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“HALF OUT, HALF IN”: POSTHUMAN ONTOLOGIES IN MONIQUE ROFFEY’S *THE WHITE WOMAN ON THE GREEN BICYCLE*

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ABSTRACT

Monique Roffey’s *The White Woman on the Green Bicycle* explores the porous boundaries between human and nonhuman through the protagonist’s relationship with her surroundings. Set in the Caribbean island of Trinidad, the novel outlines the processes of unlearning that the white female protagonist undergoes in order to explore the blurring boundaries between human and nonhuman. This paper focuses on the various ways in which the novel systematically dismantles the binaries of civilisation/primitiveness, nature/culture and human/nonhuman, as its protagonist comes into contact with various alternative ontologies. The paper also endeavours to delineate the progression of the protagonist towards a posthuman existence, and the role of her surroundings in bringing about the evolution.

Keywords: postcolonial, posthuman, Caribbean literature, alternative ontologies

In the age of information, a quick google search of the Caribbean yields a large number of tourism websites, in which the home pages display a bunch of stock photographs: serene sunsets, emerald hills, sparkling seas and carnival costumes. Marketing the “true Caribbean” experience, these websites exhort tourists to experience life in the Antilles by availing “a unique opportunity to take part in Carnival, goat racing, calypso dancing and wildlife adventure,” (“Trinidad and Tobago”). Laden with the attractions of a Caribbean-themed amusement park, the “The official tourism website of the Caribbean” markets a timeless, primitive and picturesque version of the Antilles— a land of idyllic beauty, characterized by endless oceans and colourful landscapes, the perfect stage for the white man to act out his medieval fantasies of conquest, his religious pipe dream of conversion, and his Renaissance zeal to reform. This fantasy of ‘authentic’ indigeneity not only caters to the cruise ship tourists, but also the Western humanist scholar.

The Antilles from the tourist brochures recreates a carnivalesque rendition of what Johannes Fabian describes as a Lévi-Straussian vision of the scene of anthropology: “For Lévi-Strauss the ethnographer is first and foremost a viewer (and perhaps voyeur). ... It invokes the ‘naturalist’ watching an experiment. It also calls for a native society that would, ideally at least, hold still like a *tableau vivant*” (67). Within the almost-naturalized categories of the human and nonhuman that characterize liberal humanist ideologies, indigenous persons of colour have recently been included within the ambit of the former, within which their position remains liminal at best. The dualist constructions of nature and culture that work to uphold Eurocentric knowledge also treat the colonized subject as an object of study rather than a subject, and their engagements with the nonhuman as mystical, irrational, superstitious and occult.

Functioning through several processes of ontological purification liberal humanism celebrates 'modern' Western science and technology, privileging the human–nonhuman assemblages ratified by Eurocentric episteme over indigenous associations with their nonhuman surroundings. This paper adopts the relational ontological approaches adopted by the posthuman school of thought in the context of Monique Roffey's *The White Woman on the Green Bicycle* (2009), where the boundaries between the rational self and the primitive other are dissolved through the relations between the 'civilized' human protagonists¹ and the nonhuman nature. Posthumanism², which considers "the human and nonhuman as mutually constituted in and through social relations," (Sundberg 321) serves as the perfect tool to examine the parallels of womanhood and nature in the two novels, which are set in eras that are more than a century apart, while illustrating the blurring boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, as well as nature and culture.

The depiction of nature and landscape in Caribbean literature is never a monolithic portrayal: even though nature is a passive backdrop to human action for the white colonizer, in Roffey's novel, nature emerges as an agentic force, a political actor that participates in the coproduction of socio-political collectives. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant aptly notes:

The relationship with the land, one that is even more threatened because the community is alienated from the land, becomes so fundamental in this discourse that landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character. Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history. Landscape is a character in this process. (168)

Rather than shying away from the liminal positions of the human and the nonhuman within the Caribbean landscape, Roffey's novel pursues it. Instead of being silent about what Walter Mignolo terms as the 'loci of enunciation' (25), the work acknowledges that bodies of thought are situated within power relations vis-à-vis their location of origin. The novel carefully traces the arrival of its White European female protagonist at the Antilles, her engagements with its nonhuman components, and finally her assimilation within the fluid spaces of the human/posthuman once she is dissociated from the Eurocentric and colonial imaginaries that constitute the European selves as "modern" and "civilized" "human", as opposed to non-european/nonhuman ontologies which are perceived as "primitive", "mystical" and "subhuman".

