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The Anthropocene, Cli-Fi and Food: Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam*

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This article examines Margaret Atwood's climate fiction novel *MaddAddam* (2013), a dystopian cautionary text in which food production and eating become ethical choices related to individual agency and linked to sustainability. In the novel, both mainstream environmentalism and deep ecologism are shown to be insufficient and fundamentally irrelevant in the face of a submissive population, in a state of passivity that environmental studies scholar Stacy Alaimo relates to a scientific and masculinist interpretation of the Anthropocene. The article focuses on edibility as a key element in negotiating identity, belonging, cohabitation and the frontiers of the new *MaddAddam* postapocalyptic community.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; climate fiction; environmentalism; Anthropocene; food; ethics

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El Antropoceno, ficción climática y comida: *MaddAddam*, de Margaret Atwood

Este artículo se centra en la novela de ficción climática *MaddAddam* (2013), de Margaret Atwood, un texto distópico de advertencia en el cual la producción de comida y la alimentación se convierten en elecciones éticas relacionadas con la acción individual y vinculadas a la sostenibilidad. En la novela, tanto el ecologismo dominante como el ecologismo profundo muestran ser insuficientes y fundamentalmente irrelevantes ante una población sumisa, en un estado de pasividad que la especialista en estudios climáticos Stacy Alaimo relaciona con una interpretación científica y masculinista del Antropoceno. El artículo examina de qué modo la comestibilidad es un elemento esencial para negociar la identidad, la pertenencia y la cohabitación, así como para dibujar las fronteras de la comunidad postapocalíptica de *MaddAddam*.

Palabras clave: Margaret Atwood; ficción climática; ecologismo; Antropoceno; comida; ética

I. INTRODUCTION: THE ANTHROPOCENE AND CLIMATE FICTION

The term *Anthropocene* evokes how human activity has had a noticeable impact on the earth's climate and ecosystems. However, since not all human beings are involved to the same degree in the destruction of nature, Donna Haraway favors the use of other labels like *Technocene*, *Capitalocene* or *Plantatiocene* (2015, 160). While *Technocene* blames the earth's damage on the excessive use of technology and its effects on the environment and *Capitalocene* points to the capitalist system, *Plantatiocene* highlights the massive exploitation of farmlands as a substantial catalyst behind human modification of natural landscapes and the climate. The questioning of anthropocentrism and the denunciation of the consequences that human actions have upon the earth were central to environmentalism, born in the 1960s with the aim of trying to preserve nature. However, as Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus state, twentieth-century environmentalism has, in a certain way, failed, mainly because the goal of reducing both the planet's human population and its impact upon nature is at odds with a densely populated world that is not ready to renounce technology or embrace a return to "primitive" living (2011a, 17). This has led Greg Garrard to make a distinction between *mainstream environmentalism* and *deep ecology*, such that while the former combines a concern for environmental issues with a rejection of "radical social change" (2004, 18-19), the more radical deep ecology "demands recognition of intrinsic value in nature" (2004, 21) and does not place human beings at the center. In other words, deep ecologists do not give more value to human life than nonhuman entities. In the early twenty-first century, it seems as if all conservationist movements that have based their policies on the opposition between good/fragile nature and pernicious human actions may need to evolve in order to avoid the negative stereotype closely linked to what Garrard calls deep ecology. This radical type of environmentalism has been strongly politicized and associated with leftist fanaticism and primitivism (Katsnelson 2017), and this has resulted in a negative perception of it extending to environmentalism at large. In other words, it seems that environmentalism, as a label to name any movement advocating the preservation and protection of nature, has become outdated. Millennials—the generation of young adults born between 1980 and 2000—generally refuse to be labelled as environmentalists (Benderev 2014; Katsnelson 2017) and do not share the deep ecology precepts, even though a recent survey by the Pew Research Center shows that a large majority are ecoconscious (Katsnelson 2017).

In an attempt to make sense of the collective anxiety about climate change and to force us to respond to the prospect of ecological disaster, there is an increasing number of climate fiction (cli-fi) novels depicting a world that is more or less overtly suffering the consequences of climate change. Many cli-fi novels are the materialization of conservationist and environmentalist fears: a world in which human ubiquity and the loss of wilderness gives way to a fight for survival by the few survivors in a world that has returned to the primitive (Tuhus-Dubrow 2013, 59). Cli-fi novels sometimes intertwine satirical elements or even critiques of certain ecological principles, as is the

case in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, comprised of *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* ([2009] 2013) and the novel this article focuses on, *MaddAddam* ([2013] 2014). Set in an apocalyptic present after a deadly virus—the so-called Waterless Flood created by Glenn/Crake, a version of the mad scientist type—has nearly wiped out humanity, *MaddAddam* also provides extensive analepses to the time before the pandemic.¹ Cli-fi novels such as *MaddAddam* employ fiction as a possible agent of action in that they try to make readers react from their assumed state of *stuplimity*.² Cli-fi has not only the potential to represent the consequences of climate change, but also the capacity “to provide a space in which to address the Anthropocene’s emotional, ethical, and practical concerns” (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2019, 229). Among those fundamental concerns are, no doubt, human food production and consumption, given their direct connection with climate change and its consequences.

