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# Tales of Becoming: Borders and Posthuman Anxieties in Daisy Johnson's "Starver" (2016)

## ≈ Abstract

This article aims at examining Daisy Johnson's collection of short stories *Fen* (2016) and, most particularly, its opening piece "Starver", through the lens of posthuman feminism by arguing that Johnson's collection puts forward a relational ontology which refuses to consider human subjectivity as exclusively restricted to the confines of human bodies by blurring traditional boundaries as constitutive of oppositions such as nature/culture, human/non-human, male/female, which have traditionally articulated anthropocentric worldviews. Johnson's focus on the English Fenlands as a borderline, liminal topology mirrors contemporary preoccupations with the porosity and instability of allegedly firm borders and, by extension, of identity. Johnson's collection ultimately interrogates the relationship between individuals and their environment, radically distressed by human intervention and capitalist consumerism, thus heading to the "sixth extinction" of the Anthropocene.

Keywords:

Daisy Johnson; posthuman feminism; Fen; short story; Anthropocene

## ≈ Resumen

La finalidad de este artículo es explorar la colección de relatos *Fen* (2016) de la autora británica Daisy Johnson, prestando especial atención al relato que abre la colección, "Starver". El artículo se apoya en las premisas del feminismo posthumanista para argumentar que la colección de Johnson propone una ontología relacional, conforme a la cual no resulta posible continuar definiendo la subjetividad humana en términos exclusivos de lo humano. Para tal fin, Johnson desdibuja las fronteras tradicionales que han constituido oposiciones binarias en la epistemología antropocéntrica, tales como naturaleza/cultura, humano/no humano, masculino/femenino. El hecho de que la colección de Johnson se sitúe en las denominadas "Fenlands" del Reino Unido como topología liminal encuentra un correlato con la preocupación contemporánea relativa a la porosidad y fluidez del concepto de frontera y, por extensión, de la identidad. En último término, la colección de Johnson cuestiona la relación entre el individuo y su entorno, que se ve radicalmente alterado por la excesiva intervención humana sobre el mismo, dirigiéndose así de modo inevitable hacia la "sexta extinción" del Antropoceno.

Palabras clave:

Daisy Johnson; feminismo posthumano; Fen; relato; Antropoceno

Contemporary discussions of limits, borders and demarcations extend to reflections on the nature of human subjects and their relationships to the world, to non-human animals and to machines and artefacts. These explorations eventually lead to a questioning of the dominant paradigm of natural law by posing the question of whether “human” as a category still refers to a Kantian community of reasonable beings and the “human figure as the constitutive [...] stuff of history and the social” (Wolfe 2003, x-xi). Clear-cut boundaries between the given and the constructed, human and non-human animals, nature and culture are currently being questioned in favour of “a non-dualistic understanding of nature–culture interaction” which aims to overcome the boundaries firmly established by anthropocentrism (Braidotti 2013, 3), including new formulations of gender. As Rosi Braidotti has suggested, the enlightened universal ideal of the humanist “man of Reason” is inadequate because of its partiality and is exposed as “very much a male of the species”, since this paradigm implicitly assumes the humanist subject to be “masculine, white, urbanized, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit, and a full citizen of a recognized polity” (2017, 23). As opposed to the hegemonic presence of the humanist enlightened subject, the negative difference which constitutes the “Other” – often a sexualised, racialised or naturalised “Other” – unearths world historical systems of domination whilst advocating “multiple and complex reconfigurations of diversity and multiple belongings, so as to challenge the dominant vision of the ‘others within’ that so far had just confirmed the European subject’s self-representation” (24). Posthuman feminism needs to criticise narrow-minded self-interests, intolerance, and the xenophobic rejection of Otherness (25) by “becoming-minoritarian”, an ethical and philosophical position which entails the separation of *bios*, as exclusively attributed to human life, from *zoe*, a vitalist continuum which includes in its ethical worldview the consideration of “the life of animals and non-human entities” in a “human-non human continuum” (26). Immersed in this vitalist continuum, human beings would progressively see ourselves as “earthbound” (Colebrook 2017, 3) and not as mere observers of matter but as oriented towards matters in which our own being depends on a world:

This vitalist approach to living matter displaces the boundary between the portion of life – both organic and discursive – that has traditionally been reserved for *Anthropos*, that is to say, *bios*, and the wider scope of animal and nonhuman life, also known as *zoe*. The dynamic, self-organizing structure of life as *zoe* stands for generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories, and domains. *Zoe*-centered egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the postanthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded, and unsentimental response to the opportunistic transspecies commodification of life that is the logic of advanced capitalism. (Braidotti 2013, 60)

Departing from such premises, this article aims at examining Daisy Johnson’s collection of short stories *Fen* (2016) and, most particularly, its opening piece “Starver”, through the lens of posthuman feminism by arguing that Johnson’s collection puts forward a relational ontology which refuses to consider human subjectivity as exclusively restricted to the confines of human

bodies and experiences by blurring traditional boundaries as constitutive of oppositions such as nature/culture, human/non-human, male/female. Johnson’s focus on the English Fenlands as a borderline, liminal topology mirrors contemporary preoccupations with the porosity and instability of allegedly firm borders and, by extension, of identity. Johnson’s collection ultimately interrogates the relationship between individuals and their environment, radically distressed by human intervention and capitalist consumerism, thus heading to the “sixth extinction” of the Anthropocene.

### Borderscapes and Liminal Topologies

Daisy Johnson’s collection *Fen* is located on East Anglia’s fenland, unstable marshes in between solid ground and the sea where the writer spent her teenage years. It was not after moving from East Anglia to Oxford that Johnson engaged it actively “writing it [the Fenlands] out”, using place as a “fodder for writing” (Hirschman 2017, 201) by turning the mythical quality of childhood memories into a “landscape [which] almost had to be diminished down into a memory for it to be something I could write about” (Lea 2016).

Johnson’s profound sense of discomfort and uneasiness – which she relates to the troublesome years of adolescence spent in what she regards as a strange country (Lea 2016) – translates into her flight from realism and her preference for “apocalyptic, weird fiction” (Hirschman 2017, 201) in which everydayness and ordinariness are transformed into a distorted world turned strange. In so doing, readers are invited to evoke Johnson’s childhood uneasiness by, among other things, considering the collapse of traditionally fixed limits and demarcations between fact and fantasy, history and myth, the familiar and the strange, human and non-human. Non-coincidentally, the narratives’ main characters are young women, uncomfortably posed in an interstice between childhood and adulthood, whose uncertain position mirrors the topographical instability of the land.

Johnson’s deliberate focus on female characters signals a narrative which is “ripe for change, is ripe for transformation, ripe for rewriting”, in which women would not be merely represented as “mothers and partners”, but rather as “I-carrying figures in their own right” (Lea 2016), as “real women, facing everyday problems who were also watching their world distort, turn strange, [...] normal women beset by extraordinary things” (Hirschman 2017, 201).

To do so, Johnson attaches mythical qualities to the Fenlands which date back to Roman times, when attempts were first made to drain the soil and folklore constructed the marshes as a strange place into which people rarely ventured (Crown 2016) for its in-betweenness, an unstable amalgam of land and sea which has helped to consolidate its “reputation as a liminal space and limit, culturally and environmentally” (Packham 2019, 206). In the nineteenth century, East Anglian Fens were turned into fertile soil by a complex system of dykes, plumps, drains and embankments which prevent the land from flooding, although these efforts proved inefficacious due to the effects of rising sea levels and soil erosion. As Paul March-Russell indicates, Fenland District Council, popularly known as “Silicon Fen”, is identified with both tech firms around Cambridge and with an economy “reliant upon traditional but declining sources of employment such as fishing and agriculture” (2020, 33), which Johnson uses to criticise capitalist modes of production, indiscriminate

~ global growth and the exhaustion of natural resources, as will be further argued.

As Sarah Crown suggests in her review of Johnson's *Fen*, the uncanniness of the Fens derives "both from their singular geography (the lack of firm perimeters; the edgeless, overlit swaths of sky-filled water) and their essential provisionality; the ever-deepening sense, in this age of global warming, that their inhabitants are living on borrowed time, in a borrowed place" (Crown 2016). Johnson herself intertwines her own sense of adolescent uneasiness with the Fens' liminality and its destabilising effects to "destroy something from the inside" (Lea 2016) by exploring the fluidity of a borderscape and its uncanny effects on its inhabitants: "I was interested, also, in ideas of the uncanny, in how the places we consider home can easily turn against us" (Hirshman 2017, 201).

