor he is "nearly as mysterious and alluring as second-Bear had been"

⁶⁹ Branza and Liga do not know it already, but Urdda has found a passage to the real world and has crossed into that other dimension.

⁷⁰ After Urdda's departure, Liga has become increasingly distant to Branza, since she does not seem to suffer for Urdda's absence as Branza does. As the reader will understand later, Liga's absence of negative emotions is due to the construction of her haven as a safe space, from which every negative emotion must stay out (see Van Eecke 2021). However, this emotional prison does not affect Branza, who feels lonely and finds in non-human companions a relief to solitude.

⁷¹ Teasel is the second bear, after Davit, that Liga and her daughters meet in Liga's haven, without knowing that a man hides inside them. Unlike Davit-bear, who has been tender to the girls as according to his nature, Teasel-bear has patriarchal, predatory and abusive behaviours. After Urdda's departure, Branza spends some time with Teasel-bear but gets disappointed by him more than once. He harasses her and tries to take sexual advantage of her, profiting of his bear shape, until he disappears from Liga's and Branza's world, accidentally coming back to the real world.

(258). Nonetheless, he is “warmth and consolation” and relieves the women’s feelings of loneliness (258).

When Liga and Branza are brought back to the real world by Miss Dance’s magic, after Urdda’s request, the whole Liga’s world disappears, as well as its inhabitants, Wolf included. However, her trans-species friendship with Wolf has shaped Branza with a post-speciesist empathy, like their experience in an almost-bear body has shaped Bullock’s, Noer’s and Filip’s feelings toward non-human life. When Branza discovers how men treat non-human animals in the real world, she is disgusted. Seeing a man (Vivius Strap) “flogging one of those near-broken-down donkeys of his”, so starven that it has “not the energy to obey him”, Branza flies at him, and Urdda has to detach and move her along, while Strap calls them “spinsters and witches and busy-biddies” (359-360), emphasising their status as outsiders and that Branza’s post-speciesist approach is seen as extravagant and “witchy”. Urdda gets mad at her sister, claiming that she “must learn a different behaviour” to match the difference of this world from the fairyland where she grew up (360). In the real world, Urdda tells Branza, the “beast” belongs to Vivius Strap, who “has rights over it, to treat or mistreat as he will”, which is to Branza impossible to understand (“other people’s desires are so *wrong* and so *cruel* [...]”, 360-361).

Branza’s awkward trans-species empathy seals her marginal role as a woman. To this end, Branza acknowledges soon that the real world where men mistreat animals is the same world where men mistreat women. In this world, women cannot hang around alone safely (as Urdda tells Branza, “It is not the same in this world. It isn’t safe, a woman alone”, 372). The “proximity between oppressed people” is indeed, as Kelly Oliver points out, central to the Western understanding of “man, human, and animal” (2009: 34). Men such as Vivius Strap and his mates define themselves ‘men’ “against wom[en]” as well as they become ‘human’ by defining themselves “against the animal” (Oliver 2009: 34), by which the association between women and non-human animals with a negative connotation follows. In her essay “Woman-Battering and Harm to Animals” (1995), Carol J. Adams points out how, in cases of domestic abuse, the mistreatment of pet animals by violent men is often associated to life-threatening their wives or female partners (Adams 1995: 56). In particular, Adams states that the murder of a pet often indicates an increasing life-risk for the woman (56). She reports some cases where, after murdering, battering, or mistreating pet animals, violent men killed their female

partners; and even some cases where abused women, sensing the threaten implicit in the man's harming of the pet, turned their situations by killing their violent partners. In those cases, not only the "psychological abuse [...] went beyond the point of tolerability" (Dutton 1992: 27 in Adams 1995: 56), but also the women realised that their life was actually at risk (56). Adams argues that woman-battering and violence against animals are, to abusive men, ways for enacting male dominance (56).

In the case of Branza trying to defend the donkey by flying at his tormenter, her empathetic understanding, as a woman, of men's violence against animals comes out. At the same time, her attitude is also surely fostered by her experience in Liga's world, where non-human animals were her companions and friends. If, in Liga's haven, the women's non-violent attitude was ruling, yet in the real world men's violence rules instead. In this frame, Branza seems to recognise and despise how men's dominance is enacted through the violence against non-human animals. In the real world, Branza's (and her mother's and sister's) non-violent attitude that was ruling Liga's haven is replaced by a male-dominant approach which strikes out in the donkey-battering. Facing this violence, Branza cannot remain silent, but feels the urge to speak loud her dissent. Nonetheless, since St Olafred is ruled by men's violence, Branza will pay the consequences of her act of dissent.

It is precisely in that moment of need that Branza's friendship with her lost Wolf companion emerges as a crucial feature. Branza is hanging around in St Olafred alone – despite her sister's warnings – when she accidentally meets a group of six or seven men who call her "the donkey's saviour" and mock her (374). They laugh at her and provoke her, saying that the donkey is now "dogmeat [...]. Whipped into slices, neat as a cleaver done it" (374). This provocation reminds Adams' argument that harming animals is "a form of sexual mastery, the instantiation of dominance" (1995: 73), by which violent men act their control over women (71). Even if Branza is not a sexual partner to the man who killed the donkey, nor to the men who are now threatening her, we can find in the men's words and mocking their attempt at demonstrating their ruling and control over animals' bodies as well as women's ones. It emerges how male identity is constructed, in patriarchal culture, through the "control of others" and the "impunity with which women and animals are harmed" by them (Adams 1995: 80). Within this frame, the men encircle Branza and mimic her cruelly. She tries then to close her eyes and project herself in her lost haven, "with Wolf trotting up the path to say his good

mornings” (375). Thus, by imagining that “Wolf were besides her”, she undergoes a guise of metamorphosis. Her senses get sharper, she “breathed the boy’s smell”, and Wolf’s growl “bubbled in her throat”, as Wolf was in her body, or as if they have become the same thing (375) – likewise “Foxfire”’s protagonist got influenced by the behaviour and nature of the fox. And while the men keep on mocking and scaring her, Branza “bared her teeth. [...] She barked, sudden and deep. She bit at the air, right close to the ones in front of her” (376). The men get surprised and leap back, saying “We have druv her mad! We have broke her brain!”. One of the men calls her “Come, doggy-doggy-dog!”, showing how insulting and degrading women with animal-related appellatives is a feature of the patriarchal speciesist culture (Oliver 2009: 37). But Branza walks to him

full of wolf-teeth, wolf-love of herself, wolf-rage on her behalf. She took the boy’s head in her two hands and bent to him among the others’ hoots and whistles, and she bit his cheek hard – which was salt, which gave, meat under her teeth, the scratch of his reddish beard on her lower lip. (376)

She tries then to reach another man’s head, but they walk away, scared. Thanks to the memory of her trans-species friendship, Branza can survive a threatening situation of violence. As in “Foxfire”, the trans-species friendship inspires the human protagonist. This alliance is critical to female characters to learn about survivance in the patriarchal world, but also about being alive. Without the alliance with the fox, “Foxfire”’s protagonist would not have gotten out of her depression; while, without the friendship with Wolf, Branza would not have had the inspirational model to “bite back” her aggressors. Companion species come out, in these episodes, as according to Haraway’s perspective: they help coping with the violent mechanisms of contemporary society. As Haraway discusses in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2016c [2003]), companion species “colonize all [our] cells”, enacting what Lynn Margulis calls symbiogenesis (Haraway 2016c: 93). Inspired by Margulis’s symbiogenesis, and by evolutive biology, the actions of companion species involve “eating, and partially digesting, partially assimilating, and partially transforming” (Haraway 2016a: 65). In their sympoiesis, companion species produce collectively evolutionary systems that “have the potential for surprising change” (Haraway 2016a: 61). Even if they are not biological

sympoietic organisms or holobionts, companion species have this power to produce a surprising change and unexpected stories. In this sense, relying on Karen Barad's intra-action (Barad 2007), critters "do not precede their relatings", but they make each other "through semiotic material involution" (Haraway 2016a: 60). The (collaborative) kind of colonisation between companion species describes well the relationship between Branza and the protagonist of "Foxfire" with their non-human companions. The way in which the companion animals' features get embodied by the human characters, defining their behaviour, enacts a transformation into them.

In the stories considered so far, not only human characters unlearn their cultural imposed background and its violence, but they also improve their skills to survive and their pleasure to be alive. Moreover, human-animal companionship is not functional to the reaching of a better, more complete state of humanness, as often in traditional fairy tales. On the contrary, human characters remain shaped by their non-human experiences or alliances, acquiring some of the non-human features of their companions or of their personal non-human shapes. Therefore, these alliances defy the boundaries of species, as well as patriarchal gender roles and obligations, situating the characters into a liminal dimension which is neither fully human neither fully non-human, by which it seems to emerge the "pleasure" in the confusion of boundaries claimed by Haraway's cyborg (2016b: 5-7; see § 2.3.3).

3.3 "Water taught modesty of the soul": the nostalgic other-than-human longing as a form of resistance⁷²

Likewise human/non-human relations in *Tender Morsels* and "Foxfire", Katherine Vaz's short story "What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone" (2010) is soaked in a nostalgic dimension of other-than-human longing too. Nostalgia, as it is represented in the tale, reminds the feeling experienced by Branza and Davit for the magical dimension of Liga's world, where their lives were melted with non-human ones. Branza's and Davit's nostalgic longings can be related to that of Meredith from Vaz's tale: through their magical, more-than-human, trans-

⁷² Part of the material from this section is the extension of an essay that has been published in *Textus* 2/2025.

species longing, they all wish for a utopic horizon of better social and cultural conditions, where heteropatriarchal pressures and anthropocentric violence may disappear (as in *Tender Morsels*), where an embodied way of thinking may lead to a deeper aliveness (as for Davit, as well as for “Foxfire”’s protagonist), or for a better way of communicating and caring for each other (as for Meredith).

3.3.1 Nostalgia, solastalgia, utopian desire: Branza’s “backward glance”

The nostalgic feelings experienced by Branza and Davit in *Tender Morsels* resonate with Glenn Albrecht’s definition of solastalgia. As intended by Albrecht, the term is connected to the environmental crisis and the devastation of landscapes and ecosystems. If “nostalgia” comes from the combination of the Ancient Greek words *nostos* (“home or native land”) and *algos* (“pain or sickness”), solastalgia is a combination of *algos* and *solacium* (“solace”) or *solus* (“desolation”) (Albrecht 2005: 42-45). With a ghost reference to “nostalgia”, “solastalgia” means “the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one’s home and territory” (Albrecht 2005: 45). More than the nostalgia for a distant homeplace (which is not necessarily a material place, but can also be one of the spirit), solastalgia is the nostalgia for a different state of the present, a different environmental/ social/cultural order affecting an emotionally important homeplace. It combines an understanding of nostalgia as “a desire to be connected with a positively perceived period in the past” (Albrecht 2005: 43) with the loss of “psychic stability” due to the lack of an integral unity between the human and the earth (as observed by Elyne Mitchell 1946, in Albrecht 2005: 42), as well as with the powerlessness and sense of isolation felt towards environmental injustice.

Looking at Davit’s and Branza’s experiences, their nostalgia for the lost other-than-human experience (either embodied or in relation) may be understood as partly experienced as a form of solastalgia. Both feel indeed a “form of melancholia connected to lack of solace and intense desolation” (Albrecht 2005: 44) when coming back from a world where they felt a kind of integrity with the non-human which is now lost. The heteropatriarchal and speciesist culture of St Olafred causes their suffering for a lost past/other world based on a non-violent culture. Their desire for recovering a fairyland dimension of gentle multispecies and beyond-gender-

violence coexistence retrieves the fairy-tale imaginary as a site where to find a multispecies dimension that, in its frequent representation of transbiology and trans-species encounters, defies the binary logics of heteropatriarchal anthropocentrism. In this way, Branza's and Davit's stories of nostalgic longings enact the contemporary cultural need, in Euro-Western contexts, to recover a silenced archive of multispecies tales which may help finding again an interconnectedness between the human of the non-human, whose theoretical and pragmatical lack is partly cause and partly consequence, among other things, of the current planet "trouble".

Moreover, Branza's and Davit's positive past experiences dwell in a ghostly dimension. After Davit came back to reality and when Branza is forced back to it, the heaven dimension has completely disappeared and cannot be reached back.⁷³ Davit, in particular, who has lived in Liga's haven just for a few months, has the feeling of having dreamed it all more vivid than Branza. His nostalgic longing for bear-life in Liga's heaven resonates with Consigliere's description of "the scent of another world outside the walls, of a different state of time, of the pasts and futures skirted and lost, of a gentle co-becoming" (Consigliere 2024: vi). A feeling which, once felt, fosters his nostalgia: "and, from that time, have not stopped yearning for it" (Consigliere 2024: vi).⁷⁴

However, the crucial point of Consigliere's argument is that nostalgia is not meant as a passive feeling, but rather as one that is potentially revolutionary. She draws on nostalgia as the "[r]oots of every anti-modern resistance and remembrance of happiness", "a place where a crucial struggle occurs" (Consigliere 2024: 39) – as well as *dysphoria mundi* is to Preciado an emotion that may foster social and political change. To this end, nostalgia leads Branza and Davit toward a utopic desire which resembles, as queerness to José Esteban Muñoz, "a horizon imbued with potentiality" that can be used, as in Consigliere's perspective, "to imagine a future" (Muñoz 2009: 1). Muñoz proposes hope – following Bloch – as a hermeneutic where utopianism is necessary to fight political pessimism and antiutopianism (4). As re-enchantment is necessary to fight back the petrosexoracial order, so Muñoz's queer hope is a "backward glance" (4), whereas queerness turns out as an imaginative force "distilled from the past" (1).

⁷³ The ghostly nature of Liga's haven will be further explored in § Chapter 4 through ecofeminist hauntology.

⁷⁴ In the original Italian version, Consigliere uses explicitly the term "nostalgia": "e, da allora, non ha smesso di averne *nostalgia*" (Consigliere 2020: 8, my emphasis).

From the past is also distilled Branza's backward glance which fosters her to "bite back" her aggressors. Muñoz's backwards glances, as well as Consigliere's nostalgic feelings and Preciado's dysphoria mundi, are what might "enac[t] a future vision" (Muñoz 2009: 4).

One of the final moments of *Tender Morsels* is quite explicative of the resistant/future-enacting/utopic-driving force of nostalgia and nostalgic desire. When Branza is forced back into reality, she is not at ease with her new condition. As discussed above, she does not understand and accept the violence permeating the real world – as in particular against women and non-human animals – and she longs for going back to her safe haven. Hence, she tries first to get asleep near to the old cottage where Liga lived with her abusive father, hoping to wake up to her past world. After failing, she goes to Miss Dance – the powerful witch who carried her and Liga back, closing the holes between reality and Liga's fantasy world – and asks her to bring her back to Liga's haven. However, as Liga first makes her notice, trying to get back to an unreal place born from one's despaired "heart's desire" is very much similar to trying to die. It was indeed after trying to jump off a cliff to kill herself and her daughter, after the several sexual traumas she endured, that Liga, when she was fifteen, was saved by the moonish critter who carried them into Liga's haven. As she says to Branza: "I went because I was so unhappy; had I stayed, I would have died of it [...]. I came to that cliff, and I was *determined* to die of it" (Lanagan 2010: 383, original emphasis). Liga tries to show Branza that her life is not so despaired as her own was: she has a loving mother and sister, and she has "good work", "fine friends" and "prospects of marriage" (383). Seeing her mother so unhappy because of her attempt at running away, Branza tries to console her saying that "of *course* I do not want to be dead; of *course* I am not as unhappy as that!" (383, original emphasis).

However, as Miss Dance explains to Liga, it is difficult for Branza to find her own "heart's desire" in the real world, since, for twenty-five years, she has grown up in a fake world built around her mother's desire, finding no space to grow her own. She "has not had enough of a true life to even conceive of her own heart's desire" (328). Encaged in Liga's desire, Branza has not had the chance to self-determine her faith – unlike Urdda, who chose instead to cross in the real world at the age of fourteen. Eventually, resigning to the belief that her daughter has not lived enough of a true life to get along with the harshness of reality, Liga agrees with Branza that she shall go to Miss Dance "and have [her] do the necessary magics to send you to *your* heaven" (385, original emphasis).

