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"BEING TREATED LIKE A FETAL CONTAINER IS ENRAGING": EXAMINING ANGER AND ANXIETY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN REPRODUCTIVE DYSTOPIAS

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***Abstract**: The paper examines the manner in which female anger and anxiety are channelled through two recent American reproductive dystopias, Leni Zumas's* Red Clocks *(2018) and Louise Erdrich's* Future Home of the Living God *(2017). Starting from these two novels, I argue that anger and anxiety in feminist dystopias represent both the vehicle for political and social critique and the response to (potential) oppressive reproductive practices.*
***Keywords:** dystopia, women's reproductive rights, anger, anxiety, climate catastrophe.*

"There are so many roots to the tree of anger
that sometimes the branches shatter
before they bear."
(Audre Lorde, "Who Said It Was Simple")

1. Introduction

In a homonymous article for *The Nation* magazine, Katha Pollitt (2018) memorably observes that "We Are Living Through the Moment When Women Unleash Decades of Pent-Up Anger", arguing that the Trump campaign and his subsequent term in office are responsible for this new reality in the United States. Gender justice advocate Farrah Khan (qtd. in North, 2021) similarly argues that Trump's administration created a fight-or-flight climate, characterised by

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hypervigilance, lack of safety and security for those at the other end of his policies (primarily women and minorities, immigrants, marginalised groups), and that all this has been conducive to social anxiety and psychological trauma. Some specialists deemed the emotional crisis engendered by his election "Trump anxiety disorder", whose "symptoms include feeling a loss of control and helplessness and fretting about what's happening in the country and spending excessive time on social media" (Kwong, 2018). Soraya Chemaly (2018) similarly observed that "women's anger over Trump's election has been the single greatest propellant of women's multifocus activism" (p. 236).

Some of the issues the Trump administration addressed head-on were undeniably meant to "strip women of their fundamental rights to control their own bodies and economic futures, while catering to social and religious conservatives and big-business interests" (Ahmed et al., 2020). The administration rolled back access to birth control offered through Obamacare programs and worked to defund Planned Parenthood and similar health providers; it reversed Obama-era directives regarding campus sexual assault, narrowed the definition of sexual harassment and allowed universities to require a greater burden of proof during investigations, which is expected to discourage the reporting of abuses (Ahmed et al., 2020). Moreover, it reinstated and expanded the so-called Global Gag Rule, under which foreign NGOs who rely on American global health assistance are prohibited from providing legal abortion services or advocating for abortion law reform. In practice, this has been shown to lead to more unsafe abortions and hence more maternal deaths worldwide ("What Is the Global Gag Rule?", 2019). American women's reproductive rights have similarly taken a blow with the appointment of Justices Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court of the United States. Trump VP Mike Pence was notorious for his conservative views with respect to women's sexuality and reproductive health care. Likened to a "prophet restoring conservative Christianity to its rightful place at the center of American life" (Coppins, 2018), Pence has built a career on efforts to restrict women's and LGBTQIA rights.

In a similar anger- and anxiety-inducing feat, the Trump administration's attack on women and minority rights was doubled by cuts in environmental protections vital for the good health of the American people. This had a profound and immediate impact on both domestic and international environmental and climate policy. Some of the more prominent measures targeting

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climate change and the environment included cutting funds for programs operating under the Clean Air Act (Trump is also a climate change denialist) and withdrawing the country from the Paris Agreement, which promotes the global reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The administration similarly removed protections for the nation's wetlands and limited wildlife protections, altered the Endangered Species Act in order to weaken critical habitat protections, weakened regulations aimed at limiting toxic discharge from power plants into public waterways, rejected bans on pesticides linked to developmental problems in children, and more generally restricted the scientific and medical research the Environmental Protection Agency can rely on to determine public health regulations (Popovich et al., 2021).

