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## *Memories*

Introduzione	5
Marina Camboni, Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli	7
Daniele Fiorentino, Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli	13
Cristina Giorcelli, Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli	15
AA.VV., Maurizio Vaudagna	19

## *Special Section*

### *Posthumanism and Environmental Poetics in American Literature*

Cristina Iuli and Pilar Martínez Benedí, “A Pop Song on the Last Day of Earth”: Post-humanism and Environmental Poetics in American Literature	25
Leonor María Martínez Serrano, “All Nature Teems with Life”. Anthropogenic Wastelands in Robert Hass’s Eco-poetics	35
Cristina Iuli, Wanderers on the Way Into the Neighborhood of Being: Katherine Larson’s Poetry of Life-forms	55
Jane Desmond, Poetry, Animals and the Imaginative Ethnographies of Creaturely Lives	77
Owen Harry, Daoism and Posthuman Subjectivity in Ursula K. Le Guin’s <i>The Lathe of Heaven</i>	99
Daniela Fargione, Breaking Bread and Sharing Dreams with the Other-than-human: Extinction and Multispecies Community in Lydia Millet’s <i>How the Dead Dream</i>	117

<b>Valentina Romanzi</b> , Love Is a Thing with Feathers: Posthuman Metamorphoses in <i>This Is How You Lose the Time War</i>	137
<i>Un Forum a puntate</i>	
<i>Frontiera/Frontiere: Conversazioni su confini e migrazioni tra il Mediterraneo e l'Atlantico</i>	
<b>Valerio Massimo De Angelis</b> , Introduzione	159
Terza puntata:	
<b>Claudia Bernardi</b> , Risonanze tra i confini del Nord America e del Mediterraneo	161
<i>Articles</i>	
<b>Alice Ciulla</b> , Opening and Closing Gates in Cold War America: Foreign Policy and the Politics of Immigration Law	179
<b>Giuliano Santangeli Valenzani</b> , Picturing Italy: Cold War Perspectives in American Travel Writing on Italy, 1948-1960	199
<b>Eva Pelayo Sañudo</b> , The Urban Cowboy: Gender, the Frontier (Ethni)City and the Myth of the West in Mario Puzo's <i>The Fortunate Pilgrim</i>	221
<i>L'inedito</i>	
<b>Emanuele Nidi</b> , Introduction	247
Letter by Paul Panda to W. E. B. Du Bois, May 31, 1921	261
<i>Abstracts</i>	267
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	275

VALENTINA ROMANZI

## Love Is a Thing with Feathers: Posthuman Metamorphoses in *This Is How You Lose the Time War*

### Introduction

In 2005, American author Naomi Shihab Nye wrote in her poem “Sifter”:

When our English teacher gave  
our first writing invitation of the year,  
*Become a kitchen implement*  
*in 2 descriptive paragraphs*, I did not think  
butcher knife or frying pan,  
I thought immediately  
of soft flour showering through the little holes  
of the sifter and the sifter’s pleasing circular  
swishing sound, and wrote it down.

{...}

Everyone laughed  
and acted but the more we thought about it,  
we were all everything in the whole kitchen,

{...}

*This*, said our teacher, *is the beauty of metaphor.*  
*It opens doors.*

(n. pag.; italics in the original)

This, indeed, is the *power* of metaphor: it builds bridges to realms other than reality. Or, rather, to realities other than ours. In what follows, I wish to explore how metaphor contributes to the expression of the posthuman subject, taking up Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone’s 2019 novella

*This Is How You Lose the Time War* as a case study. In the text, the pervasive use of metaphor projects the protagonists onto a posthuman dimension, a plane of existence that is not wholly other from what we know and inhabit, but that expands it by embedding materialities and subjectivities often relegated to the margins or discarded as inanimate.

My claim is that metaphor, as a discursive construct, has a material, bodily counterpart in metamorphosis. In other words, the discourse of posthuman subjectivity engages with the possibility of metamorphosis prompted by metaphors. Metamorphosis will yield figurations of subjectivities and spatialities that well surpass the traditional, humanist view of Man and conventional perceptions of the world, giving way to a nexus of subjects and spaces reflecting Braidotti's vision of the posthuman.