In the beginning, Monique Roffey's novel portrays a protagonist who is markedly ambivalent in her attitude towards the Caribbean. In the chapter titled "Arrival", Roffey describes the arrival of Sabine Harwood at Port of Spain, filled with misgivings about life in the Antilles:

"The Cavina shifted out into a long channel marked with buoys. George became excited, his eyes glittering, his nose twitching with the sea smells. Port of Spain harbour glimmered into view. The hills of the northern range encircled the harbour, immense, draped in cloud-shadow and what looked like blue-green velvet – these mountains once part of the mighty Andes chain. George gasped in open admiration. *Bitch, muse, hypocrite, friend* – I knew not what to call Trinidad." (Roffey 148, original emphasis)

The rifts in the border between humans and nonhumans in the text begin to take shape when the human protagonist begins to discern a woman in the hills: a woman "half sculpted from the sticky oil-clogged bedrock" (61), whom she often views as a sexual competitor. Unable to comprehend the attraction felt by her husband towards a life in the Caribbean, Sabine often accuses the "green woman" of seducing her husband. Through Sabine's sexual jealousy directed at her nonhuman rival, there is an overturning of what Mel Chen terms the "animacy hierarchy" (13): which ascribes a descending order of value to various life forms, within

¹ The novels also contain exquisite depictions of white male characters and black female characters who may be described as posthuman, but the paper does not focus on those interactions: the paper only refers to sections that refer to the white female protagonist.

² The works which are classified under the common label of "posthumanism" are in no way homogenous. For more definitions of the 'posthuman', see "Introducing Post- and Transhumanism" by Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (Ranisch, Robert, and Stefan Lorenz. Sorgner, editors. *Post- and Transhumanism: an Introduction*. Peter Lang Edition, 2014).

which human life holds the supreme position, followed by animal life, plant life and nonliving matter. Sabine's insecurities often find outlets in the conversations she has with the "green woman", such as the one quoted below:

You, Sabine addressed the hill. All you do is watch. That's all you've ever done. Sit back and observe the disaster going on.

It's my privilege.

[...]

All I know is you, you haven't changed.

No, I don't change.

I've changed. I hardly recognize my face in the mirror. Another version of myself, of that woman who rode around so carefree on her bicycle. I thought loving George would be enough. But he loves you.

They all love me.

Yes. But you show no concern.

You're free to go. *Go*.

You know I won't, so long as he's here." (61-62, original emphasis)

Sabine's relationship with the "green woman" gradually evolves into a close friendship, as she vacillates between a range of emotions for the Trinidadian landscape, and finally comes to seek solace and comfort amidst the nonhuman entities that surround her: the trees, flowers, animals and her pet dog. Her attachment-avoidant relationship with the "green woman" also expresses her insecurities in the face of the untroubled timelessness of the nonhuman world that surrounds her, facilitating a hyperbolic awareness of her own human mortality. What follows is a series of anthropomorphising, and various iterations of its reverse technique, which Gigi Adair terms as "thingomorphising" (179). After decades of her life in the Antilles, Sabine no longer thinks of herself in human terms: "I had been smuggled into the island, just like one of those great Samaan trees" says she, "A seedling on arrival, a sprig. I had taken root, grown into the earth of the island" (244). By the end of the novel, Sabine Harwood seems to be located at the threshold of the human and nonhuman: replete with qualities that mark her as a member of a posthuman species, beyond the binaries dictated by the Western discourses of liberal humanism.