Against this background of concerted action to roll back women's rights and environmental protections, my paper sets out to explore the manner in which female anger and anxiety are channelled through and illustrated in two recent American reproductive dystopias, Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) and Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks* (2018). Starting from these two novels, I argue that anger and anxiety in feminist dystopias represent both the vehicle for political and social critique and the response to (potential) oppressive reproductive practices.

2. Feminist anger is all the rage

Writing over four decades after the publication of their groundbreaking *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which set out to explore the feminist poetics of nineteenth-century Anglo-American women writers struggling to escape and subvert patriarchal literary standards, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2021) observe that present-day feminists are channelling the "rebellious rage of the madwoman we studied, a female figure incensed by patriarchal structures that have proven to be shockingly obdurate" (p. 7). *Still Mad* nearly half a century later, the two scholars examine in their recent book of this suggestive title the manner in which feminist anger found expression in the literary imagination of women writers starting with the second half of the twentieth century up to today. This group includes Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, Claudia Rankine, Patricia Lockwood, and Rebecca Solnit, among many others. Positing that "reading and writing always hold out the promise of liberation" (p. 23), Gilbert and Gubar show how these female authors and feminist activists capitalised on the challenges in their own lives to contribute to cultural transformation across generations.

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Still Mad is part of a longer list of books providing a scrutiny of anger in the aftermath of Hillary Clinton's historic campaign for the US presidency and her subsequent loss to Donald Trump. Other notable titles include Soraya Chemaly's *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* (2018), Brittney Cooper's *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (2018), Rebecca Traister's *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger* (2018), Gemma Hartley's *Fed Up: Emotional Labor, Women and the Way Forward* (2018) and Lilly Dancyger's edited collection *Burn It Down: Women Writing about Anger* (2019). This phenomenon has been doubled by a wave of recent fiction by women writers which features unapologetically angry protagonists, such as Claire Messud's *The Woman Upstairs* (2013), Lauren Groff's *Fates and Furies* (2015), Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* (2015), Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) and Christina Dalcher's *Vox* (2018), alongside the two novels which are analysed here. These novels denounce the stifling patriarchy and toxic masculinity which silences women's voices and renders them invisible, holds them in contempt when childless and single, regulates the reproductive capabilities of their bodies, encourages self-sacrifice, and limits their worth outside the domestic unit.

The fiction and nonfiction works above provide provocative insights into women's rage as key to the growth and development of the nation and as a catalyst for social intervention and insurrection throughout its history. "There is little more threatening to the social order than a woman who's angry", writes Jess Zimmerman (2021). Anger is a potent tool for change and it provided the impetus for the women's movement, the civil rights movement and gay rights movement. It fueled the campaign for abortion rights and sustained the fight against police brutality, sexual harassment and violence. The richness of recent material on the historical uses and promises of anger elevates a rather marginalised and derided manifestation of emotive expression, especially in women. For, as Rebecca Traister (2018) observes, rather than being regarded as "ugly, hysterical, marginal, laughable", anger should be recognized for the "energy, intensity and urgency" it injects into feminist causes (p. 24). As a form of resistance to patriarchal norms and conformity, a woman's anger takes her out "of her earth mother role as bastion of peace and calm, out of her familial role as peacemaker, out of her political role as preserver of the status quo, out of her economic role as cheap labor, out of her social role as second-class citizen" and renders her a person (Kaplow, 1973, p. 38).

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As I have already argued, women's anger has manifested with extraordinary intensity in the field of reproductive rights, bodily integrity and access to relevant healthcare. Women across the United States have marched against restrictions on pregnancy terminations, against systemic misogyny and sexual predators occupying powerful positions in government, in business and the media. In addition, they have written extensively on these transgressions in order to cultivate communities of feminist resistance, fortify their convictions, amplify their voices and work out alternatives.

