de genere

Rivista di studi letterari, postcoloniali e di genere
Journal of Literary, Postcolonial and Gender Studies

http://www.degenere-journal.it/
ISSN 2465-2415

After the Fire, New Ways to Make a Soul: Family Abolition and Ecological Imaginaries in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Ursula K. Le Guin's "Solitude"

Lucio De Capitani
Ca' Foscari University of Venice
lucio.decapitani@unive.it

The work of Anita Desai and Ursula K. Le Guin – key figures in Anglophone Indian literature and American speculative fiction respectively – variously invite feminist readings. They often push against prescribed gender roles, which, in turn, allows them to question traditional family structures. In this essay, I compare them specifically through an analysis of two texts focused on the intersections of violence, coercion and care within the family – Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and Le Guin's short story "Solitude" (1994). I juxtapose these two texts as critiques of the institution of the family, variously combining reflections on family abolition and ecofeminism. This specific theoretical pairing serves to highlight how both texts force the reader to rethink kinship in non-proprietary terms; how they emphasize the possibility of establishing connections beyond the boundaries of the family unit, including with nonhuman subjects; and how, in both stories, explorations of family abolition, whether successful or not, are interwoven with ecological imaginaries.

Lucio De Capitani Lucio De Capitani is a researcher at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. His research interests include Anglophone, colonial, postcolonial, and Indigenous literatures (particularly the work of Robert Louis Stevenson, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Cherie Dimaline), theories of world literature, connections between anthropology and literary studies, as well as ecocriticism and speculative fiction, with a focus on cli-fi, solarpunk, abolitionist, utopian, and dystopian imaginaries. He has co-edited the collection *Venice and the Anthropocene. An Ecocritical Guide* (2022, wetlands) and published *Ethnographic Narratives as World Literature. Uneven Entanglements in European and South Asian Writing* (2023, Palgrave).

Introduction

Comparing Ursula K. Le Guin and Anita Desai on feminist grounds may seem, at first, a tricky enterprise. Le Guin achieved prominence in the context of the American New Wave of science fiction in the 1960s and 1970s,[1] contributing to its formal and thematic experimentalism and countercultural politics. If an interest in gender and sexuality is widespread within the New Wave, Le Guin is notable for her repeated engagement with feminist thinking, leading her, over the years, to revise the very texts that had established her as a major figure in speculative fiction. She repeatedly addressed the feminist criticism of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (K. Le Guin 2017 [1969]) in both essays ("Is Gender Necessary?" and its "Redux" version, K. Le Guin 2024 [1976/1988]) and fiction ("Coming of Age in Karhide", K. Le Guin 2003 [1995]), tackling the shortcomings of her early experiment with gender. Similarly, if the first three *Earthsea* novels (1968-1972) were relatively conservative in presenting gender roles within a fantasy setting, as she discusses in "Earthsea Revisited" (K. Le Guin 2018 [1993]), the final three books (1990-2001) were conceived of as a feminist rethinking of the series.[2] These revisions are arguably never abjurations, and Le Guin "doesn't silence her younger self but listens and responds and listens again" (Attebery 2021, 23); however, this self-conversation has nevertheless led to an explicit radicalisation of Le Guin's feminism.

Also Desai began her career in the 1960s, as part of a growing number of women writers that appeared in the post-Partition period, after a distinctively male-dominated phase of Anglophone Indian fiction.[3] As Karen D'Souza points out, Desai, "celebrated for bringing a new mode of psychologically subjective writing to postcolonial India, […] was of the first generation of Indian women writers reacting against an earlier wave of social realists" (D'Souza 2020, 65). Differently from Le Guin, however, she prefers not to identify as a feminist, stating that she "wasn't even aware of such a concept as feminism" when she started writing and that she does not "have much patience with the theory that it's women who suffer", for "men suffer equally" (Demas Bliss and Desai 1988, 524). Certainly, in the Indian context, self-identifying feminists do not exhaust the whole history of the struggle against women's oppression; distancing oneself from the term, thus, does not necessarily imply a lack of interest in patriarchal dynamics in India.[4] If Desai shares that interest, albeit with a focus on an upper-class English-educated milieu (see Gopal 2009, 152), her emphasis on "equal" suffering does at the very least highlight an aspiration to a *universalist* viewpoint, which Desai has pursued since the 1980s. Her writing, by her own description, is characterized by a first phase focused on "this material of home and family and especially womanhood, the women in the family" (Desai, Guignery, and Tadié 2009, 373); and a second phase, inaugurated by two novels with male protagonists – *In Custody* (Desai 2008b [1984]) and *Baumgartner's Bombay* (Desai 2008a [1988]) – in which she "[tried] [her] at something which […] made a bigger demand than simply writing down what is most familiar and easy for you to understand" (Desai, Guignery, and Tadié 2009, 373).

[1] For a discussion of the New Wave and Le Guin's location within it, see Harris-Fain 2015.

[2] The *Earthsea* books are published together in K. Le Guin 2018.

[3] On this point, and for a discussion of the role of women novelists within Anglophone Indian fiction, before and after Desai's debut, see Singh Chanda 2008, 13-15.