When Branza finally goes to Miss Dance and asks her to send her back to her own heaven, she distressingly realises that this is quite impossible. Branza's "last bit of hope and longing" wears out in her desperate request to Miss Dance (398), as if her ability to desire was limited to a fantasy kind of life. What Branza gets from Miss Dance is not eventually the access to the place of her own "heart's desire", but rather the awareness that sending her back to a heaven would mean to spoil forever her chance to live a real life. Instead, as Miss Dance tells her: "you are a living creature, born to make a real life, however it cracks your heart. [...] you could not have stayed there [in Liga's place] for ever and called yourself alive" (400). And, above all, "It is required of you only to *be* here, not to be *happy*" (401, original emphasis).

Branza's dream of getting back to her safe haven is completely undone by Miss Dance. Nostalgia is defined, by the witch's gentle refusal to send her to utopia, as a condition that Branza should stay-with. Not something that must be solved, but something that should stay-with her, defining her resistance to the violence of reality (as when she bites back her aggressors), and her desire to live a peaceful life, with the utopic and nostalgic horizon of the safe world she once knew. Nostalgia gives Branza the power to resist and not submit to conditions she dislikes: it proves to be not only a "remembrance of happiness", but also "the place where a crucial struggle occurs" (Consigliere 2024: 39). The utopic horizon depicted by the place of Liga's heart's desire allows Branza to eventually sense what she might want from life, which is a gentle co-existence, surrounded by loving and caring people.

Eventually, Branza acknowledges that she does not want to live in a utopia, but that such very utopia may work well as a "remembrance of happiness" which may design a horizon to her longing. This acknowledgment occurs through the materialisation of her utopic-nostalgic horizon thanks to a gift Urdda gives her.⁷⁵ The gift consists in a locket that, once opened, soaks Branza in a dream-like projection of her lost heaven, where she can see and embrace her companion Wolf. It is after re-embracing her nostalgic utopia that Branza is finally aware of

⁷⁵ Urdda gives Branza her gift on the occasion of her marriage with Davit Ramstrong. Branza's marriage with Davit overlaps with the plot of the Grimm's tale. In "Snow-White and Rose-Red", when the prince transmogrified in bear comes back into his human form, he marries Snow-White (who in *Tender Morsels* is Branza), and his brother marries Rose-Red (Urdda). In *Tender Morsels*, only Branza follows the steps of the traditional fairy tale: she marries Davit Ramstrong, who is not only the first-Bear, but also an important and respected person in the frame of St Olafred town. Urdda, on the contrary, chooses to go to Rockerly to train as a witch, rejecting the traditional happy ending where women's faith must coincide with marriage.

“[h]ow poor she had been, and how empty her life!” in the times when Wolf “had been her only companion, when Urdda had gone and it was only herself and Mam and the dream-world around them. No Davit! No children! Only that strange, bland town!” (Lanagan 2010: 484-485). The “backward glance” into her nostalgic utopia gives eventually Branza the strength to recognise how much she was idealising her beautiful but fake utopia and to appreciate what she has now, in its realness and complexion. Branza’s “backward glance” holds over to the backward glance operated by contemporary retellings, where silenced features from the fairy-tale archive are unearthed, thus offering a multispecies and ecotransfeminist horizon which may suggest generative narratives able to “bite back” contemporary social violence and challenges.

3.3.2 “Whalien” desires and the silenced daughters in “What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone” by Katherine Vaz (2010)

Branza’s post-human desire is echoed in Katherine Vaz’s short story “What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone” (2010). Vaz’s tale elaborates on similar feelings about desire and nostalgia for an other-than-human way of life, with a focus on the dimension of water.

Vaz engages with a retelling of “The Little Mermaid” by Hans Christian Andersen, which was first published in 1837 (Andersen 1983), and which fits within the Christian background of the author. Unlike most classic fairy tales, “The Little Mermaid” does not come directly from a folk tradition but was invented by Andersen himself. However, as Marina Warner points out, Andersen elaborated “varied strands of oral and written tales in Eastern as well as Western tradition, about undines and selkies, nixies, Loreleis and Mélusines, in which the fairy creature appears on earth and stays with a mortal as his bride only on certain conditions” (Warner 1995: 396). Andersen’s tale is about a young mermaid who falls in love with a human prince, who becomes the symbol of her longing for humanness. According to the author’s Christian perspective, the Mermaid’s longing is related to her desire for obtaining a soul, which is not allowed to non-human beings. To become human, the Little Mermaid offers her tongue and voice to a sea witch, who gives her in turn a pair of human legs. However, the legs are not suited for her body, so that every step causes to her an immeasurable pain.

The belief that non-human animals do not own a soul is not only a feature of Christianity, but is supported also by the dualisms of modern Western philosophy (human/nature, mind/body, men/women, etc.), which are at the basis of the oppression of non-human beings, as well as of those of all the de-humanised human categories according to gender, racial, colonial, and class binaries. These dualistic categories are the same at the basis of the historical prosecution of witches, as discussed in § Chapter 2. Silvia Federici remarks that Descartes considered non-human animals “mere brutes, ‘destitute of Reason’, arguing that ‘[n]othing [...] causes so many errors as the belief that animals have a soul like ours’” (Federici 2004: 148). Descartes considered that “the presence of thought” is what differentiates “man” from “beast” and “confers upon ‘him’ mastery over the surrounding world” (Federici 2004: 148). However, Federici remarks that the dualism between the “thinking head” and the “body-machine” is not egalitarian but draws on a “master/slave relation”, since “the primary task of the will is to dominate the body and the natural world” (Federici 2004: 148).⁷⁶

If we consider non-human animals from the point of view of the Cartesian position – which is shared by Andersen’s Christian perspective – becoming human also means to climb up to a higher level of being: crossing the borders between species to become human means to obtain a soul, thus becoming a superior creature. In Vaz’s tale, the desire for becoming Other is reversed if compared to “The Little Mermaid”. Meredith Locke, the protagonist, tired of the limits and poorness of human communication, longs to go beyond her human condition and to learn from the “modesty” of watery languages.

“What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone” pictures a married couple – Meredith and Ray Locke – sharing the same “fascination for anything aquatic” that they built “[i]n their years together” (Vaz 2010: 201). Meredith and Ray are described as “water people” (Vaz 2010: 200). They are so passionate that they set a huge water tank in their living room. However,

⁷⁶ However, the position of Descartes has been discussed (see Sorell 2005; Sax 2009). Boria Sax points out that Descartes’ denying of a soul to animals did not mean denying that they have “what is commonly called life, or a bodily soul, or organic senses” (Descartes 1637/2008: 203 in Sax 2009: 329). Their capacity for sensual perception and emotion is, according to Sax, acknowledged (2009: 318). However, Sax points out that Descartes’ deprivation of a soul to animals was crucial in avoiding witch trials to familiar animals during the great witch-hunting in Europe (319). By depriving them of a soul, Descartes also deprived animals of any demonic significance; his position was contested by some of his contemporaries, such as Sir Thomas Browne, who contested Descartes’ position that animals were incapable of language, since he considered that they were capable of talking to witches (Browne 1646/1672 in Sax 2009: 319).

their commitment to such watery passion seems to be fading away, together with their love for each other: “they no longer went swimming, as they used to; they did not visit the ocean often, though it was a short drive away” (Vaz 2010: 200). Most importantly, “they hardly talked at all” (200). The story is immersed, since the first pages, in a deep melancholy. In addition, the reader gets to know early that Ray is cheating on Meredith.

Despite the fading of their shared passion, Meredith’s “idea of happiness” is still enclosed in the image of bodies suspended in the water. Flipping through a book by an underwater photographer representing “swimmers wearing little or nothing in pools, lakes, tanks”, Meredith thinks: “Look how peaceful they were, their skin almost melting, ravishing beyond belief” (Vaz 2010: 201).

The reason of the shift from the Little Mermaid’s longing for humanness to Meredith’s longing for watery otherness may be read as connected with the historical context of climate and social crisis, which uncovers the contemporary disconnection between the human and the non-human – which also causes the feeling of dysphoria mundi. In the current widespread dysphoric conditions toward the critical situation of the environment, and of the whole planet continuously threatened and wasted by the tentacles of neoliberalism, colonial wars, and extractivism, the longing for non-human otherness comes in the form of a melancholic nostalgia (or solastalgia) for a lost connection with the environment and the non-human. This issue is explored by Margret Grebowicz in *Whale Song* (2017). The author investigates the fascinating extrangement that humans experience for whales, which are understood as “whaliens” or “aliens of underwater” (2017: 8). Grebowicz argues that the passion for whales and that for alien intelligences have both to do with “how people imagin[e] life on Earth and a future of different, better social relations” (8). Although it is projected towards the future, this nostalgic passion is also rooted in a melancholically dreamed past life:

Whale song seemed to belong as much to a forgotten Earth in need of conservation, a quiet age of sail living only in the annals of human memory [...]. It came from elsewhere and was destined still elsewhere—haunted, endangered, prehistoric, futuristic, transient, astro-nautical, exiled, extra terrestrial, a sound at the very edge of personhood, speech, music, life, habitat, “Earth”, but squarely in the sweet spot of longing. (6)

This passion also includes the interest in whale songs, which, according to Grebowicz, are “shelved with fragments of our yearning for deeper meaning” (8). This yearning is collateral to the “conditions of social impoverishment” which feature modern human life (13). In these conditions, marine mammals seem to indicate a way out and humans turn to the “the other most intelligent mammals” (13) as a response to the “unlivability of modern life” (16). This unlivability echoes the conditions of “dysphoria mundi” claimed by Preciado and produced by the oppressive structures of contemporary society.

Black feminist activist and researcher Alexis Pauline Gumbs addresses marine mammals too as “a form of life that has much to teach us” (2020: Introduction). Her aim, as “a marine mammal apprentice, opening myself to guidance from these advanced marine mammals” is “to identify with”, to “see what happens when I rethink and refeel my own relations, possibilities, and practices inspired by the relations, possibilities, and practices of advanced marine mammal life” (2020: Introduction). To this end, as Astrida Neimanis argues, rethinking embodiment as watery allows us to question the individualist understanding of embodiment typical of Western humanism, which figures bodies as “discrete and coherent individual subjects, and as fundamentally autonomous” (2017: 2). Therefore, as in Grebowicz’s perspective, the interest in cetaceans allows to build what Nina Lykke and Mette Bryld call “the nostalgic imaginary of postindustrial culture, longing for an alternative world where the wounds inflicted by the destructive logic of present-day social relations between humans, technoscience and nature are healed” (1999: 3; also in Grebowicz 2017: 16).

Meredith’s posthuman longing might be influenced by this fading of the anthropocentric dream. Her heroine is Annette Kellerman, an Australian professional swimmer, actress and performer called “The Million-Dollar Mermaid”⁷⁷ because of her ballet performances in tanks, dressed up as a mermaid. Meredith’s dreaming of Kellerman includes her saying, inside her performance tank filled with home-furnishing, “*This is home, and I am a breathless dream inside it*” (Vaz 2010: 202, original emphasis). Breathlessness is a crucial feature of Meredith’s watery passion. Since they got the tank, she and Ray hold domestic free-diving competitions with each-other. In the midst of their lack of communication, their apnoea game based on a

⁷⁷ A musical movie based on Kellerman’s life and directed by Mervyn LeRoy presents the homonymous title (*Million Dollar Mermaid*, 1952).

wordless underwater language “became a method for dealing with the silence in the house” (Vaz 2010: 201).

Meredith is particularly fascinated by “how far people could go to defy the body’s limits” in freediving (Vaz 2010: 202), and by how they risk their lives, since their bodies are all but designed to stay breathless. “The lure of breath-holding” is to Meredith “how it violates the laws of the gods. Fasting, meditation, and prior hyperbreathing can prolong submersion; uncanny how many souls risk blackout, bloody lungs, damaged tissue, burst veins. Death” (Vaz 2010: 2010). Despite the risk, Meredith seems very interested in defying the limits of her human body. Once, she tries an apnoea race with herself, thinking: “If you can hold your breathe for one second, you can endure a second longer” (Vaz 2010: 209). But she endures too long and faints, having Ray to rapidly jump into the tank to rescue her. After this dramatic episode, Ray and Meredith share an emotional moment where they cry and laugh and hold each other’s hands after a long time. Nonetheless, while Ray is about to tell Meredith how much he loves her, she tells him that she knows about the cheating. Eventually, they get divorced, and some time later Ray remarries.

After some years, the two have a random encounter, after which they start to occasionally call each other. When Meredith discovers that she has a terminal cancer, Ray decides to go and take care of her. In the last scene of the story, Meredith and Ray are sitting by the ocean together, and Meredith recalls Annette Kellerman’s saying that “Water taught modesty of the soul” (Vaz 2010: 218). As Kellerman narrates, “After leaving the shore behind, I seemed to shrink and shrink till I was nothing but a flecky bubble and feared that the bubble would burst” (Vaz 2010: 218). Such modesty taught by water seems to come up in the new kind of physical and loving language Ray and Meredith experience by the ocean – by the end of both the story and Meredith’s life. By the seaside, they are “beyond words” (218), and eventually able to perform their love and give it a meaning without the intermediate of words, but just by touching each other in front of the ocean, where the tide “sings a body to seep” (219). Eventually, Ray and Meredith understand the modesty of a wordless communication, by which they seem to meet Karen Barad’s new materialist claim that, in human society, “language has been granted too much power” (Barad 2003: 801).

The question of silence is crucial to Vaz’s short story as well as to Andersen’s traditional fairy tale. In *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1995), Marina Warner explores the issue of “the

silence of the daughters” in fairy tales and literature (1995: 387-409). Moving from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Warner recalls the episode where the king asks his daughters to tell him how much they love him. Unlike her sisters, Cordelia says nothing. Her silence is not understood and she is punished. However, Warner observes how silence proves, in the end, “[...] what had been dumb insolence to have been model honesty as well as modesty”, since “[i]n wordlessness lies sincerity; as a mute subject, Cordelia speaks from the heart [...]. Words are lies” (1995: 389-390). Similarly, the silence of the Little Mermaid is reversed, in Vaz’s tale, into a modesty of the soul. No longer the spell of a sea-witch, silence is meant in Vaz’s tale as a sought-after state of the soul, which leaves space to the song of the ocean tide, a more authentic language than human verbal language.

Beside the modesty that might be cheered in silence, it is crucial to remember that, as Warner remarks, in popular narratives, silent female characters are often exalted as heroines (1995: 387-409). Warner points out that silence is a desirable quality in “a web of other ideal criteria held up for the [female] sex”, where “perfection in a woman entails exemplary silence and self-effacement” (395). Alongside, loquacious female characters are “likely [...] to be up to no good” (395). Warner remarks also how this “self-immolatory heroism” typical of women’s silence is “one of the few chivalrous enterprises open to them” (393). Let’s think about Cordelia and all the other “silenced daughters” of folk and fairy tales. The protagonist of *The Twelve Brothers* (also known as *The Wild Swans*) is forced to silence since her brothers have been transformed into swans (or ravens, according to different versions of the tale) by an evil queen. To save them, she is forced to sew nettle shirts for them and be silent until her brothers can wear the shirts and get back their human-princes form. Her forced silenced is exalted in the tale as a valuable quality, pointing to her pure heart, while it puts her in danger as she risks to be burnt up as a “witch”, since she cannot speak her truth out or her brothers will be swans forever (see Andersen 1983).

Andersen’s silenced Little Mermaid is the sister to many literary silenced daughters, such as Eliza from *The Wild Swan*, or “Philomel, and [...] Lavinia from *Titus Andronicus*, and [...] other raped and mutilated figures of myth and tragedy”, becoming then “an approved and much-loved nursery character” (Warner 1995: 398). Nonetheless, “The Little Mermaid”’s “chilling message” is that “cutting out your tongue is not enough. To be saved, more is required: self-obliteration, dissolution” (Warner 1995: 398). In this regard, when she realises

that the human prince will never love and marry her, Andersen's Little Mermaid is given the chance to kill him in order to break the spell and be allowed to get back to her watery life. But the Mermaid refuses; instead, she throws the weapon and herself into the sea, and she dies. Therefore, by the means of her silent acceptance, she is rewarded with the promise that she will be given a soul and thus be accepted into God's kingdom.