3. Anger and anxiety in contemporary reproductive dystopias

Just as anger was a catalyst for rights-based activism, literature has played a pivotal role in the advancement of human rights, as people's "reading acts have implications not only for the imagination but also for the legislation of an international human rights community" (Slaughter, 2007, p. 328). The manner in which human rights are portrayed in literary narratives can enable the steadfast pursuit of social justice and ensure their practical realisation by appealing to our shared humanity (Adami, 2012, p. 113). From this perspective, Valentina Adami (2012) highlights the centrality of feminist speculative fiction alongside legal theory in advancing and sustaining women's reproductive rights (p. 114). She observes that by zooming in on the status of women's rights in the present, speculative fiction and dystopian narratives put forth projections of "what might happen in the future if current trends continue unchallenged, or if, on the contrary, they are challenged and subverted" (Adami, 2012, p. 114). Along the same lines, Sarah Hall (2007) maintains that, in order for its speculations to be taken seriously, dystopian writing must be "part of a discussion of contemporary society, a projection of ongoing political failures perhaps, or the wringing of present jeopardy for future disaster" ("Survivor's Tale"). Consequently, the oftentimes negative scenarios advanced by feminist speculative fiction mirror existing conditions in the writer's immediate reality, which is mostly dominated by insecurity and anxiety triggered by excessive control over women's bodies or the unchecked deployment of reproductive technologies (Adami, 2012, p. 122).

The spate of recent reproductive dystopias is illustrative of this climate of intense apprehension triggered by the increased regulation of women's bodies and by restrictive interventions in the field of women's rights across the world. Only in the last few years, a plethora

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of novels authored by women explore the consequences of criminalised abortion, large-scale infertility, the commodification of women's (procreative) bodies and forced gestation, among others. Jennie Melamed's *Gather the Daughters* (2017), for instance, spotlights an isolated fundamentalist patriarchal community where only men can ever leave the island, child abuse is a way of life, sexual violence is normalized, and women live solely for reproductive purposes. In the high technology-driven alternative reality of Helen Sedgwick's *The Growing Season* (2017), pregnancies are no longer exclusively reliant on women's wombs, as babies are carried to term in external pouches and procreation has been democratised. The novel raises important questions about pregnancy, motherhood, women's empowerment and subjugation. Maggie Shen King's *An Excess Male* (2017) examines the consequences of China's One Child Policy and of the preference for male babies under an authoritarian regime which heavily regulates the citizens' family life. Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018) is set in an unnamed nation in Southwest Asia and imagines a society where a virus has decimated a large part of the human population. As a result, the surviving women are forced into polygamous marriages, their bodies are entirely dedicated to the cause of reproduction and subjected to fertility-enhancing experiments as part of their civic duty to ensure the survival of the species. Failure to do so triggers the execution of the noncompliant women. Joanne Ramos's *The Farm* (2019) similarly exposes the capitalist exploitation of women's reproductive capabilities in a novel dealing with the intersection of commercial surrogacy and the American Dream.

Almost four decades ago, feminist philosopher Julie Murphy (1984) noted in her article "Egg-Farming and Women's Future" that patriarchy regards women mostly as "reproductive bodies" who "exist for the production of the species" and who "are constantly discouraged, forbidden to use [their] bodies for [themselves]" (p. 68). Sarah Hall doubles down on the subject, claiming that "the area of reproductive rights is an absolute minefield", one "laid in the female anatomy", and that any "interference with fundamental rights of the female body and the female mind is the absolute sign of a failing society, or a desperate society" (Lowen, 2008). Louise Erdrich's recent novel *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) constructs such a failing and desperate society. Seemingly without explanation, the world is confronted with a climatological meltdown that had been brewing for some time – ever since winter became a "ghost season" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 130) –, accompanied by the dissolution of the natural world and the biological

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regression of all things living. For lack of anything else, people are arguably blaming a "new kind of virus. Maybe bacteria. From the permafrost" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 9). Even in the context of dystopian fiction this is not surprising, given that permafrost thaw has been acknowledged by the United Nations as one of the five most pressing environmental issues of these last few years (Briquetti, 2021), which also represents a threat for human security both regionally and globally.

