"Making Generative Oddkin": Female Bodies as Sites of Connectivity in Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light*

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1. Introduction: What Is at Stake?

The last decades have made clear that anthropogenic climate change has brought the planet face to face with an unprecedented crisis: entire species are threatened in their very existence by horrifying developments of global warming, such as drought periods and sea level rise. The archipelagic region of the Caribbean especially suffers under hurricanes, heatwaves and landslides, to name but some of the gravest consequences of global warming. Today as in colonial times, the Caribbean largely bears the brunt of so-called Global North nations' consumption of the planet's resources and their use of "tropical" ecosystems for tourism and recreation while global warming affects 'the West' much less than the Caribbean (Paravisini-Gebert 278). Haiti, the setting of the novel this article attends to, is one of the erstwhile colonies in the so-called Global South that have frequently made headlines in recent years for the natural disasters they were shaken by (Danticat "Haiti"), and as such offers a productive space to not only discuss these uneven developments but also to offer alternative ways to engage with and live in this world. Importantly, such alternatives, embodied in calls for collective action against climate change and in solidarity across boundaries between nations and species, abound in art, sustaining the growing importance of the environmental humanities (see Oppermann and Iovino 2017).

Straddling disciplines as well as the alleged divide between the arts and sciences, Donna Haraway's critically acclaimed *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) sutures together a non-Eurocentric, decolonial agenda and the environmental humanities. Her central intervention is the rallying cry to "mak[e] generative oddkin," to overcome boundaries of otherness and participate in egalitarian co-habitation in a "multispecies" world (3). What reverberates in Haraway's texts is that the only way to save billions of lives across species boundaries is to act on a basis of solidarity. In this article, solidarity is understood as extending across species lines to depose humankind from their self-proclaimed center *while* also demanding solidarity with those hit hardest by climate catastrophes, (for the time being) mostly former colonies in the Global South (Nixon 22), most often those who

contribute the least to carbon dioxide emission and environmental pollution.

Literature, with its imaginative powers, is a potent agent in forging such solidarities. Contemporary literatures have brought forth a rapidly growing number of pieces of fiction that engage critically with climate change, the role of the human and their relation to nature and to the non-human. Caribbean literatures in particular are active participants in discourses on ecologies, climate change, its impact on Caribbean ecosystems and its entanglements with Caribbean colonial history – think, for instance, of Olive Senior's *Gardening in the Tropics* (2005 [1994]), Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden* (2001) or Monique Roffey's *Archipelago* (2012). One of the most powerful voices in the field of Haitian literatures, Edwidge Danticat tackles legacies of colonialism in her writing, including her earlier novels *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and *The Farming of Bones* (1998). Dividing her time between Haiti and the US, she has received a great number of prizes and is often turned to as a spokesperson regarding the state of Haiti. Throughout her work, she weaves traumas from the colonial past and the postcolonial present into her narratives, showcasing the enduring legacies of violence wrought on Caribbean people (and Caribbean women in particular). In her novel *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013), colonial legacies are a latent concern, too (Braziel 82).[1] More overtly interested in bonds of community, the novel weaves intricate connections between characters of all kinds: an entangled group of human characters is tied together through shared and overlapping pasts and memories, which continue to shape their present. At the same time, these human characters do not exist in isolation from animals and nature: instead, the novel imagines ecological solidarities among species reminiscent of Donna Haraway's "webbed ecologies," i.e., indelible and complex ecological relations (49). These take shape against the backdrop of the novel's overall emphasis on connectivity.

Subdivided into two parts and eight chapters, the plot of *Claire* starts on the seventh birthday of its eponymous protagonist Claire, daughter of the fisherman Nozias. Claire's mother died after giving birth and Claire runs away when she finds out that her father now wants to give her to another woman – who, too, is connected to Claire corporeally, as I will explain later. This calls into question filial bonds and foregrounds women as connectors beyond the biological family. As the novel draws to a close, Claire observes the villagers looking for her and descends from the mountain where she has sought refuge. The narrative moves cyclically back and forth through time, halting at key events in Claire's, her family's and the town's recent history. Through this circular motion, the narrative introduces selected inhabitants of the fictional Haitian "seaside slum town" Ville Rose, the setting of many of Danticat's works (Braziel 81), uncovering hidden relations between the characters. Scholarship has picked up on several aspects of *Claire*:

acknowledging connectivity as a pivotal theme of the novel, Silvia Martínez-Falquina examines how "grief in the contact zone" is represented (845). Carine M. Mardorossian and Angela Veronica Wong provide us with a fine-grained analysis of connectivity and the innovative use of magical realism in the novel (2020), and Jana Evans Braziel explores how *Claire* adds to the construction of Ville Rose as an imagined space marked by violence throughout Danticat's writing (2021), to name some key examples.

This article zooms in on connectivity as ecological solidarity in *Claire*. Ecological solidarity in *Claire* is premised upon the realization that humans and non-humans are interconnected and face climate change together, even though some might have to do so in a more precarious state than others. The novel also insists on a move beyond alterity, toward ideas of "joint being" in a time and space contested by global warming. This kind of connectivity reminiscent of Haraway's oddkin necessitates and enables ecological solidarity, making it an ethical duty to account for the non-human other in *Claire* and Ville Rose. Bringing together central ideas from the fields of postcolonial studies, ecocriticism and material feminism, I explore how the novel portrays and opens up relations across species and which capacities it ascribes to the female body, building on the reproductive capacities of many female bodies. Ecocriticism constitutes a particularly fruitful lens for reading Danticat's novel, given that the text reconfigures generative connections between humans and the non-human and thus joins ranks with many interdisciplinary and transmedial forms of ecocriticism. Understanding relationality and connectivity as opportunities for ecological solidarities, I hold that connections between female humans and the other-than-human, wrought on the levels of content and form, emphasize interspecies relationality and use the connective nature of the sea as a way of implicitly relating to other islands of the Caribbean. As the novel constructs female bodies as a particularly potent site of connectivity and ecological solidarity, this article examines how the female body is written and how depictions of pregnancy, family- and kinship-making conjoin to showcase the female body as an agent of kinship involved in "multispecies worlding on a wounded terra" (Haraway 105). The gendered trope of allegedly visceral connections between women and nature, however, cannot be viewed uncritically, as I will discuss in the conclusion.