Significantly, borderlands and borderscapes and the various ways in which these are mediated through narratives and images are central to constructing new configurations of belonging and becoming (Nyman and Schimanski 2021, 2). The interstitial nature of borders and borderscapes springs from their liminality, a term created by Victor Turner (1964) that refers to various aspects of constructing relations between individuals, groups and collectives. As Wolfgang Müller-Funk has suggested, borders and boundaries are not simply spatial issues, but always "entail temporary and dynamic moments" (2021, 23). Built to simultaneously "separate and divide on the one hand, and to welcome and allow passage on the other" (Manzanas 2007, 9), borders are porous and allow interactions as well as the generation of connections between or among heterogenous entities or variables. As they meet at the border, the latter are mutually dependent either if they remain separated or establish some mutual exchange through which "otherness and difference" are negotiated (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, 2). Thus, "borders", "thresholds" and "interstices" may entail, precisely because of their indeterminacy and their position at a physical, cultural and ideological crossroads, a useful locus of mediation and transformation, particularly appealing in an age of "global mobility [...] and interethnic transnationality" (Achilles and Bergmann 2015, 3).

Borders and border-crossings constitute not only geopolitical realities but also figurations where otherness and difference are often negotiated. Borders and borderscapes come across as sites of conflict and surveillance, but also of resistance and transformation. Previously fixed categories, including that of the border itself and those predicated upon an "inside"/"outside" topology, emerge as unstable, porous and fluid. Narratives stand out as integral parts of bordering processes and border-crossings due to their impact on our world, which trigger not only the need to negotiate borders themselves, but also the construction of new racial, cultural and ontological configurations. Johnson's sharp focus on borderscapes and liminal phenomena problematises the relevance of fixed categories constructed as opposite phenomena and firmly situated in each side of a clear-cut border: human/non-human, nature/civilization, fact/fiction, male/female.

Interestingly, Johnson problematises the alleged fixity of physical ontological borders in a literary form which itself brings to the fore liminal positions, border-crossings and hybridization; namely, the short story.

## Genre Border-Crossings and Daisy Johnson's Short Stories: *Fen*

One of the routes taken by present-day theorisations of the modern and contemporary short story centres on the genre's connection with liminality. Works by Claire Drewery (2011) or Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergman (2015) have convincingly defined the status of the short story as an intrinsically borderline vehicle of literary expression. Its characteristically formal and thematic hybridity shows in the borderline combination of expressive capacities, strategies and traits of different genres, yet brevity remains the short story's only stable and unequivocal defining feature. The short story's interstitial nature alongside the genre's resistance to comply with identifiable categories other than brevity and its degree of immediacy to address historical changes make it a privileged fictional medium for critical reflection and social contestation. The sense of insecurity and cultural alienation, particularly acute in Johnson's characters, finds in the short story an expressive medium which is hospitable to the problematics of interspecies encounters and troubled identities which populate Johnson's *Fen*. The writer herself argued how "short stories are this perfect form where you can do really weird things and really weird things happen and, despite being small, they seem to be able to contain that really well" (Lea 2016).

In this sense, Johnson draws from the short story's potential to defy limits, to encapsulate hybridization and to resist definitions and closure in order to destabilise facts and assumptions, thus moving beyond the limitations of realism in portraying apparently solid lives. In her urge to reconsider demarcations and boundaries, Johnson tackles fictional forms themselves and questions narrative boundaries and clear-cut categories when defining her own work:

The links between stories in *Fen*, I hope, create the sense that this is neither a short story collection nor a novel. I love Jonathan Cape's design of the book particularly because nowhere on the cover do they state whether they are short stories or a novel. There is a limitation to thinking with these boundaries in mind, and one of the most enjoyable things about writing *Fen* was moving away from such restrictions. (Hirshman 2017, 202)