[4] See Loomba 1993 for a discussion of the complex status of feminism in India within a broader history of women's movements from the colonial era onwards. Another useful discussion in this sense can be found in Menon 2015.

While at odds, Le Guin's increasingly vocal feminism and Desai's "non-feminist" desire to expand the scope of her writing share an awareness of the limiting and oppressive nature of prescribed gender roles. They are, in a way, complementary: one claims the right for a woman writer to speak about gender and from her consciously gendered (and politically engaged) positionality, rejecting allegedly "universal"/"genderless" (read: male) standards for art (see K. Le Guin 2018, 982). The other rejects the idea that a woman writer should *only* talk about womanhood and domesticity. Both stances invite feminist responses.

An intriguing aspect of Le Guin's and Desai's pushing against prescribed gender roles is their questioning of traditional family structures. In this essay, I therefore compare two texts focused precisely on the intersections of violence, coercion and care within the family – Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and Le Guin's short story "Solitude" (1994). In Desai's novel, Nanda Kaul, a widowed upper-class Indian woman, embraces isolation after a lifetime dedicated to her husband and children, but her retreat is interrupted by the arrival of her great-granddaughter Raka, a child with whom she tries to establish some kind of relationship beyond traditional family roles. Le Guin's short story, instead, is a science-fictional tale envisioning a society in which solitude is imperative to avoid domination over others, and explores, from the perspective of an anthropologist and her children, what shapes love and kinship can take within this different social arrangement.

I juxtapose these two texts as critiques of the institution of the family, combining reflections on family abolition and ecofeminism. This specific pairing serves to highlight how both texts force the reader to rethink kinship in non-proprietary terms; how they emphasize the possibility of establishing connections beyond the boundaries of the family unit, including with nonhuman subjects; and how, in both stories, explorations of family abolition, whether successful or not, are interwoven with ecological imaginaries.

Family abolition and ecofeminism

Family abolition could be defined as the overcoming of the institution of the family as part of a broader political project of liberation. Arguably "the most scandalous demand of feminists" in the 1970s, it was mostly abandoned in favour of reformist proposals (Weeks 2021, 343). However, the work of feminist Marxists like Sophie Lewis and M. E. O'Brian has recently galvanized family abolition as a political horizon once again. Both discuss the connivance of the family with capitalism in managing and privatizing care and social reproduction. Lewis argues how, despite the family being framed as a refuge against economic hardship and alienation, "for all purposes except capital accumulation, the promise of the family falls abjectly short of itself", often because "simply too much is being asked of too few" (Lewis 2022, 9). The family fails at the task of providing "acceptance, solidarity, an open promise of help, welcome, and care" (Lewis 2022, 9), while preventing better alternatives to emerge:

> The family – predicated on the privatization that which should be common, and proprietary concepts of couple, blood, gene and seed – is a state institution, not a popular organism. It's at once a normative inspiration and a last resort: a blackmail passing itself off as fate; a shitty contract pretending to be biological necessity. (Lewis 2022, 9)

Family abolition, for Lewis, is "the abolishment of the isolated privatization of human misery: the radical scarcity and overwork that is born of the logic of marriage

and of family" (Lewis 2020, n.p.). As O' Brian specifies, that abolishment is not meant to forcibly replace and destroy "the forms of love present in the best families" but for these forms to be "broadened, generalized and made universal," expanding "relations of care and consensual interdependency" (O' Brian 2023, 53). It does involve, however, abandoning a proprietary notion of kinship, especially between children and parents, ideally "[exploding] notions of hereditary parentage" (Lewis 2019, 26); and it involves dismantling what O'Brian calls "family terrors" (O' Brian 2023, 31) – the forms of violence that the family, in its current form, enables.

Kathi Weeks defines abolitionism as "a method with a distinctive theoretical infrastructure, one that requires scaling up our analyses both spatially and temporally" (Weeks 2021, 434). This method is characterized by "the aspiration to systems thinking with a focus on social structures", and by "a critique that refuses reform as an adequate remedy" (Weeks 2021, 434), aspiring to radically transform the society that needs families to begin with. In this sense, parallels can be established with police and prison abolition, which are about "eliminating the reasons people think they need cops and prisons in the first place" (Purnell 2021, 6). Abolitionist methodologies, therefore, involve acts of destructive salvaging/creation on a systemic level. Importantly, such abolitionisms are only conceivable within broader prospectives of liberation that involve overcoming "wage labor, private property, the capitalist state, white supremacy, settler colonialism, and anti-blackness" (O'Brian 2023, 54). More generally, family abolition resonates with a variety of political projects and theoretical frameworks – queer liberation, radical polyamory, Black and Indigenous thinkers on family and kinship – that can share the abolitionist trajectory of dismantling toxic institutions while retrieving and universalizing the utopian kernel at their heart.