Before I begin my analysis, some structural questions need to be addressed: first, to what degree does ecological solidarity in *Claire* transcend anthropocentrism? The narrative is written from a human perspective and the human remains the center, that much is certain. Interspecies connections, such as a character relating to frogs (as discussed later), remain momentary and tentative, and mostly index *possibilities* for ecological solidarity. Ultimately, *Claire* does not mark a radical step beyond anthropocentrism. However, the incipient and

small-scale dynamics of connecting in solidarity across species boundaries performed in the novel are an important part of ecological solidarity, not despite their tentativeness, but because of it. In situations of precarity, relating to *others* can come at a bigger cost than in situations of privilege. This is not to say at all that it is only the privileged who engage responsibly with the more-than-human world, far from it. But what is important to note is that solidarity amidst precarity has to be gauged as the object of multiple contestations. Second, which kind of *anthropos* do I have in mind, which kind of *anthropos* writes this article? The characters in *Claire* are Haitian, some of them wealthier, some of them poorer, but all of them inhabitants of a country with a long history of (neo)colonial exploitation. Especially important for a Global North scholar in the context of climate change, I do my best to not impose a Eurocentric framework on *Claire* and its lifeworlds, but to use my engagement with it as a form of solidarity in the light of uneven privileges.

To help me do so, in the following I will outline key arguments from the environmental humanities, postcolonial theory and material feminisms, showing where the three converge and how they can be used productively in the context of narratives such as *Claire*. Building on this framework, the section "Connectivity, Kinship and Women" zooms in on the three paradigms as constructed in *Claire* to find out how they are interlinked in the novel. Foregrounding the body more explicitly, the section on interspecies solidarity and female bodies connects the above to the core interest of my article, i.e., the ways in which *Claire* constructs the female body as an especially potent connector and thus an agent working against anthropocentrism and toward ecological solidarities. In the concluding section, I include a critical discussion of the discursively, socially constructed and oft-invoked openness of women and female bodies in particular to the more-than-human and the dynamics of caring for it in a gender-sensitive assessment of the question.

2. Leveling: Environmental Humanities, Postcolonial Theory, Material Feminisms

One of the greatest strengths of the environmental humanities is its interdisciplinary character, as a diverse number of arts and sciences enter into a multi-faceted dialog. Literature, straddling boundaries of aesthetics and politics, is a particularly fruitful and tractable site for exploring pivotal issues on ecocriticism's agenda. Exploring how literary forms react to the Anthropocene, the time of long-term human impact on the planet and the climate that we are in right now, Birgit Neumann maintains: "[T]he changes ushered in by the age of the Anthropocene pose a representational challenge to literature and put pressure on narrative forms, most importantly on representations of

time, space, and events" (91). Against the backdrop of material and ecological challenges, literature as a creative and *material* medium is entangled in efforts of reckoning with anthropocentrism and its horrid effects, the Anthropocene and how it transforms the environment, necessitating for instance different forms of narrating the slowly unfolding and persistent violence of climate change (cf. Nixon 2011). *Claire*'s subtle acts of ecological solidarity, connected to shifting paradigms of neo-colonialism and climate change in the novel, are one possible response to this challenge.

Words matter greatly in the context of ecological solidarities. The layers of meaning behind the word *environment* performatively reduce the material sphere to a conceptual backdrop, an empty space that *environs*, or surrounds, an agential human species (Alaimo *Bodily Natures* 10). Plumwood has famously subsumed this dynamic under the term "hyper-separation" (8), denoting the supposition that everything human and human-made is entirely different from all things not human-made. This distances the human from the natural and ingrains a hierarchy between the human and the *non*. Engaging with these questions of anthropocentrism and hyper-separation, Donna Haraway takes on the "widespread destructive commitment to the still-conceived natural necessity of the tie between kin making and a treelike biogenetic reproductive genealogy" (139). Kinship, according to her, is much more generative than what filiation allows for. It is radically relational in that it moves beyond artificial boundaries of a kind of "true" relationality assumed by filial logics. Pivotal to postcolonial studies, Edward Said explains that the emphasis on descent and preservation of sameness along the lines of the family tree is called "filiation" (16), to which he proposes his counter-model of "affiliation" (16). In his *Poetics of Relation*, Caribbean scholar Édouard Glissant posits the Caribbean as an inherently relational space (8). After all, "*[t]he unity is sub-marine*," as reads the quote from Edward Kamau Brathwaite which Glissant includes in the paratext of *Poetics of Relation* (n. pag; original emphasis). Accounting for the gruesome history of the slave trade, Glissant's concept of relation constitutes a counter-discourse to histories of enslavement and deracination (8).

Said and Glissant devised their models for human communities; Haraway makes clear that the deconstruction of filial relationality is relevant in interspecies contexts, too. Both understandings of affiliation are relevant for a reading of *Claire*. Drawing attention to the connective potential of kin, Donna Haraway explicates: "Making kin as oddkin […] troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible" (2). Here, she deliberately adds the qualifier "odd" to "kin", to stress the necessity for transcending established parameters of thinking. Likewise controverting anthropocentrism, Stacy Alaimo puts forth her vision of "trans-corporeality" (*Bodily Natures* 2). It

underscores the very physical corpo-reality of human being and imagines it "as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (2). Furthermore, "trans-corporeality denies the human subject the sovereign, central position" (16). These and related approaches demonstrate an underlying sense of solidarity not restricted to the human species, questioning the pedestal onto which anthropocentrism elevates the human. Time and again, *Claire* centers such entanglements, foregrounding the female body in particular in its capacity for connection. The novel thus calls into question binary understandings of "the human" and "the non-human" and challenges a hierarchy between the two in a move toward ecological solidarity.

