



Towards Non-binary Science Fiction: Naomi Alderman's *The Power* athwart Difference Feminism

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In her science fiction novel *The Power* (2016), Naomi Alderman unsettles the coordinates of Western biopower by imagining a matriarchal regime responsible for the direct reversal of essentialist categories to the detriment of the male population. Traversing the nature/culture divide and addressing recent debates around gender politics, in this article, Alderman's work will be framed within the domain of queer speculative fiction with the aim to show how her novel counterintuitively configures as a non-binary narrative where the spectrum of gender identity is not reduced to male-female distinctions. By addressing the essentialist drift of some differentialist and separatist stances in feminism, which perceive the erasure of sexual boundaries as a threat to the essence of what it means to be "woman," the nuanced queering drive of Alderman's poetics will be presented as the evidence that it is only by scattering dualistic notions rooted in biology and ultimately rearranging both the social and symbolic order that the existing patriarchal system can be overturned.

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Nel suo romanzo di fantascienza *The Power* (2016), tradotto con il titolo *Ragazze elettriche*, Naomi Alderman si interroga sugli effetti a cui il rovesciamento speculare del sistema patriarcale in un regime matriarcale porterebbe in ambito sociopolitico. Per il suo tentativo di ridimensionare il divario tra natura e cultura e il desiderio di affrontare alcuni tra i più recenti dibattiti sulle politiche di genere, il romanzo di Alderman verrà qui inquadrato nell'ambito della narrativa speculativa queer e presentato come il terreno fertile per una letteratura non binaria in cui l'ampio ventaglio delle identità di genere non sia più ridotto a dicotomie dettate dalla biologia. A tale scopo, lo spettro politico presente in *The Power* verrà messo in dialogo con il pensiero femminista della differenza sessuale e in particolar modo con la deriva essenzialista e separatista che ha portato in alcuni contesti a individuare nella cultura queer una minaccia per le tradizionali categorie di 'uomo' e 'donna'.

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*Unless I learn to use
the difference between poetry and rhetoric
my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire.*
Audre Lorde, *Power* (2017)

Published in 2016, Naomi Alderman's *The Power: A Historical Novel* stands as a seminal work of contemporary speculative fiction weaving an intricate tapestry of societal power dynamics through the prism of gender. Set in a distant but recognizable future where women have developed the ability to inflict electric shocks through their skein, a striated muscle on their collarbone, a compelling exploration of gender roles, authority, and the consequence of power shifts unfurls against a backdrop that is both hauntingly familiar and eerily divergent from the reality we inhabit. The capsizing of traditional, top-down belief systems prompts a profound re-evaluation of societal norms and expectations, while indirectly hinting at the failed attempts, made first by patriarchal institutions and later reiterated by several feminist stances, to address the needs of a convoluted present. For this reason, some of the main themes in Alderman's novel will be here tackled through a critical appraisal of difference feminism – or, more generally, of the philosophy of sexual difference – as originated in Italy in the 1970s by a set of feminists who reinterpreted the positions of philosopher Luce Irigaray (1974), ultimately landing on a worldview that turned out to be fraught with the perils of the dialectical paradigm they had wished to disrupt in the first place. As we will see, in fact, by sticking to male-female binarism, difference feminism has fallen short of the epistemological shift required for a reductionist vision to be overthrown, and has ignored that, as Bruno Latour writes, “[i]n abandoning dualism [the] intent is not to throw everything into the same pot, to efface the distinct features of the various parts within the collective” (1993, 193).

In the novel, the spread of a newfound physical endowment among young women culminates in what is referred to as the “Day of the Girls”, an event marking a succession of global insurrections fuelled against the entrenched male domination. However, the recalibration of power dynamics does not usher in a paradisiacal matriarchy, and rather manifests as a system typified by discord, violence, and a noticeable biopolitical imbalance. Curiously, while the main viewpoint characters of the story are three women – Margot, an ambitious and increasingly ruthless politician; Allie, an abused foster child turned into a fanatical cult leader; and Roxy, the feisty daughter of a renowned criminal – the events are meticulously chronicled by a male autodidactic journalist from Nigeria, Tunde, who leverages digital platforms to disseminate a live account of such epochal changes. Although provided with evident psychological depth, Tunde's character is conceived as a reversed polarization of the virtues women are expected to show in the western traditional imagery. That is, while Tunde's gaze dominates the narrative as it records the way history is reshaped by women, his is not the vantage point of a patriarch. Instead, he is presented to us as an outsider to his sex, and for this reason often accepted or at least tolerated whenever he finds himself in the company of women. Similarly, throughout the novel, readers are given the impression that the story is being narrated by a woman, but the denouement catapults them into a future scenario, wherein a fictional male author, Neil, endeavours to draft and publish a “historical” novel revisiting the time prior to the Armageddon-like global event, known as the “Great Cataclysm”,

that the novel counts down to. Like women writers have historically been concealed within a male-dominated field, an exchange of letters shows us Neil being constantly patronized by Alderman herself, who here accesses the storyline in the role of Neil's assertive mentor. Through a rhetorical language exuding irony, Alderman is not only offering a valid critique of the publishing industry and its centuries-old, sex-based prejudices, but she also seems to hint at the epistemic violence inevitably derived from a dichotomous conception of society as the hierarchical predominance of one sex over the other, whether male or female. Eventually, it all comes down to a matter of representation, which Alderman addresses with originality, yet also with a nod to the past, as intertextual references to authors like Virginia Woolf and Audre Lorde (Alderman 2017, 274; 328) suggest.