Such convergences, in particular those between family abolitionist thinkers and non-Western/postcolonial/decolonial perspectives, stem from the intersection of the family with histories of colonialism, racialization and empire. Paraphrasing Kim TallBear (Dakota) and Angela Willey, one of the privileged locations of "normative categories of nature, sex, and love" are "*settler-colonial* forms of kin, kind, and relating that are hierarchical, anthropocentric, capitalocentric, and hetero- and homonormative" (TallBear and Willey 2019, 5, emphasis mine). More broadly, imposing certain family structures, and/or positing them as normative, has been a key aspect of colonial projects. In Joe Turner's words, "claims to family were central to the ideology of empire and practices of colonial rule", and "claims to European domesticity and the bourgeois home not only placed people in a hierarchy of cultural inferiority, but this was also central to how they were governed" (Turner 2019, 13). This does not imply that oppression within kinship structures is a uniquely colonial invention, but it does mean that colonialism *has* shaped, according to its hierarchies, present-day, hegemonic family forms at a global level – most notably, the bourgeois nuclear family as unit of capitalism. This legacy, at the same time, is complicated by the encounter with (very diverse, and variously affected) local/precolonial forms of kinship and gender relations.

While the abolitionist methodologies of Lewis and O'Brian pay close attention to Black and Indigenous perspectives and histories, they are not framed in terms of climate, environmental or multispecies justice, or in *eco*feminist terms. The ecological implications of their thinking, therefore, are worth exploring. To this aim, useful connections could be drawn with Silvia Federici's politics of the commons, recently reframed as a "re-enchanting of the world": "reconstructing our lives around a commoning of our relations with others, including animals, waters, plants and mountains" as a way to "collectively deciding our fate on this earth" (Federici 2019, 8),

after acknowledging "the existence of a logic other than that of capitalist development" (Federici 2019, 188). Resonating with family abolitionist concerns, Federici aligns the commons/re-enchanting of the world with (social) reproductive justice:

> From a feminist viewpoint, one of the attractions exercised by the idea of the commons is the possibility of overcoming the isolation in which reproductive activities are performed and the separation between private and public spheres that has contributed so much to hiding and rationalizing women's exploitation in the family and the home. (Federici 2019, 4)

With an emphasis on the Global South, Federici highlights a series of struggles, ranging from "land reclamation, the liberation of rivers from dams, resistance to deforestation, and, central to all, the revalorization of reproductive work" as ways to "reconnect what capitalism has divided: our relation with nature, with others, and with our bodies" (Federici 2019, 189). Reading Federici with family abolitionist arguments in mind highlights that a politics of commoning, brought to its logical conclusion, is also a politics of family abolition and vice versa, for both aim at exploding the utter privatization of life, and in doing so avert planetary destruction.

Angela Balzano, on the other hand, makes the connection between family abolition and multispecies justice explicit. Her programme of "re/productive degrowth" variously expands the Harawayan slogan "making kin not population," most notably, for the purposes of this essay, with the idea of "making posthuman kin for planetary regeneration" (Balzano 2021, 21, translation mine). This involves the creation of transspecies connections as a strategy to redistribute means and goods with the inclusion of the nonhuman (Balzano 2021, 22). Not necessarily a pleasant operation, Balzano's posthuman kin-making resonates with the abolitionist strategy of tearing down the reassuring facade of the family to replace the violence it hides with liberated care:

> Posthuman kinships do not have the reassuring face of anthropomorphizing friendship, they are conflictual relationships that are not about the individual human and non-human, they cannot be depicted in the bucolic picture of twosome love [...]. [They] resemble assemblies, are informed by government policies and financial flows, woven by multiple naturalsocial actors on a g/local scale, and can be monstrous: imagine a coordinated opening of the gates of slaughterhouses! (Balzano 2021, 107, translation mine)

Working through "monstrous" proposals is the stuff of abolitionist thinking, aiming to unlock universes of collective care by dismantling seemingly benevolent, utterly naturalized toxic institutions. As Balzano points out, care should be granted to all earthlings or it is just ephemeral, class-infused privilege (Balzano 2021, 23), so it seems clear to me that the idea of universalizing care promoted by family abolitionists should also be rethought in multispecies terms.

In the following sections I turn to *Fire on the Mountain* and "Solitude", analyzed through the lenses of the family-abolitionist and ecofeminist matrix sketched so far. As I expand upon in the conclusion, there is an apparent disjuncture between the collectivist thrust of this matrix and the seemingly individualist focus of the two stories. As I argue, however, I see the two perspectives, due to the ways in which Desai and Le Guin tackle "individualism", as ultimately compatible.

Fire on the Mountain

In his 1984 review of *In Custody*, Salman Rushdie praises Anita Desai's novel for finally "[writing] of the perils and responsibilities of joining oneself to others rather than holding oneself apart" (Rushdie 2010, 71) – an assessment that matches Desai's own perception of her career's trajectory as moving away from the domestic sphere. Moreover, he singles out Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* as one of Desai's most prominent "isolated, singular figures" (Rushdie 2010, 71) of her previous production. The assessment is, in many ways, correct: we are introduced to Nanda as she begrudgingly monitors the arrival of a postman to her house of Carignano, in the Himalayan hill station of Kasauli, in Himachal Pradesh:

> Nanda Kaul paused under the pine trees to take in their scented sibilance and listen to the cicadas fiddling invisibly under the mesh of pine needles when she saw the postman slowly winding his way along the Upper Mall. [...] bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries, she had wanted to be done with them all, at Carignano. She asked to be left to the pines and cicadas alone. (Desai 1999, 3)