As a text of and for the posthuman, *This Is How You Lose the Time War* questions the very concepts of corporeality and spatiality: through an unconventional set of metaphors, the chrono-spatial continuum – the environment in its widest definition – acquires not only materiality but corporeality, and in turn the body itself becomes space, an environment. The result is a protean, posthuman assemblage of body-space-time-otherness-identity-language in which these concepts intermingle, interact, and exchange properties. *This Is How You Lose the Time War* follows chrono-agents Red and Blue as they move “upthread” and “downthread” through the time-space continuum, depicted as a braid of interwoven hair locks, to fight a seemingly endless war between their respective factions, the Agency and Garden. Written in epistolary form, the novella traces the evolution of their relationship from enmity to star-crossed love. Each letter is preceded by a third-person section illustrating Red and Blue's lives as they carry out assignments and find each other's letters, which are then presented to the readers. Blue's sections were written by El-Mohtar, a Canadian poet and short story writer, and Red's by Gladstone, an American science fiction and fantasy writer.

The novella can be read as an example of climate fiction, since it is “deeply engaged with the central conceptual struggles underlying the environmental crisis, and [...] consequently questions the assumptions of human mastery and exceptionality that led to anthropogenic climate change” (Caracciolo et al. 9). In this formulation, cli-fi does not need to be

explicitly about environmental collapse, but it does need to interact with the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to it. It needs to entertain the notion that “the ecological crisis is, at its core, a failure of humanism” (10), something that in philosophy sits squarely within the purview of posthumanism.

In *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, Red and Blue hint at habitat destruction, climate change, and human responsibility for planetary collapse (3). Often tasked with manipulating societies in order to *cause* such destruction, in their letters the protagonists reflect on the delicate balance ensuring the persistence of life, with Red, for instance, musing that it is “so easy to crush a planet that you may overlook the value of a whisper to a snowbank” (13). Despite these occasional references, human responsibility for the demise of whole planets across the many threads of reality never takes center stage, but lingers in the background of the whole narrative. A parallel to our own experience of climate change and the slow unraveling of our habitat, the destruction of the many worlds across the space-time continuum is cast as a hyperobject – i.e., a phenomenon whose effects may be experienced, but whose massive dimensions escape human capacity for definition and containment, whether in space or time (see Morton). Its ghostly presence pervades the story, expressing what Bould has recently theorized as the “Anthropocene Unconscious,” i.e., the silent yet ubiquitous shadow of the human footprint on our planet in contemporary narratives, even when they are not specifically about it.

The treatment of anthropogenic environmental collapse in *This Is How You Lose the Time War* and its depiction of a homoromantic relationship between the two female-identifying protagonists situate it within the contemporary panorama of progressive SF. However, what truly sets the novella apart is its use of language and style. Despite abundant evidence of the opposite, it is still widely believed that most SF works are not worthy of attention regarding stylistic and formal issues, which are “dealt with in a knee-jerk fashion, assumed to be either plain and unexperimental [...] or downright poor: clumsy, intrusive, and unconcerned with literary quality” (Mandala 16). SF’s strength seems to lie in worldbuilding, which surpasses any other element of composition (see Sanders). Yet, form is essential for some of its most authoritative writers. Le Guin, for instance, claimed: “The

style, of course, is the book. If you remove the cake all you have left is a recipe. If you remove style all you have left is a synopsis of the plot” (30). Peter Stockwell echoes this when he argues that we cannot separate content from language, especially when we are carrying out a literary analysis. After all, we cannot escape the boundaries of language, as it is an all-encompassing trait of our species. Through language, we can cognitively and figuratively experiment with the realm of the more-than-human or other-than-human, an environment which might bring us closer to a fuller understanding of both the human and the posthuman as correlated concepts. While ideas of the Posthuman have been advanced through both discursive practices and examples from several kinds of human and non-human aggregates (from medical devices to cyber-life to companion species), few examples of how to bridge the gap between the discursive and the corporeal are available. By focusing on the idea of metaphor-induced metamorphoses, I suggest a way in that direction, showing that literary texts can serve well to imagine the posthuman not only speculatively but also generatively.

