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Chloé Bour-Lang

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Reading the Links of the World: an Introduction to Barbara Kingsolver's Ecofeminist Ethics

Chloé Bour--Lang
Université de Strasbourg
SEARCH (UR 2325)

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Résumé

Lire les liens du monde : une introduction à l'éthique écoféministe de Barbara Kingsolver

Dans la fiction de l'autrice américaine contemporaine Barbara Kingsolver, les liens qui unissent le monde sont au cœur de tout, et plus encore quand il s'agit d'observer la relation des êtres humains à la nature. À travers une grille de lecture écoféministe, cette étude de son roman intitulé *Prodigal Summer* (2000) propose d'observer les comportements liés aux dynamiques de genre ainsi qu'aux idéologies qui en découlent, afin de mettre en lumière le rôle de la littérature dans un possible renouvellement paradigmatique. En défaisant les idéaux de masculinité destructeurs dénoncés par l'autrice à travers l'analyse de quelques protagonistes et de leur relation à la nature, cet article vise à étudier la critique qu'elle propose quant à cette attitude délétère. Celle-ci deviendra la base d'une histoire de réunification, dans laquelle la traque de l'animal se transforme en manière de prendre soin des interconnexions du monde.

Mots-clés : écoféminisme, animaux, interdépendance, écofiction, littérature américaine.

Abstract

In Barbara Kingsolver's stories, the links that tie the world together are at the heart of everything – especially when it comes to examining human beings' relationship to nature. Through an ecofeminist lens, this study of her 2000 novel, *Prodigal Summer*, aims at unraveling the ideological and gender-bound behaviours of the protagonists, to further reveal how literature can play a role in a paradigmatic renewal. By unknitting the ties of the masculine and destructive ideology through the analysis of some of the male protagonists and of their relationship with nature, this paper aims at showing how Kingsolver exposes its ominous biases. This criticism eventually turns into the base for a story of reunification, where tracking animals become a way to take care of the interconnections of the world.

Keywords: ecofeminism, animals, interdependence, ecofiction, American literature.

As we are faced with an increasing number of environmentally-related catastrophes, from the multiplication of social issues to the current Covid-19 pandemic, Barbara Kingsolver's fiction offers a thought-provoking reassessment of the Western ideology that created a fertile ground for these crises to happen. Inheriting from her budding activism born in the 70s, she interweaves interrogations surrounding ecology, feminism and power dynamics, and by doing so, questions our relationship and understanding of the natural world. Her singular insights thus invite readers into a reimagining process for a more functional and habitable world, which Bénédicte Meillon has already analysed for its re-enchanting qualities¹.

Despite her relevance to the understanding of today's world by opening pathways towards a healing reflection, and despite being widely acclaimed by critics and readers alike, Kingsolver remains relatively unknown to the French public and scholars. This paper seeks to offer an ecofeminist reading of Kingsolver's fiction, which builds on Meillon's analysis, for ecofeminism is concerned with similar questions². Our analysis will therefore draw from Carol Gilligan's work *In a Different Voice* which laid the grounds for an ecofeminist ethic, as she identified that a feminine "conception of morality [is] concerned with the activity of care" through its emphasis on "responsibility and relationships," as opposed to a masculine "conception of morality as fairness," which emphasizes "separation rather than connection"³ and focuses more on the autonomy of the individual than on her context and relationships⁴.

My aim, through this analysis, will be to show how literature participates in redefining the Western understanding of nature, specifically through the recovering of the ability to perceive, acknowledge and care for its connexions. By analysing how Kingsolver puts forth the invisibilisation of the links that tie the world together in her 2000 novel *Prodigal Summer*, this paper proposes an ecofeminist reading of both the author's work and new insights into our critical framework.