The only certainty is that of "biological chaos" across the animal world and of "things going backward at an awkward rate" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 296): "small-celled creatures and plants have been shuffling through random adaptations for months" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 49); "ducks are not ducks and chickens are not chickens, insects are nutritious, and there are ladybugs the size of cats" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 105); giant birds of prey have become beakless and featherless and developed reptilian tails evocative of the Archaeopteryx of the Jurassic Era; chicken have turned into "pale iguanas" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 305); and "saber-toothy cat thing[s]" are lurking in the shadows, preying on pet dogs. On top of everything else, mammalian forms of life are confronted with a massive reproductive crisis, as "dogs, cats, horses, pigs, et cetera have stopped breeding true" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 49). The human species undergoes the same unexplainable crisis of reproduction, as the number of stillbirths has increased, echograms reveal underdeveloped neocortices and male sexual organs which are not forming properly (if at all). Additionally, more and more women die giving birth, martyrs in a world that is "climbing back down the swimming-pool ladder into the primordial soup" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 77) because "[s]omething terrible, unnatural, is taking place and [they] are doomed to die in a welter of bloody, agonized hysteria" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 220).

In these circumstances of large-scale ecological unravelling, the experience of being pregnant is less one of joy and hopefulness and more one of uncertainty and insecurity. The novel's protagonist, Cedar Hawk Songmaker, a 26-year-old Ojibwe adopted and raised by "Minneapolis liberals" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 3), is on the run in an attempt at safeguarding her pregnancy and keeping her newborn in defiance of a new political order bent on strict control and persecution by state powers and a new religious authority, a "church government. The Church of the New Constitution" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 128), evocative of Margaret Atwood's totalitarian Republic of Gilead.

Written as a series of diary entries meant for the protagonist's unborn child, Louise Erdrich's novel documents the way the dissolution of the natural world triggers and is doubled by the steady rolling back of women's rights and by the introduction of regressive reproductive

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policies. The dystopian narrative portrays the progression of Cedar's pregnancy in parallel with the regression of the environment, of living beings, and of human – and particularly women's – rights and liberties.

The parallels with (a gloomy version of) contemporary or historical America are hardly understated, and the architecture of social horrors and state terror is described in an abundance of detail. In a feat removed from reality only by a few degrees, given the latest militarization of law enforcement and US borders, the state has been highly militarised and military drones, "so artful, so small" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 267), are patrolling the neighbourhoods, forcing people underground. The borders with the neighbouring Mexico and Canada had already been sealed years before as "neither of them want us", yet the latter "still functions as the escape hatch in the roof of this country, though the fence is well guarded and people are constantly hunted down and returned" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 134), in a legislative move suggestive of the Fugitive Slave Act of the pre-Civil War era as well as, again, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. As part of an ideology that, for women, amounts to state terrorism, members of the community have been pitted against one another, encouraged to turn in their pregnant neighbours and family members or even tortured and forced to confess during "truth seminars" reminiscent of the Inquisition: they "can only be administered by ordained ministers and overseen by the military" and "conducted according to certain laws – precedents set by the church a few centuries back have come in handy" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 230).

As a result of the reproductive crisis, "female gravid detention" is enforced throughout the country by legislative fiat under the currently notorious post-9/11 Patriot Act, which not only empowers the government to keep track of pregnant women throughout the country, but also allows for them to be sequestered in medical establishments to deliver their newborn babies in controlled circumstances. Former prisons have been converted into birthing centres, subsequent to the ostensible mass euthanasia of their lawful occupants: "A sign above the entrance says Stillwater Birthing Centre, but it is only a painted piece of canvas that covers Minnesota Correctional Facility Stillwater" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 301). Pregnant women are forcefully removed from their homes and confined to these centres, but also "any woman who's childbearing age. You can get picked up for running a stoplight or jaywalking. […] Any mistake and you end up here" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 306). Chemaly has noted that pregnant women tend to be stripped of their humanity and regarded by the society as vessels, foetus carriers or baby machines (p. 115). A recent example in this sense is an