Since the first paragraph, Nanda refuses human contact and wishes to disappear into the natural world. She strives for stillness, declaring that "to be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake" (Desai 1999, 4) and that "she would imitate death, like a lizard" (Desai 1999, 23). Her desire for solitude is a rejection of *family* life – specifically, the domestic experience of an anglicized upper-class Indian woman. The letter she receives, containing her daughter's request of hosting her great-granddaughter Raka, brings her back to unwelcome images of "the heads of children and grandchildren, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamouring about her" (Desai 1999, 17), coalescing into a recollection of despised domestic duties, and resentment towards "her sons and daughters, of her confinements" (Desai 1999, 18). She recoils at the idea of having Raka around, which she perceives as accepting the yoke of household obligations once again:

> Now, to bow again, to let that noose slip once more round her neck that she had thought was freed fully, finally. Now to have those wails and bawls shatter and rip her still house to pieces, to clutter the bare rooms and the cool tiles with the mountainous paraphernalia that each child seems to require or anyway demand. Now to converse again when it was silence she wished, to question and follow up and make sure of another's life and comfort and order, *to involve oneself, to involve another*. (Desai 1999, 19, emphasis mine)

What emerges from this description is that Rushdie is only partially right in his implication that *Fire on the Mountain* is *not* concerned with "the perils and responsibilities of joining oneself to others". If anything, Nanda is *obsessed* by those perils. She is memorable for the unrelenting way in which she articulates her revulsion of family life and her awareness that "care is another name for control" (Berrigan 2022, 2). Nanda, who understands "the care of others" as "a religious calling she had believed in till she found it fake" (Desai 1999, 30), stands as an unrelenting protest against the traps and violence of kinship. Such protest, however, is complicated by Nanda's complicity in the "family terrors", and by her inability to conceive care as anything *but* coercion.

By contrast, Raka reveals herself as an independent, silent and solitary child with a "gift for disappearing" (Desai 1999, 45). She undertakes several wanderings, exploring

the mountain, in a much more unruly and wild merging with the nonhuman than Nanda's own attempts, leading her gran-grandmother to see her as "the finished, perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave, flawed experiment" (Desai 1999, 47). Fascinated, Nanda develops the need to establish some form of relationship with Raka. A spark of that possibility briefly emerges when the two go for a walk together and witness the appearance of "a wild horde of black-faced *langurs*, those fierce, lithe panthers of the monkey world, more feline than simian" (Desai 1999, 58). They experience a moment of rare connection, in which "Raka, too, threw her head back on her shoulders and laughed with her great-grandmother at the face an old langur made at them from the top of the tree"; and that ends with the two of them "[going] downhill, laughing, at a quicker pace – refreshed" (Desai 1999, 58-9). Mediated by these wild nonhuman presences, this episode stands out as a moment of shared exhilaration between Raka and Nanda that allows the reader to envision a glimpse of (their) kinship as "enigmatic and unruly, the social formations that go by this name [evading] the specifics of structure and definition" (Berrigan 2022, 11).

However, such possibility is lost when Nanda, unable to disentangle care from control, tries to take hold of Raka. Her strategy is to entertain Raka with aggrandized tales of her father's travels, of his meetings with strange people and animals, and of the marvellous house of her childhood. However, her fairy tales exhaust the child, who "could not bear to be confined to the old lady's fantasy world when the reality outside appealed so strongly" (Desai 1999, 100). Raka's instincts are correct in rejecting Nanda's stories, for, expressing an impulse to control her with fabrications, they echo the possessive and destructive kinship relations that Nanda, far from being only a victim of alienating domesticity, has enabled in the past. Raka is, after all, sent to Carignano while Asha, Nanda's daughter and Raka's grandmother, attempts to reconcile her daughter Tara (Raka's mother) with her abusive, alcoholic husband, convinced that "he's not really so bad as Tara might make you believe, she simply doesn't understand him, doesn't understand *men*" (Desai 1999, 15). While Nanda might sneer at her daughter's reasoning, she will admit, by the end of the novel, that she was complicit in acquiescing to patriarchal demands herself, as her husband "had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress" (Desai 1999, 145). It is thus Nanda's acquiescence to abusive marriage dynamics, now forced onto her granddaughter, that is responsible for Raka's own traumatic experience of the household, epitomized by her recollection of "the nurseries and bedrooms of her infancy, with their sickly-sweet smells of illness, sadness, drink, medication, milk and tension" (Desai 1999, 90).

Analogously, if Nanda's relationship with the nonhuman world is a correlate for her desire for freedom, it is compromised by her tendency to domesticate it. Nanda's stories culminate with the description of exotic animals, but in chains: "We had a pair of monkeys that we kept chained to the veranda rails because they were too destructive to let loose. They were gibbons – long-limbed, black-faced and silvery, like *langurs*, such fun" (Desai 1999, 99). This description is a twisted version of the previous appearance of the *langurs*, and reflects Nanda's contradictions in envisioning anything wild – the animals or Raka herself – as something she envies but cannot help but try to control, being unable to conceive relation without coercion. Moreover, further stressing Nanda's tendency to tame the nonhuman, Jill Didur argues that she organizes the landscape of Kasauli through carefully managed "picturesque aesthetics" (Didur 2013, 502), which, similarly to how she delinks herself from her complicity with domestic violence, allows her to conceal the exploitative dynamics at work within the territory she occupies. These

include interspecies violence: excluded from Nanda's descriptions of the landscape, but immediately noticed by Raka, is the Pasteur Institute, where, as Nanda's cook Ram Lal explains, animal testing and vivisection have historically been performed:

> Once a whole village was rounded up and taken there – a dog had gone mad and bitten everyone in the village. The dog had to be killed. Its head was cut off and sent to the Institute. The doctors cut them open and look into them. They have rabbits and guinea pigs there, too, many animals. They use them for tests. (Desai 1999, 44)

As Didur argues, Desai "uses the presence of the Pasteur Institute in Kasauli to concretize an exploration of how the romantic search for the picturesque that fuels Nanda's postcolonial retreat to Kasauli relies on an unacknowledged instrumentalization of the environment" (Didur 2013, 512).

If Nanda's imagination hides the traces of family/environmental violence, Raka is instead aware of both. Like Nanda, her search for freedom is described through her mimicry of animals: in her movement she is "lizard-like" (Desai 1999, 42), "a soundless moth" (Desai 1999, 46), "a bird fallen out of its nest, a nest fallen out of a tree" (Desai 1999, 50), but her shapeshifting intimates a more egalitarian, transformative multispecies relation, as it does not hide an ambition of control. It is a more radical attempt at self-transformation, which involves overcoming a nature-human dualism, compared to Nanda's ultimately picturesque and domineering vision of nature. This is also because Raka *does* connect family and environmental violence: when she runs away from a masquerade at the local club – which evokes memories of her alcoholic father – her imagination connects her abused mother with the animals populating a nearby ravine, where the remains of the nonhuman beings tested upon at the Pasteur Institute have been dumped: "Ahead of her, no longer on the ground but at some distance now, her mother was crying. Then it was a jackal crying" (Desai 1999, 72). Raka's final act brings this intuitive awareness of intertwined forms of oppression to its extreme conclusion: she sets fire to the mountain, which Desai interprets as an attempt to reveal a truth behind the illusions – including Nanda's fabrications – that mask various forms of violence: "she herself is only interested in the truth of things – stones, pine-cones, solid objects – and finally she sets fire to that whole illusory world, from the ashes of which some kind of truth should show through" (Jussawalla and Desai 1992, 166–7).

In Desai's fiery finale, I see a powerful abolitionist image, but a truncated one, unleashing only the destructive side of abolition. The fire is the attempt to reach a kernel of truth behind exploitative relations, but it is also the misguided action of a traumatized child that wants to see the world burn. Abolition, however, must be "the simultaneous destruction of the basis of coercion, and the unleashing of new forms of care" (O'Brian 2023, 57); if destruction is abundant in the novel's finale and Raka's fire is simultaneously a protest for slaughtered animals and for the victims of domestic abuse, care – multispecies or otherwise – is nowhere to be found.

"Solitude"

Also Le Guin's short story illustrates how care, love and kinship can be intertwined with coercion. More optimistically, however, it shows a possible way through which this toxic entanglement can be dissolved, albeit not without loss. Part of the Hainish Cycle

– Le Guin's most frequently explored science-fictional setting – the short story centres on Leaf (an anthropologist from Hain, the founding planet of the interplanetary league of the Ekumen) that embarks on a mission to study the population of the planet Eleven-Soro. The planet is populated by a society of hunter-gatherers in which adults rarely speak with each other, mostly living in solitude and silence, and only children are taught or spoken to. Leaf plans to use her two children, Borny and Ren, as informers to gather information on Sorovian culture. What she does not anticipate is that both children will embrace Sorovian culture, and the tale deals with the consequences of their different understanding of kinship and community. The story is narrated by Ren, and is presented as an addendum to Leaf's fieldwork report.

There are two key moments of conflict between Leaf and her children. The first one occurs when Borny leaves his family to join a "boygroup" in the wilderness. Sorovian society practices a rather strict form of gender division: women, girls and children live in "dispersed villages" (K. Le Guin 2012b, 176) called auntrings; adult men live mostly as hermits, whereas adolescent males gather in bands, who are mostly occupied in competing for territory, and often engage in violence. Leaf, who comes from the gender-egalitarian Hainish society, is shocked to learn that her son is embracing what she perceives as a barbarous notion of masculinity, and allows him to leave only reluctantly. Unexpectedly, Borny returns from the wilderness, having understood that he does not want to pass through the brutal coming-of-age process that Sorovian men undergo and then proceed "to go on living alone your whole life" (K. Le Guin 2012b, 189). He thus asks her mother to go home.