As is well known, industrialized food production triggers deforestation, soil erosion, desertification and pollution, and it has been argued that dystopian cautionary narratives of climate collapse that foreground the “link between humans and food [...] are appealing and effective in mobilizing readers’ imagination of plausible webs of environmental risk” (Botelho 2019, 36). This article’s purpose is therefore to discuss how *MaddAddam* engages with climate change by focusing on specific moments involving food in the novel, moments that highlight the “emotional, ethical, and practical concerns” of living under the effects of climate change in the Anthropocene era (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2019, 229). Drawing on Garrard’s distinction between mainstream “shallow environmentalism” (2004, 19) and “radical environmentalism” or deep ecology (20), I first consider *MaddAddam*’s vision of environmentalism before the pandemic, looking at how the novel portrays different reactions to environmental changes brought about by food production and consumption. In addition, the use of food and its social meanings in *MaddAddam*, before and after the pandemic, are examined as practical elements that demonstrate how food choices—a decision eventually made at the individual level—have a real and significant impact not only on our environment but also on our identity formation and sense of community.

Throughout her career, Atwood has demonstrated a pervasive awareness of and ecological orientation towards nature. Moreover, issues of consumerism and gender are closely intertwined with food in her writing. In her first novel, *The Edible Woman* ([1969] 1997), the protagonist eschews meat, which is “equated with the exploitation of women, animals and the environment” (Ferreira 2019, 147). *Surfacing* ([1972] 2009)

¹ Crake decides to exterminate humanity in order to save the earth. In the metaphorical fight between an environment about to collapse and the human race, Crake situates himself on the side of nature/the earth. He acts both as a mad scientist and as a radical deep ecologist who does not grant his fellow human beings any privileged position. By means of genetic reengineering, he expects to expel the destructive human race from the earth forever.

² The term *stuplimity* was coined by Sianne Ngai. In a derivation from the concept of the sublime, *stuplimity* is “the experience of boredom increasingly intertwined with contemporary experiences of aesthetic awe” (Ngai 2005, 8), a “synthesis of excitation and fatigue” (36).

has been described as a “feminist and nature-based search for the self” (Van Spanckeren 1988, xxii), while extinction, evolution and the question of human identity—that is, whether humanity can “become *human* at some future time” (Greene 1988, 68; italics added)—are tackled in *Life Before Man* ([1979] 1996). Furthermore, Atwood’s most famous novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* ([1985] 1996), which has achieved canonical status, is a partial reflection on the 1980s response to climate change and its effects on women, animal extinction and food. In the *MaddAddam* trilogy, Atwood turns her attention to some of her more recent concerns. Unlike her previous novels, the trilogy shows a stronger emphasis on science and its effects, including issues like the development of biotechnology and the uses that may be made of it. In her view, “no matter how high the tech, *Homo sapiens sapiens* remains at heart what he’s been for tens of thousands of years—the same emotions, the same preoccupations” (2005, 286). This dovetails with Hannes Bergthaller’s observation that “the behavioral patterns that lead to environmental destruction are not in any way ‘unnatural,’ [...]; they are indeed lodged in ‘the ancient primate brain’” (2010, 741). Scarcity of food due to environmental collapse brought about by climate change is a visible and immediate effect in the fictional realm of the *MaddAddam* trilogy and can be perceived by the reader as a real threat. Indeed food—essential for human survival—is central to climactic moments in many postapocalyptic fictions, such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* ([2006] 2010)—where food is “so difficult to find, and so dangerous, and yet, a non-negotiable necessity [that it] takes on a role of its own” (Staves 2013)—or Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* ([2008] 2012)—which openly explores food symbolism and control of food as power (Lioniello 2016).