### Posthumanism

In Rosi Braidotti’s formulation of “critical posthumanism” (*Posthuman* 49),<sup>1</sup> the posthuman subject is understood as a relational configuration – i.e., a construct shaped by the continuous exchange and contact with others, both human and nonhuman. It retains a strong “embodied and embedded” (50) nature, which stresses its ties to the community, and is “nomadic” – i.e., powered by the ethics of becoming. A concept derived from the works of Deleuze and Guattari, to which Braidotti often returns, the nomadic subject relinquishes the unity, stability, and hegemonic positioning of the humanist subject in favor of an ever-shifting subjectivity that nevertheless does not leave its corporeality, its embodiment, behind. For Braidotti, echoing Hayles’ position, the posthuman subject is not a purely conceptual or mental construction; it exists within the world and as part of it, as an element that is interlocked with the many living beings and living *essence* that transverses it – what Braidotti calls *zoe* (60). Braidotti’s view can be supplemented by Stacy Alaimo’s notion of *trans-corporeality*, by which she

means that “all creatures, as embodied beings, are intermeshed with the dynamic, material world, which crosses through them, transforms them, and is transformed by them. [...] The figure/ground relation between the human and the environment dissolves as the outline of the human is traversed by substantial material interchanges” (435). The environment, in Alaimo’s view, acquires the same status as the human. No more mere background to the exceptionalism of the – “transcendent, disembodied” (436) – humanist subject, the world that surrounds us takes center stage. Matter, especially when traversed by *zoe*, reclaims its relevance in determining the metamorphic nature of the posthuman subject through the notion of *becoming*, that is, of entering into contact with other *zoe*-forms in such a way that the human subject will be metamorphosed, turned into something more-than-human not in an evaluative sense (as in *better than the humanist subject* the way that transhumanists wish the Posthuman to be; Ferrando 27-28) but in a quasi-quantitative way, which makes the posthuman subject *polymorphic*, composed of more than one dimension. *Becoming*, as we will also see regarding *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, is a state of being, a process that *in itself* is a feature of the Posthuman subject, and not just a means of achieving a fixed, final result. On the contrary, a full metamorphosis of the human subject is not desirable, as it would only shapeshift one static, rigid subjectivity into another. It is rather in the malleable, ever-shifting process of metamorphosis, which will continuously have to find some fuel to perpetuate change, that the Braidottian posthuman subject is realized.

In 2008, Bruce Clarke linked the posthuman to metamorphosis explicitly, arguing:

Posthuman metamorphs couple the media systems that enact them to the social systems communicating them to the psychic systems of readers or viewers variously comprehending them. The contemporary discourse of the posthuman signifies a post-Darwinian world, where, as [...] Bruno Latour has remarked, “the human form is as unknown to us as the nonhuman. [...] It is better to speak of (*x*)-*morphism* instead of becoming indignant when humans are treated as nonhumans or vice versa.” (3)

Instances of posthuman metamorphosis extend across *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, marking the evolution of Red and Blue's relationship. Such fleeting, challenging shifts find their linguistic expression in and through metaphors, whose literalization brings about the enmeshed, entangled posthuman subject that is always *becoming*.

### From Metaphor to Metamorphosis

In his classic essay "Metaphor" – still notable among the trove of studies on the topic<sup>2</sup> – Max Black explains that substitution-based metaphor (i.e., metaphor understood as replacing one statement with another through analogy) can occur when there is "no literal equivalent, L, available in the language in question" (32). In this specific instance, metaphor is "a species of *catachresis*, [...] the use of a word in some new sense in order to remedy a gap in the vocabulary; catachresis is the putting of new senses into old words. But if a catachresis serves a genuine need, the new sense introduced will quickly become part of the literal sense" (33). However, such literal sense does not derive from a simple, one-to-one relationship of analogy – that is, metaphor does not coincide fully with the literal meaning it is trying to replace or compensate for. Rather, Black argues for interaction-based metaphors, i.e., metaphors whose meaning originates from the *entanglement* of two "systems of commonplaces" (40), whereby the reader will apply some of the features of the "subsidiary subject" to the "primary subject" of the metaphor,<sup>3</sup> generating meaning that cannot be fully explained through translation into "plain" literal language. Such intellectual operations on the reader's part demand "simultaneous awareness of both subjects but [are] not reducible to any comparison between the two" (46). The result of metaphor, in other words, is not the arithmetic *sum* of the literal features it extracts from these systems of commonplaces but the *product* of their interaction. Such a view of the generative meaning-making power of metaphor evokes some of the traits of the posthuman, among which inter-relationality plays a fundamental role. Indeed, more than one of Black's observations on metaphor can be applied to the posthuman, as conceptualizing it stretches the boundaries of language: whereas scholars can refer to resources like



the *Posthuman Glossary* to delve into the intricacies of terminology, literary authors must resort to rhetorical strategies to manifest the inexpressible, and metaphor is chief among them.