Johnson here emphasises her resistance to fixed categorisations, borders and demarcations that seek to clearly distinguish allegedly opposite and mutually exclusive concepts. In so doing, Johnson also problematises fictional borders and traditionally established genre categories by intentionally blurring and – to an extent – problematising demarcations between the short story and the novel. In a sense, Johnson's intentional refusal to categorise *Fen* as a collection of short stories or as any narrative form in particular – thus moving away from limitations and restrictions in terms of both form and content – enables the narrative to rest upon an inspiring and engaging tension between the individuality of each story and the sense of their integration in a larger whole, provided by the recurrence of, for example, the mentions of the fictional director January Hargrave or the relevance of meeting places where characters gather, as is the case of the local pub "The Fox and Hound", whose name significantly brings to the fore the hunt trope as also applicable to affairs and sexual encounters for characters in the narrative, often propitiated around such gatherings, as well as human and non-human relationships and transformations, as will be further argued. ~

Such tension between particularity and universality inevitably recalls the term “short story cycle” as applicable to *Fen* (Cox 2019, 234), a category which had been famously defined by Forrest Ingram as “a set of stories so linked to one another that the reader’s experience of each one is modified by his experience of the others” (1971, 13), thus combining a tension between the unity of each narrative with its integration into a larger whole in which characters, places or themes may reoccur. Although some scholars have shown a preference for other denominations – such is the case of Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris’s notion of “composite novel” (1995) or Rolf Lundén’s concept of “short story composite” (2000) – Ingram’s idea of balance between the “individuality of each of the stories and [the] necessities of the larger unit” (1971, 15) remains prevalent, thus producing, as Gerald Kennedy has suggested, a sense of “progressive unfolding and cumulative effects” (1995, vii). The short story cycle’s ability to integrate individual experience and a sense of a shared fate as integral to a community has been signalled by, among others, Paul March-Russell, who suggests that the genre is particularly prone to proliferation in moments of communal or national change in its ability to encompass multiple voices and perspectives and communal affiliations (2009, 115), also applicable to the complexities arising in post-Brexit Britain.

In this sense, the progressive and cumulative effect of the short story cycle favours the portrayal of human identity as a process in a perpetual flux through the portrayal of “provisional identities [...] that emerge within a story or series of stories but which are neither rigidly defined nor fixed” (Smith 2018, 7), quite in tune with Johnson’s agenda for *Fen*. Thus, the short story seems particularly suitable to address processes of identity formation in all their complexity, which the narrative’s formal hybridity also reflects, since its “formal materialization” may be read as a “trope of multiplicity” (Davis 2001, 19) which can cross “geographic, cultural, ethnic, and even linguistic boundaries” (7). In addition to this, the short story cycle’s suitability to reflect cultural encounters and political tensions matches the complexities of borderscapes as “sites where the new identities [...] come to the world and problematise the alleged fixity of the border” (Nyman 2021, 188).

Johnson’s intentional choice of a narrative form which defies rigid categorizations and clear-cut demarcations in favour of a porous fluidity which permeates the narratives also extends to the major themes and motifs which the stories address. The narrative’s use of these themes is conditioned by Johnson’s choice of place, the English Fenlands, not only as a topography which retains some alien qualities from ancient times, but also as a borderscape where the liminal and the weird comfortably sit. Johnson’s emphasis on borderscapes eventually serves the purpose of destabilising the seemingly ordinary and problematising the nature of borders and complex interactions between the environment and human and non-human animals in the age of the Anthropocene.

### Johnson’s *Fen* and the Age of the Anthropocene

The English Fenlands entail a topology geographically scarred by human intervention across the centuries in order to regain the land from the sea and make it profitable for human habitation and labour, in repeated attempts to drain the marshland and transform it for commercial gain. However, and as Paul March-Russell has suggested, these efforts are clouded by the “constant struggle to farm the land”, which eventually signal “the precariousness

of such interventions against the imminent threat of the land’s reclamation by the sea” (2020, 34). Johnson’s deliberate focus on the English Fenlands as a liminal topology mirrors the collection’s anxiety to address humans’ destructive intervention of nature and, as the stories in the collection show, it brings to the fore the disastrous effects of climate change in nature, as well as the problematic relationships of human and non-human animals, which are being distressed and enhanced by deeper timescales of climate change, human geological impact on the environment and coastal erosion.