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Oklahoma state legislator who observed as late as 2017, using language steeped in dystopian fiction, that gestating women are nothing but "hosts" who "invite" babies in (Embury-Dennis, 2017). Another example, just as evocative of speculative scenarios, is a proposal by the Trump administration official in charge of the Office of Refugee Resettlement to use a controversial, scientifically dubious method to reverse the chemical abortion of an undocumented young woman in their custody who had become pregnant as a result of rape (Sherman, 2018). In many other recent instances coming out of ICE detention centres (Aguilera, 2022; Dickerson et al., 2020), women have been pressured into invasive gynaecological procedures recalling dark times in the history of the country and later ruled unnecessary. In the hands of contemporary women writers, such cases show how dystopian narratives have moved their settings closer to home. Indeed, it is their very familiarity that renders them terrifying and enraging.

Defiant but also fearful of this new world order, the young protagonist of Louise Erdrich's narrative tries to navigate the novel reality initially by avoiding capture and eventually by plotting escape. Isolated at home, Cedar ends up terrorised by a Mother – an obvious reference to the Aunts in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and a similar enabler of the new totalitarian theocratic regime. This talking head's sole mission is to urge women to "have the courage to save the country we love" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 104), become a Womb Volunteer and gestate embryos taken from in-vitro clinics or old sperm banks. It is here that the narrative turns into a litany of anxieties and doubts, triggered by Cedar's severe isolation and dread at being found: "Will this be the day that I am discovered and taken away? And what then? What would they do to you?" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 130) Trapped behind barricaded windows and locked doors for weeks in a row and separated from her family members, she experiences a "dark sense, a weight coming down": "Desperation chokes me. I want to walk from this house. I want to disappear. The edges of my dream are still with me, the endless running, the chase, the certainty of capture." (Erdrich, 2017, p. 146)

She is eventually captured and imprisoned to bring her pregnancy to full term under church-state supervision. In "gravid detention", the symbol of her resistance becomes an "angry ball of yarn" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 162) which, together with a fellow pregnant detainee, she first unravels from blankets over long stretches of time, then braids into a rope strong enough to allow them to climb out the window and down the prison-hospital wall. The "old-time finger-weaving", an "Ojibwe method of creating fancy sashes, wall hangings, belts, tumplines, and ropes" (Erdrich,

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2017, p. 171) proves symbolically instrumental in facilitating their (short-term) escape. But the "angry ball of yarn" above is not just a symbol of Cedar's resistance against regimentation and subjugation, it is the very core metaphor for the activist agenda of the novel itself, which similarly spins a good – and angry – yarn. Just like Cedar is steadily documenting life on the precipice for a future generation in the form of letters to her unborn child, so is Erdrich's novel advancing this activist idea of resistance through the power of narration.

Letter writing, both real and fictional, has often been used as a form of communication in trying circumstances which endanger those involved in the exchange, as for instance when contact is forbidden or movement restricted, during times of war or foreign occupation, or when the dialogue between two people represents an overt act of political opposition (Bower, 2017, p. 110). Moreover, given its potentially transgressive, counteractive character, especially in times of strife, the circulating written word stands proof against total control and manipulation by the powers that be. As François Lyotard (1993) observes, totalitarianism cannot be fully realised until it eliminates the intractable contingency of writing (p. 90). Cedar's daily documentation of the steady biological and societal deterioration is an act of resistance against the controlling forces of the new government, which, as the ultimate keepers of knowledge and data storage, have practically seized all communication channels. They have imposed a complete news blackout and the only people with access to the internet are those who have never expressed "new unconstitutional" ideas, have "never purchased anything unusual or given any sign of owning an interior life or living by any other set of rules but the given rules." (Erdrich, 2017, p. 172)