The resolution of this conflict leads, however, to another one: as Leaf, with "infinite relief" (K. Le Guin 2012b, 189), prepares to call the Ekumen spaceship, stating that it is "time, past time, that we all got back to our own people" (K. Le Guin 2012b, 189), Ren protests:

> "I have no people," I said. "I don't belong to people. I am trying to be a person. Why do you want to take me away from my soul? You want me to do magic! I won't. I won't do magic. I won't speak your language. I won't go with you!" (K. Le Guin 2012b, 189)

Ren's outcry is to be understood within the framework of Sorovian culture: Sorovians strive to become fully autonomous individuals, and recognize no binding allegiance to a community – they see themselves as *persons*, not as members of a *people*, to follow the distinction that Ren employs here. Consistently, they perceive any violation of an individual's autonomy as "magic" – though Ren points out that this is a misleading translation for a term that indicates "an art or power that violates natural law" (K. Le Guin 2012b, 179). The boundaries of that violation are different from those of Hainish culture, for Sorovians "truly consider most human relationships unnatural" and see "marriage, for instance, or government, [...] as an evil spell woven by sorcerers" (K. Le Guin 2012b, 179). Conversely, it is of foremost importance, for Sorovians, to be able to "make their soul", which is what they call the process of growth and self-actualization through which one becomes a fully-autonomous *person* in the Sorovian sense. This is achieved primarily – at least for women – through the art of attentiveness that they call "being aware", practised in solitude. As Ren explains:

> By solitude the soul escapes from doing or suffering magic; it escapes from dullness, from boredom, by being aware. Nothing is boring if you are aware of it. It may be

> irritating, but it is not boring. If it is pleasant the pleasure will not fail so long as you are aware of it. Being aware is the hardest work the soul can do, I think (K. Le Guin 2012b, 202)

What Ren is thus accusing her mother of is violating her autonomy and hindering her growth – her soul making – in ways that she cannot even comprehend, enslaving her to circumstances and spaces, and forms of sociality – including kinship arrangements –, that are completely unnatural to her.

Leaf's reply to her daughter's protest, and to her claim that she "has no power over [her]" (K. Le Guin 2012b, 192), is significant, and contains the kernel of the story's conflict over the meaning(s) of kinship:

> After a long time she said in Hainish. "I agree. I have no power over you. But I have certain rights; the right of loyalty; of love."
> "Nothing is right that puts me in your power," I said, still in my language.
> She stared at me. […] "You are one of them. You don't know what love is. You're closed into yourself like a rock. I should never have taken you there. People crouching in the ruins of a society […] – each one in a terrible solitude – and I let them make you into one of them!' (K. Le Guin 2012b, 192)

Though the reader (and Ren, as the narrator) may be sympathetic to Leaf's anguish, through her Le Guin explores a proprietary, albeit well-meaning, conception of parenthood, which denies a child's right to autonomously pursue radically different societal or kinship aspirations. Conversely, Ren's idea that "nothing is right that puts [her] in [her mother's] power" (K. Le Guin 2012b, 192) echoes the family abolitionist stance that "no human being should ever own or entirely dominate another person, even children" (O'Brian 2023, 7). By representing the possibility of a society in which human relationships are organized in a radically different way, and by having an outsider denounce such arrangement as an incapacity to love – ironically, as she is violating her child's autonomy –, Le Guin creates a situation that encapsulates the violence of the family as a normative institution. Le Guin summarizes the story as "[wanting] to write about an introvert who finds a good place for introverts to live" (K. Le Guin 2012a, ix), but clearly here rehabilitating "introversion" is functional to "[compel] us to see humans as much more than we have been encouraged to imagine" (Graeber 2020, 71) – in David Graeber's assessment of the radical potential of anthropology, which matches the political impetus of Le Guin's fictional ethnographies. Sorovian society, in particular, presents not so much a rejection but an alternative conception of "community", challenging the reader to imagine how, though seemingly atomised, there might exist persons that are able to maintain, as Ren puts it, "a kind of community, a wide, thin, fine network of delicate and certain intention and restraint: a social order" (K. Le Guin 2012b, 187).

Leaf will relent, after Ren's forced assimilation into Hainish customs, on the spaceship, almost kills her daughter. This is the last dialogue the two share, anticipating their final separation:

> "Mother, I want to go home and you want to go home," I said. "Can't we?"
> Her expression was strange for a moment, while she misunderstood me; then it cleared to grief, defeat, relief.
> […]

> Then noises began to come out of me, sobbing, howling. Mother was crying. She came to me and held me, and I could hold my mother, cling to her and cry with her, because her spell was broken. (K. Le Guin 2012b, 195-196)

Though it involves loss – Ren remains of Eleven-Soro, Leaf returns to Hain, and there is a real chance they will never see each other again – the breaking of "the spell" of domination exercised in the name of love is ultimately what saves them both, allowing them to let go of a mutually unsustainable relationship. This is the story's abolitionist moment: a breaking of seemingly natural and inviolable contracts of love that allows better alternatives to emerge, or, in this case, to continue to exist.