1. A Reading of Separation

Although Barbara Kingsolver's characters are complex and certainly not flat-out stereotypes, they come to embody the author's underlying criticism of the social construction of masculine and feminine traits, specifically in regards to the characters' relationship with nature. Indeed, through an (eco)feminist reading of her fiction, it becomes clear that a resolutely masculine attitude towards the environment, be it from male or female characters, is deleterious to much more than nature itself. Carol J. Adams thus explains that the "construction of a separate and individual self directly reflects the masculinist predilection to make invisible the interconnections between people and all living things⁵." Therefore, an analysis of the invisibilisation of the links that connect human beings to the natural world and which behaviours are at play in this erasure will shed light on how *Prodigal Summer* gives the opportunity of a critical reading of the dominant ideology of separation. By endorsing the idea that human animals are above the natural world and should maintain this virtuous separation, these characters are partaking in what the author presents as a deadly dynamic⁶.

¹ Bénédicte Meillon, *La nouvelle-oxymore de Barbara Kingsolver : la révélation des écritures et l'écriture des révélations*, thèse de doctorat, Université de Toulouse-le-Mirail, 2005.

² In her Ph. D. thesis, Meillon already recognized the ecofeminist reach of Kingsolver's work, dedicating a subpart to what she entitled "le courant 'écoféministe'" (p. 397-403) but did not go into details.

³ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 19.

⁴ Josephine Donovan, Carol J. Adams (eds.), *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 2.

⁵ Carol J. Adams, "Caring About Suffering A Feminist Exploration (1995)", in Josephine Donovan, Carol J. Adams (eds.), *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 200.

⁶ This study also benefits from Andrée Collard and Joyce Contrucci's insight on the subject, which they developed in their book, See *Rape of the Wild: Man's Violence Against Animals and the Earth*, Indiana University Press, 1989.

1.1. Removed from Nature

Although Barbara Kingsolver's fiction often foregrounds tension between the ways of characters who remove themselves from Nature and those who partake in it, her stories regularly offer a critical reflection of the position those who belong to the latter group adopt towards the natural environment⁷. Characters who buy into a traditional patriarchal approach therefore tend to display a controlling behaviour inheriting from religion, watching Nature from a dominating standpoint.

While *Prodigal Summer* is infused with religious subtext⁸, some characters such as Garnett specifically embrace a traditionally Christian understanding of the world and nature. A bitter old man who lives by himself and desperately tries to find a way to create the perfect American chestnut, he is first introduced by the fact that he is "lost" since becoming a widower, and, "lacking a wife," "turned to God for solace"⁹.

His religious approach to nature is revealed through his understanding of (agri)culture, for he uncovers his viewpoint when scandalised by the fact that his neighbour will not use any pesticide on her orchards as he reflects that she decided "to grow apples with no chemicals whatsoever, in flat defiance of the laws of nature"¹⁰. Contrary to his own inclination to generously spray his whole garden with suspicious chemicals, Nannie Rowley indeed opted for an organic method, which the old man disapproves of and reads as being somewhere along the lines of sorcery. Indeed, Garnett's whole understanding of nature is rooted in his reading of the Bible, and serves as a means to justify his rather non-ecological approach, as one of his letters to Nannie showcases: "If the Holy Bible is to be believed, we must view God's creatures as gifts to his favored children and use them for our own purposes, even if this occasionally causes this one or that one to go extinct after a while"¹¹. According to Garnett's beliefs, human beings are meant to be the guardians of the natural world, which was made for them to act upon as they wish – even if they are to become death angels.

This detachment and objectification of nature and animals demonstrate a will to dissociate the human experience from everything deemed natural, an idea Bénédicte Meillon already touched upon in her Ph. D. thesis, as connected to religious experience¹². Ecofeminists such as Marti Kheel also examined the connexion between the religious heritage of Western cultures and a dualistic division between nature and culture, tracing it back to "the Jewish and Christian religions" and "being reinforced in the 1600s by the increasingly mechanistic worldview of modern science"¹³. This vision led to a fertile ground for the exploitation of both nature and animals – which is precisely how Garnett positions himself when he believes that God gave him nature to tend to (with the help of chemicals) and animals to (over)use.