In this sense, and as anthropologist Richard Irvine has argued, the East Anglian Fens can be regarded as “an Anthropocene space – that is, a space in which the characteristics of the Anthropocene epoch are acutely visible” (Irving 2017, 156–7). As a concept, the Anthropocene was popularised by Paul Crutzen (2002) to design a new geological era succeeding the warmer Holocene, in which human intervention in the environment becomes visible and whose effects are yet to be determined. Significantly, Crutzen situates the advent of the Anthropocene in the English Industrial Revolution, coinciding with the date of invention of Ian Watt’s steam engine in 1789:

It seems appropriate to assign the term “Anthropocene” to the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene – the warm period of the past 10–12 millennia. The Anthropocene could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt’s design of the steam engine in 1784. (Crutzen 2002)

As such, the Anthropocene encompasses a vast number of factors and locations, ranging from global climate change to major

disruptions in oceanic and atmospheric currents, the disturbance of the water cycle and of other important chemical cycles [...], soil degradation, the rapid loss of biological diversity, pollution with toxic and non-degradable substances, all accompanying a continuous growth in the number of humans and their domesticates. Human activity moves more earth, sand, and stone worldwide than all natural processes together. (Horn and Bergthaller 2019, 2)

In this sense, human impact on Earth as a major geological force has produced irreversible alterations which also require an alternative epistemological approach which would depart from the anthropocentric worldview. As Colebrook suggests,

The Anthropocene has presented itself to many as a nonnegotiable difference: ‘we’ abandon a world that was deemed to be indifferent to our narrow historical periods, and ‘we’ recognize that human history is geologically significant after all, and that ‘we’ have made a definitive difference. (Colebrook 2017, 4)

Questions such as “sustainability” or “environmental preservation” today relate, more than ever before, to the welfare state and the economic and political stability of the planet. Bruno Latour has argued that awareness of the Anthropocene closes down the modern conception of the infinite universe, drawing us back to the limited and exhausted earth and to our consciousness of being “earthbound” (Colebrook 2017, 3). Latour’s “politics of nature” (2017, 1) requires a reformulation of the concept of “nature” itself, traditionally understood as an entity which possesses a harmonious natural balance; nature should rather be seen as a self-regulating system in a fragile and dynamic equilibrium. In doing so, the concept of nature also requires reformulating its traditional opposition with “culture”, and of “Anthropos” or “humanity”, understood as the planet’s dominant species, whose behaviour directly impacts on the planet in coexistence and symbiosis with other non-human species. Latour’s “political ecology” challenges the long-established, clear-cut demarcation of the conceptualization of “politics” and “nature”, developed “over centuries in such a way as to make any juxtaposition, any synthesis, any combination of the two terms impossible” (3). However, a radical reformulation of such conceptualisations – which also apply, by extension, to “the old distinction between humans and things, subjects of law and objects of science” (3) – may also offer new opportunities when putting forward “new ways of thinking and new communities that produce environmental solutions as a form of civic knowledge” (Emmett and Nye 2017, 7).

But problematising such dichotomies and rethinking its borders as porous also implies reconsidering planet Earth as a mere continent of humans and their experience, as Timothy Morton suggests (2013, 101), which subsequently poses doubts pertaining to the traditional distinction between subject and object or, in other ways, traditionally erected barriers between a human consciousness which observes and perceives and a world of things being perceived by the human subject. Such reformulations are core to a major epistemological turn which has defined our contemporary times aiming to overcome flawed and non-inclusive perceptions of a human-centred world in which agency and action are exclusively attributed to humans by destroying the pervasive distinction between natural and human histories (Braidotti 2017, 27). The “post-anthropocentric” turn – or the “posthuman”, in the words of Rosi Braidotti – also puts forward whether human subjectivity can be exclusively defined within the confines of their own species:

The postanthropocentric turn takes off as two major issues converge: the first is climate change [...]. The second is information technologies and the high degree of global mediation they entail. These challenges open up new global, ecosophical, posthumanist, and postanthropocentric dimensions of thought. (28)

For Braidotti, the posthuman blurs categorical distinctions (“human–nonhuman, nature–culture, male–female, European–non-European”) which have structured Western thought in attempting to “redefine a program of feminist social justice” (28).