When metaphor meets the posthuman, language acquires (or, possibly, reacquires) a material dimension. “Man is a wolf,” an example Black uses, becomes literal in *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, as Blue shapeshifts into a monstrous wolf to protect Red from a trap set by Garden (79). In this specific case, and others I will analyze in the next section, the metaphor is literalized, realized concretely. (Wo)man is not only aggressive, wild, dangerous – or any other feature we might infer from connecting man to wolf. Blue *becomes* a wolf and *is* a wolf, not just like one. This metaphor does not play on similarity or substitution, it works on *identity*, through the interaction of states of being, of a metamorphic, polymorphic subjectivity. In other words, when expressing the posthuman, metaphor becomes metamorphosis.

Kai Mikkonen argues that “for a change to be described as a metamorphosis, it requires a presupposition of the original form. Consequently, we may think of the construction of the new form in terms of a metaphor that both replaces and compares one with another and that creates two or more forms into a new, meaningful image” (311). In other words, metamorphosis both encloses the interpretations of metaphor identified by Black, and always implies that something of the original shape is retained. Thus, it is to be understood as an expansion on the original subject, not as its total annihilation through substitution. Similarly, Bruce Clarke states that the “metamorphic imaginary since Darwin has a distinctly evolutionary valence” (2). Darwin’s work attributes to metamorphosis both a natural, i.e., not *supernatural*, status and a progressive one: post-*Origins*, metamorphosis is often read as the next step in the evolutionary ladder, a necessary transformation which intimates “that the essence of the human is to have no essence” (2). This ties post-*Origins* metamorphosis to the posthuman, which starts from the assumption that the humanist subject is but an incomplete, outdated conceptualization that does not express the whole potential of/for humanity. Nevertheless, we cannot have the *post*-human without the human. Some elements will be retained, just as metaphor and metamorphosis demand. Notably, Clarke’s argumentation

that posthuman metamorphosis has an evolutionary valence ties into what Mikkonen, deriving insights from Le Guern and Jakobson, writes about the difference between metaphor and metamorphosis: “metamorphosis paradoxically supposes that it can make metaphors and similes real, that is, analogous with the reference point of a sign, by literally fusing the opposites of a metaphor together to *provide a literary figure with a sense of physicality and time*” (312; emphasis added). In other words, metaphors exist as atemporal figures of speech; when they are placed within space and time, they become metamorphoses. This collapse of the difference between signifier and signified thus leads to the collapse of the difference between the realm of words and the realm of objects (Jakobson, “Statue” 35). The literalized, materialized, temporalized metaphor that is metamorphosis bridges the gap between language and reality.

Thus, language finds itself enmeshed in the posthuman assemblage, becoming one of its fundamental components. The posthuman subject is as much discursive as it is embodied. After all, the human subject has always been a product of language<sup>4</sup> – or rather, of a linguistic fallacy. In his *Unbecoming Human* (2020), Felice Cimatti draws from Derrida to argue that the humanist ideal of the human, conceptualized as “the living being that is *not* an animal” (1), relies on a word, “animal,” that has no referent in the world: “The animal of which we speak is never the animal as it is in and of itself: the animal is always an ‘*animot*,’ the spoken-of animal, metaphorised and idealized. [...] The animal does not exist” (2). It follows that the relational concept of the human, too, cannot be grounded. Cimatti’s work pushes the human towards *unbecoming* – that is, relinquishing the discursive construct of the human as other than the animal – in order to reappropriate the very animality of the human, of which language is but an expression.<sup>5</sup> This, he argues, may lead to a newfound communion between human and environment, a return to an understanding of the human as part of the environment and of the environment as part of the human.