More precisely, that means that Garnett and other men who inherit from this ideology believe themselves to be on the right side of this binary, where culture is opposed to nature, mind to body, and reason to emotion¹⁴. Persuaded that he is most virtuous thanks to his reasoned approach, Garnett's character comes to embody this agitated fight against the untamed and irrational nature when he vehemently tries to demonstrate his rightfulness to Nannie, whom he sees as an unreasonable facilitator of the natural chaos. Meticulously quoting the Bible, he

⁷ The author therefore answers to a "white masculinist tradition of the hunting narrative in the American literary canon" as described by Antoine Traisnel in his book *Capture: American Pursuits and the Making of a New Animal Condition*, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, p. 17.

⁸ There are no less than 107 occurrences for the word "God" in the 447 page-long novel.

⁹ Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹² Bénédicte Meillon, *La nouvelle-oxymore de Barbara Kingsolver*, *op. cit.*, p. 359-361.

¹³ Marti Kheel, "The Liberation of Nature: A Circular Affair (1985)", in Josephine Donovan, Carol J. Adams (eds.), *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39-40.

writes her letters that are passionate and divided into erroneous arguments: “That was it exactly, he thought. That was *telling* her¹⁵.” Garnett does not care for a debate but wishes to impose his perception, which he believes to be the only one to be valid. Displeased by his neighbour’s practices, his conclusions are not drawn from empirical observations of her successes and failures, but rather from what he thinks he knows. Actually, the old man even interprets Nannie’s actions as ways to test out his faith, for he repeatedly meditates that the woman is “a test on his faith, his cross to bear¹⁶.” He therefore exhibits a point of view and a way of enforcing it that is representative of the anthropocentrism central to the culture of his native country, the United States. Indeed, in his set of beliefs, which mirrors that which is still dominant in contemporary Western ideology, there is an unquestionable hierarchy at the top of which God is when it comes to believers, directly followed by men – overlooking the natural world and making sure it does not stray from its servitude¹⁷.

Watching from above, men who believe in this ideological narrative of domination consequently withdraw themselves from the natural world. Through the voices of feminine characters emerges the concern that such behaviour comes with men running the risk of ignoring the consequences of their actions.

In *Prodigal Summer*, this attitude becomes particularly salient and telling when it comes to hunters, as they only conceive of the natural environment as a gigantic playground. The only hunter who is given a voice is the ephemeral partner of one of the protagonists, Deanna Wolfe. The relationship she develops with Eddie Bondo is permeated with hunting subtext and worries, between her desire to protect the forest of which she is the ranger and the prey-like position she sometimes occupies in their courtship¹⁸. While Deanna has a hard time addressing Bondo’s real motive for being on her territory, as she is scared he will kill the animals she desires to protect, she still tries to uncover his ideological groundings when she asks:

‘When you get a coyote in your rifle sight and you’re fixing to pull the trigger, what happens? Do you forget about everything else in the world until there’s just you and your enemy?’ [...] “Focus,” she said. ‘That’s what you call it? The idea that there’s just the two of you left, alone in the world?’¹⁹

Above any ecological consideration despite being less careless than others, Bondo withdraws himself from the world, blind to the web of consequences that stem from the act of killing one or several animals. Alone in the world against his designated enemy, the hunter reshapes his reality to correspond to what he believes to be true, where he gets to decide who exists and who ceases to exist. Just like Garnett, he inherits from the same culture of separation and domination over nature, taking upon himself a Godlike role of creation and destruction. This prevents him from perceiving the consequences of such a narrative of disconnection, which then becomes heavy with consequences in his relationship to the natural world, specifically through hunting.

¹⁵ Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

¹⁷ This argument was also developed at great length by Carolyn Merchant in her 1980 book *The Death of Nature*, which participated in establishing ecofeminism as an academic framework.