Importantly, Le Guin's cultural critique has specific environmental corollaries, focused on rethinking the role of technology and the relations between human beings and the materiality of the world. As for the former, it is revealed that the peculiar societal arrangement of the Sorovians is the result of surviving the collapse of a technologically advanced – and unsustainable – society. In her interpretation of Before Time stories – focused on the civilization that had ruled the planet in the past – Leaf reads the presence of the "sorcerers", which employ what seem to be advanced technologies, as proof that Sorovians are superstitiously afraid of technology itself. She fails to understand that Sorovians are articulating the potential for technology to enable domination *if* misused, as Ren explains:

> "But technology isn't magic," I said.
> "Yes, it is, in their minds; look at the story you just recorded. Before Time sorcerers who could fly in the air and undersea and underground in magic boxes!"
> [...]
> "The boxes weren't magic," I said. "The people were. They were sorcerers. They used their power to get power over other persons. To live rightly a person has to keep away from magic."
> "That's a cultural imperative, because a few thousand years ago uncontrolled technological expansion led to disaster. Exactly. There's a perfectly rational reason for the irrational taboo." (K. Le Guin 2012b, 187-8)

Le Guin is staging, in the (mis)communication between the two characters, ideas about the misuse of technology and its connection with ecological disaster that she has expanded upon elsewhere:

> Technology of the last two hundred years or so [...] is what has caused the ecological crisis that [...] we are beginning to live through. [...] Well, if this was caused largely by our wonderful high technologies and the exploitation of the Earth that they require, then are we going to call upon the technology to fix it? Isn't that the definition of insanity? (Carpenter and K. Le Guin 2015)

Le Guin here uses a problematic "we" in identifying those responsible for ecological collapse, but, as Arwen Spicer points out commenting this passage, "if her language is ambiguous, her critique is not. It is aimed squarely at [...] the Western view of technological progress as a panacea for climate change and other ills" (Spicer 2021, 78). "Solitude" adds to that reflection a warning against unquestioned faith in *all* forms of technology – including *social* technologies like the privatized family – that can enable domination if misused, and if the exploitation they enable is not properly addressed.

"Solitude" offers an alternative in the practice of being aware, which allows Ren to "make her soul" by attuning to the very world that surrounds her. This is how Ren describes her return to Eleven-Soro after her ordeal on the Hainish ship, anticipating new possibilities of growth, understanding and (silent, solitary) engagement:

> From the lander approaching I saw the oceans of Eleven-Soro, and in the greatness of my joy I thought that when I was grown and went out alone I would go to the sea shore and watch the sea-beasts shimmering their colors and tunes till I knew what they were thinking. I would listen, I would learn, till my soul was as large as the shining world. (K. Le Guin 2012b, 196)

And this is how she describes her being aware as a way to reconnect with her own body, and with the materiality and beauty of the world:

> To be aware of the grain of dust beneath the sole of the foot, and the skin of the sole of the foot, and the touch and scent of the air on the cheek, and the fall and motion of the light across the air, and the color of the grass on the high hill across the fiver, and the thoughts of the body, of the soul, the shimmer and ripple of colors and sounds in the clear darkness of the depths, endlessly moving, endlessly changing, endlessly new. (K. Le Guin 2012b, 201)

I propose reading this practice, and Sorovian society at large, through Federici's "re-enchantment of the world": as an attempt to acknowledge the necessities of recovering "our need for the sun, the wind, the sky, the need for touching, smelling, sleeping, making love, and being in the open air" (K. Le Guin 2012b, 190) from capitalist alienation. Admittedly, in the "introverted-friendly" Sorovian society, which is quite different from Federici's envisioned commons, the ways in which some of these needs can be satisfied are different. However, this particular "kind of community" similarly offers a challenge to normative family structures and hegemonic technologies of/as domination, questioning whether they are necessary for planetary salvation, or to guarantee collective care and well-being. This challenge resonates with Ren's final pluralist plea, to the children of Hain, to listen her story "to learn *one* of the ways to make a soul" (K. Le Guin 2012b, 203, emphasis mine).

Conclusion

The two stories diverge in crucial ways from the ecofeminist and family abolitionist framework I have put them in conversation with. In neither does abolition emerge in a context of collective struggle, the "insurgent social reproduction" (O'Brian 2023, 1) that, for O'Brian, is the most likely site from which privatized care can be abolished. However, as discussed, Desai questions the validity of exclusively individualistic revolts against the exploitations enabled by the family form and perpetrated against the nonhuman; and Le Guin argues for a multiplication of kinship forms in a way that presupposes a rejection, at a societal level, of technocratic, extractivist development. Both stories are thus at least ideologically compatible, if not overlapping, with collectivist approaches.

Most importantly, they offer visions and insights that ecofeminist family abolitionism can latch on to: images of the interwoven pain of animals, women and children; the unveiling of multiple forms of care as coercion; and the exhilaration of seemingly anti-social forms of self-actualization, rooted in entanglements with the

nonhuman, that, in a "future in which no one relational or household model is expected, privileged or over-invested with hope" (Weeks 2021, 448), can be materially possible, and equally honour different possibilities of a fulfilling human existence. Indeed, when the key images of the two texts – the wildfire and soulmaking – are juxtaposed, and if we remember that the wildfire can also signify ecological regeneration and not just wanton destruction, we are provided with a motto that epitomizes an ecofeminist family abolitionism: after the fire, new ways to make a soul.

Works cited

Attebery, Brian. 2021. "*Always Coming Home* and the Hinge in Ursula K. Le Guin's Career." In *The Legacies of Ursula K. Le Guin: Science, Fiction, and Ethics for the Anthropocene*, edited by Christopher L. Robinson, Sarah Bouttier, and Pierre-Louis Patoine. Palgrave.

Balzano, Angela. 2021. *Farla finita con la Famiglia. Dall'aborto alle parentele postumane.* Meltemi.