Writing also becomes a means of keeping faith and clarity of thought when confronted with the surreal threat of annihilation. The protagonist takes it upon herself to keep "a record and an inquiry into the strangeness of things" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 70) that characterises the historic times they are living in as "there have always been letters and diaries written in times of tumult and discovered later, and my thought is that I could be writing one of those." (Erdrich, 2017, p. 3) Moreover, her "long and involved missive" is a way of preserving her humanity and recording it for future generations against the backdrop of dehumanising practices and evolutionary uncertainty that might bring about "a lightless future devoid of the written word" (Erdrich, 2017, p. 35). This testimonial 'writing to the future' is ultimately an act of unwavering hope for the world and for her son's survival.

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To turn now to Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks*, published one year after Erdrich's novel and in response to the same political context, the objects in the title similarly function as a metaphor for anger – for women's angry wombs, for a society that turns its female citizens into ticking bombs and their bodies into battlefields, and for the clock that has been turned back on women's rights. The narrative is set in a fictional coast town in Oregon, in the not-so-distant future, when a Personhood Amendment is ratified by the US Congress to grant "the constitutional right to life, liberty, and property to a fertilised egg at the moment of conception" (Zumas, 2018, p. 32). As a result, abortion has become illegal across the country, "[a]bortion providers can be charged with second-degree murder, abortion seekers with conspiracy to commit murder" (Zumas, 2018, p. 33). Women once again flee to the haven of Canada to have their unwanted pregnancies terminated, but ever since the erection of the so-called Pink Wall at the border between the two neighbouring countries, they are returned to the US to face prosecution.

In-vitro fertilisation has been similarly outlawed, since "embryos can't give their consent to be moved" from the laboratory to the uterus (Zumas, 2018, p. 33). In addition, in order to "restore dignity, strength, and prosperity to American families" (Zumas, 2018, p. 33), unmarried persons are legally prohibited from adopting children. Zumas's braided narrative explores how this new reality is seen from the perspective of four women at different stations in their lives, but similarly trapped by personal and social pressures, and whose lives intersect at key moments in the novel.
The "Wife" Susan Korsmo is a stay-at-home mother who has put her legal career on hold to raise a family and has arguably contemplated driving her car off the cliffs more than once – sometimes with her children in the backseat – due to overwhelming personal and societal pressures. A former legal professional who gave up a promising career and a victim of unrealistic expectations instilled by ambiguous gender and social ideals, "she envisioned motherhood as a jubilant merging" and "[s]he never thought she would long to spend time away from [her children]" (Zumas, 2018, p. 254). Due to a sense of meaningless existence outside the domestic realm, she is caught between manifestations of anger – "Her narrow face, edged by blond waves, pulses with anger. At her kids for not settling faster? At her husband for doing nothing?" – and despair and alienation. Her anger is akin to a wild animal, seemingly expressed by the recurrent image of a "little animal black and twitching, burnt to death but not quite dead", "sooty, burnt, charred to rubber" (Zumas, 2018, p. 55; p. 273) that she summons when overwhelmed.

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The "Daughter" Mattie Quarles is a teenager who refuses to have her accidental pregnancy define the rest of her life and subsequently endangers her freedom by seeking an unlawful abortion. She is an aspiring marine biologist affected by the large number of whales dying on their beaches (a whale is "a house in the ocean. A womb for a person." (Zumas, 2018, p. 126)), but also a criminal in the making ever since her womb became the "house of the tufting, clumping, unnamed infiltrator" (Zumas, 2018, p. 312). Mattie is at war with the "tuft of cells inside her, multiplying" (Zumas, 2018, p. 75) and is haunted by the figure of her former best friend, who similarly sought termination for an unwanted pregnancy and almost died, only to survive and serve time in prison. The "Biographer" Ro Stephens is an unmarried high school History teacher and writer who cannot conceive and cannot adopt. She "has a gentle face – freckled, laugh lined, sad in the mouth corners. But her eyes are angry" (Zumas, 2018, p. 48). Her anger is manifold –