¹⁸ Although it must be noted that Bondo shows signs of growth and ideological questioning throughout the story, his behaviour is still haunted by the strong ideological grounds of his masculine upbringing. In this regard, this paper partially aims at completing Bénédicte Meillon’s own approach of the matter for she noted that « les nouvelles de Barbara Kingsolver mettent également en valeur des masques d’hommes qui s’éloignent des images traditionnelles de la virilité masculine », p. 232. This study of the depiction of traditional masculinity that haunts *Prodigal Summer* and shapes the protagonists’ interactions will further enable an understanding of Kingsolver’s critique of the patriarchal influence over the natural world and, consequently, of its intrinsic tendency to sever the ties that it is made of.

¹⁹ Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

Through this specific manner of perceiving the world, the act of hunting appears to be removed from a sense of reality, where hunters get to decide on the rules and enforce them on unwilling participants – leading to a murderous irresponsible game, heavy with ideological subtext.

Indeed, in this mindset, men hold little to no responsibility towards nature, which they get to experiment with or control as they please. This careless behaviour infiltrates their whole relationship with their surroundings, which is what Deanna comments on as she disapprovingly reflects on Bondo's behaviour: "*Shoot every coyote, screw every woman, see the world*, she thought: the strategy of prolonged adolescence²⁰." The hunter's manner of apprehending the world is therefore described as immature, foreshadowing the reach of his irresponsible and careless ways. The absurdity and disregard of his approach are accentuated by the accumulation of hyperboles in Deanna's reflection, while hinting at the playfulness of the man's way of roaming the world. Indeed, through his hunting eye, Bondo creates his own reality, supported by hunting traditions, which respond to rules that are only applicable in this very specific context – but not in reality. Guided by what he thinks he knows about the natural environment and wild animals, rules that were created by other men disconnected from a holistic ecological perspective just like him, he unconsciously creates his own playful understanding of reality, where, "alone in the world," he gets to decide of the outcome of his games – just like a hand master.

In this game, animal lives become malleable, shaped by men as they will and made for them to enjoy. Their existence does not exist outside of the setting of the hunt, as animals are severed from the world they belong to. Their lives, as well as the ties they have to their environment and their family are completely disregarded, as Deanna herself points out: "It's not just one life²¹."

The juxtaposition in Deanna's explanation regarding the treatment of coyotes and that of women reveals her budding reflection when it comes to the connexion between the two groups. Through the revelation of what she believes to be Bondo's pattern, she drafts the underlying behaviour that ecofeminists believe to go with a predatory attitude encouraged in masculinity. Indeed, "some ecofeminist writers have, in fact, regarded as definitional to patriarchy men's control over women, animals, and nature²²," giving birth to an intersectional study of oppressions. Through this thought process, Deanna starts to shape the blueprints of a vegetarian ecofeminist concern that analyses the fate of women in a patriarchal society as closely linked to the way animals are treated²³. Using this framework, it becomes apparent that Deanna feels connected to animals, specifically coyotes, in the sense that she relates to their prey-like position in the gaze of men. Early on in the novel, she remarks her lover's attitude and reminds him that she is her own person, belonging to herself only: "She turned to face him with an animal glare. 'Is that it? You were watching me like some predator and you think you *have* me now?'²⁴" Evidently, her anxiety when it comes to the well-being of animals makes her wary of Bondo's intentions. She foresees that his ideological anchoring implies the possibility that he might apply his disconnecting dynamics to their relationship, and therefore that he might detach her from her world of connections.

Although Deanna is more than consenting in her liaison with Bondo, the latter falls under the ominous influence of his hunting mindset. The protagonist is therefore aware that women and animals alike are susceptible to becoming preys and trophies – creating a sense of unease

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

²² Josephine Donovan, Carol J. Adams (eds.), *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²³ Josephine Donovan, Lori Gruen or Carol J. Adams amongst other dedicated their work to this branch of ecofeminism.