Oryx and Crake, the first novel in the *MaddAddam* trilogy, introduces a postapocalyptic situation in which Jimmy/Snowman seems to be the only human survivor after the Waterless Flood pandemic. Before the apocalypse, the world was divided into the Compounds—inhabited by a powerful scientific minority—and the Pleeblands—where the common people lived, crowded into slums and at the mercy of a savage capitalism with no respect for human rights. While *Oryx and Crake* tells the story from Jimmy’s point of view, *The Year of the Flood*, the second novel in the trilogy, renders the same chronological period from the perspective of two other survivors, both of them women: Ren and Toby. The main thread in the story follows the God’s Gardeners, a deep ecology religious group that rebels against the Compounders, while the Painballers, violent convicts dehumanized to a reptilian level, are forced to fight each other to the death. Finally, in the postpandemic scenario of *MaddAddam* the earth is ravaged by a harsh, inhospitable climate. The last remaining humans and the Crakers—created in a laboratory by Glenn/Crake in an attempt to replace the almost extinct human race—join forces in the fight for survival. The Painballers and biogenetically created wild animals like the Pigeons constitute the main threats to the survival of the new *MaddAddam* community.

MaddAddam features many instances of food consumption and feeding. Indeed, Debra Wain and Penelope Jane Jones emphasize the intertwined nature of cli-fi and food across the entire *MaddAddam* trilogy. For them, food is used “to structure the narrative [...]

and to develop and position characters” (2018, 4-6). In other words, food—what the characters can or choose to eat—operates as both a symptom of technological advances in human history and a defining symbol of belonging. On her part, and with a focus on the connection between meat consumption from genetically modified animals—“artificial” meat—and environmentalism, Susan McHugh reads *Oryx and Crake* as an “exploration of the post-apocalyptic as a posthuman condition” (2010, 187). Relatedly, Jovian Parry remarks how reflections on the edibility of humans and animals permeate *Oryx and Crake* and how “eating ‘real,’ ‘natural’ meat can be seen as a method of reconnecting to the natural world, as well as a statement about subjugating it” (2009, 248). In other words, eating meat can be read as an ambiguous act that bears the potential to both reinstate humanity in a dominant position over the nonhuman, but also to blur the boundaries between communities/species. As is shown in what follows, both possibilities are explored in *MaddAddam*’s treatment of food and feeding.

2. ECOLOGICAL RESPONSE: FOOD AND CLI-FI IN *MADDADDAM*

MaddAddam offers two main narrative threads: analepses to the life of Zeb—brother of Adam, the founder of the God’s Gardeners’ cult—before the apocalypse brought about by the pandemic, and the events that happen in the narrative present, after the pandemic, which are filtered through Toby’s focalization.

2.1. Before the Apocalypse

The privileged people living in the Compounds were mostly scientists and their families. Instead of taking ecologist measures, they employed technological advances to escape from the unbearable natural conditions outside their artificial habitat. They adopted what Stacy Alaimo calls a “resource management approach” (2016, 105), because they saw nature as a space in which “everything is part of the food chain, and subject to natural law: consumption by violent murder in the preponderance of cases” (Istvan 2019). However, even before the pandemic, some citizens tried to adopt environmentalist strategies to resist the change and help restore nature. In *MaddAddam*’s pre-Waterless Flood society, environmentalism is exemplified through two different groups: Bearlift—an example of mainstream environmentalism—and the God’s Gardeners—who have a religious and deep ecology understanding of life.

It soon becomes obvious that the Compounders were not total strangers to the latent danger that the degeneration of nature involved for human survival. In an ironic metafictional comment that mirrors *MaddAddam*’s plot—a cli-fi novel that fictionalizes the apocalypse to warn about it—the narrator mentions that the “issue of apocalypse” due to climate change had become pervasive in popular culture and general entertainment: “There had even been online TV shows about it: computer-generated landscape pictures with deer grazing in Times Square [...] earnest experts lecturing about all the wrong turns taken by the human race” (Atwood [2013]

2014, 32). The novel shows how the media functions as a useful tool to appease the population so as to achieve an objective that is all but innocuous: “to render reality into information, rather than to effect material change” (Alaimo 2016, 101). *MaddAddam*’s preapocalypse society shows general apathy camouflaged as minimal environmental action without any real positive impact. Alaimo has productively discussed apathy in the face of impending ecological collapse. Like early twenty-first-century societies, the preapocalypse population in *MaddAddam* receive data/information “divorced from actual places” and for “the Benefit of Society [...] but not necessarily [for the benefit of] ecologies, habitats, or nonhuman creatures” (102). According to Alaimo, the climate change phenomenon has been primarily studied and analyzed from the perspective of the conventional sciences. Largely based on what she sees as masculinist principles of detachment and objectivity that produce an allegedly neutral “view from nowhere” (98), this approach creates a binary structure composed of two separate and distinct parts—the subject and the object of study.³ Only a “distinctive group of humans” (102)—the subjects—have access to scientific truth about nature; the rest of humanity, in contrast, are homogenized and objectified into “a universal human class” (102) released both from liability and from action. In Alaimo’s words, “all responsibility, all accountability, all values, all risks, are magically erased. Uncertainty in this articulation does not point to the necessity of the precautionary principle, but instead serves as a prelude to apathy” (99). Apathetic responses are apparent both in *MaddAddam* and in reality when, paradoxically and simultaneously, climate change is perceived as something real but incredible: “the prospect of a forthcoming catastrophe which, however probable it may be, is effectively dismissed as impossible” (Žižek 2010, 238).