If we accept that language is an intrinsic part of being human, then, by extension, metaphor is, too. However, whereas the humanist construct of human and animal masked its purely discursive nature, there is a sort of “sincerity” in the metaphor: it does not try to hide that, in general, it does not have a referent in reality. Metaphors carry no strong claims to a real-

world referent. At times, when used as catachresis, they do serve to make up for a lack of signifier to a new signified, but, in general, metaphors exist within language, as the potential for new referents. If metaphors are a forge wherein to *create* referents, then, they may be also instrumental in inspiring new hybrids, new perspectives, new entanglements, in a way that eschews the normative, mutually exclusive view of human and animal entities produced by humanism. Literalizing a metaphor, turning it into a metamorphosis, means embodying it in a real-world referent, enmeshing it into the chrono-spatial environment. It also means generating links between the many elements that make up the human, some long accepted, others – like animality – rejected. Accepting the human as a discursive construct allows us to move beyond the conceptualization of “man” as the counterpart to the simulacrum “animal” – a conceptualization that, as mentioned above, derives from humanism (Cimatti 1). At the same time, this view allows for a reconceptualization of human subjectivity as the contingent outcome of discursive composites made up of another form of language, not built on dichotomies but on relationality: language that holds infinite generative potential may usher in new subjective formations capable of embodying and expressing non-dichotomous relations between species.

## Analysis

As I have argued, metaphor is one of the primary literary devices deployed by authors to express instances of the posthuman, in that it generates a discursive space where the identity of the characters can be fluid, protean, always in a state of *becoming*. In *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, posthuman metamorphoses engender an assemblage of subject-body-space-time-language that blurs the boundaries between matter and environment, making the case for a different understanding of *zoe* in the posthuman age. This happens primarily through the pervasive use of metaphors, which are

deployed to describe settings, actions, characters, impressions, emotions. Following Alaimo (“Transcorporeality”), they break down the figure/ground distinction that normally exists between agents performing tasks and the environments hosting them. Thus, interaction-based metaphors tie space and time to a corporeal dimension, and bodies to a spatial dimension. The environments which Red and Blue cross are often personified, given bodily features and agency, invested with *zoe*: Blue, for instance, “combs or snarls the strands of time’s braid” (El-Mohtar and Gladstone 10) and Red “braids and unbraids history’s hair” (85). As the day breaks, “the horizon blinks, and morning yawns above it” (39). “The volcano [...] vomits rocks into the air” while “the lava [...] spits” (49). In turn, Red and Blue’s (post)human bodies become one with the chrono-spatial continuum. Blue writes: “I feel you, the needle of you, dancing up and downthread with breathtaking abandon. I feel your hand in places I’ve touched” (102), experiencing Red’s presence in time/space as if she were caressing a part of her body. Red, in turn, writes: “I want to be a context for you, and you for me” (130), making herself an environment for their love.

These quick references to the metaphorical use of language already introduce the blurred boundaries between the human and the nonhuman in *This Is How You Lose the Time War*. Such contamination is at its most evident, though, when we focus on the “species” to which Red and Blue belong. Braidotti introduces the act of *becoming* as a triad of processes that can – but not always do – happen simultaneously: becoming-animal, becoming-machine, and becoming-earth (66-67). From the outset, these processes are embodied by the leads of the novella. Red, who belongs to the Agency, is introduced as she roams a barren battlefield:

She holds a corpse that was once a man, her hands gloved in its guts, her fingers clutching its alloy spine. She lets go, and the exoskeleton clatters against rock. Crude technology. Ancient. Bronze to depleted uranium. He never had a chance. That is the point of Red. [...] Her weapons and armor fold into her like roses at dusk. Once flaps of pseudoskin settle and heal and the programmable matter of her clothing knits back together, Red looks, again, something like a woman. (El-Mohtar and Gladstone 2-3)

Red is a mechanical hybrid, whose shape can approximate that of a human female but does not coincide with it. Her appearance can shapeshift easily so that she will blend in or stand out, depending on the necessities of a given mission through space and time. In her first letter to Blue, an answer to a taunt on her enemy's part, she explains that members of the Agency experience life differently from Garden people: "We're not so isolated as you are, not so locked in our own heads. We think in public. Our notions inform one another, correct, expand, reform. Which is why we win" (12). Later, Red explains that Agents exist within the cloud, and inhabit "cyborgian" bodies which are designed or modified rationally in order to suppress physical impulses and needs (61). The description of Red's Commandant reiterates the point:

Usually Commandant operates upthread from some gleaming crystal citadel or other. At times the Agency has called Red to report to a bare platform orbiting an unfamiliar star, forgetting even to produce a humanlike superior she can address. The stars alone listen. Commandant [...] retreated to her pod long ago and now roams time and space as a disembodied mind, wedded to, webbed through, the Agency's great hyperspace machines. She takes form only when she must, and when she does, she chooses any form that lies to hand, or none. [...] Commandant stands before [Red], in the form of a big woman in an army uniform, wearing an apron, with bloody pliers in one hand. She holds them as if she is not used to holding things. (133-34)

Based on the insight Red offers through her letters and description of the nature of the Agency's members, it is possible to argue that they are already expressing several of the features Braidotti associates with the Posthuman subject: relationality, nomadism, inter-connectedness. They are, in a sense, the expected result of the process of *becoming-machine*, as they are represented as hybrid creatures more in touch with technology than with feelings and sensations. In relishing her embodied nature as a field agent, Red is unique among her peers.

Conversely, Blue and her peers belonging to Garden embody the *becoming-earth/animal* processes. She explains as follows:

Garden seeds the past with us [...] and we learn from and grow into its threads. We treat the past as trellis, coax our vineyard through and around, and harvest is not a word for swiftness; the future harvests us, stomps us into wine, pours us back into the root system in loving libation, and we grow stronger and more potent together. I have been birds and branches. I have been bees and wolves. I have been ether flooding the void between stars, tangling their breath into networks of song. I have been fish and plankton and humus, and all these have been me. But while I've been enmeshed in this wholeness – they are not the whole of me. (71-72)

The metaphors, here, are evidently drawn from the semantic field of agriculture: seeding, growing, harvesting. Blue is both the plant undergoing these processes and the one harvesting the time-braid. She is, at times, animals or natural elements, but never just them, and never just herself. Her subjectivity is polymorphic and relational. Like the Agency, Garden, too, keeps its members embedded. Narrating to Red the tale of how she had been infected by an insatiable hunger as a child and had to be cut off from Garden, she writes:

Garden can, does, has, will shed pieces, always, cuttings, flowers, fruit, but Garden endures and grows stronger again. [...] I had never been alone. [...] I was only my own body, only my own senses, only a girl whose parents were running to her because she had a bad dream. I touched their faces, and they were mine; I touched the bed I was on, smelled apples stewing somewhere outside. It was as if, in my own small way, I'd become Garden – so me in my wholeness, me in my fingers, in my hair, in my skin, whole the way Garden is whole, but apart. (123)

Only in her isolation, for the first time, does Blue experience a sense of completeness, as for the rest of her life she exists as a member of a bigger, interconnected whole. She is repulsed by it, and longs to be taken back by Garden, to be again part of that entangled totality of interwoven beings. Even as an adult, back to being part of the Garden, she revels in that sense of belonging to a greater organism.

Thus, the human-machine and human-earth/animal hybrids that make up the Agency and Garden even before the events of the novella begin

coincide with processes of *becoming*. Nevertheless, at the point in which the diegesis starts, their inter-relationality has lost much of its posthuman potential: members of the Agency and Garden, despite representing alterity for the readers, are not *interacting with* alterity, at least not in the sense that Braidotti implies. Even though there has been, at some point, a process of becoming through contact with the Other that originated the posthuman subjectivities of the Agency's and Garden's members, that process has long been interrupted in favor of isolating themselves once more as a "species." There is no communication among members of these opposed factions, no true exchange of information, values, emotions. Only when Red and Blue start writing to each other can the Posthuman process of subject creation through becoming and relating to Otherness resume. From such foreign contact, unexpected and awe-inspiring, derives the metamorphosis expressed through generative language – i.e., metaphor. It is Blue that transforms Red through her words, and vice versa.

The first and most visible step of this transformation, stylistically, is the deployment of metaphors in the salutation of the letters. Blue becomes, for instance, Mood Indigo, 0000FF, Lapis, Blueprint, while Red is Cardinal, Miskowaanzhe ("red light" in Anishinaabemowin language), Price Greater Than Rubies, Strawberry, Raspberry, Apple Tree, My Heart's Own Blood. The nomination through referents evoking the color of their names (in themselves metaphorical) continues past the direct address that opens each letter. In a passage describing Red finding a message by Blue, the authors choose this wording: "She feels each letter and word and wonders how long the sky and sea spent winding this cord, and who taught her the knot code in the first place, whether the iris bit her lip in frustration as she worked through a difficult passage" (70). Later, writing directly after Blue has saved her life by taking her wolf form and fighting the beast that wanted to kill her, Red confesses: "I try not to think of you the same way twice. [...] I change your shape in my thoughts. It's amazing how much blue there is in the world, if you look. You're different colors of flame: Bismuth burns blue, and cerium, germanium, and arsenic. See? I pour you into things" (81).