Highly pertinent to the question of *ecological* solidarity that this article and this special issue pursue, discourse on anthropocentrism is often imbued with "the racial blindness of the Anthropocene as a willful blindness that permeates its comfortable suppositions and its imaginaries of the planetary" (Yusoff *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, xiii). To speak of "the Anthropocene" and of "*anthropos*" as though they were unitary concepts occults that communities of People of Color were historically and are presently less agential in the destruction of our planet. "The history of European Empire constructed a gendered and racial hierarchy of embodied and disembodied subjects along the lines of nature/culture," one that, as postcolonial ecocritics Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur and Anthony Carrigan make clear, "relegated women, the Indigenous, non-Europeans, and the poor to an objectified figure of nature as much as the white propertied heterosexual male was tied to rationality, subjectivity, and culture" (11). Postcolonial literatures offer vibrant counter-discourses. "African-diasporic cultural production," for instance,

> intervenes productively in reconsidering the role of "the animal" or the "animalistic" in the construction of "the human" by […] observing trans-species precarity, and hypothesizing cross-species relationality in a manner that preserves alterity while undermining the nonhuman and animality's abjection, an abjection that constantly rebounds on marginalized humans. (Jackson 18)

Post- and decolonial fiction and non-fiction, thus, offer tangled narratives of the human, of alternative Black and Indigenous humanities and of the other-than-human, reckoning with the false unification of many Anthropocene discourses. As a piece of Caribbean writing, *Claire* tackles some of these concerns, its characters sharing in the experiences and histories of specifically Black Atlantic dehumanization and oppression.

Regarding the Caribbean, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert laments that "the extended Caribbean region […] faces the compounding effects of climate change – impacts worsened by decades of seashore development as tourism dollars replaced the dwindling profits of the

sugar plantation as the source of precarious incomes" (278).[2] Although colonial plantation slavery in the Caribbean has come to an end, it is closely related to modern-day tourism, and both have contributed and still contribute to climate change. Colonial substitution of local Caribbean ecologies with sugar-cane plantations destroyed entire ecosystems, and tourism is in many ways a neocolonial exercise of power, with wealthy travelers mining precarious regions for "exotic" experience, increasing carbon dioxide emissions with plane flights and encouraging environmental destruction for the sake of touristic infrastructures (Paravisini-Gebert 279). In this light, the input of postcolonial and, specifically, Caribbean literatures is invaluable wherever the aim is ecological solidarity across power hierarchies. As my analysis of *Claire* will show, a postcolonial understanding of the Anthropocene, of ecocritical discourses and of material feminisms is indispensable in a reading of a narrative that highlights shared and unshared precarities and imagines ecological solidarity among species.

3. Connectivity, Kinship and Women

Environmental precarity characterizes the world of *Claire*: "[T]he rivers […] swelling in response to the lack of trees, the land erosion, the dying topsoil" (Danticat 53) and "blistering temperatures" causing the death of a plethora of frogs (55) are but two examples. Those are not figments of the author's imagination, but actual consequences of precarious ecologies in Haiti (Ferdinand 96). With an eye on these occurrences in *Claire*, Kristina Gibby concludes that "ecological anomalies signal to the reader that all is not well, neither in the natural world nor in the human society" (356). These ecological anomalies in the novel foreground the link between human and non-human communities, symptomatic of generative oddkin. Regarding such linkages, connectivity through relationality as theme and structure pervades all layers of *Claire* as a novel. Formal and material elements are part and parcel of literature's workings, as Caroline Levine succinctly points out: "One cannot make a poem out of soup or a panopticon out of wool. In this sense, form and materiality are inextricable, and materiality is determinant" (9). Similarly interested in both form and materiality, Haraway toys with the dual meaning of *matter*: "It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (12). To attend to how forms and performances of materiality embody relationality as part and parcel of the ecological solidarity depicted on *Claire*'s content level is thus pivotal to an ecocritical and materialist reading of the novel.

Places, times, matters and meaning in *Claire* are defined by their ceaseless complementarity, made up by thick connections in the sense of Haraway's "thick present" that interspecies entanglements create (1). In *Claire*, every inhabitant of Ville Rose is connected to multiple

others. Families and individuals are connected through personal relationships, tragedies and/or shared suffering, and the town Ville Rose itself, with central places and spaces such as the market, the beach, the school and the radio station with its famous broadcasts, also become zones of encounter for characters and their stories. The cemetery is a potent example of these dynamics. In the cemetery, there are "headstones [that] belonged to the most prominent families in town, including the Ardins, Boncys, Cadets, Lavauds, Marignans, Moulins, Vincents, among others" (Danticat 12). The cemetery acts as a kind of gathering place, for bodies, histories, and living relatives who come to visit the graves. Thus, it qualifies as a space of community and, possibly, kinship. When Claire, Nozias and a woman named Gaëlle, whom I engage with in more detail later on, happen to meet in the cemetery, Nozias asks: "'Do you remember my daughter?' […] while nervously patting Claire's shoulder. 'Please,' the woman [says], 'let me remember mine'" (14). Loss unites the families and physically brings them together in the cemetery. At the same time, however, it keeps them apart because the rift of grief cannot always be transcended. The connections woven between all characters of the novel are so intricate that it is fair to call connectivity an organizing principle both of *Claire*'s setting and the novel as a whole. On these grounds, Ville Rose has been called a "mesh" (Mardorossian and Wong 200) and a "microcosm" (Ibarrola-Armendáriz 194), whose secluded character makes it an especially prolific foil for multi-faceted connections and which relies heavily upon its tightly knit community (199) – or communities.