Nonreligious mainstream environmentalism is portrayed in *MaddAddam* as assimilated by the capitalist apparatus—“a fabricated deceit of and for the rich and powerful” (Istvan 2019). Bearlift is a clear example of the hypocrisy of institutionalized environmentalism, an excuse for private corporations to dispose of their trash by feeding polar bears with city leftovers: “Bearlift was a scam [...] lived off the good intentions of city types with disposable emotions who liked to think they were saving something” (Atwood [2013] 2014, 59). This mainstream understanding of sustainability is linked to a desire to preserve the environment without renouncing “technological, economic, and social progress on a global scale” (Berghthaller 2010, 730). In this context, technology is used by the inhabitants of the Compounds to defend themselves from a hostile nature through the creation of artificial habitats—anything but cutting down on consumption, procreation and progress. In sum, *MaddAddam* shows how the pre-Waterless Flood society is mainly oblivious to the natural environment. In this context, and as Christina Bieber Lake points out, it may be argued that the apocalypse

³ In line with Anthropocene feminism—“a response to the masculinist and techno-normative approach to the Anthropocene” (Grusin 2017a, v-vi)—Alaimo claims that mainstream discourses on climate change create a “gendered ontology of feminine corporeal vulnerability as opposed to the scientific (or masculinist) imperviousness” (2016, 103).

in *MaddAddam* is designed to instigate reflection by functioning as a mirror image of the choices available to early twenty-first-century citizens/readers (2013, 13).

In the pre-Waterless Flood times, food is produced mainly with the help of technology since naturally sourced traditional food is disappearing: “the changed climate is shown to diminish people’s ability to produce food in the same way as done in the past” (Wain and Jones 2018, 5). That is, even in their self-protective technological isolation, climate change has negative implications for the Compounders’ daily lives. Thus, they witness how some species are annihilated and how the earth suffers changes caused by human agents. They also desperately try to imitate chocolate, a highly appreciated symbol of well-being and pleasure that has become something to mourn, an irrecoverable loss: “The Choco-Nutrinos had been a desperate stab at a palatable breakfast cereal for children after the world chocolate crop had failed. [...] they took it for granted” (Atwood [2013] 2014, 140–41). This nostalgia for “real” food from times before the postapocalyptic setting of *MaddAddam* suggests that the novel may be identified as a critical dystopia—utopia in dystopia—since memories of “real” food bring in a sense of “resistance, survival, and horizons of hope” (Sousa Oliveira 2019, 50). According to Manuel J. Sousa Oliveira, “real food” also flags up the class division between the powerful Compounders and the poorer people in the Pleeblands, fed by technologically produced “nonreal food” (2019, 52). In order to bring to the fore ecocritical issues, novelists have frequently associated the consumption of genetically modified food, such as, allegedly, some “fake meat,” with disgust (McHugh 2010, 181). McHugh identifies three different types of “fake meat” produced in the Compounds (2010, 183), and the reaction of abjection they produce is exemplified in *Oryx and Crake* when Glenn/Crake shows Jimmy the “Neoagricultural” section where the genetically manipulated, chicken-based “ChickieNobs” are produced (Atwood 2003, 202). From this perspective, and were it not for the problem of sustainability, killing and eating an animal would be less repulsive than eating something that has never been alive.

MaddAddam can be read as a mirror image of contemporary reality. The 2019 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Report concludes that one of the greatest challenges for people working throughout the food chain is how to get “more food for more people with less resources and emissions” (quoted in Flachowsky et al. 2019, 66). The report highlights that, in order to achieve this goal, “the changing of consumption behavior of humans” is of major importance (quoted in Flachowsky et al. 2019, 66). One distinct cause of ecological degradation is the kind of food being produced, since the landscape is shaped by consumers’ tastes: “Eaters [...] must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and that how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used” (Berry 1990, 149). In the *MaddAddam* trilogy, Atwood makes efficient use of food to expose this kind of link between cause and effect. As Toby explains to Blackbeard—a Craker child—people before the Waterless Flood ate unethically, in the “wrong way” (Atwood [2013] 2014, 92): “Bad people in the chaos ate the Children of Oryx [animals] [...].