Such metaphors, though, do not work merely on analogy, as comparisons or substitutions. As mentioned above, Blue can take any shape through

Garden. She is animal, plant, and matter – anything traversed with *zoe*. Red, equally, can mechanically shapeshift according to her needs. They *are*, in essence, the many things they call each other, not singularly but as a whole. Blue is all the different colors of flame, the sky, the flowers; singling only one of them out is merely naming them through synecdoche – a part for the whole. Fundamentally, this whole encompasses any and all facets of *zoe*, a fact that is all the more true because it is acknowledged by the Other. Put differently, their naming each other things, their referencing elements that evoke their polymorphous identity constitutes the interaction, the act of relating to each other that originates one of the elements of critical posthumanism. They enter into communication, and thus start changing each other. In her first message, for instance, Blue brags that she has “infiltrated” (8) Red’s mind, and Red answers back arguing: “I’ve repaid your letter with my own. Now we have a correspondence. [...] Who’s infecting whom?” (14). As they warm to each other and start revealing their grudging respect turned into affection and, later, love, the concept returns. Red writes: “I have built a you within me, or you have. I wonder what of me there is in you” (95).

This declaration foreshadows what will happen towards the end of the story, when Red’s Commandant orders her to kill Blue with a poisonous letter and Red chooses to renounce her essence and take a literal part of Blue into herself to save her. In this sense, Red and Blue’s transformation into an entangled posthuman subject is not only figurative, as expressed by their growing feelings for each other, but literal. Key, here, is the way in which the authors choose to represent the missives. Far from being traditional letters, Red and Blue send each other messages in the most disparate ways, translating words into things, *materializing* language. They subvert all tropes about epistolary exchanges while retrieving them. This becomes evident from the very beginning:

On a span of blasted ground, [Red] finds the letter. [...] There should not be a sheet of cream-colored paper, clean save a single line in a long, trailing hand: *Burn before reading*. [...] She finds a lighter in a dead soldier’s pocket. Flames catch in the depths of her eyes. Sparks rise, ashes fall, and letters form on the paper, in that same long, trailing hand. [...] The letter burns her fingers as the signature takes shape. She lets its cinders fall. (4-5)



Here, the classic intimation often found in spy stories, “burn after reading,” is overturned. Only by destroying the letter can the message be received. The following missives are written in equally unexpected media: boiling water inside an MRI machine, bones of long-dead pilgrims, feathers, knots, tree rings, the stirring of tea. Two examples to illustrate the point: first, after consulting the literature on wax and sigils and perfumes, Red sends her letter on a piece of undigested dried cod inside a literal seal that Blue kills on a mission (41-43). This case of homonymy (seal=sigil; seal=marine animal) gives corporeality to a feature of epistolary exchanges, turning the wax seal into a slaughtered animal, whose function is *still* that of protecting the contents of the letter, extending the metaphor through similarity.

Second, Blue sends six letters in crimson seeds, delivered in a pouch tied to the neck of a goose and written in aftertaste. Red “eats the first three seeds one by one. [...] As each letter unfolds inside her mind, she frames it in the palace of her memory. She webs words to cobalt and lapis, she weds them to the robes of Mary in San Marco frescoes, to paint on porcelain, to the color inside a glacier crack. She will not let her go” (101). Ingesting the seeds induces a temporary metamorphosis: as she reads the fifth, “she is not a person anymore. She is a toad; she is a rabbit in the hunter’s hand; she is a fish. She is, briefly, Blue, alone with Red, and together” (117).

By materializing the letters in all these different instances, words themselves acquire a corporeal, physical dimension. Saying that Blue’s letter was a feather is no more a simple metaphor conveying notions of levity and softness, but a literal metamorphosis of the language. These corporeal words interact with Red and Blue’s bodies, changing their physiology, contaminating them and transforming them in such a way that will draw them closer, and further from their respective factions. Indeed, it is such corporeality of words that ensures the survival of the two characters. Once the Agency succeeds in poisoning Blue, Red chooses to travel back to all the moments in which she opened Blue’s letters in order to absorb as much of her as possible, revealing that the shadow she had noticed following her through time and space, only known as Seeker, is Red herself.