In Vaz's version, silence is not exalted as a female heroic quality pointing out to self-effacement. Silence is proposed instead as a human quality which is not based on gender oppression, and which overcomes the anthropocentric framework of human language, which is word-based, representational, and mind-driven. Considering the nature of language, Eva Meijer asks: "Can we call the communications of other animals *language*? [...] Is human language special, or are all languages special? What even is language?" (2019: 2, original emphasis). Meijer questions the specificity of language, and that of non-human ones. As other non-human languages, watery language is not – in its modesty – dumb or mute: it is just wordless. To this end, as Meijer argues, it is plain how the 'intelligence' of a language is measured according to a human-shaped standard, which states what is a language and what is not. From the point of view of Meredith Locke, water language – because of the absence of words – is rather embodied, made of emotions and physicality. By the end of the tale, she thinks (with a reference to "The Little Mermaid"'s Christian ending): "What idiocy to separate God's love from tactile human love" (Vaz 2010: 218). Therefore, by retelling the value of silence, and by re-enabling a wordless communication beyond the anthropocentric framework, "What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone" intertwines issues about both women's self-determination and that of non-human beings.

3.3.3 Tentacular thinking: the intelligence of the body

If the anthropocentric perspective considers the mind and the body in a dualistic hierarchic relationship, where the mind – associated to the (male and white) human – is superior to the body – associated to non-humanity –, Lanagan's, Blackie's and Vaz's stories about transbiology, trans-species friendship, and other-than-human longings seem to question this hierarchy. What if an embodied life would be more desirable than a mind-centred one? What

if to be alive meant to think less, and be more with the instinctuality of the body? What if a non-human condition was more desirable than a human one?

In her speculative fiction “Autobiographie d’un poulpe ou la communauté des Ulysse” (“Autobiography of an Octopus, or the Community of Ulysse”, 2021) – which appears as part of the collection *Autobiographie d’un poulpe et autre récits d’anticipation* –, philosopher Vinciane Despret speculates around the possibility of thinking and communicating beyond the paths of the mind-driven human language. Despret is among the authors, together with Donna Haraway and Fabrizio Terranova, who wrote the initial version of “The Camille’s Stories” in 2013 (see § 1.1). Her *récit* “Autobiographie d’un poulpe” draws on a similar perspective, especially for the representation of a compost community, where newborns are raised in sympoiesis with endangered non-human species. Despret’s speculative story depicts a human community living in the gulf of Naples in a next future, where octopuses have disappeared from the shore, and humans try to call them back by raising their children in sympoiesis with them. Human children, who are all called “Ulysse”, grow within an educational model inspired to the behaviour of their non-human companions.

The pedagogy described by Despret’s *récit* echoes Alexis Pauline Gumbs’ writing on the lessons taught by marine mammals. In *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (2020), Gumbs draws on black feminisms and marine mammals focusing on the need, for oppressed bodies, to learn to “breathe again”. “Undrowned” are the Black people who survived to the “middle passage”: those who did not drown into the ocean separating them from a life of slavery. They kept on breathing in “unbreathable circumstances”. Gumbs argues that, in the frame of the current “racial gendered ableist capitalism”, oppressed bodies “are still undrowning”, or “[b]reathing in unbreathable circumstances”. Therefore, it is necessary to “practice another way to breathe” (Gumbs 2020: Preface; original emphasis). As the protagonist of “Foxfire” needs to practice another way to stay with her body and finds a “mentor” in the fox figure, marine mammals are summoned by Gumbs to be “teachers, mentors, guides” (2020: Preface) – which is the same role of octopuses in the education of the Ulysses. This kind of more-than-human apprenticeship defies the logics of the petrosexoracial regime: it teaches to unlearn the received education.

Despret’s “symenfant” (*symchildren*) receive a watery apprenticeship too: since an early age, they learn to think, act, and communicate beyond the anthropocentric word-centered and

mind-driven model. They are raised instead according to “tentacular thinking” (Haraway 2016a: 30-57) which is typical of the octopus. As Eva Meijer argues, the octopus’ thinking is “tentacular” in the sense that its neural activity is decentralised, and neurons are dislocated in the tentacles.

The brain of the octopus may be small, but most of their nerve cells are in their arms, which can taste and touch and operate independently of the brain. You could say that octopuses think with their arms, and that those arms form a stronger connection between the ‘self’ and its surroundings than they do in humans. (Meijer 2019: 163)

According to Haraway, “tentacular thinking” is inspired to the “diverse earthwide tentacular power and forces and collected things” inhabiting the Chthulucene (2016a: 32). Those include:

cnidarians, spiders, fingery beings like humans and raccoons, squid, jellyfish, neural extravaganzas, fibrous entities, flagellated beings, myofibril braids, matted and felted microbial and fungal tangles, probing creepers, swelling roots, reaching and climbing tendrilled ones. (32)

Tentacular critters inhabiting the Chthulucene are also all the other abyssal monsters and chthonic deities coming from different epistemologies, such as “Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa [...], Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Spider Woman, Pachamama, Oya, Gorgo, Raven, A’akuuljjusi, and many more” (101). Like in fairy tale retellings, Haraway “resignif[ies] and twist[s] the stories”, rewriting the idea of monstrosity intrinsic to the patriarchal and anthropocentric culture. Tentacular beings are resignified no longer as threatening, monstrous, and evil critters, but rather as powerful forces, companion species, and trans-species allies to build the Chthulucene with (such as the figure of Medusa, see § 1.1.2). Tentacular critters move against “human exceptionalism and bounded individualism”, which, as mentioned, have become unthinkable (30). The word “tentacle”, as Haraway remembers, comes from the Latin *tentaculum*, which means “feeler”, and *tentare*, “to feel, to try” (31). It will be needed to feel-and try-with “[m]yriad tentacles [...] to tell the story of the Chthulucene” (31), or to imagine other ways of co-existence. As in the neural functioning of the octopus, tentacular thinking is all but individualistic: it invites to make-with, to be symchtonic (33) and in sympoiesis, to

collaborate-with other beings and species. It invites to generate oddkins and to become-with whereas it is impossible to act without a collaborative thinking. The Chthulucene is not an autopoietic system, but it invites to sympoiesis (33).

Similarly, the language the Ulysses learn helps them not to fall immediately within the binaries that, in the anthropocentric model, frame humans' relation with the world and the "othered" others.

Cette langue autre, m'explique Ulysse, permet aux enfants de ne pas entrer trop vite dans les catégories qui façonnent le rapport au monde et aux autres. C'est une langue – dit-il, "qui n'a pas de centre, une langue traversée ou traversière".⁷⁸ (Despret 2021)

To this end, in Ulysse's "*symlangue*" ("symlanguage"), the subject is no longer the centre of the enunciation, yet this language does not have an actual centre but is "traversed". The singular form does not exist, and each verb is always declined in the plural form, as individuals are always understood as the sum of a crowd.⁷⁹ Many human languages, on the contrary (such as French, Italian, and other European ones) "donnent au sujet plein pouvoir sur le verbe – le sujet constituant le centre significatif de tout énoncé"⁸⁰ (Despret 2021). By this non-individual and embodied kind of education, symchildren learn to live as their symbiont, the octopus. For instance, they learn to see with their skin instead that with their eyes; they learn, through music, to let parts of their body guide their actions instead of their mind (Despret 2021).

The octopus-inspired model for signifying the world and communicating goes beyond the "perversed", "stored information" of human cultural communication, as it is understood by Margret Grebowicz quoting Vilém Flusser: "[i]n contrast to natural communication, [...] the unnatural or 'cultural' communication of humans is 'perverse', because it wants to store the information it acquires" (Grebowicz 2017: 19). Ulysse's *symlangue* eliminates instead the unnecessary and simplifies the connection to others by listening to the less noisy "modesty"

⁷⁸ "Ulysse explains to me that this other language allows children not to fall too fast into the categories which define our relation with the world and with the others. It is a language – he says, 'which does not have a centre, it is a traversed or transverse language'" (my translation).

⁷⁹ It is the case of the holobiont, discussed in § 2.3.3.

⁸⁰ "[...] give to the subject total power upon the verb—the subject constitutes indeed the centre of meaning of the whole statement" (my translation).

of the octopuses' watery language. This modesty, like Cordelia's silence according to Marina Warner's reading discussed above, "turns out to be model honesty", and helps the communication between one body and another without the intermediation of words. According to Karen Barad, indeed, the mediation of words detaches a representational language from reality:

The idea that beings exist as individuals with inherent attributes, anterior to their representation, is a metaphysical presupposition that underlies the belief in political, linguistic, and epistemological forms of representationalism; [...] representationalism is the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing. (Barad 2003: 804)

On the contrary, Ulysse's *symlangue* is performative, where performativity contests "the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real" (Barad 2003: 802).

In "What the Conch Shell Sings When the Body is Gone", Meredith seems to have longed throughout the whole story for a similar way of being in the world and communicating. After having risked her life in freediving, she seems to gain a new awareness of the liminal space between life and death, but also between different worlds and possibilities of existence: "People realizing their mortal limits drift about in a condition too profound to bellow, one foot in this world and one in another" (Vaz 2010: 215). These two worlds are not only those of life and death but can also be understood as the human and the watery world. In this sense, Meredith's favourite quote by Annette Kellerman is a praise for those who can swim their "solitary course night or day and forget a black earth full of people that push" (Vaz 2010: 215).

Meredith's dissatisfaction with her human life, as well as her longing for a watery one, seems to have a grip on her body. Although the story is grounded in the realist world of urban capitalistic contemporaneity,⁸¹ the boundaries of Meredith's body seem sometimes to blur into that of a watery being. For example, she happens to have "a distinct sensation of sprouting cuts that were like gills", by which "she could breathe nearly forever at the bottom of the sea" (Vaz 2010: 216). In other scenes, references are made to Meredith's proximity to the world of

⁸¹ Ray's and Meredith's jobs as chefs, for instance, take an important space in the plot.

water, such as when “Lifting her fingers off the fogged up window, she left behind the shape of a clamshell” (Vaz 2010: 202), or when she is described as wearing teal gowns “with a fishtail” (Vaz 2010: 204). Thereby, Meredith’s metamorphosis is not material (as in the case of Lanagan’s bear-boys) but is rather one of the spirit, more likely to those experienced by Branza and the protagonist of “Foxfire”. The relation with the non-human (a wolf, a fox, or water) shapes the human body and thinking. It shifts the anthropocentric point of view, as well as for Bullock and Noer there is a new post-human and post-speciesist sensibility after their experiences in bearskin.

Unlike Andersen’s Little Mermaid, whose silence is both the cause of her death and what makes of her a female heroine, Meredith and Ray find the “tactile human love” they had no longer words to speak of in the silence of watery language. An echo of the angelic ending of Andersen’s tale is proposed in the final lines of Vaz’s tale: “What if a person aimed to find God within physicality, to have bodily desire increase? What idiocy to separate God’s love from tactile human love” (Vaz 2010: 218). These lines, however, are the opposite of an exaltation of the value of women’s silent sacrifice. Indeed, Vaz refuses and reverses the body/soul dualism implicit in Andersen’s tale by reclaiming the value of the body’s ability to feel and produce meaning. An embodied form of love is reclaimed, not much different, from the point of view of the plot, from what in Andersen’s tale is the love of God which will eventually reward the Little Mermaid with a soul. Thereby, when she is about to die, Meredith too, like the Little Mermaid, is “rewarded” with that which she was longing for: in this case, not a soul, but rather a body able to love and be loved, an embodied experience of communication that goes beyond words. The pleasure of touching bodies is only found by Meredith in the final silence, when she and Ray rest “now beyond words”, and the song of the ocean tide may eventually reveal itself.

Conclusions

In all the stories discussed in the current chapter, the non-human stands as the longed-for (utopic) horizon of a better, “more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman” or “human-as-humus” (Haraway 2016a: 101) possibility of existence – especially when confronted with what Grebowicz addresses to as the “unlivability of modern life”, or Preciado understands as

“dysphoria mundi”. The human “yearning for a deeper meaning” might be found rather in the non-human dimension than within the conditions of “social impoverishment” characterising contemporary capitalism and the solastalgic feelings connected to the Anthropocene. Non-human worlds, such as that of watery mammals, might teach “about the vulnerability, collaboration, and adaptation we need in order to be with change at this time” (Gumbs 2020: Introduction). However, as already mentioned, the representation of the non-human is not only a momentous state functional to becoming a perfectionated human. To be fair, all the characters from the discussed stories come out transformed from their liminal experiences in-between species and biological kingdoms. They all choose liminality as a site where to ground the alliance between marginalised critters and from which to generate ecotransfeminist horizons which challenge the heteropatriarchal speciesist order. Instead of gaining a perfectionated, whole human status through the trans-species experience, the discussed characters choose to inhabit the liminal, which is the space of the sabbath, of witches, oddkin, non-conforming bodies, identities and relationships. Their longing for the post-human, non-human, or other-than-human emerges as a necessity: an undeniable need to make kin with other species to survive the structural violence and contradictions of human society.

The discussed fairy-tale trans-species conditions seem to anticipate the Euro-Western post-human discourse, at the same time narratively challenging the heteropatriarchal anthropocentrism and recovering fairy-tale features belonging to the European fairy-tale archive which have been silenced under the heteropatriarchal speciesist narrative. In this way, the retold fairy-tale transbiological and animistic dimension seems to ‘theorise itself’, thereby fitting within a broader ongoing theoretical discourse centred around the urgency of remodelling our approach to the human/non-human Western divide.

Chapter 4

The Magical-Material Efficacy of a Heart's Desire

Magical Bodies and the Reconfiguration of Spacetimemattering

As suggested by Stefania Consigliere's understanding of nostalgia, the nostalgic desire for the post-speciesist experience longed by Vaz's, Lanagan's, and Blackie's characters occurs in the form of a resistance. Indeed, it is the nostalgic desire felt by these characters that pushes them to look for better social conditions. From Stefania Consigliere's point of view, desire has also much to do with magic: she understands magic as "efficacy of intentions" (2024: 94), which can be intended as the material realisation of an intention (or desire). In the retold fairy tales discussed in the present study, the characters' desires enact this kind of efficacy upon matter: they can be so strong that they can move the borders of space, time, and matter, or "spacetimemattering" (Barad 2007; 2017). By the notion of "spacetimemattering", Karen Barad means the inseparability of space, time, and matter. These elements, as the verb form in "mattering" suggests, continuously remake themselves through the sedimentation of intra-actions (Barad 2017: 111). The entanglement between the magical body and the reconfiguration of spacetimemattering in retold fairy tales is the focus of this last chapter.

In line with the Western feminist tradition, the reconfiguration of spacetimemattering in feminist fairy-tale retellings often moves from the situated female body. It is the case of Angela Carter's short story "Wolf-Alice", which draws on the capacity of the protagonist's body to self-determine the coordinates of space, time, and matter, moving from its situated positioning. As a wolf-girl raised in the quasi-total absence of a cultural background, outside of the

heteropatriarchal and speciesist framework, Wolf-Alice is free to reconfigure and retell the world starting from her body. This is also what happens in Antonia Susan Byatt's short story "A Stone Woman" (2003), where the situated body emerges as an "onto-epistemology" (Barad 2007; see also Kaiser and Thiele 2014). Drawing on Icelandic myths and fairy tales about trolls and agential "earth-beings" (de la Cadena 2015), "A Stone Woman" features Ines's shifting from the anthropocentric perspective to the geological point of view of the stone body into which she transmogrifies. By this metamorphosis, Ines questions the anthropocentric distinction between *bios* and *geos* (as Martínez-Alfaro argues, 2025). In "Wolf-Alice" as well as in "A Stone Woman", the liminal body reminds to Haraway's definition of the body as a "material-semiotic generative node" (1988: 595): it generates different coordinates of spacetime-mattering, which include not only epistemologies but also unconventional worlds.

The onto-epistemologies of Ines and Wolf-Alice encounter Urdda's and Liga's ability to malleate the matter of the fictional world(s) of *Tender Morsels* (2008). Even if neither of them has to do with transbiology or transmogrification, Margo Lanagan's characters enact, as magical bodies, a reconfiguration of spacetime-mattering that starts from their heart's desires. In particular, by the end of the novel, Urdda will reverse the traditional tale's ending based on heterosexual marriage by choosing the witch path. This choice situates her magical body outside of a whole "human" category. As a woman and a witch at the same time, Urdda inhabits liminality like her other-than-human companions. In Lanagan's novel, the magical "efficacy" of heart's desires has direct consequences on the material world.