> at the amendment laws, the agencies, Dr. Kalbfleisch, her ovaries, the married couples, the term-house procedures. At Mattie for getting pregnant at the drop of a trilby. At [her brother] for dying. At their mother for dying. At [herself] for trying so hard. (Zumas, 2018, p. 224)

Her sole refuge is the beach, which "is a good place for rage: the sky and sea can take it", as "her screams are absorbed by the booming waves, the heaped fields of oyster cloud" and "nobody human is around to hear" (Zumas, 2018, p. 284).

Like many professional women, the Biographer is trapped between what she identifies as the "biological throb", which demands that she "make more of yourself!", and her passion for writing "a magnificent book on [polar explorer] Eivør Mínervudottír that would give people pleasure and knowledge" (Zumas, 2018, p. 92). These conflicting impulses add to her fury as she harbors a feeling of self-betrayal for giving in to societal pressures: "How much of her ferocious longing is cellular instinct, and how much is socially installed? Whose urges is she listening to?" (Zumas, 2018, p. 332) As if to unconsciously feed and sustain her anger, she keeps a list of "Accusations from the world", which she revisits from time to time to add new entries. All the items on her list are imputations and reproaches that arguably most women have had directed at them either by family members, peers, or society in general – "Every child needs two parents", "If you can't have a child the natural way, you shouldn't have one at all", "Your body is a grizzled husk", "You're too old, sad spinster, are you only doing this because you're lonely?", "Preferring one's own company is pathological", or "Do you think anyone actually believes that you're happy

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on your own?" (Zumas, 2018, p. 11; p. 147). Some of these "accusations" seem to have been internalised by the Biographer, who sometimes uses them against herself or to belittle her ambitions. As Meera Atkinson (2017) observes, "due to social prohibition on expressions of anger, this anger may bind with shame, resulting in a tendency toward contempt for the self and / or others" (p. 124). Ro thus becomes the vehicle for exposing and criticising the manner in which, in paternalistic and oppressive societies, even apparently strong-minded and independent women internalise misogynistic discourse and use it (consciously or unconsciously) to put themselves down.

Ostensibly, none of the four protagonists harbours more contempt for her peers than the "Mender" Gin Percival. As the town pariah and its unofficial healer, she lives in the woods and offers women services they couldn't otherwise afford or be entitled to under the new regime. She, more than others, fails to conform to the womanly image of her gender and lives as a recluse who holds in disdain most people in her community, who "already think she's unhinged, a forest weirdo, a witch" (Zumas, 2018, p. 43). In her inner monologues, she constantly deems them "silly bitches" and "ignorant" for having severed their ties with the natural world and even admits to "hat[ing] them all" (Zumas, 2018, p. 96). From this perspective, the Mender seems like an embodiment of Joreen's "Bitch" of Jo Freeman's 1968 "Bitch Manifesto", who "rudely violate[s] conceptions of proper sex role behavior" and whose "attitudes toward [herself] and other people, [her] goal orientation, [her] personal style, [her] appearance and ways of handling [her] body, all jar people and make them feel uneasy" (p. 52).

A great part of the novel is concerned with the legal actions orchestrated against the Mender, when she stands accused of having provided abortion services to a married woman in the community. This quickly turns into a 21st century representation of the Salem witch trials of a bygone era. During the legal proceedings, when false testimony is given against her, "[t]here is nobody to contradict her but the mender herself, who is a forest weirdo, a seaweed-hexing kook" (Zumas, 2018, p. 258). But

> [t]his predicament is not new. The mender is one of many. They aren't allowed to burn her, at least, though they can send her to a room for ninety months. Officials of the Spanish Inquisition roasted them alive. If the witch was lactating, her breasts exploded when the fire grew high. (Zumas, 2018, p. 258)