“Red kills time” (174), and she does it literally – once more, a literalized metaphor – as she moves from strand to strand with no regard for the preservation of time’s braid. She works on an assumption, that Blue cannot

be killed by a poison built for a Garden agent if she has been contaminated by Red's essence: "They have sprinkled bits of themselves through time. Ink and ingenuity, flakes of skin on paper, bits of pollen, blood, oil, down, a goose's heart" (179). Thus, she collects these bits as the Seeker, absorbing them into her body:

Red finds water in an MRI machine in an abandoned hospital and drinks. In a temple abyss, Red gnaws fallen bones. In a grand computer's heart, she peers through optic circuits. In a frozen waste, she slides a letter's splinters into her skin. She takes them into herself, adapts. Finds all the missing shades of Blue.

As the letters' taunts change tone, she must be more inventive. A spider eating a dragonfly. A shadow drinking tears and coiled enzymes within. [...] She travels the labyrinth of the past and rereads the letters. Recreates both herself and Blue, so young-seeming now, in her heart.

She clutches the text like a spar against a flood.

(182)

Once she has collected all traces of Blue, she is ready for her final metamorphosis:

On a bare island far upthread, she places the seal upon her tongue, chews, swallows, and collapses.

She shades herself with Blue, from blood, tears, skin, ink, words. She thrashes with the pain of growth inside her: new organs bloom from autotranscribed stem cells to shoulder old bits of her away. Green vines twine her heart and seize it, and she vomits and sweats until the vines' rhythm matches hers. A second skin grows within her skin, popping, blistering. She claws herself off upon the rocks like a snake and lies transformed. And more: A different mind plays around the edges of her own.

She feels herself alien. She has spent thousands of years killing bodies like the one she wears. Sea spray breaks the barren sunrise to rainbows.

(184)

With Blue growing inside her, Red can then access Garden to find Blue as a child and give her the antidote for the poison. Saved from certain death, Blue writes one last letter, in which she acknowledges their interwoven nature. "I want to explain myself – this self you've saved, this self you've

infected, this self that was Möbius twisted with yours from its earliest beginning” (196).

Thus, the circle is closed, in an array of metaphors pertaining to the field of bodily sensation (eating, touching, digesting, hurting, and so many more). Red is Blue and Blue is Red, both identities tangled together through the threads of time they so often walked. Their subjectivities, born from interaction with alterity, produce two posthuman beings settling into a permanent state of becoming: Red becoming Blue, Blue becoming Red. In the background – but no less relevant – lies generative, metaphorical language made matter, body, and space (“Letters are structures, not events. You give me a place to live inside,” writes Red; 95), ingested, digested, preserved within posthuman bodies slowly becoming posthuman subjects.

Red and Blue share a protean nature. Change is implicit in their existence; thus, their metamorphosis is never complete. Whatever shape they take will never be the last. In a state of permanent mutation, transformation, *becoming*, they embrace their being with each other and with their environment, letting their subjectivities be permeated by otherness. In sum, *This Is How You Lose the Time War* engages with the posthuman imagination to the point of reading as a manifesto for life *in fieri*, the highest expression of that inter-relational *zoe* which transverses all living matter.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Due to space constraints, I point the reader to Ranisch and Sorgner (2014) for an overview of the Posthuman. Ferrando (2013) also offers useful insights on terminology.
- <sup>2</sup> Due to space constraints, I am leaving out references to other studies of metaphor. I am especially eschewing mention to Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* and the research on conceptual metaphor on the grounds that I am not looking at the abstraction of the concept, but at its concrete realization in a specific case study.
- <sup>3</sup> In a simple metaphor like "Man is a wolf", man is the primary subject, the one invested by metaphor, and wolf the secondary, the one that lends its features.
- <sup>4</sup> On the discursive nature of human subjectivity, see Butler.
- <sup>5</sup> Unbecoming, in my understanding, is but another type of becoming in the sense illustrated before. It is becoming by deconstructing, by relinquishing notions unveiled as fallacious.

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