²⁴ Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

that permeates the whole retelling of her relationship with the hunter. Consequently, there is an ongoing negotiation of limits between them, especially when it comes to territory and nature. Deanna, as a ranger, sees the protected area she tends to as an extension of herself. When Bondo broke into this guarded forest, unannounced and armed, he set the tone for their relationship dynamic. Deanna will have to continuously remind him that he is in fact on her (protected) territory and should therefore acknowledge and respect her limits and the rules that come with them²⁵. Because Deanna feels so connected to the environment she protects and actively participates in, Bondo's intrusion is a violation of her personal physical space, and therefore, by extension, of her corporality. Through the hunting gaze, women and animals, Deanna and coyotes, are both at risk of being disembodied. Disconnected from themselves, metaphorically and physically, the integrity of Deanna's world is threatened by the irruption of the hunter's mindset in her otherwise tightly linked environment.

Questioning the willingness of animals and women to participate in the predatory games of courtship and hunting leads us back to the study of the playfulness men believe to be involved in in the act of pursuing their prey. Confronting Caillois' framework on the analysis of playing to the dynamics involved in hunting, Marti Kheel observes that there is a "major logical flaw" in the game of hunting, since "only one of the 'participants' has chosen to compete" and, therefore, "the animal does not consent to play, or be, his 'game'" – rendering the "experience of the animal [...] nonexistent or morally irrelevant²⁶."

Another of Kheel's observations based on Caillois' analysis that is particularly relevant to the study of the hunter's ideology in *Prodigal Summer* regards its last criterion, which focuses on the make-believe aspect of the game. Kheel indeed shares her concerns about the very real impact of what is inscribed in a sense of unreality, "for the goal of the hunter's 'game' is deadly serious²⁷" and aims to result in the end of a life. Indeed, if Eddie Bondo does not seem to be completely disconnected from the world to which he belongs, his overall tone tends to be light and carefree, which is accentuated by the focus drawn onto his young age²⁸. As a consequence, Deanna's role often is one of guidance and reconnection. One of the ideas she is the most critical of is that of the ecological role of the hunter, which often leads to tension with her lover. When her viewpoint is that of a specialist since she wrote her Ph. D. thesis on the topic of coyotes and their role in their environment, Bondo keeps his grounds in the ideological house of cards built by patriarchy and hunters.

2. The Dismembering Ecology of Hunters

By further analysing this transformation of reality by hunters, the consequence of their ideology becomes apparent. Reading the environment as they please, they eventually transform nature into a much darker, much grimmer version of itself – filled with gruesome clues of the dramatic patriarchal understanding of ecology that cuts the ties of the world, dismembering it gradually.

While Deanna is certainly critical of what she exposes as a fallacious perception of the imagined role of hunters in the natural world, Kheel brings a detailed analysis of this well-known narrative. Answering to what they claim to be an altruistic motivation, these particular hunters, Kheel explains, "claim that without their services, the animals they kill would die from starvation." They allege that they regulate the "population density," "claim(ing) the title of 'managers' for the biotic community" – "hence [...] performing a laudable ecological role²⁹."

²⁵ Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, *op. cit.*, p. 28, "You're still in my territory."

²⁶ Marti Kheel, "The Killing Game: An Ecofeminist Critique of Hunting", in *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, n° XXIII, 1996, p. 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁸ Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²⁹ Marti Kheel, "The Killing Game: An Ecofeminist Critique of Hunting", *op. cit.*, p. 35.

Conversely, the consequences of a hunting culture make Deanna even more critical of these practices, as she deplures:

They have those hunts all over [...]. There's one going on right now in Arizona, the Predator Hunt Extreme, with a ten-thousand-dollar prize for whoever shoots the most. [...]. Can you feature the damage those men will do to the state of Arizona in just one weekend, the plague of mice and grasshoppers they'll cause?³⁰

Similarly to what Deanna reproaches to Bondo and his macabre playmates, Kheel notes that “sport hunters overlook the extent to which their own actions have produced the problems that they claim to resolve³¹.”