Against the backdrop of relationality as a characteristic feature of the Caribbean region in the Glissantian sense, these communities involve the human and the other-than-human. This focus on ecology and ecological connectivity in the novel is thus directly tied to critically engaging with colonial legacies. To give an example, the characters' "various stories intersect at the sea's shore" (Gibby 348). And not always for better: fishers rely on it for their trade, so the sea structures and provides life (in a way that also takes life, i.e., the life of non-human others). Fishing, however, is no longer profitable, due to the changes that the sea has undergone: "Now they [the fishermen] had to leave nets in for half a day or longer, and they would pull fish out of the sea that were so small that in the old days they would have been thrown back. But now you had to do with what you got; [y]ou could no longer afford to fish in season, to let the sea replenish itself" (Danticat 9). As a side-effect, the deictic interpellation through the second-person pronoun calls on readers to extend solidarity, to bemoan the impoverishment of the sea and to sympathize with those who have no choice other than to take what they can get to sustain their income. As Malcolm Ferdinand has put it so accurately in the context of responsibility for deforestation, "[t]he discourse that holds the poor

and marginalized responsible for the Earth's deforestation is a discourse of *injustice*" (90; original emphasis) and an "environmentalism of the rich[, which] adopts a post-material vision of nature and loses sight of the world" (91). His 'environmentalism of the rich' rhetorically contrasts with that of the poor (Nixon 2011) and underscores the entangled subject positions under discussion and presses for postcolonial ecological solidarity in the midst of precarity in *Claire*.

It is against this backdrop that the changing sea in *Claire* comes to assume a hovering presence as it also takes human life. The very first sentence of the novel introduces a "freak wave," writing the body of water as an imminent threat. Its corpo-reality is highlighted by the description of "a giant blue-green tongue, trying, it seemed, to lick a pink sky" (Danticat 3). These very waters then claim the life of fisherman Caleb, which marks the first incisive event of the plot, happening so fast its narration only comprises the first three paragraphs of the novel. Incidents like this one will be familiar to those living in the Caribbean, ravaged as the region is by hurricanes (Glissant 124). Read with an eye to ecocritical concerns, the wave "may at first look surreal and give us pause in light of its singular, extreme, decontextualized, and remarkably short-lived intensity, but in our current context of climate disasters and environmental crises, the element of surprise" is replaced by an atmosphere of ubiquitous catastrophe (Mardorossian and Wong 201). This atmosphere comments on the transformation that nature is undergoing due to climate change.

Too often, supposedly neutral geological coverage of ecological transformation occults the material histories of Black communities and the lands they live in. 'Anthropogenic' climate change, which costs fictional Caleb his life, is indeed the product of colonial destruction of nature and Caribbean communities (Yusoff, "White Utopia/Black Inferno" 3). Imbued with echoes of a Black transatlantic history, the sea in *Claire* is a prime agent of connectivity: it serves as a bridge to connect Ville Rose to different parts of the Caribbean, the water that connects the Caribbean islands allowing for entanglements between diverse Caribbean cultures (Glissant 206), and it is a site of contact and connection between the human and the more-than-human. In the novel, the sea remains ambiguous: "The sea was both hostile and docile, the ultimate trickster. […] You could scatter both ashes and flowers in it" (Danticat 200). This view of the sea is echoed by Édouard Glissant, who stresses its ambivalence in its relation to life and death and to the history of slave trade and slave labor in the Caribbean (121). Pursuing a similar point, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) reminds us of collective Black history at sea. Since thousands of enslaved people died during the transatlantic slave trade, which involved the Caribbean as one of three central points, huge parts of Black diasporic history and collective memory drowned in the waters of the sea. Configurations of

the sea in verbal or visual postcolonial art oftentimes conjure up memories of this history. In the context of connectivity or links between the human and the more-than-human, the ambivalent implications of the sea point to further contestations of ecological solidarity.

Communities and connectivity in the novel may well be perceived of as rhizomatic in Glissant's sense: building on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, he posits the rhizome as a form of community-building opposed to imperial mechanisms of hierarchization, which, according to Glissant, "is the principle behind Poetics of Relation" (11). The entangled nature of rhizomatic relations hammers home the message that climate change affects all species, anticipating a global future community of climate change victims, many of which are today's perpetrators. It is no coincidence then that an important site of connectivity in the novel is the sea at whose border Ville Rose is located. In *Claire*, connectivity *begins* with interhuman filiation and affiliation. By far the most powerful site of connectivity in the novel is the female body, whose physical reality the novel showcases time and again. For instance, on Claire's sixth birthday, she is described as "wearing her pink muslin birthday dress, her plaited hair covered with tiny bow-shaped barrettes" (Danticat 5–6). Such minute descriptions of hair and clothes are recurrent in the novel. Analogously, this description is immediately followed by another one. The narrator recalls that Claire "and her father were standing next to a plump woman with a cherubic face framed with a long, straight hairpiece. The woman was wearing black pants and a black blouse and had a white hibiscus pinned behind her ear" (6). Coincidentally, the woman described is Gaëlle, whom Claire and Nozias keep meeting. Female characters are perennially bound to their appearance. Their bodies are equipped with attributes customarily understood as expressive of a feminine gender performance, which matter comes to signify. This brings together the motifs and themes of clothing, hairstyles and fabrics, texture and nature, for instance as flowers are frequently used as accessories by women characters (6). They meet *on* the female body; the female body in its corpo-reality becomes a site of convergence, not least for humans and ecology.[3]

Claire's body also invites memories of her mother Claire Narcis for Nozias and highlights mother-daughter relations as an inherent part of the connections that the female body in *Claire* affords: "Their lithe and limber bodies moved in the same way, their arms glued to their sides as they walked, their legs moving too slowly, languid from one step to the next" (37). The text draws an analogy between the two Claires, mother and daughter who even bear the same name: "[t]he layering of names also layers histories and fates" (Mardorossian and Wong 202). Strong parallels between mother and daughter are not limited to Caribbean literatures, and here the onomastic similarities evoke Emily Brontë's

Wuthering Heights. Like little Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, little Claire inherits her mother's name – interestingly both names start with 'C'. Likewise, the older Catherine and Claire both die shortly after giving birth to their daughters. These parallels underline somewhat comparably tragic family stories, but as *Wuthering Heights* is a staple of canonical and colonial English literature, the parallels here also point to ambivalent connections and colonial practices of exploitation (by the alleged 'mother country') as one historical reason for hardship in the Caribbean.[4]