4.1 "She discovered the very action of time by means of [her] returning cycle": the clock and the mirror in "Wolf-Alice" by Angela Carter (1979)

4.1.1 "Nothing of her is human except that she is not a wolf"

"Wolf-Alice" is the last short story collected in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) and the third tale of *The Bloody Chamber*'s wolf-trilogy, after "The Werewolf" and "The Company of Wolves". As Cristina Bacchilega argues, Carter's collection

represents a progressive path of (female) sexual and narrative liberation (1997: 141). Therefore, the last character of the collection (Wolf-Alice) stands for the most realised representation of empowerment. Like the two other stories from Carter's wolf-trilogy, "Wolf-Alice" is related to the "Little Red Riding Hood" tale (Bacchilega 1997: 65). The short story is also rooted in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and the sequel *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871). "Wolf-Alice" is not only inspired to fairy tales, but also to legends and myths about feral children and children raised by wolves (Lau 2008: 89).

Like the "Little Red Riding Hood" tale, Carter's tale engages with wolves too. Abandoned as a newborn in the woods, Wolf-Alice is raised by a wolf pack. Once rescued by humans, she is taken under the care of some nuns. However, she refuses to stay at human social conventions, and her wild behaviour exasperates the nuns, who send her to the Duke's castle. The Duke too is an old werewolf banished from human society, who feeds on human corpses.

Like Davit and Noer in *Tender Morsels*, Wolf-Alice does not want to be rescued, "civilised", and welcomed back into the human community. "Nothing about her is human except that she is *not* a wolf" (Carter 2006: 141, original emphasis): dwelling in liminality, Wolf-Alice does not speak human language and, when the nuns invite her to join the human community, she rejects the offer. Like fairy-tales silenced daughters (Warner 1995), "[m]utilation is her lot" (Carter 2006: 140), but, like Katherine Vaz's Meredith, it is also her choice. If she had spoken, Wolf-Alice "would have called herself a wolf" (Carter 2006: 140). Besides being mute, Wolf-Alice has other features characterising her other-than-humanness: "[t]wo-legs looks, four legs sniffs", her eyesight is "poor", but she is not troubled by that since

[h]er long nose is always a-quiver, sifting every scent it meets. With this useful tool, she lengthily investigates everything she glimpses. She can net so much more of the world than we can through the fine, hairy, sensitive filters of her nostrils [...]. Her nose is sharper by night than our eyes are by day [...]. (140).

Like Alice in Wonderland, whom Northrop Frye describes as "often a nuisance or an unwanted guest" (2006: 83), Wolf-Alice is always an inadequate and undesired guest. Both in the convent and at the Duke's castle, Wolf-Alice is – like her homonymous – a "perennial

stranger” (Carter 2006: 144). She is marginalised by the human community “in animal privacy out of fear of her imperfection because it showed us what we might have been” (Carter 2006: 144). In this regard, one of her most scandalising features is that she suggests what Karen Ya-Chu Yang calls “a postmodern ecofeminist proposal of a new kind of humanity, one which involves border-crossing intermixing and reciprocity” (2018: 71). Her in-between status and transbiological behavior (to the nuns’ request of being grateful for having being rescued, “she arched her back, pawed the floor, retreated to a far corner of the chapel, crouched, trembled, urinated, defecated”, Carter 2006: 141) are scandalous to the human community, since they open, enlarge, blur and threaten the category of “human”. As suggested by Ya-Chu Kang, Wolf-Alice is neither a wolf nor a human, but “[s]he is a new species and character awaiting her own creation. She creates her own self as a reconciling amalgamation of dualities” (2018: 70). In so doing, Wolf-Alice scares humans and the privilege they hold in the pure category of “human” which they assume to exist and discloses a horizon of trans-species possibility.

4.1.2 Alice’s underworld: the clock and the mirror

In “Wolf-Alice”, a feature which has much to do with *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is the theme of the “descent to a lower world” (Frye 2006: 63). The lower world is a “subterranean or submarine world beneath this one” (Frye 2006: 65), which Northrop Frye describes as a “mysterious place of birth and death from whence animals and plants proceed, and to which they return” (63). The descent to a lower world is, according to Frye (2006: 64), one of the four primary narrative movements in literature. The others are the descent from a higher world; the ascent from a lower world; and the ascent to a higher world. “All the stories in literature are”, according to Frye, “complications of, or metaphorical derivations from, these four narrative radicals” (2006: 64).

Within the theme of the descent, Frye argues that Alice from Carroll’s novel is characterised by a “break in consciousness” often involving “forgetfulness of the previous state” (Frye 2006: 67). Her descent into the lower world, following the White Rabbit, occurs into a dreamlike dimension. There, Alice experiences an amnesia of her precedent life, which involves “a change so drastic as to give the sense of becoming someone else altogether” (Frye 2006: 67).

As Alice herself says, “it’s not use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then” (Carroll in Frye 2006: 68).

The descent to the lower world is characterised by an “individual loss or confusion or break in the continuity of identity”, which has analogies to “falling asleep and entering in a dream world” (Frye 2006: 68), as in the case of Alice. The girl is “never quite sure of her own identity” (Frye 2006: 82); she is “always either too big or too small” (83), never fitting into the context. Her continuous shapeshifting brings her to a state of crisis: “She feels estranged from her body” (83).

At the same time, the only things guiding her in this world without reference points are her instinct, her desires, her cravings. Her behaviour follows her cravings and can be described, as Gianni Celati writes in *Alice disambientata* (2007 [1978]), as “caduta nel basso” (“falling underground”) or “caduta nella instabilità delle voglie” (“falling into the instability of the cravings”, 2007: 70). “Verso cosa? Verso dove? ‘Da che parte?’ si chiede Alice” (“Where to go? What to look for? ‘Which way?’ Alice asks herself”, 70). However, the consequence (if she grows bigger or smaller) is not really important, since it is the craving itself what Alice discovers (“è l’automatismo che produce uno scarto a darci gioia, la vera scoperta di Alice”, 70). Alice’s following of her cravings is a sort of escape from “how it should be” (“fuga dal ‘come deve essere’”, 70).⁸²

Losing oneself into the lower world seals the loss of all our references, for what concerns both our identity and our orientation in time and space. Frye considers that two elements are crucial to find oneself again when all coordinates are lost: the clock and the mirror. These two elements feature daily life and are essential references to navigate time and space.

In ordinary life there are two central data of experience that we cannot see without external assistance: our own faces and our own existence in time. To see the first we have to look in a mirror, and to see the second we have to look at the dial of a clock. The night world progressively becomes, as we sink deeper into it, a world where everything is an object, including ourselves, and consequently mirrors and clocks take on a good deal of importance as objectifying images. (Frye 2006: 77)

⁸² All translations from Celati’s work are mine.

The night world is, according to Frye, what we find “[o]n the lower reaches of descent”: it is “often a dark and labyrinthine world of caves and shadows where the forest has turned subterranean, and where we are surrounded by the shapes of animals” (2006: 74). The night world, as understood by Frye, reminds the condition of Wolf-Alice’s world. The world of Carter’s tale is shaped indeed with “increasing alienation and loneliness” (Frye 2006: 76), as they are experienced by Wolf-Alice after her separation from the wolf-pack and her marginalisation from the human community. Frequent in descent themes are also “animal companions [...], as part of the pattern of metamorphosis” (Frye 2006: 76), which is the condition of the tale’s protagonist. Eventually, at the bottom of the night world there is the “cannibal feast” (Frye 2006: 78), which, in “Wolf-Alice”, occurs as the Duke’s habit of feeding on human corpses.

In the fictional night-world of Carter’s tale, characterised by the total absence of social and cultural coordinates, the lonely Wolf-Alice needs to find her own coordinates. In this respect, the clock and the mirror become to her essential means. It is only when she resignifies the meaning of the clock and recognises her own presence in the mirror that she begins to make sense of herself and the surrounding world. To do so, she starts from the only thing that she has: her own body.

In the night world of the Duke’s castle, “all clocks were banished” (Carter 2006: 146). In-between the human and the wolf, but neither wholly the one nor the other, Wolf-Alice “lives without a future”, “[l]ike the wild beasts” (Carter 2006: 141). Her understanding of time is not linear, but static: “She inhabits only the present tense, a fugue of the continuous, a world of sensual immediacy as without hope as it is without despair” (141). Something changes when, on a full-moon night, “she began to bleed” (144). Initially “bewildered” by her first menstruation, she progressively understands that her bleeding occurs every full moon. If “She had, as yet, not direct notion of past, or of future, or of duration, only of a dimensionless, immediate moment” (144), moon after moon, bleeding after bleeding, Wolf-Alice understands the connection between the cycle of the moon and the cyclic bleeding of her vulva.

She learned to expect these bleedings [...]. Sequence asserted itself with custom and then she understood the circumambulatory principle of the clock perfectly, even if all clocks were

banished from the den where she and the Duke inhabited their separate solitudes, so that you might say she discovered the very action of time by means of this returning cycle. (145-146)

Therefore, Wolf-Alice makes sense of time from her situated body. By her own materiality, she generates diachronic knowledge of her situatedness and that of what surrounds her. Her body, with her menstrual cycle, becomes the clock by which she can navigate Alice's night world.

Furthermore, Wolf-Alice's understanding of time is circular, thus creating a fracture with the linear progressive development of the patriarchal discourse (as Anna Pasolini points out, 2016: 102), as well as with the capitalist, colonialist and speciesist order oriented toward progress through the exploitation and extermination of unproductive bodies. Pasolini argues that circular time dissociates from the patriarchal timing that, while it "apparently entails progress", is actually "unable to account for the transformations of the female body" (Pasolini 2016: 102). In addition, this kind of time can neither account for all the bodies which, as those of women, are marginalised within the category of the "non-human". Therefore, we can say that time is reconfigured in a way that defies heteropatriarchal anthropocentrism by Wolf-Alice's meaning-making of the "circumambulatory principle of the clock".

After the clock, Wolf-Alice discovers the mirror. Seeing there her own reflexion, she first thinks that she has found a playmate, but then she gradually understands that this partner is nothing but a "particularly ingenious variety of the shadow she cast on sunlit grass" (Carter 2006: 147). Although she mourns the loss of her only friend in her daily solitude, Wolf-Alice recognises that what she saw within the mirror is the reflexion of herself. In this way, she recognises herself as a particular body and starts to feel the "essential difference" separating herself from the surroundings (146). Thereby, the world ceases to be "the emanation of her questing nose and erect ears" and she acknowledges its existence prior to her acknowledgement of it, waiting "for her arrivals to give it meaning" (146). In this way, Wolf-Alice makes sense of herself and the world as separated things, which, by the way, can enter in relation with each other to mean-making. Namely, her process of self-subjection is fulfilled when she understands that she can create her own meaning for the world surrounding her, according to what she needs and desires: "the landscape assembles itself about her, she informs it with her presence. She is its significance" (148).

Refusing human language when she was at the convent (the only way she speaks is by howling to her lost wolf pack), Wolf-Alice had sealed her difference from humans. But, since she recognises herself in the mirror, she also seals her difference from the wolves. Finding some old dusty clothes in the Duke's castle, Wolf-Alice clothes herself up: "now she knew how to wear clothes and so had put on the visible sign of the difference from [the wolves]" (147). Wolf-Alice's growth means her acknowledgement of herself as an in-between critter.

4.1.3 Wolf-Alice's semiotic-materiality and oddkin

Through the clock and the mirror, Wolf-Alice makes sense of and self-determines herself, as well as time, space and the surrounding matter. This meaning-making process moves from her situated body, which is free from any social convention, and can live upon its instinct, desire, cravings, and intention. As Alice in Celati's reading, Wolf-Alice is devoted only to her will, which is free from patriarchal as well as anthropocentric structures.

Through her embodied process of meaning-making, with the help of a mirror reflecting herself, and a clock which follows her menstrual bleeding, Wolf-Alice emerges as a "material-semiotic generative nod[e]" (Haraway 1988: 595). As proposed by Donna Haraway in her 1988 essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic since their performative materiality produces knowledge and meaning of themselves and of the surrounding world. The body is, to Haraway, a "material-semiotic actor" since the presumed "object" of knowledge is actually an "active, meaning-generating" part of the process of knowledge production (Haraway 1988: 595). This knowledge (an "object" of knowledge) is produced in "social interaction" (Haraway 1988: 595), which means, as Karen Barad would say (2007), that individuals do not pre-exist the phenomena by which they intra-act. The knowledge produced this way is situated as well as the body producing it. In this regard, there is a link between Haraway's and Barad's understanding of the semiotic-material production of knowledge and the way Wolf-Alice builds her own space-time epistemology. The positioning of her body as an in-between species and menstruating body is retrieved in the semiotic-material positioning of the circular time she makes sense of. To this end, the semiotic-material generative body of Wolf-Alice is a situated body generating a situated epistemology.

Situated bodies are characterised, according to Haraway, by a “split and contradictory self” (1988: 586). Therefore, they overlap with Frye’s definition of a “break in consciousness” which is typical of Alice and her descending companions into the lower world of the night. Fragmented selves can “interrogate positionings and be accountable”, they generate “heterogeneous multiplicities” which cannot be “squashed into isomorphic slots or cumulative lists”, but which can rather generate “fantastic imaginings that change history” (Haraway 1988: 586). The “knowing self” is “partial”, “never finished, whole” (Haraway 1988: 586). This definition well describes Carter’s postmodern in-between bodies, which are never reducible to a whole etiquette, but which always move and sit in liminality.

According to Bacchilega, Carter’s *Bloody Chamber*’s bodies are “disobedient”, since they “expose or upset the paradigms of authority inherent in the texts they appropriate” (Nancy Walker in Bacchilega 1997: 23). Nonetheless, the postmodern body is namely featured by “an internalized challenge to the humanist notion of integrity and seamless wholeness” (Hutcheon 1988: 84). Postmodern subjects decentralise from the “masculine Cartesian subject” considered to be “the origin of meaning” (Hutcheon 1988: 164). They recognise and reinforce difference, suggesting “alternative notions of subjectivity” moving from paradigms of “race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on” (Hutcheon 1988: 159). The boundaries of such bodies are porous, mobile: as “objects” of knowledge, they are “boundaries projects” (Haraway 1988: 597), dwelling in liminality and intra-action.

Because of their porosity, situated bodies can better relate with other in-between critters. Since this knowing self is characterised by partiality, unfinishedness, imperfection, in-betweenness, it is “*therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another” (Haraway 1988: 586, emphasis in the original). By the end of Carter’s tale, the wolf-girl, both subject and object of her reconfigured onto-epistemology, gets out of her solitude, which was the price of her almost total freedom. After having ignored each other for long time, Wolf-Alice and the Duke eventually encounter each other.

The Duke has the habit of going to the town graveyard in the moonlight to unearth human corpses and bring them home to eat them. One night, the young husband of a dead bride who had just been devoured by the Duke decides to take revenge. With the approval of his fellow villagers, he shot the Duke, who comes back home wounded and bleeding, howling “like a wolf” (Carter 2006: 148). Wolf-Alice is firstly scared by the sound of pain, but then,

understanding that she has not been wounded herself, she turns “pitiful as her gaunt grey mother” (148). Then she leaps upon the Duke’s bed “to lick, without hesitation, without disgust, with a quick, tender gravity, the blood and dirt from his cheeks and forehead” (148). Through this act of care, the Duke, whose image had disappeared from the mirror’s reflection, comes back in there little by little. If the Duke had once “passed through the mirror and now, henceforward, lives as if upon the other side of things” (142), the “soft, moist, gentle tongue” (149) and care of Wolf-Alice bring him back to this very side. As well as Wolf-Alice has met herself in the mirror, the recognition of the Duke that she enacts makes him exist again together with his reflection. This excerpt remarks the absolute lack of an “independent, self-contained existence” which is as the basis of Barad’s notion of “entanglement”. According to Barad, individuals do not exist prior to their intra-action, but they “emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating” (Barad 2007: ix). The very notion of “intra-action” is introduced by Barad in order to contest the dichotomy implied in the notion of “interaction”, whose premise is that there are two (or more) separated, pre-existing things interacting with each other (Barad 1996: 179).