They killed them and killed them, and ate them and ate them. They were always eating them” (93). Excess of demand together with the lack of ethics around the production and consumption chain led to people in the Compounds eating food of dubious composition—“quasi-meat products at SecretBurgers” (131); “fish fingers... twenty per cent real fish [...]. Who knows what was really in them. [...] we ate them” (149). The Compounders ate technologically manipulated food without questioning their own possibilities and choices, blind to its origins and the ethics of its production; they even accepted products like the above-mentioned “ChickieNobs,” which provided no sensorial inputs whatsoever. Food choices carry ethical implications. Danette DiMarco understands Jimmy’s aversion to eating Pigeons—creatures genetically much like himself since they were created to serve as sources of replacement organs for humans—as evidence of his potential for change and “his ability to be compassionate and ethical” (2005, 188), in contrast to Glenn/Crake, who is depicted as the *homo faber*, focused on instrumentalism and economic profit “grounded repeatedly in a violation of nature” (2005, 181). Not only human-like animals but also the weakest members of society were at risk of becoming food in the Pleeblands, since their bodies could be eaten by animals. Poor children from the slums were first sexually exploited and then disposed of by feeding them to fish: “The sex bazaar side [...] kids [...] from the favelas on a limited-time-use basis, turning them over, and fishfooding them at a fast clip” (Atwood [2013] 2014, 176). Or even worse, some vulnerable, underprivileged women from the Pleeblands would first be completely exhausted by their sexual exploitation and then, in an exercise of soulless cannibalism, eaten by other humans, the predator Painballers—“sex until you were worn to a fingernail was their mode; after that, you were dinner. They liked the kidneys” (9). Lack of ethics, empathy and humanity, then, shaped the landscape of both the Compounds and the Pleeblands before the Waterless Flood—a desolate landscape for a dystopian story.

On the other hand, the God’s Gardeners are an example of a deep ecology response, even though, paradoxically, they eventually became part of the trigger for the apocalypse due to their incomplete knowledge and involuntary support of Glenn/Crake’s plans. They were nevertheless conscious of the ethical significance of food consumption. The God’s Gardeners used food as a tool of resistance against the status quo, in contrast to the acquiescence shown by the rest of the population. They grew vegetable gardens on the roofs of old buildings, took “Vegivows,” did not eat animals and tried to preserve nonaggressive ancestral agricultural traditions. They ate ethically, rejecting everything the capitalist-scientific dominant class had manufactured or manipulated. If “people are defined by what they eat” (Sceats 2000, 1), then the God’s Gardeners were the only force of resistance attempting to preserve an environment being led into destruction. It was a marginal attempt, however, and insufficient to conserve biodiversity. Furthermore, according to Hope Jennings, their male leader Adam’s “only ethical stance in relation to the environment and nonhumans is to adopt a positioning of inaction” (2019, 27).

2.2. After the Apocalypse

After the Waterless Flood, human survivors and Crakers find themselves in a post-Anthropocene epoch when the environment experiences a renaissance: “the enemies of God’s Natural Creation no longer exist, and the animals and birds—those that did not become extinct under the human domination of the planet—are thriving unchecked. Not to mention the plant life” (Atwood [2013] 2014, 209). The main threat for the MaddAddam community still comes from some humans. The Painballers are genetically and biologically human beings, but the extremely bloody conditions of the Painball “game” result in the fact that those who had survived it “more than once had been reduced to the reptilian brain” (9). The dehumanized Painballers became predators, unable to feel empathy for the suffering of others, whether human beings or animals. Their choice of food functions as a systematic indicator of their loss of humanity. They practiced cannibalism without any remorse even in the pre-Waterless Flood times and in the post-Anthropocene period they still abuse any living creature that comes into their hands—they eat whoever and whatever they find. A further instance of cannibalism in the novel occurs when Zeb resorts to it after his helicopter crashes in the middle of the Mackenzie Mountains. Zeb worked for Bearlift piloting helicopters to transport food to feed polar bears. On his last trip, his companion Chuck’s attempt to kill him caused a fight that eventually resulted in the crash. Without any food and far away from civilization, Zeb was forced to eat “some of Chuck” (70)—his dead enemy—in order to survive. This scene recalls a real-life event that took place in October-December 1972, when Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 crashed in the Andes and survivors eventually resorted to eating parts of the corpses of those who had died.⁴ In these two cases, cannibalism is exclusively the last and only chance to survive, not a gratuitous choice. They underline the difference between eating in the “wrong” and in the “right” way; in other words, the difference between voluntarily becoming a predator on one’s own kind and cannibalism for survival. While in the case of the Painballers “hatred and viciousness are addictive. You can get high on them. Once you’ve had a little, you start shaking if you don’t get more” (11), Zeb tells himself that eating part of a corpse for “*Nutrition, capital N*” (77; italics in the original) is justified. It is also a test that reminds Zeb of his childhood, when his father forced him to eat his own vomit. On both occasions, Zeb had to overcome his abjection and deprive the act of eating of any symbolic meaning—“See no Evil, Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil” (77)—in order to preserve his sense of human identity.⁵