Matrilineage and liminality, as well as forms of kinship deviant from rigid frameworks of lineage, contribute to reconfiguring female identity – and, later, multispecies relations – in *Claire* as multiplicitous and indomitable. However, through the death of Claire's mother and other portrayals of problematic filiation, the novel questions whether matrilineage and filiation are the most generative forms of community-building: Claire Narcis and Nozias have had to try hard to have a child (Danticat 20). After the death of little Claire's mother, "the figure of the adopted/orphaned/abandoned child as a significant persona whose anxieties of belonging call into question issues of nationhood and genealogical beginnings" (Montgomery 321) finds its correlate in little Claire. Instead of maternal filiation, kinship relations of care for little Claire are *af*filiative: Right after Claire Narcis's funeral, Nozias has consigned little Claire to her mother's family's care. Three years later, he has then taken her in again. Now he is torn between kin and family: Nozias regards himself as unfit to properly raise his daughter because he is a man (Danticat 15). Gendered stereotypes in his logic notwithstanding, his reasoning propels the plot's quest for kinship. The reason Nozias has singled out a woman named Gaëlle to give Claire to is that Gaëlle nursed Claire on the day she was born. The scene is described unabashedly: "The fabric vendor unbuttoned a silk blouse, making no effort to shield her large breasts, which were a few shades lighter than her face" (22–23). The moment is captured as the movement of unbuttoning is narrated and female breasts take center stage. Here, it is Nozias's perspective, which is representative of the more general male gaze, that seems to inform the depiction and apperception of the female body. *Regarded* in its biological capacity and corpo-reality, the body here corresponds with stereotypical images of the female body. The objectification of the female body by a male onlooker in a way matches the objectification and exploitation of the non-human. When Gaëlle has breast-fed Claire, Nozias thinks "that his child and hers were now milk sisters" (23). This is acutely reminiscent of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, where Denver muses: "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk" (242).

Next to its affiliation with Brontë, *Claire* thus also establishes ties to one of the most famous female African-American writers of our

times and her famous neo-slave narrative *Beloved*. The novels, both engaged with precarious femininity in the context of (neo-)colonial structures and the extended African diaspora, become a kind of 'milk sisters' themselves. Both *Beloved* and *Claire* center on the female body, attuned to its viscerality, while also connecting it to stories and imageries of violence. In *Claire*, this bond woven through breast milk as a channel is profoundly affiliative. The word 'sisters' maintains the primary status of filial relationships, but the affiliative community of *milk* sisters proves that affiliation beyond biological family is possible. It is this act of nourishment through the female body which encourages Nozias much later to ask Gaëlle to take care of Claire. The female body thus becomes the site of affiliative quests for kinship. Connec-. tivity, which is pivotal to the Caribbean and Caribbean thought, here culminates in the female body. This connectivity is constructed as both filial and affiliative. Further engaging with the idea of solidarity across species boundaries, affiliative interspecies connectivity is the focus of the next section.

4. Of Flowers, Frogs and Fish: Interspecies Solidarities between Female Humans and Other-than-Humans

The female body in Danticat's *Claire* not only accommodates connective bonds beyond filiation within the same species, but it also enables solidarities between the human and the non-human. Effectively, it is constructed as an agent of kinship, kinship which straddles boundaries between forms of being and thus offers a site of alliance in the face of climate change. Linking the female body to nature, the novel weaves bonds between females and plants, i.e., trees and flowers. Plants, which Jennifer Leetsch has called "nodes and knots of meaning" with an eye to the critical plant studies turn in the environmental humanities (60), have long featured in Caribbean women's writing. When Gaëlle is pregnant, deforestation and rising sea levels cause her to wonder: "Might she even have to give birth in a tree?" (Danticat 54). These cogitations are important on two levels. First, the tree as potential birthplace underscores the potential which Caribbean trees can have for filial and affiliative relations *as well as* the pressures put on those living through times of climate change to adapt to changing living conditions. Second, as a consequence of climate change, this imagined birthplace recalls origin stories of humanity, with evolution having started in the water. This kind of cyclicality imagined for the future underscores the importance of the more-than-human for the genesis of humankind generally in the now. Gaëlle's fleeting thought thus underlines that humans are entangled with the non-human and points to a yet unknowable future. This is in line with Zakiyyah Jackson's observations of literary ways of "hypothesizing cross-species relationality in a manner that preserves

alterity while undermining the nonhuman and animality's abjection, an abjection that constantly rebounds on marginalized humans" (18).

Another motif in *Claire* that conjoins content and form to posit the female body as a prime human site for interspecies connectivity centers on flowers. Shortly after Gaëlle's daughter Rose is born, her father Laurent is buried. Gaëlle recalls attending the funeral although she was not supposed to do so immediately after giving birth. She remembers: "During the gravesite prayers, her breasts ached and swelled, wetting the front of her white dress" (Danticat 163). This highlights the corpo-reality of her female body, very recently post-partum. Gaëlle then remembers "Claire Narcis standing alone under a flame-colored weeping willow by the cemetery gate." The scene culminates framing Claire Narcis as follows: "That morning, it seemed that Claire Narcis and the weeping willow had become one. […] Claire Narcis had seemed that morning to be a dazzling mirage, a veil between the dirt being piled on [the] coffin and the wailing baby waiting at home" (163). This strengthens the complex and complicated coalition between female bodies and plants. The near-homophony of *veil* and *wail* accentuates this fusion, species effectively folding into one another. The tree in question being a *weeping* willow, semantics are in concert with the atmosphere of the funeral and simultaneously foreshadow Claire Narcis's own death during her child's birth. Female corporeality also comes to matter as the memory is filtered through Gaëlle's perception and the explicit comment on her pregnant body determines the tone of the scene. Women characters and female bodies are ligated to flowers, and through the atmosphere of grief and passing, the connection is affectively imbued with ambiguity.