A tension therefore resides between two very different understandings of the word “ecology,” which calls for a re-centering around its original meaning, still applicable today. Indeed, the term was coined in 1866 by the biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel, who “defined it as ‘the entire science of the relations of the organism to the surrounding exterior world’³².” Just as Barbara Kingsolver and her protagonist show, a man who claims to be an ecologist but refuses to see the relations in the world and therefore the consequences of his actions must be doubted as best.

A more extensive study of the practices of hunters and a focus on their use of animal tracks in *Prodigal Summer* can further reveal the separating dynamics on which this activity is based when practiced as a sport or a game. Indeed, the way Kingsolver’s characters observe – or *read*—these remnants in the novel tell the story of a disconnecting process as well as its reshaping consequences. Analysing how tracks, animal waste, and other remnants are used in the tracking of animals by hunters sheds a light on the relationship they create with animals and their environment, especially since the very goal of hunting implies death and literal dismemberment – a severing of the ties of the animal herself, be it with herself or with the world of the living.

Indeed, in the relationship created between hunters and animals, tracks become clues of the animals’ passage – but also possibly bear the signs of their attempt at escaping from the men who hunt them down. Among the remains that serve as means to pursue their prey, there can be tracks but also feathers, blood, or entire body parts which carry the story of the animal that is running away from sight. Traditionally, animal tracks are at the heart of the imagery of the hunt, in which the hunter, whom we imagine to exclusively be a man who will catch the animal and turn her into food, will enable his family to survive. In this representation resides a strong fantasy around which is built a major part of the idea of masculinity, based on the idea that hunting was a determining activity in the socialization and survival of the prehistorical human beings. However, ecofeminists such as Mies, Ruether or Haraway, dispute this theory, which, according to them, lacks solid grounding. On the contrary, it would rather seem that hunting was a fairly insignificant activity³³, which consequently calls for a reevaluation of the whole narrative told about the relationship between human and non-human animals.

As we have seen, in *Prodigal Summer*, the end goal of the hunt seems to be much more than a mere hunting for subsistence story. Inscribed in this tale of ecological intervention, Deanna

³⁰ Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

³¹ Marti Kheel, “The Killing Game: An Ecofeminist Critique of Hunting”, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

³² K. Friederichs, “A Definition of Ecology and Some Thoughts About Basic Concepts”, in *Ecology*, vol. 39, n° 1, Jan., 1958, p. 154.

³³ Burgart-Goutal indeed explains that meat hunted by men did not represent a large part of their daily consumption, for hunting “only covered a very small part of the dietary needs in prehistorical societies, the majority coming from plant-based food, which was most probably collected or grown by women”, *Être écoféministe*, « L’Echappée », 2020, p. 144, My translation, « la chasse [...] ne couvrait qu’une toute petite partie des besoins alimentaires des sociétés préhistoriques, l’énorme majorité provenant de la nourriture végétale, qui était selon toute probabilité collectée ou cultivée principalement par les femmes ».

indeed identifies the desire for men to eliminate predators as a means to metaphorically replace them and fulfil their ultimate domination fantasy.

In the process of the hunt, even when deemed ecological, the way hunters approach tracks and remnants as clues becomes very telling for their reading and solving will indicate whether the animal should be put down or not. Indeed, Kheel explains: “Whereas natural predators prey on the old, the weak, and the sick, human hunters typically select the biggest and the healthiest animals to kill. As a consequence, hunters promote what Teale has called a kind of ‘evolution in reverse’³⁴.” Furthermore, by deciding who should live or die, hunters take a godlike power, through which they do not decide to solve the suffering of sickly and already dying animals, but rather to remove those who threaten their status – cutting the connections created by the natural environment to artificially place themselves in their now-vacant spot.