“The shape of power is always the same”

The cue for the book, Alderman once stated, was a simple question: “What if women and not men were the sex that could do more physical harm and cause more pain? Do we think that in those circumstances women would remain peaceful, loving, and kind, and lovely? Or do we not?” (Brown 2019, n.p.). The interrogative essence of Alderman's proposition is not an easy one and beckons an extensive contemplation of human nature, bearing the weight of decades of studies on the intricacies of biopower, from Michel Foucault onwards, which force us to ponder whether, under altered circumstances, women would persevere as paragons of care and kindness or, alternatively, be propelled into new outward manifestations of their inner self, therein challenging the deeply ingrained notion of femininity as synonymous to docility. To do so, Alderman expectedly leans more on the literary and political front than the philosophical manifestations of bio- and identity politics, deliberately leaving behind ample space for interpretation. Indeed, science fiction generally imposes ambiguous questions, thereby urging us to traverse the wide space-time dimension where speculation converges with acute socio-cultural commentary, and Alderman is no exception. Her poetics is the result of a careful reading and profound appreciation of works of feminist SF and dystopias belonging to past generations, which often challenged gender expectations, acknowledging that “heterosexual love is an institution designed by men to subjugate women” and “inculcates in [men] an intense fear of expendability – perhaps the reason why these stories simply and flatly equate an all-female world with female domination of men” (Russ 1980, 9). A similar epilogue recurs in *The Power* too, where heterosexual pleasure remains inextricably linked to a desire of subjugation, which might also account for the total absence of love relations between women in the novel. Overall, it might be argued that Alderman's failed utopia belongs to a larger mosaic of works on sex-roles reversals and revolutions, like Suzy McKee Charnas's *Holdfast Chronicles* (1974–1999), which is composed of a series of “narrative subtleties [that] reveal ever-shifting subject positions and gender identities liable to construction and reconstruction” so that “[i]n terms of the definition of utopia as the expression of women's desire, the novel problematizes the issue of the women's utopian desire, the object of which [...] is both textually constructed and negated” (Cavalcanti 2003, 60).

As Hanna Arendt observes in her analysis of the meaning of revolution, the subversion of the ruler-ruled dichotomy, even in democratic political contexts, does not prevent body politics from affecting the people, unlike other forms of government where only the rulers are exposed to corruption and where “an ‘innocent’ people might indeed first suffer and then, one day, effect a dreadful but necessary insurrection” (1965, 255).

Premising that the reference to Arendt's philosophy is not casual, since it has often been made into a political tool by difference feminism,¹ it might be said that, upon reading *The Power*, one not only feels entitled to ask what consistency there is in the claim that a major transformation must lead to "dreadful" results, but also to call into doubt the illusion of being able to overthrow whatever dominant ideology by so doing, in that Arendt's statement emphasizes how within a republican framework the entire population becomes vulnerable to the effects of political corruption. Besides, in many pieces of speculative fiction, republics offer the backdrop for the exploration of sociopolitical issues, as in the exemplary case of Margaret Atwood's Republic of Gilead featured in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Unsurprisingly, the Canadian author acted as Alderman's mentor at the time she was writing the novel, possibly shaping the way political structures and power relations are conjectured in *The Power* as well. Several years after the publication of her masterpiece, Atwood even returned to reason on the epistemological significance of fictional, yet realistic, dictatorial governments, their emergence and eventual destruction:

I've said earlier that dystopia contains within itself a little utopia, and vice versa. What, then, is the little utopia concealed in the dystopic *Handmaid's Tale*? There are two: one is in the past – the past that is our own present. The second is placed in a future beyond the main story by the Afterword at the end of the book, which describes a future in which Gilead [...] has ended, and has thus become a subject for conferences and academic papers. I suppose that's what happens to utopian societies when they die: they don't go to Heaven, they become thesis topics. (Atwood 2013, 90-1)

"Utopian" societies, as Atwood calls them, are the topographic and political expression of the complexity of human actions, which rarely allow to be thought of in black-and-white terms. "*Utopia*", she writes, "is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite – because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood 2013, 66). Presently, we have an extensive vocabulary at our disposal to refer to that middle ground between utopic and apocalyptic imageries – eutopias, anti-utopias, uchronias – whose core is perhaps best encapsulated in the idea of "mixtopia" as proposed by Giuliana Misserville (2020), who conceives of it as a conceptual framework transcending the confines of conventional reality/fiction distinctions, and embodying a material-semiotic inclination towards unheard-of methodologies intended for practical solutions to the trials of everyday existence. Such a complex interplay of permeable subjectivities in a perpetual state of flux can be traced in Alderman as well, although in her novel individual entities often tend to become typified, as if alluding to the dangers of the constitution of fixed identities in the face of a world in becoming. It is no wonder that such fixity is found in the interstices of power and its lithic fabric:

The shape of power is always the same; it is the shape of a tree. [...] It is the shape that lightning forms when it strikes from heaven to earth. [...] the shape electricity wants to take is of a living thing, a fern, a bare branch. The strike point in the centre,

¹ Adriana Cavarero refuses any reading of Arendt as distinguishing ontological rooting to biological birth, as she contends that "[g]iven that Arendt calls upon action, understood as a synonym for freedom and spontaneity, to redeem the human from the biological dimension that reduces the human to a mere 'natural being', it is indeed a bit surprising that she should turn precisely to a natural phenomenon – birth – to constitute the foundation of action" (Cavarero 2016, 112).

the power seeking outward. [...] Orders travel from the centre to the tips. (Alderman 2017, 3-4)

Then, in history as in fiction, power operates hierarchically, it strikes “from heaven to earth”, somewhat echoing the terms used by Foucault to describe it, that is as a “capillary form of existence” that “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (1980, 39). And, while materialist feminists claim that “an excessive emphasis on the discursive construction of bodies has tended to reduce them to plastic and passive matter” (Alaimo & Hekman 2008, 237), semiotic readings of bodies can still play a relevant role without necessarily jeopardizing their material existence, as Karen Barad instead harshly suggested when she wrote that Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity “ultimately reinscribes matter as a passive product of discursive practices rather than as an active agent participating in the very process of materialization” (Barad 2007, 151). Thus, since in Alderman power unexpectedly passes from (biological) men to (biological) women, all these tensions must be taken into account, in particular in their negative polarizations, as in the book knowledge is twisted to such an extent that even the religious order is upset, and all that is left of the Scriptures is a series of apocrypha collected in the so-called *Book of Eve*, made for holding the passages that work for women and “rewriting the bits that don’t” (Alderman 2017, 104). “When the people change, the palace cannot hold” (Alderman 2017, 4), it reads, as a demonstration that, when dealing with power, “[d]espite the lack of a definitive answer to the question of its origin”, all we need to know is the significance of “its shape and direction” (Warchał 2020, 90), which are written on bodily matter, making of the body a heterotopic space of subjection/insurrection, in a kind of corporeality that Alderman magnifies to describe the coordinates of the social space as well (see Capalbo 2020, 81). Therefore, whereas some have accused Alderman of having neglected the intersectional nature of identity politics in a work where “white heteronormativity is constituted and naturalized as a universal experience of womanhood” (Miller 2020, 399), glimpses of it seem to be intentionally limited to validate the theory of a world where inverted dichotomies fall short of their ambitious objectives, leaving space to the rise of what Broders describes as a “utopia gone mad” (Broder 2021).² If, due to this alleged lack of intersectional awareness, Hoyle believes that Alderman’s is a “narrow focus on how power acts on people and shapes the world” (Hoyle 2017, n.p.), she fails to consider that the premise of power contention is often limited to begin with, since those seeking dominance, in the novel as elsewhere, are socially integrated individuals, meaning white, heterosexual, cisgender men and women.