As Noël Sturgeon has suggested, “issues of poverty and inequality must be part of understanding the genesis of environmental problems and identifying adequate solutions” (2017, xxi). In doing so, feminist criticism emerges as core to critical environmental analysis: on the one hand, because of the long-term association

between “gender” and “nature” which, despite claims against essentialist identifications which had consistently denied women a significant place in the body politics, unearth diverse and interlocking forms of oppression, whilst also problematising both “gender” and “environment” as “value-laden products of specific historical and cultural contexts” and, more adequately, as “social constructions rather than empirical objects” (MacGregor 2017, 2). On the other hand, the association between “gender” and “nature” also problematises the gendered interaction of human labour with the environment and the gendered impact of environmental degradation, yet the point is to see these processes through the “*lens of power* rather than to see gender [...] as a biological fact” (4; italics in original). As Greta Gaard suggests, feminism has been central in both “theorizing and enacting gender, racial and inter-species justice” (2017, 115). In tune with that, Johnson argues how “male-dominated stories we have told ourselves are missing such a large part of human experience that there needs to be space for alternative ones next to them” (Lea 2016). *Fen* aims at providing such alternative space by problematising gendered environmental intervention and, in doing so, destabilising borders for the “irruption of the uncanny” (Lea 2016).

### Gendered Transformations: Daisy Johnson’s “Starver”

The Anthropocene gives a name to the insight that humans are profoundly changing the ecology of the planet, and that they are doing so on a global scale. Quite significantly, Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller have argued how the Anthropocene designates, rather than an era, an ecological threshold (2019, 2), a state for which there is no precedent in geological history: the Anthropocene “heralds a future for humanity, the contours of which we are only just beginning to apprehend” (2). An essential part of this epochal consciousness is the realisation that many of the categories used to grasp the relationship between humans and nature have become obsolete, thus bringing about the need to reformulate traditional paradigms and ways of perceiving, understanding and of being in the world, focusing not only on human populations, but also on questions that pertain to coexistence and symbiosis with non-human species. “Human history” cannot be disentangled from “natural history”, with mutual dependencies, needs and behaviours.

A sense of such entanglements and interdependence is core to Johnson’s *Fen*, a concern which she shares with contemporaries such as China Miéville, Sarah Hall or Jon McGregor, whose collection of short stories *This Isn’t the Sort of Thing That Happens to Someone Like You* (2013) is also set in the coastal Fenlands. When discussing the nature of her own work, Johnson refuses to categorise *Fen* as an example of a magical realist narrative (Hirshman 2017, 201) because she is conscious of the urge to portray characters as historically situated:

I wanted the stories to be populated with, yes, the weird but also with the mundane, the boring: eating, sleeping, periods, friends, everyday worries. I also think that some of the best short stories inhabit this place between the everyday and the extraordinary. They crackle with odd energy. (Wimhurst, 2017)

Johnson seems here to suggest that such “odd energy” – terms which combine both a sense of weirdness and uncertainty with a destabilising power – springs from the narrative’s focus on

intersections and borders, which she both thematises and problematises in *Fen*. In what follows, such weird intersections between the identitary borders between the identitary borders separating human and non-human animals will be inspected in the wake of a general concern for human transformations of the environment in the age of the Anthropocene, as entailed in Johnson's "Starver", the collection's first narrative.

"Starver" already signals in its opening paragraph the land's altered state and, in doing so, the story adjusts the collection's tone and movement to this statement: "The land was drained" (Johnson 2016, 3). The statement unequivocally refers to the pervasive human intervention in the Fens. The story's – and the collection's – opening sentence works as an ominous predicament for the narratives to follow, which will address in different ways the consequences of ecological degradation in both human and non-human animals inhabiting the Fens. As Johnson herself affirmed, the collection's starting point was "the eels", "stranger creatures" which writhe in "masses in the last puddles as the land is drained". As a child, Johnson was

always aware that it had been somewhere that was fished for eels a lot [...] You fish for them at night, you wade into the water and there are these quite scary creatures. And then the idea that the waster had been pumped away – so where did the eels go? (Lea 2016)

Johnson's childhood memories intertwine in "Starver" with larger ecological concerns which, in turn, problematise the human/non-human border by exploring miraculous transformations.