In this near-religious experience, animals can be perceived as sacrifices that need to be killed for the self-realising prophecy to take place. This analysis can benefit from Kheel’s approach of the religiosity of the hunting experience, for she explains that “part of [its] meditative awareness entails a ‘merging’ with their prey³⁵.” By metaphorically putting themselves in the skin of their prey in order to find them, to then end their life and possibly consume them, they completely engage in an act of merging, a brief yet intense act of connexion. In a way, once fully dismembered and cut off from the world, the animals become assimilable for the human animal.

By being used and transformed into something new that does not belong to itself, the animal undergoes the same process of estrangement as the environment, pervaded by death and disconnection. This transformation of non-human victims of the hunt and of the natural environment gives birth to a transformed nature, dismembered and reshaped into what can be named the patriarchal nature.

In this environment, seen through the eyes of predator hunters, everything that escapes the control of non-human animals by leaving clues of their passage compromises their integrity and transforms their environment into a threatening one. Consequently, their own body betrays them for it gives hints about who they are and where they are headed – possibly even leading back to their home and their family. Indeed, since hunters have learned to read the environment to become efficient and to accomplish the ultimate goal of killing (possibly as much as possible), the body of the animal is used as a weapon against its owner.

As a result, the animal’s identity is fractured, transforming the environment into defamiliarizing and uncanny surroundings. The animal’s home becomes unsafe, transformed into a disproportionately deadly space. Acknowledging this pervasive threat, the narrator tells about animals who take the shape of ghostly apparitions, foreshadowing or reminding of their disappearance just like for the coyote accordingly introduced to the readers as follows: “Coyotes: small golden ghosts of the vanished red wolf³⁶.” Kingsolver thus borrows a horror trope that she inserts without warnings and therefore nods to the eerie and menacing liminality of magical realism – as if to warn that men have breached the wall between horror and reality, leading to the world being pervaded by uncanny reminders of their corruptive ways.

Answering to Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring*, *Prodigal Summer* therefore bears the weights of its grim observations when it comes to the deadly impact of a disconnecting approach to agriculture. Published in 1962, Carson shared concerns regarding the inconsiderate use of pesticides in agriculture, even more so that they directly derived from products that were used in World War II for their deadly effects. Carson’s foreshadowing therefore finds a follow-up in Kingsolver’s novel, which proposes a story using *Silent Spring*’s setting as a starting point. The near sterile environment is thus described as follows:

³⁴ Marti Kheel, “The Killing Game: An Ecofeminist Critique of Hunting”, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

She lived among ghosts. She deferred to the extinct as she was to the spirits of deceased relatives [...]. Plenty of people had watched and recorded the disaster of eliminating a predator from a system [...]. North America's richest biological home was losing its richness to one extinction after another³⁷.

The environment therefore bears the scar of the h(a)unting culture that resulted in the extinction of several species, and is consequently transformed into a threatening place. *Prodigal Summer* thus contains numerous sombre and tragical clues of the impact of men in the natural world – and the natural places in which the plot takes place becomes haunted by the ghosts of the animals lost in the “war on animals³⁸.” As a result, the environment transformed by human animals features an increased number of morbid signals, yet not evaluated as such. For them, this is a normal dynamic, natural even, and especially profitable. Once under control, the natural world becomes ideal for those who adopt the patriarchal perspective, but, on the contrary, turns into a ghostly place for the rest of the living – human and non-animals alike.

Conclusion

Teaching how to reweave the world

Overall, this uncanny environment serves as a backdrop for Kingsolver's character to transform and reweave together. Through the didactic discourse of her female protagonists, specifically when they reflect on the behaviour of their male counterparts or interact with them, *Prodigal Summer* offers an insight into a revitalised natural world.