While accepting that Alderman might have wilfully reduced the large spectrum of identity discourses, I contend that, if plot-wise *The Power* may be referred to as “a binary novel” (Abshavi 2020, 820), its poetics, as we will see, can be counterintuitively configured as a blueprint for the full realization of what may in fact be called “non-binary” science fiction, intended as a latent or explicit rebuttal of the social and symbolic order as resting on limitations imposed by male-female reductionism. Contrary to what

² It should be noted that intersectionality is a more central matter in the Prime Video TV series adaptation of the novel (Featherstone *et al.* 2023), which counts Alderman herself among its creators. An early reviewer of the series remarked that the show “does take time to examine the intersectional aspects of the issue. Allie makes friends with a transgender nun, establishing that ‘woman’ is not simply defined by a body part, be that a uterus or a weird electronic new organ. Tunde, the sole male main character, examines how his privilege affects his sudden fame in documenting the power [...]” (Johnston 2023, n.p.).

contemporary readers may consider as an excess of political correctness typical of our times, Alderman is the heiress of a large genealogy of SF writers, from Katherine Burdekin (*Proud Man*, 1934), to Theodore Sturgeon (*Venus Plus X*, 1960) and Ursula K. Le Guin. In particular, Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), set on planet Gethen, whose human-like inhabitants differ from us in their sexual physiology, explicates the functions of SF as a linguistic tool for implementing experiments in imagination that have a grip on reality. While recalling the writing of her masterpieces, Le Guin once argued that, because of social conditioning, it is hard to see what, besides anatomical traits, truly differentiates men and women (Le Guin 1993, 159). This prompted her to omit gender and dwell on other features shared by biological men and women. As a result, Le Guin refused to resort either to binary gendered pronouns or to deflect poetic language by using the "he/she" formula. As explained by herself in the 1988 redux of a 1976 essay titled "Is Gender Necessary?", 1968 represented a turning point in history, especially for feminism, which led her to refer to Gethenians with the pronoun "he", rather than accepting the mangled version "he/she". In retrospect, Le Guin regretted her choice, writing that "I still dislike invented pronouns, but now dislike them less than the so-called generic pronoun he/him/his, which does in fact exclude women from discourse; and which was an invention of male grammarians, for until the sixteenth century the English generic singular pronoun was they/them/their", which she far-sightedly believed had to be "restored to the written language, and let the pedants and pundits squeak and gibber in the streets" (Le Guin 1993, 169-70). That said, Le Guin's case is interesting when paired with Alderman's, in that both move along the confines of utopian fiction, which Le Guin considered not a practicable alternative, yet a necessary perspective against epistemic atrophy.

Thus, non-binary science fiction, which already exists under the umbrella term "queer science fiction", mainly derives from a mindset which, due to its non-dualistic and not mutually exclusive attitude, allows for the scattering of perspectival representations of identity. That is why Alderman herself acknowledged the inadequacy of a limited perspective in writing her novel:

I wrote a whole first draft of a book that was about 200,000 words, which had one viewpoint character, and I got to the end when I realized that was not working and I had twisted this viewpoint character in so many different directions to get her to go where I wanted her to go, that she didn't make sense as a character anymore. So I threw out 200,000 words and started again. (Brown 2019, n.p.)

Alderman's revision of the book's first version might be viewed as symptomatic of the stifling effect generated by the obsolete notions that certain feminist stances still anchor to and promote to this day, as is the case with Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero. The driving force behind the philosophical Diotima community founded in Verona in 1990, Cavarero theorized a renewed approach to feminism through the lens of sexual difference, with the purpose of countering the "threat" of the universalization of language – which she believes can only be dualistically gendered – in order to prove how male knowledge has historically excluded or marginalised female knowledge (Cavarero 1991, 9). While Cavarero suggests that "[e]very human being is unique, an unrepeatable existence, which [...] neither follows in the footsteps of another life, nor repeats the very same course, nor leaves behind the same story" (Cavarero 2002, 2), virtually advocating for the disturbance of identitary inflexibilities by means of a process of subjectification, her argument loses consistency on account of her insistence on a

dichotomous worldview dictated by biology. If Cavarero rightly notes that “women do not have their own language, but rather use the language of the other”, she insists on the fact that “[t]he essence of women is their reproductive organs: woman is that who generates, the mother” (Cavarero 1991, 52; 55, my trans.). Even though in Alderman motherhood is not explicitly thematized along the lines of the nature/culture divide, any consideration of sexual difference has to account that the philosophy derived from it has made of biologism one of its hallmarks, so much so that, “unbearable as it is nowadays for many women to think of themselves starting from motherhood [...] the thought of sexual difference cannot exempt itself from this theme” (Cavarero 1991, 56, my trans.). However, as noted by Lidia Curti, “[t]he quarrel between essentialist and anti-essentialist feminism could be displaced by observing that the difference between nature and culture is yet a further essentialist argument: [...] how can we assume that the boundaries between the two are the same from one culture to another?” (Curti 1988, 153). Indeed, Alderman is aware of the uneven continuum between a culture and the historical frame that dictates its mutations. In the aftermath of the sociopolitical achievements of feminism, Alderman’s women are strong and independent, and often embody a confutation of the woman-mother correspondence, which the author renders by means of an array of female characters who do not respond to the traditional virtues associated with maternal instinct and femininity, as exemplified by the encounter-clash of Roxy and Allie: “[Allie] is easy among these women, in a way Roxy finds difficult. She’s not used to the company of girls; it’s been boys in Bernie’s family and boys in Bernie’s gang, and her mum was always more of a man’s woman and the girls at school never treated Roxy nice” (Alderman 2017, 104). Moreover, it is interesting that the relief of a mother’s gentle care is progressively denied to men, as revealed by Tunde’s thoughts and feelings as he is about to be raped:

He thinks of his mother, reaching into the pot to test the grains of parboiled rice between her fingertips. Too hot for you, Tunde, get your hands away. [...] Your brain is jangled, Tunde. Remember what they say about this. Your mind is made of meat and electrics. This thing hurts more than it should because it short-circuits your brain. You are confused. You are not at home. Your mother will not come. (Alderman 2017, 138)

After all, Allie’s sermon is clear: “The young are close to God” but “young women, especially” (Alderman 2017, 182), whereas men are scapegoats for the evil of the world:

‘You are the sacrifice and we are the recipients.
‘You are the son and we are the Mother.
‘Do you acknowledge that it is so?’
All the men in the circle looked on eagerly.
‘Yes,’ they whispered. ‘Yes, yes, please, yes, now, yes.’
And Tunde found himself muttering it with them. ‘Yes.’ (Alderman 2017, 269)

Against the seemingly perfect balance found in the illustrations of artifacts like “Son in agony” and “Holy Mother” (Alderman 2017, 34; 121) that disseminate Alderman’s novel, Allie’s separatist predicament is bound to fail, since it ignores the persistence of differences between women. Margot, for example, tries to fill the void left by her own mother’s indifference by taking over her daughter Jocelyn’s life choices: “You can be just like all the other girls. I know we can fix it for you”, Margot tells her, sure that “[t]his is what it means to be a good mother. Sometimes you can see what your kids need better than they can” (Alderman 2017, 192). Then, no one is safe in a world governed by

gender-related double standards and, if Margot's political career is at the mercy of her male opponents, by the end of the novel, women take credit for the intellectual toils of men: "Misattributions, anonymous work assumed to be female, men helping their wives or sisters or mothers with their work and getting no credit, and yes, simple theft" (Alderman 2017, 332). Clearly, Alderman is ironically railing against the effects of a misogynist society, but the sex-roles reversal also shows the senselessness of a qualitative evaluation of a person based on their biological sex, namely the material surface concealing a myriad of identity traits.

Surely, at the intersection of racial, ethnic, and gender differences, the body is a site charged with the most disparate somatopolitical values, which prevents the direct reversal of black/white or cis/trans terms and stereotypes. As observed by Stuart Hall – in his case with a focus on racial and ethnic difference – although biology inscribes difference(s) on the body, the link between somatic manifestations and what he called "politics of representation" (Hall 2019, 92) is not straightforward and demands that stereotypes be deconstructed from within. In terms of gender identity, this calls for a remapping of bodily coordinates and the constant reinvention of the language used to describe them, which inevitably exceeds any *aut aut* choice between masculinity and femininity. Then, identity is a construction where nature and culture are not mutually excluded, but in a state of continuous adaptation to otherness:

We are always in negotiation, not with a single set of oppositions that place us always in the same relation to others, but with a series of different positionalities. Each has for us its point of profound subjective identification. And that is the most difficult thing about this proliferation of the field of identities and antagonisms: they are often dislocating in relation to one another. (Hall 2019, 92)

Similarly, in queer SF, far from being a constrictive territory (*topia*), or the cue for utopias reversing traditional trajectories along a binary track, bodies materialize as heterotopias enabling each individual to freely rework their identity. In this sense, if it is true that "the thought of sexual difference cannot be other than the thinking, here and now, of a historical living sexualized feminine" (Cavarero 1991, 59, my trans.), the notion of "woman" is hardly static, if not at the detriment of any manifestation of queerness, which comes to be regarded as a menace to women's essence, as argued as far back as 1979 by Janice Raymond, who wrote about transsexual people that they "rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves" (Raymond 1994, 104). Such positions contain a latent contradiction, backed by essentialist and separatist thinkers assuming that "woman" and "feminist" are not sociopolitical classifications, but the immediate reflection of nature.

"Power travels within us as it does in nature"

That of nature is a problematic question in the novel as much as it is in current feminist debates around the menace of essentialism (Ardilli & Zappino 2019). In the *Book of Eve*, a new evangelical voice calls onto the new generation: "My children, nothing has happened here that has not been in accordance with the natural law" (Alderman 2017, 3), which makes of the power to electrocute a gendered prerequisite for a woman to be identified as such, in total disregard of the hordes of women in the book who are not able to either generate static electricity or to do it properly. This theory is supported by the fact that in the animal kingdom examples of species exist that are equipped with electricity as a natural badge of predatory status: "An Israeli anthropologist suggests

that the development of this organ in humans is proof positive of the aquatic-ape hypothesis; that we are naked of hair because we came from the oceans, not the jungle, where once we terrified the deeps like the electric eel, the electric ray” (Alderman 2017, 20). As a consequence, women who have not developed this ability are automatically relegated to a state of abnormality, so that, if those with the power are demonized by that part of the male population that aligns them with “patriarchal fears about the destructive potential of women, particularly as it relates to sexuality and deception, and an association with the unclean” (Miller 2020, 416), the ones who lack it are ridiculed or harassed by other women: “There are nasty names now for a girl who can’t or won’t defend herself. *Blanket*, they call them, and *flat battery*. Those are the least offensive ones. *Gimp*. *Flick*. *Nesh*. *Pzif*” (Alderman 2017, 64). Soon, a reversed form of camaraderie emerges where women perform acts of downright, rite-of-passage, violence on their male counterparts. Past the episode of self-defence we witness at the beginning of the novel when Allie, after flirting with a group of boys, dismisses them – “Not in the mood”, stimulating the anger of one of them – “‘That’s fine’, says Hunter, ‘but see, you brought us here and we *are* in the mood’” (Alderman 2017, 28) – and ultimately having to use force to protect herself, by the end of the story rapes on men are on the agenda, and often distort into some sort of satanic sacrifices where men are murdered as lambs to the slaughter. It is not surprising that, on such occasions, those few women trying to protect men are also persecuted or even killed:

A wife, or perhaps a sister, tries to stop them from taking the pale-skinned, curly-haired man who’s with her. She fights off two of them with precise and well-timed jolts to the chin and the temple. They overwhelm her easily, and kill her with a particular brutality. One of them grabs the woman by the hair and the other delivers a bolt directly through the woman’s eyes. Finger and thumb pressed against her eyeballs, the very liquid of them scrambled to a milky white. (Alderman 2017, 280)

The significance of biopower in relation to fictional, as well as real, bodies has been increasingly addressed in the wake of Foucauldian thinking in that “to intervene on the body is the primary tool of whoever has power”, which not only suggests that “the body’s materiality is the means and tool for the explication of the political character of all relations” but also reiterates the relation between body and language since “we ‘write’ on the body [...] whatever we identify with” (Vallorani 2012, 26-8, my trans.). Therefore, to control the body, and through it, identity (on an individual level) and social dissent (on a collective one) means that both the individual and the collective take on an equally physical consistency: they are materials manipulated by power. This is a truth our contemporaneity is no stranger to, if only we think of the recent revival of the essentialist politicization of women’s bodies: in 2022, the Supreme Court of the USA overturned *Roe v. Wade*, which in 1973 had ruled that State laws restricting access to abortion were unconstitutional as they violated a woman’s right to privacy; in Italy, the Minister for Families Roccella has opened a debate around the presumed immorality of Law 194 for legal abortion, praising the increase in the number of conscientious objectors; not to mention those countries where abortion has never been an option.

Although *The Power* does not explicitly address reproductive rights in these terms, that of motherhood is a main topic in it, especially in relation to Allie’s character. Abused by her adoptive father, with the complicity of his wife, Allie Montgomery-Taylor spends much of her time by the grave of the person she repeatedly refers to as her “loving mother now at rest” (Alderman, 26-9). Throughout her difficult existence, Allie is

guided by a *female* voice only she can hear, which convinces her that “the tone of the voice, its low, amused rumble, are the notes of her own mother speaking” (Alderman 2017, 38). It is the voice that urges her to kill her adoptive father and flee, eventually leading her to a convent, where other girls like her are being taken care of. After discovering that eels “can ‘remote control’ the muscles in their prey by interfering with the electric signals in the brain” and make “fish swim straight into their mouths if they want to” (Alderman 2017, 40), Allie becomes more and more manipulative and, after applying a similar technique to “cure” girls affected by illness or unable to control their power, she gathers around her a veritable coven and strips herself of her birthname, taking on that of “Mother Eve”: “She calls herself Eve and the voice says: Good choice, the first of women; excellent choice” (Alderman 2017, 42). Certain that “power travels within us as it does in nature” (Alderman 2017, 3), Allie/Eve firmly believes in the biological inferiority of men, so much so that she does not realize the important role these might play in what emerges ever more clearly as the political drive behind her seemingly pious ambitions – “Can I own the whole world?” (Alderman 2017, 120), she asks the voice. When Roxy, one of the most powerful characters, joins the girls at the convent, Allie/Eve sees in her the makings of a soldier, imposing on her an identity belonging to a patriarchal legacy that, by the end of the novel, turns out to be poles apart from Roxy’s true self. In fact, Roxy, who has a close relationship with her father and stepbrothers, does not believe that all men should be punished for the wrongs of the now-falling system and, when Allie/Eve tells her, “I’ve got a good feeling about you’. Roxy laughs. ‘Would you have a good feeling about me if I was a boy?’” (Alderman 2017, 105). Again, when Allie/Eve says women cannot trust men, Roxy’s reply is sceptical: “What, men? All men? Can’t trust any of them?” (Alderman 2017, 119).

Not surprisingly, the dualistic mindset of Allie/Eve’s character can be traced in the philosophy of sexual difference, too. In its early stages, difference feminism made sure to make of sexual difference the pivot of an epistemological revolution of the symbolic order and of the modalities and institutions in which it historically translates into society. Convinced that it is not by acting on social relations that sexual difference can be affirmed, but by resting on the interpretation that each female subject gives of the world starting from herself, her own desires and, as we are about to see, her relation to her mother – in short, by acting on the symbolic order first – differentialist feminist Luisa Muraro discerns first in language the established hegemony of a phallo(logo)centricity: “As a matter of fact, symbolic incompetence has repercussions at a linguistic level, causing in the female speaker an uncertainty about whether words can truly say what she wants them to say” (Muraro 2018, 32). Similarly, in Alderman’s novel, women understand that they “can band together [...] we can let men go their own way [...] we don’t need to stick to the old order, we can make a new path” (Alderman 2017, 106). Further, because of language’s link to thought, Muraro also wonders about how to start a philosophy as a woman, while being hostage to male philosophical thinking, and finds her solution in the symbolically charged space of motherhood:

There is a structure. It is the structure of the maternal continuum that from within, through my mother, her mother, her mother, and so on, refers me back to the beginning of life. This structure, though, is too often misrecognized in its effects and its original characteristics of bridging nature and culture. (Muraro 2018, 52)

Muraro's understanding of the nature/culture divide is worthy of attention, in that it contains what was the initial challenge of difference feminism against the opposition between nature and culture. Distancing herself from the notion of woman as a biologically determined entity, Muraro renders the relationship with the mother in symbolic/linguistic terms, as she laments that some women experience this connection "in the form of a painful feeling of the loss of any feeling of gratitude toward the mother. In fact, in patriarchal societies like ours, many women suffer from that loss" (Muraro 2018, 88). In this respect, Allie/Eve's relationship with the mother-figures in her life lends itself to be interpreted through this lens – from the loss of her biological mother, through the disappointment in her passive adoptive mother, to the guidance offered by the motherly voice in her head. Nonetheless, Allie/Eve's obsessive relation with the latter quickly offers an example of how easy it is to extremize theories such as Muraro's. Just like difference feminism did not originally strive for the reversal of power relations depicted in Alderman's novel, Allie/Eve's faith in the voice as belonging to God would make it hard to predict her eventual far-from-inclusive idea of religion. Still, when asked "Why do you call God 'She'?", Allie/Eve replies that "God is neither woman nor man but both these things", and yet, she goes on to say, "She has come to show us a new side to Her face, one we have ignored for too long" (Alderman 2017, 80), which, paired with Allie/Eve's growing viciousness, comes through as a contradictory way of fighting binarism with binarism: "God has returned, and Her message is for us, only us" (Alderman 2017, 81).