Flowers are ubiquitous in *Claire* and often convey an ominous aura. Each year on the anniversary of the death of Gaëlle's daughter Rose, Yves Moulin, the driver who hit Rose with his car, "place[s] a small bouquet of white roses at her […] gravesite, each rose for one year of the age that [she] would have been" (156–157). Where there could have been a little girl, there now only remains a gravesite with the flowers after which little Rose was named. In *Claire*, many women characters are named after flowers, Claire *Narcis* being one of them. The surname *Narcis* translates to a flower, a daffodil.[5] Jessamine, the best friend of Max Junior, brings to mind the jasmine tree. Flore, the maid he rapes, stands in for all flowers, her name being so similar to the Latin *flora*. Often perceived as precious and decorative, flowers in *Claire* are also enmeshed in colonial histories. In Max Senior's garden, "Jessamine expresses surprise to see African violets in the front yard, since they are not native to Haiti. As the name suggests, this plant comes from Africa" (Gibby 359). Importantly, "botanical transfers" from Africa to other places have a history of various centuries (Carney and Rosomoff 28). Judith Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff remind us that migration of African plants to other parts of the world

often was a by-product of or happened in tandem with the slave trade; histories of displacement of African peoples and transportation of plants are inextricably linked (45). At the same time, flowers are also delicate. Their fragility is of prime importance, because flower symbolism is also used to expose the structural violence from which women suffer in the patriarchally shaped Haitian community. And, to make one more point, flowers are tied to the locale, infrastructure and geography of Ville Rose itself. The town "had a flower-shaped perimeter that, from the mountains, looked like the unfurling petals of a massive tropical rose, so the major road connecting the town to the sea became the stem and was called Avenue Pied Rose or Stem Rose Avenue, with its many alleys and capillaries being called épines, or thorns" (Danticat 5). Through flowers, this description ties women to locale and locale to the precarity of women, but it also makes the natural resurface in the urban.

The narrative construction of flowers in *Claire* is part of the way in which gender-specific violence and women's linkage to the other-than-human manifest in the use of semantics, which also foments ecological solidarities by establishing connectivity through shared precarity between women and nature. One example is that the narrative mentions Claire Narcis's "*thunderous* voice" (Danticat 54; my emphasis), linking her to natural forces. More prominently, the connection is drawn by way of the verb *pummel*. Pummeling is hitting someone or something hard, mostly using one's fists. So, when the wave that drowns Caleb is said to be "pummeling" his boat, violent human agency is ascribed to the waves of the sea (3). Thus, from the beginning, borders between the human and the non-human are blurred. The context in which the verb reappears is very violent, too: The night in which Max Junior rapes his maid Flore, a turbulent thunderstorm is going on outside: "Sometimes during these storms, a house not as sturdy as this one would be *pummeled* so badly that it would be blown over by the winds that followed" (168; my emphasis). Flore is afraid of the storm's agency, which is expressed through the verb 'pummel'. The verb continues to gain connotations of fear and threat, the motif reaching its climax after Flore has been raped. Immediately afterward, "[s]he felt a stabbing pain in places where [Max Junior] had *pummeled* his body against hers" (170; my emphasis). Here, the verb *pummel*, along with the dire specifications it has accumulated prior to this moment, vocalizes the violence Flore has suffered. "The next morning [a] hummingbird flew over the *pummeled* rosebushes, and Max Junior raised his fingers, as if to grab the minute wings" (170-1; my emphasis). *Just as*—meaning both when and like—Flore has been violated by her aggressor, the rosebushes have been pounded upon by the storm. Almost like an afterthought to the field mapped by the verb 'pummel', in the following chapter Max Junior remembers "how the roses had been *pummeled* the night of the hailstorm but had still had

enough nectar to attract a hummingbird the next morning" (198; my emphasis). The roses and Flore share the capacity for resilience, too. In spite of the abuse they have had to endure, they continue to live. Evidently, the text "uses the hailstorm to examine the vulnerability of the female body" (Mardorossian and Wong 207). Flore has been violently subjugated, and the flowers', the hummingbird's and her own mutual fragility entwines them across species divisions. Interestingly enough, the flowers mirroring Flore are roses, which onomastically interpellate little Rose. Although Rose was not killed deliberately, Flore's, the roses' and her own suffering calls for interspecies empathy. These coalitions become manifest precisely through a verb which conventionally expresses human exercise of violence on the body. Semantics perform an ecological kind of solidarity, one between different species, and assert multispecies worlding in an ecological grammar of kinship and solidarity.

Ecological solidarity in *Claire* frequently also implicates the female body in a particular condition: pregnancy. Generally, negative or unconventional depictions of pregnancy mark the narrative. After Flore is raped by Max Junior, she only understands that she is pregnant when she "started vomiting" (Danticat 176). Although morning sickness is a common experience of pregnant women, vomit and its surprising appearance here symbolize the child inseminated into the female body by rape and thus indissolubly tie both child and pregnancy to the abject. Analyzing concepts of identity and alterity, psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's well-known abject theory stipulates that "what is *abject*, […] the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws [one] toward the place where meaning collapses" (2; original emphasis). The abject, endangering meaning, corrodes the boundary between self and other. Since a binary understanding of self and other is also the foundation of anthropocentrism, the abject can have a subversive force in narratives clamoring for ecological solidarity. Flore's name incessantly reminds readers of the close link between women and nature and thus conjoins both in the transcendence of boundaries for the sake of solidarity in shared precarity.

Pregnancy, directly linked to the abject, here becomes a stepping-stone to re-evaluations of relations between species in the face of ecological crises. This dynamic realizes its full potential with Gaëlle's pregnancy. At an early stage in the pregnancy, her gynaecologist has predicted that the baby will be still-born or will not survive (Danticat 51). Yet, her daughter Rose is born healthy. Still, an ambiguous sublayer remains, fortified by the reader's knowledge that Rose is eventually going to die in a car accident, which amounts to dramatic irony. During her pregnancy, Gaëlle sometimes "felt so free that she hardly remembered the baby in her body at all. But on other days, […] she [feels] as though she were carrying a nest of snakes in her stomach" (44). Gaëlle's thoughts of snakes here do not only anticipate

something bad, but they are also an instance of an-other species perceived to reside within a pregnant female human. The image, ingraining the abject into pregnancy, portrays the female body as a site for connections, both unwanted and desired ones.