Deanna's approach offers a representative glimpse of the dynamics at play between the women who wish to show the chain of consequences that stem from the men's actions and the men in their lives. As we have seen, Deanna is rather critical of Bondo throughout the novel, for she knows from experience what men who buy into the patriarchal idea of hunting are capable of. This explains her reluctance to engage with him initially and her need to confront him regarding his fallacious reasoning. Following up on Bondo's confirmation that he indeed feels “alone in the world” when he is hunting, she takes on a didactic role as she explains:

But that's wrong. There's no such thing as alone. That animal was going to do something important in its time — eat a lot of things, or be eaten. There's all these connected things you're about to blow a hole in. They can't all be your enemy, because one of those connected things is you³⁹.

This illustrates Deanna's belief that the world is made of links that should be taken care of. She explains: “Everything alive is connected to every other by fine, invisible threads. Things you don't see can help you plenty, and things you try to control will often rear back and bite you⁴⁰.” She thus invites both Bondo and the readers to open their eyes and make visible what was otherwise invisible, as she reveals the inquiry that gave birth to her thought process. It is one made on empirical examinations, from what she perceives with her own eyes as well as through those of animals she has learned to see through. Deanna, being a ranger, tracks animals down just like Bondo, but to protect them from poachers and measure the health of the natural environment. Instead of using the reconnecting strategies of the hunt as a means to end the life of animals, she shows their interest in tightening the human-animals links to their environment.

The ranger's experience therefore mirrors that described by philosopher Baptiste Morizot, for trailing becomes an ambiguous experience:

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62-65.

³⁸ Antoine Traisnel, “Huntology: Ontological Pursuits and Still Lives,” in *Diacritics*, vol. 40, n° 2, 2012, p. 3.

³⁹ Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 218.

Woven with the acute consciousness of the crises of cohabitation induced by a blind economic activity, woven with the desire to reactivate the partnerships in a world that is changed and to invent *modus vivendi* that are more habitable for all – and also woven with a bet about the ability of the livings to take back the control of the situation despite everything⁴¹.

From the grim observations that the world is filled with ghosts, rather than getting ready for the worst or ignoring that it is happening, Deanna decides to actively participate in its revitalisation and to reclaim the skills that come with hunting. Furthermore, Morizot affirms that when disconnected from the act of predation, tracking down an animal can become a form of attention⁴², and it is precisely through this augmented attention that links can recover their visibility, to then lead to a healing reconnection of the world. Deanna's pedagogical impact on Bondo as well as his ability to change therefore becomes apparent, for she remarks that he “paid attention⁴³.”

These didactical exchanges thus open the possibility for yet another reconnection: that of men and women on a philosophical level. When men stop imposing their ideological agenda as the only valid one and start observing their surroundings with the guidance of women, they learn to read the world differently and perceive the links that compose it. Male characters then get to discover a doorway towards a more feminine ethic, which can be read as corresponding to the ecofeminist ethic-of-care. Indeed, attention is “a key word in feminist ethic-of-care theorizing about animals⁴⁴,” specifically when it brings the links that tie oppressions together to light. By being so caring to animals and nature and so aware of the invisible connexions that sustain and hold together everything in the world, Deanna surely exemplifies an application of this ethical thinking. Indeed, being “concerned with ‘sustaining connection’” and “keeping the web of relationships intact⁴⁵”, Deanna participates in the reweaving of the world and invites everyone to deconstruct their ideology so as to rebuild it as a more caring one.

⁴¹ Baptiste Morizot, *Sur la piste animale*, Actes Sud, 2018, p. 147, my translation: « tissée de la conscience aigüe des crises de cohabitation que l'activité économique aveugle induit, tissée d'un désir de réactiver des alliances dans un monde qui a changé, d'inventer des *modus vivendi* plus vivables pour tous — tissée d'un pari, aussi, sur la puissance des vivants à reprendre la main malgré tout. »

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 142.

⁴³ Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

⁴⁴ Josephine Donovan, Carol J. Adams (eds.), *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.