To think of women only as mothers and/or carers is problematic, especially when done following the reproductive terms imposed by the heteronormative gaze, which ultimately signifies sex as an ideological tool promoting the physical encounter of male and female for the growth of the species. That is why a number of thinkers, including Cavarero, contend that surrogacy perpetuates the commodification of women's bodies and the over-fluidification of gender barriers, which, after two hundred years of feminist struggles to claim a female political subjectivity, might threaten to invalidate the work of the first initiators of this revolution (Cavarero 2022). Once again, the support of such thesis is sought not only in biologism, but in the refusal of any practice falling outside the confines of heterosexuality, hence Cavarero's reply to the queer community's outraged reactions to her statements: "I knew that to simply state facts supported by biological science, among others, would trigger a reaction from the lgbtqi+ galaxy, and it did" (Cavarero 2023, n.p., my trans.). Distancing herself from the battles of non-heterosexual and transgender people so as to advocate for the qualitative legitimacy of one political struggle over the other, Cavarero not only reprimands the LGBTQIA+³ community as a galactic dimension separated from the actual world but does so by resorting to nature as the only factor in determining one's (binary) gender affiliation, as when she argues that "[b]y polarizing the two sexes, the design – the system, the schema – succeeds in completing itself" so that "to paraphrase the language of genetics, one could speak of a selfish [male] subject and of an altruistic [female] subjectivity" (Cavarero 2016, 43). In short, Cavarero does not allow for the concept of womanhood (and motherhood) to extend beyond strict biological definitions, which is symptomatic

³ Differentialist feminists often cling to the category of "woman" while denying the existence of non-reductionist categorizations, suggesting that it is possible to exist as a woman without embracing a social position as such. As Antonia Caruso observes, though, this is not possible, and "queer" acronyms do not equate to labelling or "rainbow washing" gender discourses. Rather, they stand for a series of practices aimed at anti-identitary community-building, where materiality is present but not in essentialist terms (Caruso 2022, 6-12).

of the fact that, as Rosi Braidotti notes, the “hierarchical organization of differences is the key to phallogocentrism, which is the inner system of patriarchal societies” (Braidotti 1996, 255).

To better convey the relevance of proactive discussions around the theme of queerness, intended as a transversal notion hinting at all that falls outside the norm, let us suppose that the power to generate electricity in the novel is a metaphor for women’s ability to (re)produce life, namely their fertility. After all, in SF the correlation of electricity to life production is a trope going back to Mary Shelley, whose Frankenstein endeavours to surpass spontaneously generated life through chemical engineering and galvanism, de facto defying not only divine precepts, but the principles of biology, as he appropriates the creative endowment reserved to people with a fertile uterus (Mellor 1987, 294). In Alderman, this ability provides women with a sense of entitlement in the face of men, now deemed superfluous – “They’ll only keep the most genetically healthy of us alive” (Alderman 2017, 180), one of such men is heard saying. Specifically, Roxy has physical prowess galore and has no fear in showing it. Soon, however, she is betrayed by her own family and the skein responsible for her unequalled strength is surgically removed from her collarbone without her consent and transplanted on to that of her stepbrother Darrell. Against all odds, and in spite of the excruciating pain, Roxy manages to survive: “There’s a twang all through her body when they cut through the final strand on the right-hand side of her collarbone. It hurts, but the emptiness that comes after is worse. It’s like she’s died, but she’s still too alive to notice” (Alderman 2017, 236). Although it is true that “this procedure may be viewed as [...] a form of enforcing the norms of a patriarchal society” (Oney 2022, 4), it might also be argued that Darrell acts as a promethean figure who “actively chooses to oppose the idea that skein is the equivalent of a woman, which further deconstructs gender binary and shows that gender identity can be an active and indeterminate choice in biology” (Abshavi 2020, 824). Thus, on the one hand we have Roxy, now stripped of her fertile abundance, and on the other Darrell, a man who has appropriated such abundance. Regardless of the violence endured by Roxy, she is able to free herself from the shackles of dualistic thinking, as for the first time she sees her power and herself (i.e. her biological body and her worth as a woman) as separate aspects rather than intrinsically natural qualities. On the contrary, in the binary society he happens to live in, Darrell is deprived of his right to existence. He shows off his power and the consequences are devastating:

The women are not glad to see what he has done, or that he could do it. The fucking bitches are just staring at him: their mouths as closed as the earth, their eyes as blank as the sea. They walk down the stairs [...] and march towards him as one. Darrell lets out a sound, a hunted cry, and he runs. And the women are after him. (Alderman 2017, 305)

Darrell is torn to pieces and Roxy, who by the end of the book even forgives her family, not only rebukes her fellow women for their action, but also realizes that she is not less of a woman for having lost her “generative” power:

Roxy finds it [her skein] there in amongst the blood and mush. Her own self, her beating heart, the part of her that powered all the rest. A thin and rotting piece of gristle. The muscle striated, purple and red. There was a day, three days after Darrell took it from her, that she realized she wasn’t going to die. The spasms across her chest had ceased. The red and yellow flashes had disappeared from her eyes. She had bandaged herself up and walked to a hut she knew in the woods and

waited there for death, but on the third day she knew death was not going to take her. She thought then, It's because my heart is still alive. Outside my body, in his body, but still alive. (Alderman 2017, 310)

“Power doesn’t care who uses it”