In the alliance between the marginalised liminal creatures, as for the witch and her familiar, and in the oddkin they generate together, dwells the liberation of in-between identities from “a life in the world” – as for Carter’s *Tiger’s bride* (2006: 75) – which is a life of hiding and segregation. Freed from binary categories, the wolf-girl and the Duke recognise each other in the odd alliance they build. In this encounter, they are no longer lonely: thanks to their bond, they can transform themselves and the surrounding world. At the same time, Wolf-Alice can shape time and space according to her own body shape and needs – which is why humans are so much scared of her.

As Frye understands the descent into the lower world, not only “[i]t is possible never to get out of this lower world”, but also “some may not even want to” (Frye 2006: 82). It may indeed “assume the form of a false paradise” or “there may even be genuine paradises in the lower world [...] or at least places of contentment” (Frye 2006: 82), which seems to be what Wolf-Alice and the Duke find. Choosing the liminal, Wolf-Alice and the Duke have both chosen to stay in the lower world of the night, and they surely will not come back from Alice’s Wonderland.

4.2 The onto-epistemology of stones: “A Stone Woman” by Antonia Susan Byatt (2003)

4.2.1 A shift in perspective: Ines’s metamorphosis

The reconfiguration of space-time-matter(ing) and its sense-making by the situated body deals with a shift of perspective. In the literary texts considered in the present dissertation, this reconfiguration marks a shift from the human, anthropocentric perspective to the other-than-human point of view. This shifting is a crucial feature in Antonia Susan Byatt’s short story “A Stone Woman” (2003). The tale appeared first in “The New York Times” (October 5, 2003) and was later published in the collection *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003). In “A Stone Woman”, the human perspective is described by Thorsteinn Hallmundursson – a stonecutter from Iceland and one of the main characters of the story – as “a bit of a precarious perspective, here, in this land” (Byatt 2003).⁸³ To this end, human perspective is both ephemeral if compared to the deep geological time of the earth, as well as precarious in the context of the “trouble” of the planet’s crisis. To face the latter, other-than-human alliances are needed, which, in Byatt’s tale, are to be found in the geological world.

Byatt’s tale is about a woman, Ines, who, after the death of her beloved mother, slowly transmogrifies into stone. While Ines tries to busy herself “with tidying love away” and by focusing on her job, the sorrow suddenly hits her with an intestine cancer. The disease is described as a “screaming thing”, a “creature moaning” and “shriek[ing] raucously” inside her (Byatt 2003). When surgery removes the cancer, Ines is left with a huge scar on her navel. Since then, her body begins to transmogrify into stone: the scar first, then a spiralling stone composition on her belly, and slowly the rest of her body, right into her thinking and five senses.⁸⁴

⁸³ In the quotation of Byatt’s tale, pages are missing since I am relying on an e-book version. Like many other works I quote along this dissertation, paper editions of Byatt’s collection are difficult to find in the Italian libraries.

⁸⁴ Ines’s transmogrification into stone has been interpreted as “a reminder of death as the final destination of every living creature” (Irving in Martínez-Alfaro 2025: 150), even if, as María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro remarks “the protagonist’s transformation is and is not her death, as she ends up feeling more alive than ever although she is dying in biomedical terms” (2025: 138). Alla Ivanchikova argues also that Byatt’s turn to mineralogy may signal “a desire – visible in postcolonial writings as well – to find a new language to write about trauma, beyond the psychoanalytic mode” (2018: 7).

If Carter's "Wolf-Alice" moves from *The Bloody Chamber*'s focus on the female subject to slightly enter the domain of post-anthropocentrism, Byatt's story immerses progressively and almost totally in a post-human perspective. Furthermore, the non-human perspective of "A Stone Woman" is not only that of non-human living critters, but namely that of inorganic beings. Not only plants, animals, and liminal beings in-between the human and the animal are considered alive, but also stones, glaciers, volcanoes, and the earth. As María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro argues, "[t]he borders between bio and geos blur" in "A Stone Woman" (2025: 151). The tale questions and eventually reverses our human idea of what is alive (bio) and what is dead (geos).

Ines's shift of perspective is followed up along the story. The first line of the tale says that "[a]t first, she did not think of stones" (Byatt 2003). Indeed, at the beginning, Ines is enclosed – like the reader – in her human perspective. She believes that inorganic matter is dead, a belief that is questioned only when her own body begins to transmogrify into stone. Therefore, she increasingly moves away from her human point of view, which will eventually emerge as partial and inadequate to acknowledge the multiplicity of matter's points of view and agencies.

In her human form, Ines initially thinks about the mineral world as "a world of perfect, inanimate forms". Therefore, when her body begins to change into stone, Ines "had thought [...] about her own transfiguration as [...] a move from a world of warm change and decay to a world of cold permanence", fearing that she will eventually die of petrification. However, while her body changes, Ines has the chance to "look [...] into the idea of minerals", and to see that

There were whole ranges of rocks and stones which, like pearls, were formed from things which had once been living. Not only coal and fossils, petrified woods and biothermal limestones—oolitic and pisolitic limestones, formed round dead shells—but chalk itself which was mainly made up of micro organisms, or cherts and flints, massive bedded forms made up of the skeletons of Radiolaria and diatoms. These were themselves once living stones—living marine organisms that spun and twirled around skeletons made of opal. (Byatt 2003)

Ines's concerns and questions about the stone-shape her body is changing into find new answers when she meets Thorsteinn Hallmurdusson. Thorsteinn is an Icelandic stonecutter who spends the winter working in the country where Ines lives and gets back to Iceland every

summer, when the Icelandic weather gets milder. Thorsteinn's sculptures are very different from the stone statues usually made by humans. If those pervade Ines with a sense of concern, and the impression that they represent "simpering lifeless women" living "an indefinite half-life", Thorsteinn's statues look to her "alive". As the stonecutter explains, "I look for the life in them", since "[s]tones are alive where I come from" (Byatt 2003).

By then, the tale begins to intertwine with fairy tales and folk stories from Iceland, which are mostly told to Ines by the stonecutter. Such stories encourage and re-enchant her imagination, helping her change of perspective. Thanks to the Icelandic imaginary, Ines begins to see the possibility of a stone life when her metamorphosis will be finalised, instead of a petrification sentencing her death.

As Thorsteinn tells her:

Iceland is a country where we are matter-of fact about strange things. We know we live in a world of invisible beings that exists in and around our own. We make gates in rocks for elves to come and go. But as well as living things without solid substance we know that rocks and stones have their own energies. Iceland is a young country, a restless country—in our land the earth's mantle is shaped at great speed by the churning of geysers and the eruption of lava and the progress of glaciers. We live like lichens, clinging to standing stones and rolling stones and heaving stones and rattling stones and flying stones. Our tales are full of striding stone women. We have mostly not given up the expectation of seeing them. But I did not expect to meet one here, in this dead place. (Byatt 2003)

A "dead place" is, according to Thorsteinn, a place where stones, the earth, and all the elements of a landscape are not infused with magic tales and where matter is just an object. In Iceland, the contrary occurs.

Telling stories within stories is typical of Byatt's narrative⁸⁵. In "A Stone Woman", several tales from Icelandic folklore are told, "tales [...] of a treeless landscape peopled by inhuman beings, laughing weightless elves, hidden heavy-footed, heavy-handed trolls". There is, for example, the story of Katla, who is the name of a volcano but also of a troll-woman who owned

⁸⁵ See for instance the two fairy tales included in Byatt's novel *Possession* ("The Glass Coffin" and "Gode's Story", 1990), which have been later collected in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (1994).

a pair of magic breeches “which made her a very fleet runner”. When a young shepherd stole them, Katla “killed him, dismembered him, and hid his body in a barrel of whey”, and, when they found the corpse, Katla fled with her magic breeches. There are also stories about trolls who “turned to stone” when the sun hit them (...); others “who slept for centuries amongst the stones of the desert, or along the riverbeds, and stirred with an earthquake, or an eruption, into new life”. There are also “human trolls, distinguishable only by their huge size from farmers and fishermen” (Byatt 2003). Through these stories, Ines tries to make sense of her new self. “Was [Katla] a stone woman?” she asks Thorsteinn, but the stonecutter does not believe that she is a troll. “I think you are a metamorphosis”, he tells instead, collocating her in the liminal status in-between the human and the non-human, at the borders between the real and the fantastic.

As a metamorphosis, Ines’ first changes are physical. From the surgery’s cut, a stone crust begins to spiral through her belly, and then up and down her whole body, which gets eventually covered in minerals. Descriptions are made in a body horror style, making the reader initially feel the same feelings experienced by Ines: “horror and shame”. However, those feelings are slowly replaced by “a new curiosity [which] jostled the horror”. Ines’s transmogrification is ultimately understood as “strange and beautiful”, by herself as well as by Thorsteinn, who considers Ines’s body “[b]eautiful”, since her stone shape is “[g]rown, not crafted” (Byatt 2003). Progressively, Ines’s transmogrification crosses over into her mind, so that she thinks “human thoughts and stone thoughts” at the same time. Stone thoughts are “slow, patchily coloured, textured and extreme, both hot and cold. They did not translate into the English language, or into any other she knew: they were things that accumulated, solidly, knocked against each other, heaped and slipped” (Byatt 2003). Ines’s five senses change too according to her stone-becoming. Her sense of smell becomes “sharper”, so that “[s]he could smell the rain in the thick cloud-blanket. She could smell the carbon in the car exhausts and the rainbow-coloured minerals in puddles of petrol”. Her sense of taste changes too: “[s]he discovered a new taste for sushi, for the iodine in seaweed and the salt taste of raw fish”. Her sense of sight also transmogrifies: “[s]he tried reading, but her new eyes could not quite bring the dancing black letters to have any more meaning than the spiders and ants which scurried round her feet or mounted her stolid ankles”. She also begins to have troubles in seeing Thorsteinn: since he is made of ephemeral, organic matter, “He began to seem blurred and out of focus [...]”. He

was becoming insubstantial. His very solid body looked as though it was simply a form of water vapour” (Byatt 2003).

Anyway, Ines’s sense of sight is not becoming weaker; it is just changing, and she can now see something else, that human eyes cannot: “things which seemed to crowd and gesture just beyond the range of her vision, behind her head, beyond the peripheral circle of her gaze”. Indeed, worried that she will not find a place where to rest in her stone form,⁸⁶ Ines follows the stonecutter when he gets back to Iceland in the summer, hoping to find there a place to which she may now belong. It is in this country that she begins to see gigantic beings that her human companion does not. However, raised in Icelandic folklore, even if he cannot hear or see them, Thorsteinn “know[s] they call”, and is sure that Ines “will see them, when the time comes”.

[...] she sensed earth bubbles and earth monsters shrugging themselves into shape in the air and in the falling fosses. [...] Clearest of all— almost visible—were the huge dancers, forms that humped themselves out of earth and boulders [...]. [...] she seemed also to see that these things, the fleet and the portentous, the lithe and the stolid, were walking and running like parasites on the back of some moving beast so huge that the mountain range was only a wrinkle in its vasty hide, as it stirred in its slumber, or shook itself slightly as it woke. (Byatt 2003)

Those beings are calling her (“‘They call me’, she said in a whisper”, ...) and, if she initially feels shy and afraid she would not be able to fit into their “dancing, the furious form of it”, she eventually joins the “circle” of their “wild energy”. In this final excerpt, the focalisation is on Thorsteinn: the last moment of Ines’s metamorphosis is seen from the point of view of the only human character of the story. The reader too is invited to understand only a part of her other-than-humanness, and to let her go into her new, mysterious stone life.

Ines is in the garden of Thorsteinn’s house, in Iceland. A storm is raging outside, while the stonecutter

⁸⁶ People would be scared to see her stone-body: Thorsteinn is the only person to whom Ines allows to see herself. For instance, when they have to decide how to travel to Iceland, they acknowledge that they cannot get there by plane: “If she were asked to pull back her hood, the airport staff would run screaming. Or shoot her” (Byatt 2003)

looked up the mountain and saw, no doubt what she now saw clearly, figures, spinning and bowing in a rapid dance on huge, lithe, stony legs, beckoning with expansive gestures, flinging their great arms wide in invitation. The woman in his stone-garden took a breath—he saw her sides quiver—and essayed a few awkward dance-steps, a sweep of an arm, of both arms. He heard her laughter in the wind. She jigged a little, as though gathering momentum, and then began a dancing run, into the blizzard. (Byatt 2003)

While the stone woman gets reunited with her other-than-human kind, Thorsteinn gets home, “closed his door against the weather, and began to pack”. The door of Thorsteinn’s house closes as well as that of the story: the stone woman’s trespassing into a geological non-humanity is left outside of human language.

However, before closing the door to leave the blizzard outside, Thorsteinn “heard a stone voice, shouting and singing ‘*Trunt, trunt, og tröllin í fjöllum*’”. This Icelandic saying can be translated as “Trunt trunt” (which, as Thorsteinn explains, “is just nonsense, it means rubbish and junk and aha and hubble bubble”) “and the trolls in the fells” (Byatt 2003). These words come from an Icelandic tale Thorsteinn tells Ines. The tale is about a man who gets grabbed by a female troll while collecting lichens in the mountains. Year after year, people see him increasingly transmogrified. If he initially seems to still believe in the Christian God, the last time he is asked about what he believes in, he answers “*Trunt, trunt, og tröllin í fjöllum*”. Trolls, as well as the dancing earthly figures met by Ines, belong to a folkloric pagan tradition which threatens the Christian church. Together with living volcanoes, bowing mountains, and other earth-beings, they are all chthulucenic critters, composting beyond the laws of patriarchy and anthropocentrism, and, like the witch figure, they threaten Christianity and capitalism. The earth-beings encountered by Ines can be understood as fairy-tale tentacular beings: primeval forces to be identified with wind, air, water, moving earth. Like Medusa the Gorgon threatens patriarchy (Haraway 2016a), so the spinning earthly dancers threaten Christianity, and a whole order based on binary violence.

4.2.2 The agential vitality of stones

In “A Stone Woman”, the magical animistic dimension of the fairy tale enables matter and the inorganic to be empowered and acquire agency. This agential force of matter is crucial since,

as we have discussed, the petrosexoracial anthropocentrism is no longer thinkable (§ 1.1). Human perspective needs to be rethought and retold. To this end, listening to the silenced voices of matter which are re-enchanted in the fairy world becomes crucial. Byatt herself insists on the crucial role of non-humanity: “we ought to think about the not-human, in order to be fully human” (Byatt in Martinez-Alfaro 2025: 146). In this regard, the human emerges as “always intermeshed with”, as well as “ultimately inseparable from” “the more than human world” and the “environment” (Alaimo in Martinez-Alfaro 2024: 152).

Alla Ivanchikova points out how the geologic is represented as an ally not only to the human in general, but namely “to the disempowered and the oppressed” in Byatt’s story (2018: 7). To her, while female tales of petrification usually deals with punishment, in Byatt’s version the stone-woman’s geologic becoming is represented as a liberation (Ivanchikova 2018: 16). Indeed, the relationship between the female protagonist and the geologic dimension is “one of synergy”, implying the “political concep[t] of [...] decolonization” (Ivanchikova 2018: 6). Decolonization occurs, according to Ivanchikova, as Ines’s desire to “liberate the geologic from being colonized by excessively ‘organic’ human language” (2018: 16), which recalls to the excessive representationalism of human language, if compared to the performativity of the semiotic-material body (§ 3.3).

Moreover, as Ivanchikova points out, central to the discussion of the contemporary Anthropocene era is “an impulse to imagine our way out of the carbon imaginary, by showing the instability of the life/non-life ontological divide and by insisting on the interconnectedness of human and planetary history” (2018: 5). The “carbon imaginary” is how Elizabeth A. Povinelli defines the current extractionist regime (2016: 37), which is essential to neoliberalism. As already discussed through Consigliere’s analysis of the silencing of non-human voices as functional to neoliberalism (2024), Federico Luisetti argues that contemporary fights against neoliberalism – with a particular regard to Indigenous fights against extractionism – have spread “la consapevolezza che anche le pietre, i fiumi, i ghiacciai e le valli sono soggetti politici con capacità di agire, allo stesso modo delle piante, degli animali, degli uomini e delle multinazionali”⁸⁷ (Luisetti 2023: 32). Luisetti considers the case of the Australian stone site of the Two Women Sitting Down, which is sacred to the Indigenous

⁸⁷ “the awareness that even stones, rivers, glaciers, and valleys are political subjects with agencies, as well as plants, animals, humans, and multinational corporations” (my translation).