After liberating a traumatized Amanda—Jimmy’s former girlfriend and one of the human survivors—from the Painballers, Toby makes some soup to feed all the humans,

⁴ Famously, in *Alive! The Story of the Andes Survivors* Piers Paul Read gave a compelling account of the Andes accident and its aftermath based on interviews with survivors and their families ([1974] 2002).

⁵ Julia Kristeva defines abjection as the subjective horror that individuals feel when confronted with the materiality of their bodies. This confrontation disrupts the distinction between Self and Other, that is, it triggers the collapse of the demarcation of individual identity. She explains that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (1982, 4).

including the Painballers themselves (10). Sharing a meal is traditionally considered to create community. Toby even cherishes the hope that the exconvicts could be reincorporated into humanness. It is the day of the old Gardener festivity of St. Julian, “a celebration of God’s tenderness and compassion for all creatures” (10). That is why Toby, still very much influenced by her preapocalypse beliefs as a member of the God’s Gardeners, feels a parental responsibility towards all the humans present. She behaves like a “kindly godmother, ladling out the soup, dividing up the nutrients for all to share” (11). Offering food has traditionally signified friendship and welcoming. Nevertheless, the animalized Painballers are unable to respond to human solidarity and reenter human society. Their capacity to feel empathy, fondness or love has been permanently damaged. They have become no different from “other predators in the forest” (14), creatures that threaten the new posthuman community formed by the Crakers and the human survivors.

MaddAddam, as may be appreciated, seems to be addressing the question of what kind of food makes us human. In the novel, eating is one of the main traits that initially distinguishes humans from the Crakers. As Jimmy explains to the Crakers at the very beginning of the trilogy, “their food was not his food” (Atwood 2003, 187). The Crakers do not eat any kind of animal, only leaves that are not edible to human beings. The fact that they eat their own excrement positions them at another level as a species, at first sight very far from humans. As pointed out above, human beings experience a feeling of abjection when confronted with the possibility of eating our own fluids, blood or vomit. The very idea of eating our bodily waste is nauseating. Through abjection “primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (Kristeva 1982, 12-13). Thus, this Craker characteristic makes them look more like animals and less like humans. Their shocking “self-recycling” behavior is a powerful representation of Kristevan abjection, which disrupts the limits of human identity— “[it] does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 1982, 4). The posthuman Crakers, in sum, are situated in a middle ground between animals and humans. However, there is mutual revulsion between humans and Crakers as regards the other group’s way of feeding themselves. In spite of a feeling of guilt, the God’s Gardener survivors have abandoned their promise not to eat animal proteins—“It hadn’t taken them long to backslide on the Gardener Vegivows” (Atwood [2013] 2014, 34)—since they see no point in being vegan in the post-Anthropocene era. The human MaddAddamites’ new carnivorous diet is as repulsive to the Crakers as the consumption of excrement is to the humans: “The Crakers withdraw to a safe distance; they don’t like to be too close to the odours of carnivore cookery” (48). The Crakers do not understand why humans eat animal proteins, like the “smelly bone” that goes in Toby’s soup (11). Significantly, references to the “smelly bone” abound in the novel. A particularly important one is to be found in the title of the first chapter, where it is linked to the Crakers’ myth of origin: “*The Story of the Egg, and of Oryx and Crake, and how they made People and Animals; and of the Chaos; and of Snowman-the-*

Jimmy; and of the Smelly bone and the coming of the Two Bad Men" (4; italics in the original). What humans eat is so shockingly incomprehensible to the Crakers that they include it among the significant things to remember in their religious/myth-making narratives.