These connections turn into more generative oddkin relations and clear instances of ecological, interspecies solidarity when Gaëlle opens up to certain non-humans during her pregnancy: frogs. At the time when Gaëlle is pregnant, "[i]t was so hot in Ville Rose that year that dozens of frogs exploded. These frogs frightened not just the children who chased them into the rivers and creeks at dusk, […] but also twenty-five-year-old Gaëlle, who was more than six months pregnant and feared that, should the temperature continue to rise, she too might burst" (42). She identifies with the frogs, identification deconstructing the alterity of another species. Owing to the havoc that climate change wreaks on nature, this "mass animal die-off" now, only a few years after the publication of *Claire*, is no longer an outstanding event, but one in a constant stream of tragic reminders that our wounded terra is now precarious ground for some species (Mardorossian and Wong 203). In the world of *Claire*, Gaëlle's worry foregrounds parallels between exploding frogs and the swelling pregnant body. Both corpo-realities are foregrounded and depicted as vulnerable to the impact of extreme heat in another instance of new solidarities in the face of shared precarity. What is more, Gaëlle is "haunted by visions of frog carcasses slithering into her mouth and down her throat" (Danticat 42). Her visions are outstandingly repulsive because carcasses making their way down her throat contravene purity rules and transgress borders of the body, and, by corollary, borders of the self. Transgressing bodily margins in Gaëlle's imagination, the frogs are assigned the position of the abject, again exposing the instability of the *anthropos* by having the other incorporated into the human self. Although she has been alerted to the fact that some frogs are poisonous (54), Gaëlle eats one: "Without thinking, she […] stuffed the koki [frog] into her mouth." The "frog stank of mold and decay and was slippery as it landed on her tongue" (60).[6] The tongue as an abject organ, continuously moving in and out of the body here comes in contact with another species, one that, abiding by psychoanalytical rules of food pollution, transgresses categories of proper and improper (Douglas 35-6).

Once Gaëlle has swallowed the frog, she muses: "Two types of animals were now inside of her, in peril: her daughter, Rose, and now this frog. Let them fight it out and see who will win" (Danticat 60). This levels the relation between human foetus and dead frog, the mother's body is depicted as a battleground for two *animals*: Gaëlle does not differentiate between her human child and the non-human frog, but rather refers to the animality of both, suggesting that both should have a fair chance. Interestingly, the mother-to-be does not side, as filial thinking would deem *natural*, with her foetus, but instead

remains indifferent as one of the very tentative forms of ecological solidarity mentioned above. Gaëlle is not overly empathetic, but she is so to both the child and the frog, striking a balance between the two across species boundaries. Since so many boundaries of conditioning and convention are trounced here, the entire passage effectively collapses boundaries between species through the abject. Despite its grotesque framing, the scene thus also allows for interspecies solidarity. The frog is dead, but if it were poisonous to Gaëlle or the unborn child, it would get another chance at exerting its lethal agency in the pregnant female body. Ultimately and in occluded ways, then, the non-human abject here is a demand of ecological solidarity. By the same token, Gaëlle even comes to develop a habit that is a clearer example of ecological solidarity. Taking walks during her pregnancy, she encounters many carcasses of frogs which died because of the extreme heat. Gaëlle takes to burying the bodies (44), "plant[ing them] in the ground," as the text puts it (45). The pregnancy broadens Gaëlle's horizon, confronting her with a situation of non-human precarity that calls for her solidarity. Gaëlle swallowing the dead frog is a sort of burial as well. Both acts are an attempt to grieve for frogs, implicitly mourning climate change and the consequent destruction of nature, and of making generative oddkin.

Ambivalent as it is, the pregnant female body in *Claire* clearly holds the potential for solidary connections between species. Nozias remembers how he and Claire Narcis went out to the sea with a boat once, and how she, already pregnant at this point, went swimming. "Her body parted the moonlit surface of the sea, pulling her forward as she sunk her head in, then raised it up and out again" (33). The text then narrates an instance of multispecies worlding: "From [Claire's] perfectly round breasts down, she was in the middle of a school of tiny silver fish, which were ignoring her and feeding on gleaming specks of algae floating on the water's surface" (34).[7] The memory, directed by Nozias's gaze, zooms in on Claire's breasts as a marker of the female body and elevates the latter's being in touch with the other-than-human. The fish themselves are eating algae, which constitutes another subliminal interspecies encounter. The sea as space allows for this transcendent contact, and the female human body is implicated in it and affiliated with other species.

Echoing the passage of Claire Narcis immersing herself into the water, the final chapter discloses that her daughter has also made a habit of this: "Sometimes when she was […] half submerged while she was listening to both the world above and beneath the water, she yearned for the warm salty water to be her mother's body, the waves her mother's heartbeat" (216). This passage is rich with implications. Contact with the sea makes intergenerational contact possible; one might even say that "the sea represents a maternal presence in Claire's life" (Gibby 361). But Claire is set in connection to more than her

mother. The sea itself is a slippery boundary line, separating an *above* and *beneath* the water. Claire stays in-between them, 'half submerged.' "With the French word for sea (mer) nestled in the French word for mother ("mère"), Danticat also suggests a mirroring between the sea's relationship to Ville Rose and its characters and the variety of mothering performed by women in the novel" (Mardorossian and Wong 204). Moreover, the waves produce continuous movement, the sea and Claire are literally in flux. Claire occupies a liminal position, which speaks to broader questions of non-binary relations between humans and water or between human and non-human. The kind of liminality that is depicted is made more tangible by the water being equated with the mother's body. Here, *Claire* picks up a well-established trope, that of water as the birthplace of the human species (Alaimo *Exposed* 115). In lieu of other species, Claire's company is the imagined presence of her mother's body, which performs kinship of both mother and daughter and the sea. Additionally, Maxine Montgomery detects the "residual presence" of Mami Wata, a "famed water goddess, a revered maternal figure in Haitian Vodou cultural traditions" in these gendered waters (316), evoking a specifically Caribbean, African diasporic female community. In *Claire*, these waters are fraught with death and life at the same time, latently conjuring up memories of the middle passage as they enable generative oddkin in the novel's present.[8] At the same time, the passage resonates uncannily with Édouard Glissant's interpretation of the slave ship as "a womb abyss," "pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death" (6). The ambivalence of the female body, pregnant or not, extends in multiple directions. Against this historical background, but also in light of contemporary climate catastrophe in the Caribbean, the waters enable and partake in interspecies connectivity, creating ecological interspecies solidarity through female human trans-corporeality.