Kunapa people. The site is believed to represent the fight between two female ancestors, a bandicoot and a rat. The bandicoot had less children than the rat, so she tried to steal one of the rat's children. They fought, and the red colour of the manganese represents their blood. But to the Australian mining company in charge of the site (the OM Manganese Ltd.), this sacred blood is just "the fourth most-used metal per tonnage in global manufacturing [...] and it is a critical component of various commodities ranging from high-quality steel production to pharmaceuticals" (Povinelli 2016: Ch. 2). As Povinelli argues, rocks "separate", dividing humans according to "how, or whether, they differentiate Life and Nonlife" (Povinelli 2016: Ch. 2). A similar divide occurs in the fictional world of "A Stone Woman": there is the "dead place" from which Ines comes, where matter is considered as a dead, inert object; and there are the alive landscapes of Iceland with their folklore, which open to Ines the possibility of an other-than-human stone existence.

As Luisetti remarks, in Western philosophy, the notion of subject (which is part of the Life/Nonlife divide) is related to the cognitive sphere: the Western philosophical subject is the one who thinks (Luisetti 2023: 32-33). Western politics concerning ecological issues usually considers that non-human subjects, since they cannot speak, cannot participate in Western "democracy" unless they have human representatives: scientists, experts, philosophers who speak *for* them (Luisetti 2023: 328). However, the statement that non-human subjects cannot speak is inscribed in the Western anthropocentric and speciesist mindset. The point is not that they do not speak, but rather that humans cannot hear glaciers, stones, rivers, forests speaking, because they do not listen to *their* languages (as Eva Meijer argues in *Animal Languages*, 2018, see § 3.3). Indeed, is not a glacier speaking, when it melts and backs down because of global warming? Are not rivers speaking when, after long periods of drought, they overflow upon villages and fields? Are not mountains and stones speaking, when they fall down, because the trees whose roots were keeping the soil together have been cut down?

In non-Western epistemologies, earth-beings can be seen as material and agential subjects. By the expression "earth-beings", anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena translates the Quechua word "tirakuna", "a composite noun made of *tierra*, the Spanish word for "earth", and pluralized with the Quechua suffix *kuna*" (2015: xxiii). Earth-beings can be "a mountain, a river, a lagoon" (5), such as the mountain Ausangate, who is sacred to the Indigenous Andean people. Tirakuna are agential subjects, they are "other than human beings who participate in

the lives of those who call themselves runakuna, people (usually monolingual Quechua speakers)” (xxiv).

Relying on the work of Catherine J. Allen, Luisetti argues that, to the Quechua communities in the Sonqo highland, in the Andes, “Essere pietra [...] significa affacciarsi all’esistenza in qualità di soggetto magico”⁸⁸ (Luisetti 2023: 54). According to their cosmogony, people and non-human animals can transmogrify into stones in moments of cosmic transition. For instance, there is a story in Sonqo telling that an Inca girl who was escaping from Spanish colonisers, and that was left behind because she needed to urinate, got petrified, which explains why a stream of water comes out of the canyon (Luisetti 2023: 54-55).

As the Anishinaabe author Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains, the Nishnaabeg communities (based in Northern America) are grounded in a form of internationalism which includes “plant and animal nations, the Great Lakes, the St. Lawrence River, and nonhuman beings and other Indigenous nations” (2017: 24). Nishnaabeg internationalism is layered in a “network of complex interrelationships” which manifests itself as “a series of radiating relationships with plant nations, animal nations, insects, bodies of water, air, soil, and spiritual beings in addition to the Indigenous nations with whom we share parts of our territory” (Simpson 2017: 58). Consequently, according to the Nishnaabeg people, knowledge “comes from the spiritual world and flows to humans through intimate relationships with human and nonhuman entities” (Simpson 2017: 28). Indigenous perspectives, such as those of the Nishnaabeg, the Inqaychus, and the Quechua people, involve non-human entities as subjects, as well as they consider them subjects in the process of knowledge production.

Hence, outside from the Western epistemologies, non-human matter speaks a language that, even if we cannot understand it, crucially needs to be listened, especially in the contemporary context of planetary crisis. Moreover, as discussed in § Chapter 3, this language can teach a lot to humans. In this regard, Byatt’s “A Stone Woman”, as a fairy tale produced in the Euro-Western UK, defies the Western cognitive primacy of *Anthropos*, and enlightens the agency of material subjects beyond the cognitive sphere. Byatt’s stone woman and the dancers of the fells, trolls or earth-beings dancing in the blizzard, reveal the material agency of even inorganic beings, whom Ines eventually joins. Thorsteinn do not pretend to see the stone dancers, or to

⁸⁸ “to be a stone means to enter existence as a magic subject” (my translation).

interiorise their language, or to investigate Ines's metamorphosis, but he understands that they exist, and their existence should be valued as well as their agency. As he comes back to the milder climate of his working country, acknowledging that the forces of nature are becoming too violent for his fragile – transparent, as Ines eventually sees it – human body, the reader may acknowledge that, as Marco Belpoliti points out, “è proprio dal non-capire che ha inizio il processo di risveglio del pensiero e anche della sensibilità”⁸⁹ (2023: 10).

4.2.3 Ines's stone body as onto-epistemology and the reconfiguration of spacetimemattering

In the reconfiguration of the borders between bio and geos, what Ines initially feared as the loss of her life is eventually reversed into that which Martínez-Alfaro defines as a “life-giving reconnection with all there is, celebrated here with Ines's dance in and with nature, myth and the enormity of geological deep time” (2025: 151). As Ivanchikova argues, Byatt's representation of the geological deep time “renders the earth mobile, revealing the slow dance of oceans and continents, mountains and valleys as they change places over millennia” (2018: 18). The mobility of earthly matter reminds Jane Bennett's notion of the “vitality” of matter, by which the author means not only the ability of things to interfere with human intentions, but also their capacity “to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (2010: viii). The spinning dancers that Ines sees and joins are not only an animist feature of the fairy tale, but they also reflect the actual deep-time movement of geological beings. Invisible to the human eye (represented by Thorsteinn's perspective) because of its extraneity to it (deep geological time is “alien” to humans, Gould in Ivanchikova 2018: 5), geological movements can be felt instead by Ines's stone perceptions.

In this regard, it is interesting the issue of erratic stones (“massi erratici”): stones that moved from their geological homeplace because of geological movements, melting glaciers or tsunamis. Erratic stones have left their geological homeland and dwell lonely in valleys, shores, and hills (Luisetti 2023: 64). Luisetti describes them as “frammenti di un tempo profondo, corpi geologici posti al crocevia di regimi temporali incompatibili”⁹⁰ (2023: 68).

⁸⁹ “it is by not understanding that the awakening of thought and sensibility begins” (my translation).

⁹⁰ “fragments of a deep time, geological bodies at the crossroad of incompatible time scales” (my translation).

They can be considered as subjects (76), since their agency emerges in the way they moved from a place to another. Luisetti recalls the art project by Motoyuki Shitamichi, who filmed erratic stones brought by violent tsunamis on the shores of the Ryukyu islands, in Okinawa (Japan).⁹¹ In Shitamichi's videos, erratic stones coexist with the sea, the local flora and fauna, and even people and tourists passing by. Luisetti remarks that the artist “è in grado [...] di rivelare la coesistenza in questi corpi geologici di storie e tempi diversi, dalla prospettiva non umana dei massi erratici”⁹² (2023: 70). Shitamichi enacts a shift of perspective by taking the point of view of erratic stones, as well as it happens to Ines by means of her metamorphosis.

The issue of the vitality of stones recalls Karen Barad's agential realism, which invites to “meet the universe halfway”. According to Barad, knowledge is always produced by the intra-active entanglement between the “subject” and the “object” of knowledge. As in the quantum principle of indeterminacy, knowledge is reciprocally and iteratively produced by the “subject” of the observation and by the matter that the “subject” supposes to observe, but which acts in its turn, and which is not just an inert object, unsensible to the process of observation (Barad 1996; 2007). Knowledge stays in-between, in the halfway; it is a matter of perspective and positioning. The halfway is also the place of metamorphosis, of those who escape definitions and labels. It is the borderland where, as in Anzaldúa's *nepantla*, transmutation occurs, where it is possible to build “new topographies and geographies of hybrid selves who transcend binaries” (Anzaldúa 2015: 82; § 2.3). In the space in-between (between human and non-human, reality and fantasy, magic and ordinary, *anthropos* and matter) new horizons can be found, telling stories of alliances beyond species and biological kingdoms, and re-enchanting the imagination.

As Birgit M. Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele argue, according to Barad's quantized diffraction, “a relational ontology emerges that can no longer be categorically separated from its epistemological processes” (2014: 165). If beings become such when they are in relation (intra-acting) with other beings, and if individuals do not pre-exist their inter-relating, there could not be knowledge before the intra-action since knowledge (epistemology) is created by intra-action (relational ontology). In this sense, ontology and epistemology become

⁹¹ <http://m-shitamichi.com/work/tsunami-boulder/>.

⁹² “can reveal the coexistence, in those geological bodies, of different times and stories, from the non-human point of view of erratic stones” (my translation).

“inter/intra-laced as onto-epistemology” (Kaiser and Thiele 2014: 165). Similarly, a new epistemology comes out from Ines’s new ontological status as a stone-woman, or an in-between critter. Ines’s onto-epistemology implies that her in-between body is a material-semiotic generative node that also reminds us of Carter’s Wolf-Alice. As embodied matter, both meet the mattered world, and this intra-action generates an onto-epistemology where stones are alive and gigantic earth-beings spin and dance in the blizzard.

In Ines’s onto-epistemology, time has another form, as well as the body. Human bodies become translucent, if compared to the solidity of geological earth-beings. Thoughts get slower, as well as time. Ines can now perceive the movement of the earth’s surface, because she is aligned with deep geological time. Matter is not dead, and Ines can see that when she gets to Iceland:

the striking thing [...] about this landscape, was that it was geologically young. It was turbulent with the youth and energy of an unsettled crust of the earth. The whole south coast of Iceland is still being changed—in a decade, in a twinkling of an eye—by volcanic eruptions which pour red-hot magma from mountain ridges, or spout up, boiling, from under the thick-ribbed ice. (Byatt 2003: ...)

The earth’s surface, mountains, geological beings are always moving: they are just moving so slowly, if compared to the ephemerality of human life, that they get alien to human understanding. But Ines can feel those movements. Her stone matter signifies the coordinates of space-time-matter as well as Wolf-Alice’s wolf-woman body signifies them through the clock and the mirror. Through Ines’s material-semiosis, “meaning-mattering” (Barad 2007) becomes a singular, but whole process. Time is retold in a deep geological sense by Ines’s other-than-human perspective. This is also what happens in “Wolf-Alice”, where time is resignified according to the wolf-girl circular understanding, coming from the cyclicity of her menstruation.

Barad introduces the notion of “spacetime-mattering” as part of their relational ontology (which, as mentioned, implies that the ontology of the entities emerges through relationality, Kirbi in Kaiser and Thiele 2013: 166). In this regard, the notion of spacetime-mattering marks the inseparability of space, time and matter, which are continuously and dynamically

“(re)making” themselves through the “iterative sedimentation of intra-actions” (Barad 2017: 111). Matter and phenomena interfere with each other, as well as with space and time, reconfiguring spacetime-mattering as a whole. To this end, the peculiar understanding of time and space according to Ines’s and Wolf-Alice’s perspectives emerges as an interference of the characters (as matter) with time and space. Therefore, their semiotic materiality thoroughly reconfigures the coordinates of the spacetime-mattering of their respective fictional universes. What comes out eventually is a process of world-making which moves from embodiment, positioning, and a shift from the anthropocentric perspective.

4.3 The magical-material efficacy of a heart’s desire: reconfiguring spacetime-mattering in the universe of Margo Lanagan’s *Tender Morsels* (2008)

The reconfiguration of spacetime-mattering in fairy-tale retellings emerges also in *Tender Morsels*. This process is epitomized by the way in which the heart’s desires of Urdda and Liga impact the novel’s world-building. As it has already been mentioned, one of the focuses of the novel are the protagonists’ “heart’s desires”. If Branza’s heart’s desire follows the traditional plot of the Grimm’s tale (she ends up by marrying Davit Ramstrong, Lanagan’s version of the prince transformed in bear), Urdda’s one does not. As well as that of her mother before, Urdda’s heart’s desire proves to have a magical efficacy on matter. Urdda’s and Liga’s intentions produce a synchronicity (Balicco 2023) between the microcosm of their heart’s desire and the macrocosm of the material world, playing (consciously or not) with the shape of the novel’s world(s). As in the quantum principle of indeterminacy, nature (the matter of the novel’s universe) answers according to what it is asked (Barad 1996, 2007, 2011). In this paragraph, I will focus on how the efficacy of the characters’ intentions shapes the consistency of the fictional world according to their needs and desires.

4.3.1 Magic as “efficacy of intentions” and the synchronicity between the magical and the quantum realm

In *Favole del reincanto*, anthropologist Stefania Consigliere defines magic as “efficacia delle intenzioni” (2020: 125), which Steven Colatrella translates as “efficacy of intentions” (Consigliere 2024: 94). Hence, Consigliere understands magic as an intention – a desire – which causes a material effect. As Daniele Balicco argues in “Realismi magici,”⁹³ magic can be understood as a form of synchronicity, where one’s intention is aligned with the external material events. Therefore,

la contemporaneità di eventi apparentemente irrelati che accadono in due spazi fisici diversi – uno psichico inconscio, interno alla mente; e uno fisico esterno, registrabile dai sensi – *esiste solo se è percepita dal soggetto*. [...] la sincronicità si verifica *solo se* il soggetto percipiente *ipotizza un senso* a quell’accadere, che lo coinvolga. È dunque un caso di *probabilità primaria*, che senza la co-implicazione di psiche e materia non avrebbe luogo. (Balicco 2023: 255, original emphasis)⁹⁴

Thus, synchronicity is directly related to one’s intention: it occurs only if one means to see it. The quantum realm works in a similar way: in the double slit experiment, matter behaves as either particle or wave according to the position of the observer. Therefore, according to the principle of indeterminacy⁹⁵, in quantum mechanics the position of the observer is crucial to determine the nature of matter (Pauli in Balicco 2023: 255). Like in the quantum realm, in the magical domain too nature answers to one’s position and intention. What occurs there is “un

⁹³ In this essay, which is part of a collection edited by Stefania Consigliere (*Materialismo magico*, 2023), Balicco elaborates on magic and synchronicity starting from the dialogue between psychotherapist Carl Gustav Jung and physicist Wolfgang Pauli.

⁹⁴ “the simultaneity of apparently non-related events which occur in different spaces – a psychic, unconscious space, internal to the mind; and a physical, external one, which can be registered by the senses – *exists only if it is perceived by the subject*. [...] synchronicity occurs *only if* the perceiving subject *assumes* that what is happening *makes sense*, a sense in which the subject itself is involved. It is a case of *primary probability*, which would not occur without the co-implication of psyche and matter” (my translation).

⁹⁵ The principle of indeterminacy is also at the basis of the feminist critique to the presumed impartiality of science. See Haraway 1988; Harding 1986; Barad 2007.

rapporto di contiguità e di co-implicazione fra microcosmo soggettivo e macrocosmo”⁹⁶ (Balicco 2023: 255). As Karen Barad’s notion of agential realism exemplifies, the universe is met in the halfway between one’s question and nature’s answer (Barad 1996; 2007). Moving beyond realism as well as social constructivism, Barad’s agential realism points out that phenomena do not pre-exist the intra-actions which produce them (Barad 1996). Therefore, in the quantum as well as in the magical domain, one’s intention has a direct consequence on nature’s behaviour.

In *Tender Morsels*, this kind of “efficacy of intentions” – or synchronicity between matter and desire – is linked to the characters’ heart’s desires. Lanagan’s revision of “Snow-White and Rose-Red” stresses the apparent flatness of the world and characters belonging to the Grimms’ tale, as well as the heteropatriarchal layers underpinning the whole plot. In particular, *Tender Morsels* questions the gender stereotypes promoted by the traditional tale. In Lanagan’s retelling, traditionally passive (female) characters gain agency through the realisation of their personal desires. This magical efficacy of intentions upon matter is a key feature of the plot. In the universe of the novel, matter answers according to the characters’ questions, as it occurs in the quantum principle of indeterminacy as well as in magical synchronicity.