The MaddAddamites eat dog ribs and Pigeon chops—which they call “Frankenbacon, considering they’re splices [...]. They’ve got human neocortex tissue” (19)—and circumvent the ethical implications of eating their former pets and their genetic relatives by emphasizing the Pigeons’ animal side. However, according to Darryl Wenneman, what defines humanity is the fact that humans are not only a biological species but also moral creatures. He draws on the work of philosophers Wilfrid Sellars and Mary Anne Warren to put forward his concept of posthuman personhood, which is “anthropocentric but not speciesist” (2013, 11).⁶ This posthuman personhood, which is open to nonhuman beings, constitutes the basis of the moral community and suggests an ethics of self-limitation that “depends on who and or [*sic*] what we consider to be a person” (Wennemann 2013, 12). To return to Atwood’s novel, what to eat is at first a mere issue of survival for the MaddAddamites. It only becomes an ethical choice once they are able to communicate with the Pigeons and recognize their ability to think and feel—the fact that the Pigeons are “Children of Oryx [animals] and Children of Crake [people like the Crakers], both” ([2013] 2014, 268). With Blackbeard acting as a translator, humans can communicate with Pigeons as equals. Once the MaddAddamites ethically recognize the Pigeons’ posthuman personhood as nonbiological humans, they are incorporated into the moral community. The implication of this for the MaddAddamite humans is that the Pigeons are kin to them and eating their kin would be a kind of cannibalism, because, as Toby says, “you are not the friend of those who turn you into a smelly bone” (268).

With the MaddAddamite humans and the Pigeons, together with the Crakers, forming a posthuman alliance to fight the Painballers, each group has to adapt their food consumption behaviors in order to create a peaceful society. The Pigeons, who have their own ethical way of nourishing themselves—they think it is morally right to kill and eat an enemy or eat any animal that is already dead, but “not kill and then eat, no” (71)—promise the humans to respect Toby’s orchard and not kill any humans—“not eating the garden, not killing them” (2014). The MaddAddamites renounce their Vegivows and find in deer “an acceptable source of animal protein” (377). Finally, the Craker Blackbeard, in spite of the repugnance that eating a living animal causes to his sense of identity, eventually “performs” the act of eating a fish as part of the ceremony and the rites he has to go through as the new chronicler and “priest” for his people:

⁶ Sellars describes two images or pictures of man: the “scientific image of man”—a material image made of body tissues and genes—and the prescientific “manifest image”—which has its roots in human self-awareness of existence in the world. On her part, Warren describes consciousness, reasoning, self-motivated and independent activity, capacity to communicate, presence of self-concepts, self-awareness and moral agency as the necessary conditions to grant personhood. Consequently, for Warren “a human fetus is not a person, is not human” (Wennemann 2013, 16-31).

Now I will eat the fish. We do not eat a fish, or a smelly bone; that is not what we eat. It is a hard thing to do, eating a fish. But I must do it. Crake did many hard things for us, when he was on the earth in the form of a person [...] so I will try to do this hard thing of eating the smelly bone fish. It is cooked. It is very small. Perhaps it will be enough for Crake if I put it into my mouth and take it out again. There. I am sorry for making the noise of a sick person. Please take the fish away and throw it into the forest. The ants will be happy. The maggots will be happy. The vultures will be happy. Yes, it does taste very bad. It tastes like the smell of a smelly bone, or the smell of a dead one. [...] the hard thing of eating the fish, the smelly bone taste—that is what needs to be done. First the bad things, then the story. (357-58)

As may be seen, eating an animal provokes in the young Craker a reaction of horror and abjection. He has been created vegan and for him eating an animal is as intolerable and unacceptable as it is for humans to eat their own vomit or excrement. And yet, Blackbeard goes on to repeat the action once and again. The decision to eat fish is for the young Craker a serious breach of his own nature that could be followed by other unexpected changes in his biotechnologically designed behavior. If the development of their myths and culture shows that the Crakers are moving away from their projected way of thinking, Blackbeard's self-imposed eating of an animal might be read as implying that the Crakers might evolve into beings capable of exerting violence, thus abandoning their initially naive outlook and behavior.

On the other hand, Blackbeard performs what for him is an extremely unethical action and validates it for the sake of “the story.” He shows a certain moral relativism in justifying the death of an animal as part of a “religious” ritual destined to entertain his people by creating a new story—“that is what needs to be done” (358). Arguably, this may be read as a metafictional commentary on the novel itself in the sense that, as Atwood has explained, in the real world climate degeneration, savage capitalist consumption and uncontrolled biotechnological development are the “bad” things she “needed” in order to write *MaddAddam* (2017). Within the diegesis, human extermination is an extremely bad thing that Crake had to bring about in *Oryx and Crake* so as to make room for the postpandemic story told in *MaddAddam*, just like the eating of a fish is the bad action Blackbeard performs so as to be able to begin telling his own tales. The Crakers understand human extinction as necessary in order for them to have their own beginning, their own myths and civilization. The end of human civilization, like the act of eating fish, are not pleasant events or actions, and yet, although on a very different scale, they are both about death and seem essential if a new story is to begin.