As a proof that Alderman may be outlining the shortfalls of all binary epistemological paradigms, in *The Power* women are still under the thumb of patriarchal stereotypes, especially when it comes to their access to political power. This is the case of Margot Cleary, whom we first meet as the Mayor of an unknown city in New England and leave as an influential U.S. Senator and the mastermind behind the ‘NorthStar camps’, centres where young women are sent to train and use their power for military purposes. While in the series adaptation, Margot, played by Toni Colette, is married to a man who struggles to care for his family while his wife is pursuing her political career, in the novel she is divorced, which exposes her even more to the treachery of her male opponents, who suggest she is less of a mother for having an ambition exceeding the care job she is naturally designed to fulfil: “Of course, we can’t expect *you* to understand what this means for hard-working families. You’ve left your daughters to be raised by NorthStar day camps. Do you even care about those girls?” (Alderman 2017, 167). Indeed, a key point in the novel is the persistence of misogyny, particularly on online platforms for cyberbullies and conspiracy theorists, where women in power are targeted as threats to be eliminated, using what we too know to be the most efficient motto: “Document everything. Stream it if you can. Put it online” (Alderman 2017, 117). Men’s resentment is epitomized by UrbanDox, a mysterious figure fuelling such anti-women networks. When asked about his identity, Alderman once said that “UrbanDox is a composite of several different people [...] an online troll [...] It seemed to me that those people would not cease to exist if suddenly women could electrocute people at will” (Brown 2019, n.p.). UrbanDox deprecates the disorder brought about by the Day of the Girls, but also attacks men, whom he believes have not stood up to the expectations of their gender, which means that no one is safe from the identity shackles of a binary culture: “They thought men had had their turn and we’d messed it up – two world wars in two generations. Pussy-whipped betas and faggots, all of them” (Alderman 2017, 178).

Against all odds, Margot succeeds, but does so as soon as she embraces a manthropogenic view of politics, intended as a “dangerous principle that resurfaces and strengthens the asymmetrical superiority of men due to the institutionalisation of sex-role differences” (Balirano 2023, 60), also configuring as a principal cause of power abuse. Indeed, during the final stages of the campaign for the senator position, Margot is faced with the provocations of her main opponent, Daniel Dandon, who publicly insults her as a woman and mother. The reaction is unexpected, and violence becomes physical: Margot discharges a jolt of electricity onto him and, while in the aftermath of the attack “[s]he thinks she needs to ask forgiveness”, it turns out that “[s]he’s wrong” (Alderman 2017, 169). Fascinated by the strength of a politician like Margot, voters manage to see past her sex: “The polling numbers say that people are, in general, appalled by Cleary. [...] But when they went into the voting booths in their hundreds, thousands, and ten thousands, they’d thought, You know what, though, she’s strong. She’d show them” (Alderman 2017, 168-9), proving that “power doesn’t care who uses it” (Alderman 2017, 297). Still, Margot, a woman unfortunate enough to have known the throes of gender expectations undeterred by a global shift in power dynamics, ends

up failing one of the characters at the “queer” core of the whole novel: her daughter Jocelyn, also known as Jos.

Jos is not like other girls; her power does not respond to her. That is why, when she meets Ryan, the two immediately fall in love. Living in a present which sees “[b]oys dressing as girls to seem more powerful. Girls dressing as boys to shake off the meaning of the power, or to leap on the unsuspecting, wolf in sheep’s clothing” (Alderman 2017, 70), Jos experiences a mirroring effect in Ryan’s intersexual nature. Due to this, Ryan too has an electrical skein and, like Jos, finds solace in a virtual community, as they meet “in a private chatroom online, both of them looking for people like them. Weird people. People in whom the thing hadn’t taken right, one way or the other. [...] ‘deviants and abnormal’” (Alderman 2017, 153). As a result, from within a newly intolerant system, they come to represent a *glitch*, which, as Legacy Russell notes, “is an error, a mistake, a failure to function. [...] part of machinic anxiety, an indicator of something having gone wrong” (Russell 2020, 7). A form of refusal, the glitch is a non-performative act able to resolve the tension of both essentialism and over-abstraction, advancing creative solutions to put to rest the biopolitically troubled nature of the material body (Russell 2020, 9). Living examples of the *trans-ness* of life, Jos and Ryan configure as what Paul B. Preciado calls “techno-soma-subjectivities”, namely “bodies that no longer inhabit disciplinary spaces but are inhabited by them” (Preciado 2013, 79); bodily reconfigurations whose fate is explicitly determined by technological progress, which has negative effects on them only when used in reiteration of the same old heteronormative patterns, as is the case with UrbanDox’s misogynist online empire. The downfall of such patterns is to be found, once again, in the obsolete insistence on sexual difference, whose emancipating advantages Preciado calls into doubt: “I carefully avoid using the word freedom, I prefer to speak about finding a way out of the regime of sexual difference, which does not mean instantly becoming free” (Preciado 2022, 25). Like Preciado, Alderman treats the body not “as an anatomical object, but as [...] ‘somatheque,’ a living political archive” (Preciado 2013, 35). In the novel, though, the outside world is unaware of Jos and Ryan’s transitional potential, as the former receives an anonymous email telling her that her trouble with her power is due to her “gender-bending confusion” (Alderman 2017, 89). For the same reason, Margot prevents Jos from dating Ryan, anxious to see her daughter uniformed to societal dictates:

‘There’ll be other, better boys’. Jos lifts her face. ‘I thought we were supposed to be together’. ‘I know, sweetheart, because of your...’ Margot hesitates over the word: ‘because of your problem, you wanted someone who’d understand.’ [...] ‘If we could find someone to help you... well, you’d just be able to like normal boys’ [...] ‘You can just be like the other girls.’ (Alderman 2017, 192)

Jos and Ryan hold in their hands the still-unrealized force of a non-dichotomous fictional imagery, one that political systems and literary canons are equally slow to accept, even when trite biologisms prove them wrong: “[A]bout five girls in a thousand are born without [skeins]. Some of the girls don’t want it, and try to cut it out themselves” (Alderman 2017, 171). Sent to camps alluding to conversion therapy centres, non-conforming people are bullied – “Tegan says [to Jos], ‘Has he got a skein? She wants to fuck him’. The others laugh. Yeah, they mutter, that’s what she likes. Weird men, deformed men. Disgusting, strange, repulsive men” (Alderman 2017, 208) – and are integrated only as long as they give proof of their strength: “There are advertisements on hoardings now [...] They sell girls one other thing; quietly, on the

side. Be strong, they say, that's how you get everything you want" (Alderman 2017, 257-8). The schism of abject subjects from the normed centre validates the idea that "Alderman's novel is contributory to cyberfeminist countercultural movements [...] a warning against today's prevalence of biological and genetic discourses over ethics and political issues" (Yebra 2018, 72). After all, it is because of such discourses that today difference feminism is often regarded as separatist – as are those who in the novel "keep the girls separate from the boys" (Alderman 2017, 64) – even though the supporters of the thought of sexual difference originally strived for the acceptance of all differences (Pitch 2021, n.p.).