4.3.2 Liga’s heart’s desire: fairyland as a haunted archive of the memory of trauma

Among the features of the Grimms’ tale investigated by Lanagan’s retelling, there is the representation of the tale’s world as a heavenly dimension. In the Grimms’ tale, Snow-White, Rose-Red, and their mother live in a poor cottage in the woods. The forest is a safe place, wild animals are their friends, and no bad thing ever happens to them. Lanagan tries to go deeper behind the reasons of such heavenly dimension. In *Tender Morsels*, the absence of a male figure (a husband/father) is explained since the girls (Branza and Urdda) are born after the several sexual violence their mother (Liga) suffered as a girl. Liga is systematically raped by her father, who manages to secretly provoke her abortions with some herbs he buys from Annie Bywell, the town witch, until Liga understands the trick and manages to keep her first

⁹⁶ “a relation of contiguity and co-implication between subjective microcosm and the macrocosm” (my translation).

daughter, Branza. After her father's death (caused by Annie Bywell, who eventually acknowledges the violence she has been complicit to and manages to help the girl), Liga suffers a gang-rape by a group of town boys, by which she gets pregnant of Urdda, and after which she attempts suicide. The heavenly dimension is explained as a projection of Liga's "heart's desire" (Lanagan 2010: 251) in her attempt to desperately escape gender violence and sexual traumas. The plot of *Tender Morsels* develops between two different worlds: the real world of St Olafred, and a fictional copy of it generated by Liga's desire. Indeed, in attempting to kill herself and Branza after the gang-rape, Liga tries to jump off a cliff, but she and the baby are saved by a magical creature, a "moonish matter", a "moon-baby" (Lanagan 2010: 58),⁹⁷ who sends them to a heaven, the place of Liga's heart's desire. Thereby, Liga's intention becomes effective, since the world answers to her question, and matter stirs according to her will. This heaven is similar, in part, to Liga's previous reality, but it is a completely "safe place", as in Van Eecke's definition: an environment that is "accepting of and comforting for those who feel vulnerable because of previous traumatic experiences" (2021: 63). In this heaven, nothing and no one could harm Liga and her daughters, which explains the absence of male figures and ferocious animals (which are also absent in the Grimms' traditional tale). In fact, Liga's haven is the place opposed to reality where, in the novel, the revised plot of "Snow-White and Rose-Red" takes place.

The double constitution of the universe of *Tender Morsels* is particularly relevant since, via the retelling of the tale's space-time-matter, the apparently naïf simplicity of the fairy tale's setting is questioned, and the story is situated in a material-cultural frame where heteronormativity and gender violence are not hidden under the fairy layers, but are uncovered in their roughness. More specifically, in the place of Liga's heart's desire, fairyland might be understood as an archive of memories. Memory might be intended here, as from Karen Barad's quantic perspective, as a "material condition of the world", where the world is understood as the enfolded materialization of its memory (Barad 2017: 47-48). Therefore, the place of Liga's heart's desire can be understood as materially framed according to the memories of her

⁹⁷ The magical moon-baby overlaps with the beautiful child from the Grimm's tale – an "angel" protector of good children (Grimm 1987: 517) – who saves Snow-White and Rose-Red when they fall asleep in the forest near to the edge of a cliff ("[...] they saw a beautiful child in a white, glistening garment sitting near them", Grimm 1987: 517).

childhood and adolescence. However, this framing occurs for contrast to Liga's past experience: each cause of sexual traumatic memories is erased from the building of this parallel world.

The non-patriarchal setting of her haven allows Liga to live comfortably as it allows her daughters to grow up safely and free. As Davit Ramstrong thinks when he accidentally gets into Liga's place in bear form, Urdda and Branza are "happy, unbowed, unbeaten" girls, "[f]ree as the forest". They are completely different from the girl-children living in Davit's homeplace, who are instead "more clothed and fearful girl-children, because so many more dangers beset and surrounded them" (Lanagan 2010: 146-47).

However, even if Liga's heaven is designed to keep patriarchal traumas outside, hauntings from the real world manage to infiltrate there anyway. As well as memory is a "material condition of the world", so is the memory of trauma, which cannot be completely erased but comes back in the form of hauntings. In Liga's heaven, hauntings have a material form: they are characters from the real world from which Liga escaped.

As Barad argues in their analysis of post-atomic landtimescapes, haunting memories are all but immaterial: "These devastated landtimescapes are surely haunted, but not merely in the sense that memories of the dead, of past events, particularly violent ones, linger there. Hauntings are not immaterial. They are an ineliminable feature of existing material conditions" (Barad 2017: 107). Likewise, in the spacetime-mattering of *Tender Morsels*, ghosts from the real world materially haunt Liga's safe fairyland.

As already mentioned, Barad's notion of "spacetime-mattering" marks the inseparability of space, time, and matter, which continuously remake each other through the sedimentation of intra-actions (Barad 2017: 11). Spacetime-mattering is continuously reconfigured according to the interference of matter and phenomena, and material hauntings, as they emerge in *Tender Morsels*, are part of this process. They come from the real world in the form of material embodied interferences: two bears who eventually reveal to be actual men, and a dwarf, the short man named Collaby Dought. The bears and the dwarf invade fairyland and interfere with the serenity of the locals, threatening its heavenlike dimension. In particular, as part of the space-time-mattering, material hauntings interfere with the constitution of fairyland's time. As it will be further investigated, time is reconfigured because of the tight entanglement of each bit of spacetime-mattering "inside all others" (Barad 2017: 110). As understood by Barad, and

as already mentioned, entanglement implies that entities do not pre-exist their intra-relating (Barad 2007: ix). But entanglement is also a continuous, never-ending, dynamic process. Time and space, as well as matter and meaning “come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action” (Barad 2007: ix). Thereby, it is impossible “to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future” (Barad 2007: ix). Therefore, Liga’s heaven too cannot stay forever in its perfect heart’s-desire shape: like each bit of spacetime mattering, it is subjected to interference, remaking, and reconfiguration too.

The mean dwarf also appears in the Grimms’ fairy tale, disturbing the serenity of Snow-White and Rose-Red. Each time the girls meet him, they find him in some dangerous situation, by which they manage to rescue him. The dwarf is never grateful to the girls, but he always disappears into the woods with bags full of gems and gold. In *Tender Morsels*, the dwarf becomes Collaby Dought, a short man who asks the town witch (Annie Bywell), to send him to the place of his own heart’s desire. Nonetheless, because of Annie’s clumsiness, he accidentally ends up in Liga’s heaven. However, he discovers that he has the power of transforming the natural elements from this foreign place, such as rocks and flowers, in gems and treasures. Thus, he goes back to Liga’s place many times to fill up with treasures that he will share with Annie. In these occasions, he meets Branza and Urdda in similar situations to those described in the Grimms’ tale, being as mean and as disrespectful as the traditional character.

Because of some accident caused by Annie’s bad magicking and worsened by Dought’s frequent incursions, the “key-joint” of time and space between the real world and Liga’s heaven is more and more distorted, causing interferences between one world and the other. Davit’s and Teasel’s incursions as bear-boys (discussed in § 3.1) are a consequence of those interferences, and they also contribute to shake once more the equilibrium of fairyland, by bringing there sexual desire.

The nature of the dwarf’s and the bears’ incursions into Liga’s heaven resonate with ecofeminist hauntologies: as Elaine Gan, Anna L. Tsing, Heather Swanson, and Niels Bubandt argue, “Every landscape is haunted by past ways of life” (2017: 2). The authors point out that the human extractivist approach towards the environment leaves its traces even long after its effective action:

We see this clearly in the presence of plants whose animal seed-dispersers are no longer with us. Some plants have seeds so big that only big animals can carry them to new places to germinate. When these animals became extinct, their plants could continue without them, but they have been unable to disperse their seeds very well. Their distribution is curtailed; their population dwindles. This is an example of what we are calling haunting. (Gan et al. 2017: 2).

It can be argued that the landscapes of the Anthropocene, as well as Barad's post-atomic landtimescapes, are built on traumas as Liga's heaven is. Thereby, they both hauntologically embody long-term oppressions, which linger there in the form of ghosts from the past spacetime-matter of trauma. Indeed, hauntings "are lively indeterminacies of time-being, materially constitutive of matter itself" (Barad 2017: 113). Similarly, in the universe of *Tender Morsels*, "material" hauntings coming from another space-time-matter, embodied in the figures of the dwarf and the bears, shake fairyland's constitution every time they get into it, each time reconfiguring the running of time.

4.3.3 The time of the settlers and fairyland's stolen future

Since fairyland and reality are intertwined, when Annie Bywell, trying to reach Dought's heaven, makes the borders between the worlds to explode to open a breach, her action cannot but be entangled with the spacetime-mattering of the whole universe of the novel. Annie's action has consequences: the two worlds are so entangled that the explosion causes time to be shifted. While it decelerates in the real world, it accelerates in Liga's heaven, so that one year in the real world eventually comes to equal ten in fairyland.

When, later in the novel, Miss Dance – the powerful witch from Rockerly – is called to reorder the chaos of time, she says to Annie: "So you destroyed the key-joint [...]. The factor, the mechanism, the *piece* [...] that keeps the times aligned between here and a heaven" (Lanagan 2010: 307). The destruction of the "key-joint" is firstly caused by Annie's opening of the breach with poor magic abilities, and then it is worsened each time Dought goes from one world to another, and by his continuous exportations of objects from fairyland to reality. Worlds are entangled, and they have material influences onto each other.

As Barad argues, “Space, time, and matter are not simply ‘there’; rather, they are constituted (and iteratively reconstituted) through the intra-active performances of the world” (2011: 157). Therefore, space, time, and matter (as it is plain in the case of Liga’s heaven) are not given once for all, but they are sensible to phenomena, and to the characters’ intentions and actions.

Since Dought has the power of transforming natural elements from fairyland into precious materials, he and Annie suddenly get rich thanks to his incursions. The axes of gender oppression and of colonial and environmental exploitation emerge here as deeply intertwined. On one side, as Lydia Kokkola (2012) points out, Dought’s intrusions into Liga’s world are shaped with the sexual violence of patriarchy, and depicted as a male violation of Liga’s “feminine” world – that same “feminine” world Liga created in order to survive patriarchal traumas. On the other side, Dought and Annie act as settlers, exploiting the resources of the “new world” for their own profit, without worrying for the consequences for fairyland’s locals.

In their 2017 essay “No Small Matter”, Barad explores the entanglement between different worlds and the consequences of land exploitation for atomic experiments from the perspective of a decolonial reading of quantum physics. The author investigates the long-term collateral effects to which exploited lands for atomic experiments undergo. They remark in particular the disorder of time caused by atomic explosions. For instance, when clocks froze at 8.15 – the time of Hiroshima atomic bombing – the quantum entanglement of macro and micro froze too, shattered, tore time in “dis/connected” pieces (Barad 2017: 105). The effects of this explosion are not limited to immediacy, as it happens in the case of Annie’s witchcraft. In nuclear (colonised) landscapes, “The temporality of radiation exposure is not one of immediacy; rather [...] [r]adioactivity inhabits time-beings and resynchronizes and reconfigures temporalities/spacetimematterings”; it “frays time’s coherence”, making it “unstable, continually leaking away from itself” (Barad 2017: 109). Similarly, even if Annie’s breach does not seem to have immediate effects, it ends up by reconfiguring fairyland’s time on the long run. Thereby, fairyland’s time is dilated. Atomic landtimescapes are recalled by Annie’s and Dought’s incursions into fairyland and the exploitation of its resources since the reason moving them is the same: profit, power. Besides, Annie’s reaching of the unexploited fairyland occurs via an explosion which opens

a hole in the walls between reality and fairyland. Annie's breach evokes atomic explosions: it is the violent act which purviews fairyland as an empty space to be exploited. As Barad argues, emptiness is "a much-valued colonialist apparatus" (2017: 113). What is considered as "the void" by the settler mindset is not actually empty. Nonetheless, the notion of emptiness has been used as "a well-worn tool [...] in the service of colonialism, racism, capitalism, militarism, imperialism, nationalism, and scientism" (Barad 2017: 113). It is with a similar approach that Annie and Dought enter a space that they consider "empty", waiting to be filled with their desire for profit.

The question of time reconfiguration in the colonised land is recalled also by Gan, Tsing, Swanson and Bubandt (2017). The authors recall Deborah Bird Rose's argument concerning settler colonialism in Australia: according to the anthropologist, "white Australian settlers brought with them a particular, and peculiar, kind of time" (Gan et al. 2017: 7). This time was set on the future of conquer: "The settlers looked straight ahead as they destroyed native peoples and ecologies. The terrain carved out by this *future* is suffused with bad death ghosts" (Gan et al. 2017: 7). In *Tender Morsels* too, the nature of time is changed by the settlers' interference: no future is allowed to fairyland's locals (Liga, Branza and Urdda) if their future is replaced with the horizon of the conquerors (Dought and Annie). Eventually, their interference will cause the end of Liga's world. In fact, the intra-action of spacetime-mattering(s) provoked by Dought's movements triggers the curiosity of Urdda. Fascinated by the weird beings hanging around in her usually quite fairyland (the dwarf and the bears), Urdda fantasises about the mysterious world they would come from. Eventually, following the traces left by Teasel-bear, she enters the cave by which he got into Liga's world, and manages to walk beyond its borders.

Urdda's relocation stirs again the balance of fairyland. For instance, her absence brings negative emotions to Liga's heaven. Emotions by which Liga's place was normally protected enter now its domain, and Branza is hit by sadness and nostalgia, grieving for the loss of her sister for ten years. Indeed, because of the time shifting, the one year Urdda spends in the real world until she manages to call Branza and Liga back equals to ten years in fairyland. When the three are reunited, Urdda has missed one year without them, while to Branza and Liga ten years have passed. This missing time – an empty hole in the characters' lives – has been stolen to them by the settlers, under the complicity of patriarchal and colonial oppression.

Furthermore, Urdda's relocation in the real world is the reason of Branza's and Liga's moving, which causes the end of the whole fairyland. It is Urdda the one who asks for Miss Dance's help to get her mother and sister back to reality. When Liga leaves the place which is a projection of her heart's desire, that place disappears. The causality triggered by Annie's opening of the breach to fairyland is similar to Barad's discussion of atomic explosions. The exploited world is led first to a reconfiguration of time, and then to a total collapse.

4.3.4 Urdda's "efficacy of intentions": the magical synchronicity of matter and desire

The definition of magic as "efficacy of intentions" is enacted by the character of Urdda. Her intentions and their encounter with the novel's nature produces a material synchronicity twice. The first time, Urdda is moved by the fascination triggered by fairyland's hauntings (Dought and the Bears). As Kokkola (2012) points out, Dought's apparitions – and the otherworld possibilities he embodies – trigger Urdda's longing for a whole world of experiences and knowledge that she is missing in Liga's heaven. Therefore, by the force of her desire, Urdda manages to breach the borders of reality:

When a girl of fourteen wants a thing – when she has wanted it all her conscious life; when she senses it near and bends all her hope, and all her will, and all her power to it – sometimes, *sometimes*, her self and her desires will be of such material that worlds will move for her. Or parts of worlds, their skins particularly, will soften to her pressure, and break in a thousand small and undramatic ways, so that she may reach through, so that what seemed a wall reveals itself to be only the thought of a wall, or a wall constructed of bricks of smoke, mortared with mist. There is a smell to such workings, and Urdda smelled it here and now at the rim of the bear-scent, as if someone had held a flaming brand near that bear-fur so that it began to singe and smoke and reek. (Lanagan 2010: 197-98, original emphasis)

To this end, Urdda's intention blurs the borders between reality and fairyland, allowing her to reach the real world, as well as, many years before, Liga did with the help of the moonish creature.

Since Urdda's desire is triggered by the material hauntings from reality, ghosts can be understood as "weeds that whisper tales of the many past and yet-to-comes that surround us" (Gan et al. 2017: 6). These ghosts enhance in Urdda what Consigliere describes as "the scent of another world outside the walls, of a different state of time, of the pasts and the futures skirted and lost" (Consigliere 2024: vi). Hauntings trigger Urdda's nostalgic desire for another world whose existence she feels, "a state of the world that we have never seen, but that we still can sense" (Consigliere 2024: 39).