In addition, and although Atwood avoids unnecessary gory details about the victims' deaths, more human lives—the Painballers'—are mown down to build a “peaceful” community in the unseen future of the story. All Pigeons and human survivors but one vote for the Painballers' execution. The killing of the violent exconvicts, no longer recognized as fellow human beings, is legitimized because they do not belong to the new posthuman community—“Who cares what we call them [...] as long as it's not

people” (Atwood [2013] 2014, 367; italics in the original). Even the Pigeons, who can eat their enemies, do not want to eat the Painballers’ flesh—“they do not want those ones to be part of them” (370). In the new community, ethical consideration is extended only to those belonging to it, and the Painballers do not. The Painballers “had been poured away, as Crake poured away the chaos” (371), including the entire pre-Waterless Flood human population. Thus, the final implication seems to be that humankind as a whole deserved the same punishment as is meted out to the criminal Painballers at the end of *MaddAddam*: extermination. Ironically, in the novel violence is the sine qua non for both the future and stories to exist. Stories provide readers with a way into un-lived experiences so they can, perhaps, avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future. In this sense, both Blackbeard’s tales for his people and the *MaddAddam* trilogy itself have didactic aims, the difference being that, while Blackbeard’s are tales from the diegetic past, *MaddAddam* is a dystopian tale for the future—yet one that has become sadly topical since the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic, when many things that we used to take for granted have become dreams from the past.

3. CONCLUSION

MaddAddam describes the way of living of the inhabitants of the earth before and after the Anthropocene, considered as a boundary stage. The novel’s two different versions of environmentalism, located in the preapocalyptic time, prove to be insufficient to counteract the majority of the Compounders’ apathy and detachment. The Compounders’ scientific interventions destroy the environment in the quest for food. In the nightmarish pre-Waterless Flood society, food—what to eat—is not only a primary need, but also a site for ethical action and reflection that interpellates every individual. Environmental concern is a recurrent theme in Atwood’s oeuvre; in *MaddAddam*, as a novelty, the danger of the abuse of technology is added to the equation, and it is not only women that are “edible”—as in *The Edible Woman*—but all the weaker members of society can become food.

After the apocalypse, and in common with other recent dystopias like *The Road* or *The Hunger Games*, food becomes more than ever a matter of survival. Some recent critics, like Jennings, locate the *MaddAddam* trilogy within the debate about Anthropocene feminism, which identifies scientific knowledge with masculinity and passivity and femininity with agency and nontechnological solutions (2019, 25). In the third novel in the trilogy, female nontechnological agency is personified by Toby, who feeds the sick, grows a vegetable garden and obtains honey from her beehive. But above all, eating in *MaddAddam* defines who one is; it is “a signifier of belonging” (Sceats 2000, 139). While at first food is a distinctive feature that separates, rather than links, human survivors from the new inhabitants of the earth, by the end of the novel there is not only a right and a wrong way to eat, but a right and wrong way to kill. In Daryl J. Wennemann’s terms, ethical recognition of the Other “depends on who and or [*sic*]

what we consider to be a person” (2013, 12). As new members of the MaddAddam community, the nonhuman Pigeons will not be killed or eaten. Nevertheless, human survivors will eat “real” meat and a Craker—against his own nature—will eat fish. The survivors’ definite rejection of veganism defines it as an ethical choice linked to sustainability rather than a moral code, in tune with Emelia Quinn and Benjamin Westwood’s observation that “in the contemporary world, veganism is motivated for many, first and foremost, by environmental concerns” (2018a, 7).

Ultimately, the new posthuman community, MaddAddam, is not so different from the preapocalyptic one, since there still seem to be legitimate reasons to exert violence—on the human Painballers, in particular. Although the novel considers various scenarios and invites readers to critically evaluate different options, it closes with a sense that, as Francis Fukuyama asserts, “there are no transcendent standards for determining right and wrong beyond whatever a culture declares to be a right” (2002, 113). Atwood masterfully uses ambiguity and irony and, in her own words, “Message? There is no message. Ha! Be nice to people [...]. If you want to do a message rent a billboard and do an advertising campaign” (2013).

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