Through Sabine's relationship with the green woman, the text also presents an alternative secularity, which may be described as a form of "posthuman queering" (Adair 179) that operates beyond the normative intra-species intimacies. The erotic aspect of Sabine's relationship with the "green woman" is quite tangible in the passages where she describes the contours of her physique in great detail. Her observations regarding her surroundings are often laced with sexual undertones, as she anthropomorphises the landscape through a lens of desirability:

I watched the green mountains all around. Voluptuous, the undulating hills of a woman. I saw her everywhere, this green woman. Her hips, her breasts, her enticing curves. Shoulders, belly. She encircled us. She laughed at us when it rained, shaking her hair. Birds stopped their chatter. The roar was deafening. (194)

The sexual attraction between a human and a landscape transgresses several animacy categories, which becomes one of the focal points of the novel. Jasbir Puar suggests that a politics of assemblage or agencement: "assemblages do not privilege bodies as human, nor as residing within a human animal/nonhuman animal binary. Along with a de-exceptionalizing of human bodies, multiple forms of matter can be bodies — bodies of water, cities, institutions, and soon. Matter is an actor" (57). Puar's notion of the assemblage may be applied to describe Sabine's posthuman sexuality, which also suggests a revision of the Western idea of the "body", which requires and reproduces human exceptionalism and a humanist subject.

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour describes how the idea of the modern in Western thought brings about the distinction between nature and culture, which is also foundational in dividing 'us' from 'them', that is, the 'moderns' from the 'primitives'. According to Latour, 'We' moderns establish our differences with 'them' on the premise that 'we' see ourselves as capable of distinguishing between nature and culture, and science and society, while 'they' remain submerged in nature (99). The interactions between the human and the nonhuman in Monique Roffey's text also subtly undermines the presumed differences between the indigenous ontologies and Western technological sophistication, to a point where the Western hierarchy within the nature-culture binary requires reconsideration. These encounters also challenge the fantasy of a 'pure' and primitive landscapes of the Caribbean, which do not merely serve as beautiful backdrops to human drama.

One example of this is provided by a comparison between the conversations that Sabine Harwood has with the "green woman" after her arrival in Trinidad, as well as the traditional Western mode of communication through letter-writing, that she brings with her from Europe. Ever since her arrival at the Winderflet village, Sabine begins to have meaningful conversations with the undulating green hills that surround her, even though the 'green woman' does not participate in the conversation through human modes. Thus, before an earthquake hits the village, Sabine accurately predicts the catastrophe: "The green woman, she's restless. She's going to roll over", she tells her husband, days before a major earthquake. The communication between the 'green woman' and Sabine is only half-decipherable to the reader, although it is an organic aspect of Sabine's life since her arrival to Trinidad: in spite of her resistance to the Caribbean way of life, the "green woman" subsumes the semantics of the "civilized" West within the semiotics of the "primitive" indigene, blurring the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Furthermore, through such conversations, the power of communication is shown to be not — or not only — products of human agency or entirely within human control, throwing into doubt a key marker of the human.

During her stay in Trinidad, Sabine also gets into the habit of writing frequent letters to the Trinidadian politician Eric Williams, even though none of them are ever sent. One such letter to Eric Williams reads as follows:

Who do you love? Your little girl? Your dead wife, the second one, not the ones alive? That half-Chinese woman who died so suddenly, so young? She coughed up blood and was gone in days. Who do you think of at night, last thing before you sleep? Who do you care about? Who is your guide? Who consoles you, Mr Williams? I'm anxious to understand my fate. I'm anxious because something is happening to my family. My husband has changed, and you know what? I'm changing, too, leaving myself behind. It's a strange and uncanny metamorphosis. I cannot fathom what manner of moth or butterfly I'll become. A beauty or a horror? How much longer will I survive? (233)

Vague and rambling, difficult to decipher, and impossible to contextualize, Sabine's letters raise doubts about the intra-species communication between humans through the Western cultural practice of writing letters. In a landscape marked by oral cultures, the efficacy of the written language is questioned when it is compared to the clear and unambiguous conversations that Sabine has with the "green woman".

At its conclusion, *The White Woman on the Green Bicycle* ultimately comes across as a posthuman narrative that, in the words of Adair, " offers an alternative ontology which not only defies the categories of anthropology, but which also demands new forms of ethical relationality" (182). This new form of ethical rationality that recognizes a liminal zone of being beyond the clearly definable ontologies and identities finds perfect expression in this novel, which successfully dismantles the nature-culture binary. Roffey's work thus becomes an important text in bridging the gap between the Western ideals of the human and the nonhuman other through a detailed representation of nonhuman ontologies.

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