The story's opening points at a disturbing reversal of non-human behaviour: the eels that are caught to feed (male) workforce to drain the Fens constitute now a production surplus, thus ceasing to serve their purpose:

They caught eels in great wreaths, headless masses in the last puddles, trying to dig into the dirt to hide. They filled vats of water to the brim with them: the eels would feed the workforce brought in to build on the wilderness. There were enough eels to last months; there were enough eels to feed them for years. (Johnson 2016, 3)

Just as the "wilderness" would not yield to human continuous drain, the animals' untamed nature does not adjust to human needs, and eels endlessly reproduce themselves to become inefficacious to serve as food. Paradoxically, the animals themselves stop eating:

The eels would not eat. They tried them on river rats, sardines, fish food, milk-softened bread, the leftover parts of cows and sheep. It was no good: they reached into the water, scooped them out, slapped them down, slit them lengthwise. There were too many eels and not enough men. And eating eels barely more than bone was not really eating at all. (3)

Such "natural" disorders and the eel surplus – which eventually requires sacrificing the "useless" animals – is read by locals as nature's mysterious revenge on human usurpation and land scarring, as "a calling down of something upon the draining.

Some said they heard words coming from the ground as the water was pumped away and that was what made the eels do it, starve themselves that way" (3–4).

Significantly, what initially seems an isolated comment on the awkward behaviour of the anorexic eels inhabiting the Fens and their abnormal behaviour as a result of uncontrolled human intervention in the natural environment, actually extends to a similarly "unnatural" behaviour which affects human animals in the story. The story is rendered by Suze, a young first-person narrator, who is informed by her sister Katy at the narrative's opening of her decision to stop eating: "I'm stopping eating, she said. I started today" (4).

As suggested in the opening paragraphs of the story, disproportionate human intervention and centuries of drainage not only produce radical alterations in non-human animals, but also induce a similar behaviour in human animals, evident in Katy's eating disorder. Significantly, Katy's anorexia is mysteriously accompanied, as her sister notices, by a miraculous process of body shifting, already noticeable on Katy's first day of fasting: "Even that first night I thought I could see the shift in her [...] When she lifted her shirt to change, her spine was a heavy ridge along the middle of her back" (4).

Very much like the efforts of those men who treated the eels with exquisite food to make them eat, Suze desperately tries to feed her sister on nice food, which she refuses to eat. Subsequently, Katy elaborates on sophisticated tricks to miss meals at the family table as her body continues mutating:

At the top of the stile she hesitated, pale with sharp points of red on her cheeks, knuckles whitening, panting a little. It was over a week now. I wondered what she was running on, air or determination or anger or nothing or someone. (7)

However, the narrative's point of inflection occurs when Katy is exposed to the sexual advances of young men at a teenage party, where her bodily shift becomes almost complete and unearths to everyone else her eating disorder, eventually triggering Katy's internment in hospital:

I looked down at Katy. Her spine was now a great, solid ridge, rising from the mottled skin of her back; the webbing between her fingers had grown almost past the knuckles and was thickening. Her face had changed too, her nose flattening out, nostrils thinning to lines. (11)

Katy eventually drowns in air, cannot walk and flops "her way down the corridor on her belly [...], the flapping of gills shuttering on the side of her neck" (13). Although family and friends refuse to fully see Katy's serious situation, Suze does realise that her sister has actually mutated into an animal and, determined to save her life, delivers Katy's body to the water, now shapeshifted into an eel: "I lay her on the ground, jerked her free from the towel, pushed her sideways into the water. She did not roll her white belly to message me goodbye or send a final ripple. Only ducked deep and was gone" (14).

In this sense, the narrative's initial plotline addressing adolescent eating disorders similarly shifts and mutates towards the

weird and the miraculous through Katy's inexplicable metamorphosis, without undermining anorexia and its related health and social issues as also central to the narrative. By having Katy's body metamorphosed into an eel, Johnson also subverts shapeshifting as a major theme and strategy in traditional fairy tales, intertwining the factual (anorexia) with the marvellous (miraculous shapeshifting) with further destabilising effects, as the writer suggests:

I listened to a lot of myths when I was a child. We had an audiobook of the Tale of Troy and my interest in myths continued after that. There is something about them – those old, weird stories – that drew me in. More than that, I suppose, I was drawn in by the idea of stealing, of rewriting. I remember that Roald Dahl book where he took fairy tales and rewrote them; how bowled over I was by the audacity of that. Rewriting is such a rich arena for attacking the norm, for overturning and exploding out from the centre ideas about gender and nature. (Wimhurst 2017)

In this sense, Johnson also interlaces in the narrative echoes of Ovidian metamorphoses of women's bodies, here foregrounding the sisterly bonds of love and complicity between the two sisters, which loosely recall Philomel and Procne's bonds of collaboration in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Furthermore, shapeshifting narratives as rendered in traditional fairy tales often regard mutations of human bodies into different animals as a punishment for sins or transgressions, whereas the recovery of the human shape parallels the character's complete atonement in eventually achieving a virtuous state as human, which relates to a superior position in the scale of living animals.