As it is to Liga, Urdda's "heart's desire" is the consequence of her dissatisfaction for the world where she lives. Indeed, Liga's heaven is a fake world. As Liga herself realises, she and her daughters are "the only true people in this world" (Lanagan 2010: 175-176). Therefore, as Miss Dance tells Liga later, "Urdda did the natural thing and returned to life in search of her true future" (328) – which Branza did not (see § 3.3.1). Even though it is a heavenly place, Liga's fairyland is also a prison to her daughters. There, they have not enough space to let their own heart's desires raise, and to self-determine their own lives. By choosing to cross into the other world, Urdda fights for the chance to self-determine her faith, as a real person, as well as – in the uncomfortable context of patriarchal reality – a woman. Her nostalgic longing is "[a place] where a crucial struggle occurs", "remembrance of happiness", as the nostalgia for a better world is understood by Consigliere (2024: 39).

Once in the real world, Urdda discovers that she has magical powers. Her affirmation as both a witch and a woman who has the right to exist echoes again ecofeminist hauntologies. Whereas Liga had to choose for exile in order to survive, Urdda reclaims her right to exist in the real world as a feminised body. The words expressed by Gan, Tsing, Swanson, and Bubandt on mass extinction and extinct faunas and floras which keep on haunting the present recall Liga's disappearance from the real world as a consequence of the traumas she suffered: "How much longer will we agree to step aside in silence as masters of the universe turn us into property, write our contracts, rape our bodies, sell our histories? How much longer will you and I choose extinction?" (Gan et al. 2017: 4). Extinction, though, is not a choice for Liga: her exile in the "safe space" of fairyland is the only way to survive traumas. Urdda, though, is the one who decides not "to step aside in silence", not to remain silent in the ghostly dimension of fairyland, but rather to fight for existence in the real world, against the oppression she would be experiencing there as a young woman.

It is only in the real world – even if it is full of obstacles – that Urdda can develop her personal heart’s desire and emancipate from the patriarchal gender oppression, stereotypes, and violence her mother had to endure. Contrarily to the happy ending of the traditional tale, Urdda chooses to attend a witchcraft apprentice with Miss Dance to train her magic abilities.

If the witch figure has been persecuted as a threat to patriarchy and other binary structures of power (see § Chapter 2), and even if in popular imagination witches are often shaped by misogyny and depicted as “cruel, exotic, devious, and evil figures” (Zipes 2013: 77), *Tender Morsels* follows the feminist reappropriation of the witch figure. In the novel, a witch is represented as she who materialises the efficacy of her desires, melting and magicking the borders between matter and thought.

In Lanagan’s novel, the re-determination of the witch figure pairs the vindication of men’s violence against women. Urdda’s magic allows her to vindicate the gang-rape her mother suffered when she was young at the hand of some boys from St Olafred, by which Urdda was born. After her mother told her the story of how she was conceived, Urdda accidentally transforms her anger in a magical act of retaliatory violence, which is the second case where the efficacy of her intentions occurs as magical synchronicity. Urdda’s “efficacy of intentions” also works in the terms of the quantum principle of indeterminacy: nature answers to Urdda’s questions, producing a synchronicity between the microcosm of her intentions and the macrocosm of matter. The same boys, now adults, who raped Liga long before, are sexually assaulted by some idols in which Urdda condenses – without knowing – her rage.

When a girl of fifteen, hovering on the point of entering womanhood, wants a thing, there is only so much she can do, and for most, *most* such girls, the wanting itself – even with all the hope and will and power they can muster – will not be sufficient to gain them that thing.

But Urdda was not most girls, and there lurked within her – pressed tight and in-crinkled as closed flower bud, mysterious as a seed or egg, invisible as an unborn in the mound of its mother – abilities most girls do not have. [...] Strong feelings were required to arouse them, and many varied and well-honed skills to manipulate them. Few stronger feelings exist than those Urdda had undergone that day on behalf of her mother, and these emotions had brought the potentialities to a state of alertness as she wept in Liga’s lap. (Lanagan 2010: 440, original emphasis)

Though Urdda is initially unaware of the first episodes of her magic, she eventually understands, thanks to the support of the women who surround her, that she needs to train her abilities to become a wiser witch. Eventually, unlike her sister, who follows the path of the Grimms' fairy tale by marrying the man transmogrified in bear, Urdda self-determines her faith as it fits her witchy character. Magic and witchcraft become tools for re-enchanting her possibility of existing as a woman beyond the patriarchal structures of oppression, heterosexual marriage and reproduction.

Magic reconfirms as the primary code for representing a cosmos where it is still possible to transform reality (Balicco 2023: 44). For those who are at risk of losing their presence to the world (Balicco 2023: 244), such as women oppressed by patriarchal structures, magic as "efficacy of intentions" allows to evade the condition of oppression and to generate new worlds. If matter answers to the question it is asked, the stories of Urdda's and Liga's efficacy of intentions suggest that a future horizon opens up for the oppressed subjectivities beyond the hauntings of traumas.

Conclusions

In all the texts discussed in the present chapter, the topic of the reconfiguration of space-time-mattering is represented from different angles.

In "Wolf-Alice" (1979) by Angela Carter, it is represented as part of the context of the difference feminism featuring the period and place from which Carter was writing (the 1970s UK). Wolf-Alice is a transbiological body, but she is also a woman. Therefore, the way she reconfigures her coordinates of space, time, and matter, is overall a deconstruction of the patriarchal law. Time, as it is semiotic-materially understood by Wolf-Alice, follows the rhythm of her menstruating body: it is not linear, as in the patriarchal view of progress, but circular. Through her neither wolf, neither human body, she defies the patriarchal laws of gender as well as the anthropocentric idea of species. By sitting in liminality, she threatens the social order with her ecofeminist, postmodern proposal of an identity free from binaries and social conventions. The potential of Wolf-Alice's freedom, a wolf-girl who (above being rescued by a wolf-pack) raises herself alone, does not reside in solitude, but in the alliance

with another strange kind: the Duke, the cannibal werewolf who shares her marginalisation from the human community. Their oddkin celebrates liminality.

In Byatt's "A Stone Woman" (2003), Ines's transmogrification into stone brings up the question of defining what is bios and what is geos. The anthropocentric perspective on stones, considering them as dead objects, is reversed by Ines's metamorphosis, which seals the possibility of enacting an agency also for the inorganic. By means of her transmogrification, Ines too reconfigures space-time-mattering. Deep geological time is more adequate to her stone body, so that organic matter begins to become transparent, as her human companion Thorsteinn, whom she can barely see by the end of the story. What she can now see, on the other hand, is the movement of mountains, stones, rocks: of the Icelandic landscape – which reminds the reader that stones are not actually immobile, but they look so only from the ephemeral perspective of human existence, which cannot understand geological deep time. Ines's reconfiguration of spacetime-mattering is about an onto-epistemological shift of perspective, which shows once again the unthinkability of the anthropocentric perspective, upon which the extractionist petrosexoracial order is based.

The stories of Urdda and Liga, and the material efficacy of their heart's desires remark how magical bodies can change the laws of a given reality, penetrating its borders and falls to give light to new horizons.

The agency of matter promoted by the magical conception of the world, moving from the witch figure to fairy tales to transbiological fiction offers the ground to "meet the universe halfway". It allows to get out of both social constructivism and realism (Barad 1996), and to accept that the process of knowing the world happens between what we enact and what matter does. In this halfway – which is the place of transmogrification, metamorphosis, and liminality – takes place the possibility to grow onto-epistemologies of care, able to account for a world in need of multispecies alliances to face the crisis of the present order.

As Gloria Anzaldúa argues, magical thinking "reads what happens in the external world in terms of my personal intentions and interests" (2015: 4-5). Therefore, it is an instrument for rethinking, re-enchanting, and transforming the world, reconfiguring its spacetime-mattering according to what Lanagan would call a "heart's desire". The fairy tale's magical-agential materialism emerges from the conception of magic as "efficacy of intentions", showing the

potential of the fairy-tale imaginary in facing the disenchantment promoted by the petrosexoracial order.

Such reconfiguration of spacetime matters uncover the retelling of the fairy-tale archive: not only the bodies are re-signified according to the feminist-retelling tradition, but this embodied reconfiguration carries forward the reconfiguration of the whole universe. The power of the reappropriated body has material effects on the whole world, which is reorganised according to the positioning of the situated body. Re-enchanted bodies re-imagine their position in the story, but also the whole universe of the story, regaining not only their agential voice – silenced by the repressive archival forces – but also the agential voice of the fairy-tale universe. Things get re-enchanted and the non-human can speak again: silenced genealogies find their voice back in the ecotransfeminist tale-telling.

Conclusions

Re-Enchanting the World with Fairy-Tale Magical Agencies

Moving from the close readings of the Anglo-European fairy-tale retellings by Angela Carter, Tanith Lee, Antonia Susan Byatt, Margo Lanagan, Katherine Vaz, and Sharon Blackie, I have argued how fairy tales can provide re-enchanting narratives to the contemporary disenchanted order of the petrosexoracial capitalism, with particular regard to the relationship between the human and the non-human which the fairy-tale animist dimension endows. Through the proposed ecotransfeminist reading of such contemporary narratives, I have argued that fairy-tale magical-material agencies offer, within the context of the Anglo-European feminist fairy tale, an insight to the (ecotransfeminist) need for worlding through multispecies generative alliances. The ecotransfeminist approach seems to be crucial nowadays in the Euro-Western context where traditional dualistic epistemologies have become “unthinkable” (Haraway 2016a: 30), and the petrosexoracial regime determines a widespread condition of unlivability and dysphoria mundi. In such a context, the magical agency of matter represented by the European fairy-tale archive and endowed with a new voice by contemporary retellings suggests new horizons of multispecies care which may answer to the need for re-enchanting the social, cultural, and political dimension of contemporaneity.

The discussions presented along the four chapters of this dissertation can be kept together through three main theoretical lines, which include the following arguments:

- (1) Contemporary feminist Anglo-European fairy tales often recover, along with the voices and agency of women silenced by the patriarchal fairy-tale archive, also non-human and material voices and agencies. To this end, such narratives offer themselves to an ecotransfeminist reading, which aims at recovering the lacks in feminist fairy-tale

studies around the reading of fairy-tale queer, non-human, transbiological, and material voices.

- (2) In such a way, contemporary (ecotrans)feminist Anglo-European fairy-tale retellings fit within the Euro-Western post-human, new-materialist, and ecofeminist discourse(s). They anticipate, dialogue, and enter in relation with such theoretical backgrounds with the shared aim of defying Euro-Western motifs which are unsustainable on a global as well as on a local scale, and in the light of the current planet “trouble”.
- (3) The proposed ecotransfeminist reading enlightens the re-enchanting potential of the genre within the framework of the contemporary unthinkability of the Euro-Western socio-cultural and political discourse, which is enmeshed with heteropatriarchal, speciesist, and anthropocentric norms.

(1) *The ecotransfeminist reading: recovering non-human agencies along with female voices.* Along the three analytical chapters, I have argued that it is possible to apply an ecotransfeminist reading to the contemporary Anglo-European feminist fairy-tale, putting feminist criticism in dialogue with ecocriticism and queer studies. As investigated, most of the discussed tales are not produced within an ecotransfeminist context. However, they present specific ecotransfeminist features, primarily because of their recovering of fairy-tale transbiological features. Indeed, while recovering female silenced voices, the discussed narratives also recover the silenced voices of the non-human. The characters’ experience of non-human life, through transmogrification or through the alliance with non-human companions, offers tools for questioning gender roles as they are defined by the patriarchal culture, which is deeply rooted into the separation between the human and the non-human. To this extent, I have worked on the representation and entwinement of dissident bodies (female, non-human, and material ones) through three main aspects, which appears to be recurrent in the genre: 1) the representation of transbiological, transmogrifying, shapeshifting bodies in-between the human and the non-human, with particular regard to female bodies or to bodies which intend to defy patriarchal gender norms; 2) the representation of the trans-species alliance between human and non-human characters within a frame that recalls the witch’s sabbath; 3) the reconfiguration of spacetime mattering enacted by the magical fairy-tale body

as part of a wider project for the deconstruction and re-enchantment of the present oppressive order.

(2) *Contemporary feminist Anglo-European fairy tales as a prolific post-human discourse.*

Throughout this research and through the reading of the motifs mentioned above, I have also argued that contemporary Anglo-European fairy tales precede and parallel the feminist post-human, new-materialist, compostist, and ecofeminist discourses. Thereby, they constitute a fertile terrain for the production of speculative imaginaries which do not emerge only in the theory but also via the pragmatical representations endowed by such narratives. In the contemporary Anglo-European fairy tales discussed along this dissertation, human bodies are blurred with the other-than-human shape, as it is typical of the European fairy-tale archive before that this blurring became a reason of suspicion and marginalisation as it occurs within the modern patriarchal fairy-tale archive, influenced by (and influencing) the witch-hunting attitude of European modernity. The European fairy tale has always talked about the post-human condition as an undeniable side of our experience as humans on this planet. Contemporary feminist voices recover this feature and put it in dialogue with contemporary post-humanist, compostist, ecofeminist, and new materialist feminist discourses. In this regard, the generation of imaginaries has always been a crucial end to the fairy-tale genre, either for repressive or for emancipatory purposes. According to the reading proposed in the present dissertation – which, of course, does not pretend to be the ultimate – such stories offer to an emancipatory reading for the dissident bodies contradicting the heteropatriarchal, anthropocentric, and speciesist Euro-Western regime into which such very tales are reframed.

(3) *Fairy tales as re-enchanting narratives.* Whereas one of the main objectives of my research was to propose an ecotransfeminist reading of magical material agencies as they are represented in the contemporary Anglo-European fairy-tale discourse, this reading not only has proved to be appropriate, but it also proves such tales to have a relevant role in the construction of a contemporary re-enchanting horizon of ecotransfeminist futurity. The ecotransfeminist ethics of care emerging from the tales' dissident transbiological bodies and their odd multispecies alliances remediates the fictional horizon of the discussed stories, uncovering the potential of subverting a given order surfacing such liminal alliances. I deem

that my argument proves that an ecotransfeminist reading of contemporary Anglo-European fairy-tale retellings may unearth the re-enchanting potential of such narratives toward the definition of a queer, feminist, and multispecies horizon of care. To this extent, in the discussed texts, Little Red Riding Hood is no longer struggling with the wolf: the wolf is her companion, whether it is not another version of herself. Beauty does not transform the Beast into a beautiful prince, but she embraces the monstrosity of the non-human, choosing to inhabit the liminal condition which is typical of the witch's sabbath. Women and non-human critters ally with each other to defy the common oppressor, which takes the shape of the anthropocentric force of heteropatriarchal speciesism. Their multispecies sabbath is reappropriated and re-enchanted as an alternative to the disenchantment of contemporaneity. The Little Mermaid does not long for the human condition anymore; it is the human protagonist indeed to long for a watery other-than-human condition which might open unpredicted spaces of possibility to fight the "unlivability of modern life" (Grebowicz 2017: 16). A queer horizon of multispecies, odd genealogies appears within the urge of re-enchantment demanded by a Western colonial contemporaneity which uses disenchantment as a weapon to sterilize the collective imaginary and imagination. Odd bodies and odd kins shake the foundation of this oppressive order in which we live. The carbon imaginary (Povinelli 2016: 37) is replaced by images of sympoietic possibilities. The magical space of the sabbath is regained as a place wherein to ground generative alliances which challenge the present oppressive order. Space, time, and matter are reconfigured according to the odd heart's desires of these magical bodies, and the world begins to fit and feed its critters what they ask for, becoming a fluid and intra-active *mattering* rather than a given status quo.

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the support of many other human and earth beings.

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors for their guidance along the writing process, for their suggestions and the dialogue we had, that really helped me improving my work and growing as a researcher.

Secondly, I am deeply grateful to my friends, to my *ame*, to my partner, to my flatmates, and to my family for their constant support along the three years of my PhD. Thank you for listening to my rants and joys, for coming with me to the library, for cooking me dinner, for thinking-with me, and for worlding a re-enchanted reality together each day.

I would also like to thank my colleagues, who have been great allies during such years: sharing the path with them has helped me navigating the often-solitary waters of the PhD.

Eventually, I am thankful to the human and non-human others who crossed my path along these years: rivers, woods, cities, mountains, the sea, animals, elves, witches, and all the other odd kins.

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Sitography

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