Interestingly, difference feminism principally opposes MtF trans people, as if for fear that biological women will be supplanted by males claiming to be female, and the answer, in short, comes down, yet again, to procreation and the insuperable asymmetry of male/female biology: fertile women need only a drop of sperm to reproduce; men, though, need the physical presence of one or more women. In Alderman, this is a matter of fact as well: "[O]ne genetically perfect man can sire a thousand – five thousand – children" (Alderman 2017, 180). It is no wonder that this tendency also derives from Cavarero's original critique of cyberfeminism as prompted by Donna Haraway in 1985 with her *Cyborg Manifesto*, where she contends that in the technological era the subject is increasingly hybrid – man-animal-machine – subversive to such an extent, in being multiple genders, as to break the stereotype of sexual belonging (cf. Haraway 1991, 149-81). In fact, Cavarero believes that hybridity could once again lead from immanent (*read* biological) factuality to abstraction (Fasoli 2021), which would collide with Haraway's notorious antinatalist motto, "Make Kin not Babies!" (Haraway 2016, 102), intended as the posthuman success in "unraveling the supposed natural necessity of ties between sex and gender, race and sex, race and nation, class and race, gender and morphology, sex and reproduction" (Haraway 2016, 102). As already mentioned, however, it should be noted that the biological rift between men and women was not the focal point of the first variant of the philosophy of sexual difference, which was instead responsible for the deconstruction of the declination of gender in terms of the heteronormative domination of one sex over the other (Pitch 2021, n.p.). In the novel *and* in our reality, such potential remains unused, imploding to such an extent that it culminates in what Alderman describes as "[t]he war of all against all" (Alderman 2017, 312). Not by chance, the only solution to the chaos of Alderman's fictional world is Armageddon, now that "bodies have been rewritten by suffering. They have no fight left. They cannot, in that moment, tell which of them is supposed to be which. They are ready to begin" (Alderman 2017, 288-9). The symbolic order finally leaves behind "the essentialistic [...] portrayal of the cosmic force of the archaic mother as the all powerful container of death and life forces" (Braidotti 1996, 251), and the only option left is the disaster before a new beginning, in the hopes that binaries will be ripped off of their hinges. Once again, the voice points the way to a now delusional and disillusioned Allie/Eve:

However complicated you think it is, everything is always more complicated than that. There are no shortcuts. Not to understanding and not to knowledge. You can't put anyone into a box. Listen, even a stone isn't the same as any other stone, so I don't know where you all think you get off labelling humans with simple words and thinking you know everything you need. But most people can't live that way, even some of the time. They say: only exceptional people can cross the borders. The truth is: anyone can cross, everyone has it in them. (Alderman 2017, 320)

Since the dawn of man, power has tended to oversimplify the complexity of society, as the voice recounts that “another Prophet came to tell me that some people I’d made friends with wanted a King. I told them what a King would do. [...] What can I tell you? Welcome to the human race. You people like to pretend things are simple, even at your cost”, when really, the “whole idea that there are two things and you have to choose is the problem” (Alderman 2017, 320). Somewhat echoing Audre Lorde (2007), the novel still ends on a hopeful note: “We can do it again. Different this time, better this time. Dismantle the old house and begin again” (Alderman 2017, 328). The easiest route to it is a new language, a mixtopic art, where polarities are refuted in favour of what Lidia Curti calls “a hybrid form of writing” (Curti 1998, 90), typical of fictions characterized by the presence of a “hybrid body, playing on the ambiguity between animal and human, truth and fiction, freak or fake”, and responsible for “the failure of identity” (Alderman 2017, 121-2). A fluid art made of what Larbalestier describes as “hermaphrodite narratives” where “hermaphroditism or androgyny is transformed from a problem that must be surgically corrected into a possible solution to the problem of difference between men and women” (Larbalestier 2002, 92).⁴ The same idea is put forth by Neil, the fictional writer of *The Power*, who observes that “what I’ve done here is a sort of hybrid piece [...] Not quite history, not quite a novel [...] Is there anything I can do to make it all seem more plausible? You know what they say about “truth” and “the appearance of truth” being opposites” (Alderman 2017, ix). The inability to acknowledge the importance of such stories has to do with a rampant political weakness, which seeks the answer without posing the question, surrendering to the fascination of literature as a vacuum-sealed art. But creative literature is never simply fictional and to refuse to look at it politically is a dangerous attitude, in that artistic or symbolic outputs are not the incontestable manifestations of a power demanding our unconditional reverence.

Here is where tools such as acronyms, which can never be only *two*, come to our aid as hermeneutically valid elements for constructing hypotheses for the intelligibility of the real. Then, prescriptive ideologies are neutralized and differences take on a rhizomatic shape, “string figures as a theoretical trope, a way to think-with a host of companions in sympoietic threading, felting, tangling, tracking, and sorting” (Haraway 2016, 31), the helplessly nomadic tendencies of free subjectivities. After all, Alderman ends on an unheard note: “Gender is a shell game. What is a man? Whatever a woman isn’t. What is a woman? Whatever a man is not. Tap on it and it’s hollow. Look under the shells: it’s not here” (Alderman 2017, 338). In short, Alderman neither formulates a full-fledged critique of the concerns of feminism nor does she idealize matriarchy as feasible or desirable. Rather, *The Power* rests on an uncharted, non-binary territory, exposing the danger of extremist ideological postures since, to borrow Lidia Curti’s words, “if there are risks in essentialism there may be greater dangers in overstating anti-essentialism” (Curti 1988, 153). That is, any feminist para-society carrying the traits of both a utopian gender-equitable society and a dystopian matriarchal autocracy must adapt to become a space of epistemic negotiation.

⁴ Thought-provoking as it is, Larbalestier’s view is not to be taken literally in that, as Pearson observes, “‘hermaphroditism’ and ‘androgyny’ are [not] interchangeable terms; the former refers ineluctably to biology, while the latter covers a wider territory that ranges from biology to obviously cultural factors such as fashion. One could argue [...] that ‘hermaphroditism’ refers to variations in sex, while ‘androgyny’ provides alternatives in the realm of gender” (Pearson 2008, 99-100).

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