As argued, the narrative also suggests a connection between disproportionate human intervention in nature and the characters' (both human and non-human) radical distress. In doing so, both the eels' and Katy's conscientious act of eating "nothingness" – and thus refusing to participate in a consumption chain to serve capitalist purposes or to belong to the social order (family, friends or school), respectively – suggests a desire to be "earthbound" (Colebrook 2017, 2). By refusing food consumption, both Katy and the eels also reject depletion and capitalist excess, signalling the destructive and inscriptive impact of human beings on earth by means of, among other things, indiscriminate and unnecessary animal consumption.

## Conclusion

Significantly, Johnson's "Starver" – and, by extension, the collection as a whole – suggests the existence of a vitalist continuum between the environment and human and non-human animals by focusing on interspecies bonds and communities, thus recalling Braidotti's "species egalitarianism". This vitalist continuum opens up "possibilities of relations, alliances, and mutual specification" which springs from her consideration of human animals as both embodied and embedded entities, "part of something we used to call 'nature', despite transcendental claims made for human consciousness" (2017, 32). Braidotti's interspecies egalitarianism and justice pivots on a relational ontology which eventually questions the possibility of defining human subjectivity within the confines of human bodies and consciousness by suggesting

cross-species alliances with the productive and immanent force of "zoe", or life in its non-human aspects, as opposed to "bios", or the former anthropocentric epistemological paradigm which Braidotti identifies with the logic of advanced capitalism. For Braidotti, it is essential not only to reconceptualise process ontologies as bounded to the non-human and vital forces, but also to frame such concerns within a feminist project of social justice, since the posthuman subject is necessarily a feminist one. Tracking those "cartographies" actualises "the virtual possibilities of an expanded, relational self that functions in a nature–culture continuum and is technologically mediated but still framed by multiple power relations" (34).

The mutation of Katy's body into an animal, or, in other words, her desire to be "earthbound", partakes of an urge to participate in a continuum of intensities by crossing a threshold where previous forms, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, "come undone" (1986, 13). Johnson's "Starver" participates in such a vital continuum by positing thresholds between traditionally fixed demarcations as productive and empowering. In so doing, the narrative is also inscribed in larger, global-scale preoccupations which relate to the Anthropocene, to human impact on planet Earth and its related consequences and to the ways humans relate to the environment and establish multispecies relationships.

In this sense, Johnson intentionally inscribes her work in a tradition of women writers who have posed similar questions through interspecies relations in their narratives, as is the case of Kelly Link, Karen Russell, Mary Gaitskill or Sarah Hall, whose influence Johnson acknowledges in her own stories (Lea 2016). Metamorphoses, shifts and transformations possess a destabilising effect by destroying "the reality around", as Johnson suggests (Lea 2016), addressing a world where women characters play a major role in transforming, subverting and rewriting.

By inscribing the liminal and the interstitial in its aesthetic and formal features, Johnson's short story turns into a place which may foster potential change and reorientations: borderscapes and interstices are unstable as sites of conflict, but they may entail contact zones which are simultaneously close and open; they divide and invite to transgress as a result of their porous and fluid nature. Thus, "borders", "thresholds" and "interstices" may entail, precisely because of their indeterminacy and their position at a physical, cultural and ideological crossroads, a useful tool of mediation where all forms may "come undone" in the "liquidity" of late modernity (Bauman 2000) and in its emphatic statement on flows and connectivities that characterises the age of globalisation. The erection of borders may promise stability and security, but they are at the same time limiting, restrictive and discriminating, while the crossing of borders destabilises fixed orders and such crossings may include elements of transgression, destabilisation and potential liberation. In this sense, Johnson's narrative hints at the semantic richness of borders, border spaces and bordering processes. Indeed, the borderline nature of the short story explains its efficacious nature in fostering interstitial spaces of criticism, dialogue, counternarratives and imaginative solutions towards a more inclusive understanding of human and non-human identity and ways of being in our contemporary world.

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## Notes

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Título:

Fronteras y ansiedades posthumanas en  
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