5. Women and Nature? Conclusion and Outlook

How do *Claire* and this article add to the discourse on ecological solidarities? Small and large acts of care are what follow in *Claire* from the realization that the human and the other-than-human are entangled; they are "what comes after entanglement" (Giraud). As Eva Haifa Giraud perspicaciously criticizes, "simply acknowledging that human and more-than-human worlds are entangled is not enough in itself to respond to problems born of anthropogenic activity" (7). Tackling one anthropogenic activity in particular, "Danticat disrupts tourist fantasies through her portrayal of Haiti's environment, including its degradation" (Gibby 347). Countering delusions about the Caribbean, the novel thus asks of its readers to recognize the ecological ordeal of the Caribbean, which, by inference, calls for

ecological solidarities through female bodies. Edwidge Danticat chimes in with a chorus of Caribbean women writers, among them Olive Senior, Jamaica Kincaid and Monique Roffey, each creating a poetics of relating to the other-than-humans, although Danticat does so more cautiously and quietly than others, always aware of the contested nature of ecological solidarity in grave precarity. Affiliations between their writing might gesture toward intersectional demands for ecological solidarity, attesting to the position of women in the context of Caribbean writing about ecologies. This paper has shown that sex and gender in the novel are important factors in the forging of solidarities and thus might recenter intersectional gender-sensitive investigations within studies of interspecies relationality and solidarity. Redirecting the focus to literature as such, there are other pieces of fiction that lend themselves well to being analyzed through the lens of Haraway's vision of kinship as "becom[ing] capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response" (1).

Despite the potency of the vision of the female body as prime connector and thus site for solidarity and, ultimately, a better planetary future, there is a downside to how unique the connections wrought between women and nature are in *Claire*. The image of the mother as caregiver has been *naturalized* through age-old discourses. Gendered tropes on the one hand relate women to empty spaces and background functions (DeLoughrey *et al.* 11) and on the other hand reinforce ideas of women as ideal care-givers. Thankfully, such discourses are continually challenged through feminist critiques, for instance by Stacy Alaimo (*Exposed* 12). It is worth asking if the entanglements between women, the female body, and nature woven in *Claire* fall within the ambit of stereotypical gender conceptions, especially against the background of Haiti's patriarchal culture. Essentialist rhetoric makes "[t]he dual meanings of nature converge at the site of woman, fixing her in a vortex of circular arguments: woman is closer to nature and is thus inferior; woman is inferior because nature has made her so" (Alaimo *Undomesticated* 3). Instead, to conceive of humans as intertwined with the material and other-than-human world can allocate renewed value to "continuity and relation – with others, with the natural world, of mind with body" (Hartsock 246). This would enable us to fully reclaim underlying concepts and "recuperat[e] terra's pluriverse" (Haraway 11).

In *Claire*, Max Senior pushes Louise into a comparison with starfish, telling her "that she constantly needed to have a piece of her break off and walk away in order for her to become something new" (Danticat 143). His arrogant assessment of her character exemplifies undesirable and forced connections between women and nature, too often made in the name of (white hetero) patriarchy. When Max and Louise stop seeing each other, Louise reflects: "Of course, this [his claim] had always been truer of him than of her" (143). She

reverses the roles, judging him and making him the starfish. Louise's judgment similarly hints at the fact that men, too, can be connected to nature, and that it is a matter of discursive construction who is perceived as what kind of human or more-than-human. Beyond that, my analysis has shown that in *Claire*, no element of the story, human or non-human, exists in isolation. Connectivity informs both content and form. Contesting the givenness of filiation, the ways in which *Claire* branches out to multiple other spheres at all times can be read as a postcolonial provocation to the monocentric thrust of filial community formation powerfully coupled with a rejection of anthropocentrism in favor of ecological solidarities. Productively aligning female characters with other females *and* the non-human, *Claire* makes room for multispecies worlding. Allowing for very different, ambiguous affiliations, *Claire* does not put women on a pedestal, but rather positions the trans-corporeal female body in relation to multiple (non-)others. Although ecological solidarity in *Claire* may still be larval in the sense that it does not lead to radical eco-activism, but rather traces small, intimate instances of solidarity across species boundaries, in a way this also transmits the message that solidarities small and large indeed are the only viable response to the current state of this planet.

Notes

1. *Claire of the Sea Light* is hereafter referred to as *Claire*.

2. See also Ferdinand (89).

3. Men's appearance and clothing are also subjects of description (Danticat 11). Nevertheless, much less space is allocated to these descriptions, which are also fewer in numbers. This entails that less significance accrues to the male *body* in *Claire per se*. Other gender identities are not mentioned.

4. Jana Evans Braziel also detects intertextual links to Jamaica Kincaid's writing (90). Kincaid, too, explores mother-daughter-relationships, legacies of colonialism and ecologies in her writing – for a more extensive discussion, see Hannah Nelson-Teutsch's piece in this special issue.

5. Daffodils play a huge role in other works by Danticat, most notably in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), where the flowers centrally symbolize female resistance and / in the diaspora.

6. This is reminiscent of the "freak wave" mentioned at the beginning of the novel, "a giant blue-green tongue" (Danticat 3), pointing to further layers of meaning.

7. In contrast to this thick connection, when Max Junior enters the sea he only *thinks* of other species (Danticat 198). Deep connectivity seems to be reserved for women. Still, it is interesting that a homosexual man, straddling heteronormative gender binaries, comes closer to being in touch with other species than other male characters.

8. Due to constraints of time and space, I cannot go into detail on latent modes of remembering in Anglophone literatures. For detailed engagement with the concept, see Liebermann 2023.

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