Berrigan, Caitlin. 2022. "Kinship Is Anarchy." *E-Flux* 10 (130): 1–14. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/130/491388/kinship-is-anarchy/.

Carpenter, Zoë, and Ursula K. Le Guin. 2015. "Listening to the Unheard Voices." *The Nation* (Youtube). 2015. youtu.be/3_vzSgkjBEI.

Demas Bliss, Corinne, and Anita Desai. 1988. "Against the Current: A Conversation with Anita Desai." *The Massachusetts Review* 29 (3): 521–37.

Desai, Anita. 1999 [1977]. *Fire on the Mountain.* Vintage.

Desai, Anita. 2008a [1988]. *Baumgartner's Bombay.* Random House India.

Desai, Anita. 2008b [1984]. *In Custody.* Random House India.

Desai, Anita, Vanessa Guignery, and Alexis Tadié. 2009. "*In Custody* and Beyond: A Conversation with Anita Desai." *ÉA* 62 (3): 370–8.

Didur, Jill. 2013. "Guns & Roses: Reading the Picturesque Archive in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*." *Textual Practice* 27 (3): 499–522. https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2013.784029.

D'Souza, Karen. 2020. "Enabling Modernisms: Discrete/Discreet Feminisms in Katherine Mansfield and Anita Desai." *Journal of New Zealand Literature (JNZL)* 38 (2): 59–81.

Federici, Silvia. 2019. *Re-Enchating the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons.* PM Press.

Graeber, David. 2020. *Anarchy—In a Manner of Speaking. Conversations with Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, Nika Dubrovsky, and Assia Turquier-Zauberman.* Diaphanes.

Gopal, Priyamvada. 2009. *The Indian English Novel. Nation, History and Narration.* Oxford University Press.

Harris-Fain, Darren. 2015. "Dangerous Visions: New Wave and Post-New Wave Science Fiction". In *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction*, edited by

Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781107280601.005.

Jussawalla, Feroza, and Anita Desai. 1992. "Anita Desai." In *Interviews with Writers of the Post- Colonial World*, edited by Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock. University of Mississipi.

K. Le Guin, Ursula. 2003 [1995]. "Coming of Age in Karhide." In *The Birthday of the World and Other Stories*. Perennial.

K. Le Guin, Ursula.2012a. "Introduction." In *The Real and the Unreal. Selected Stories. Volume 2. Outer Space, Inner Lands*. Gollancz.

K. Le Guin, Ursula. 2012b [1994]. "Solitude." In *The Real and the Unreal. Selected Stories. Volume 2. Outer Space, Inner Lands*. Gollancz.

K. Le Guin, Ursula. 2017 [1969]. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Gollancz.

K. Le Guin, Ursula. 2018. *The Books of Earthsea. The Complete Illustrated Edition*. Gollancz.

K. Le Guin, Ursula. 2018 [1993]. "Earthsea Revisited." In *The Books of Earthsea. The Complete Illustrated Edition*. Gollancz.

K. Le Guin, Ursula. 2024 [1988]. "Is Gender Necessary? Redux." In *The Language of the Night: Essays on Writing, Science Fiction, and Fantasy*. Scribner.

Lewis, Sophie. 2019. *Full Surrogacy Now. Feminism Against the Family*. Verso.

Lewis, Sophie. 2020. "Full Family Now: Surrogacy Against Feminism, Response by Sophie Lewis." Society + Space. 2020. https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/response-by-sophie-lewis-full-family-now-surrogacy-against-feminism.

Lewis, Sophie. 2022. *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*. Verso.

Loomba, Ania. 1993. "Tangled Histories: Indian Feminism and Anglo-American Feminist Criticism". *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 12 (2): 271–8.

Menon, Nivedita. 2015. "Is Feminism about 'Women'? A Critical View on Intersectionality from India". *Economic and Political Weekly* 50 (17): 37–44.

O'Brian, M.E. 2023. *Family Abolition. Capitalism and the Communizing of Care*. Pluto Press.

Purnell, Derecka. 2021. *Becoming Abolitionists. Police, Protests, and the Pursuit of Freedom*. Verso.

Rushdie, Salman. 2010. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. Vintage.

Singh Chanda, Geetanjali. 2008. *Indian Women in the House of Fiction*. Zubaan.

Spicer, Arwen. 2021. "Many Voices in the Household: Indigeneity and Utopia in Le Guin's Ekumen." In *The Legacies of Ursula K. Le Guin: Science, Fiction, and Ethics for the Anthropocene*, edited by Christopher L. Robinson, Sarah Bouttier, and Pierre-Louis Patoine. Palgrave.

Tallbear, Kim, and Angela Willey. 2019. "Critical Relationality: Queer, Indigenous, and Multispecies Belonging Beyond Settler Sex & Nature". *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* 10 (1): 4–15. https://doi.org/10.17742/image.cr.10.1.1.

Turner, Joe. 2019. *Bordering Intimacy. Postcolonial Governance and the Policing of Family.* Manchester University Press.

Weeks, Kathi. 2021. "Abolition of the Family: The Most Infamous Feminist Proposal." *Feminist Theory* 24 (3): 433–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211015841.