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The Mender's anger seems to be transgenerational, inherited – just like her gifts and healing powers – from previous generations of "witches" and particularly from her own aunt Temple, herself a similar outcast, an alchemist and a descendant of pirates, whose body lies in the freezer to be used, selected bit by bit, in the Mender's concoctions. Aunt Temple's body being ingurgitated or used up by the women in the community for healing purposes represents not only a way of perpetuating her gifts, her rebellion and resistance to norms, but also a means of re-connecting and re-membering lost ties between those women. From this angle, the Mender's simmering anger is a manifestation of what Lisa Lister (2017) has recently identified as the "witch wound", by which she means "the gaping huge gash that Patriarchy has inflicted upon us" (p. 135). It may also stand for the collective wound reminiscent of the Burning Times, when tens of thousands of women were executed in the wave of violence that swept Europe in the 17th century and insidiously found its way to the New World at about the same time. Moreover, I would argue that the character's anger and symbolism are similarly reminiscent of Tish Thawer's 2015 novel *The Witches of BlackBrook*, which gave feminist activists in the United States the already-familiar slogan of resistance "We are the granddaughters of the witches you couldn't burn!" (Danziger Halperin, 2022).

The anger of these four women, identified for the larger part of the novel by their limiting roles afforded by social conventions rather than by their names, ensures their resistance against a political and legal system which aims to curtail their agency and limit their control over their own bodies. According to Chemaly (2018), anger is a call to action and to fighting back, "linked to assertiveness, persistence, and aggressiveness", enabling the subject to "actively make change and confront challenges" (p. 23). No longer an "outlaw emotion" (a term used by feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar), but rather a moral obligation and deeply seated in "our bones, our blood, and our minds", anger is a "refutation of that oppressive standard and the control of women that comes with it" (Chemaly, 2018, p. 247). From this perspective, the novels discussed here seem to appeal to what feminist activist Audre Lorde (1997) identified as the "well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being" (p. 280). For, as Susi Kaplow noted half a century ago, "the emotion which accompanies the first steps toward liberation is, for most women, anger" (p. 38).

4. Conclusion

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After having put it on hold for many years, Louise Erdrich resumed working on her novel shortly after Trump was elected president and against the background of the increasing influence of the religious right and Mike Pence's prominence, of the conservatively-oriented Supreme Court debating the repeal of *Roe v Wade*, within a culture ostensibly dominated by sexual violence and in a world threatened by a looming climate and ecological crisis. Arguing that "fighting for women's rights is an unrelenting battle" and dreading the thought that "[her] daughters might have to live with the steady erosion of human progress" (qtd. in Alter, 2018), Erdrich constructs a society where a large-scale climate and ecological catastrophe has triggered the steady recession of women's reproductive rights in a desperate attempt at policing the last remnants of potential human life.

Correspondingly, in writing her own dystopian novel, Leni Zumas (qtd. in Charles, 2018) confessed to having drawn "the most frightening details of her story's misogynistic world from 'actual proposals' by men who are currently in control of our government." Hers is a narrative world where legislators and their enablers threaten women's wellbeing, limit their rights over their own bodies and derail their destinies.

My paper has looked at the manner in which feelings and manifestations of anger and anxiety are used to criticise and respond to these realities, arguably not far from the increasingly oppressive reproductive practices in contemporary United States. The narratives are built around desperate women whose anger is manifold: at the steady regression of the natural world, at the seemingly arbitrary limitations on their (reproductive) rights, at their various forms of imprisonment, at intolerable domestic and societal pressures and expectations placed on them. And even allowing for the dystopian medium of these women's anxieties, the narratives mirror the concerted rage of contemporary American women who are themselves witnessing the rolling back of their rights. The two novels under scrutiny here, but also many other recent works by women, can be read as forms of (angry) resistance and speak to the creative force of anger in providing "the impetus, the subject, and the inventiveness of their work... The fact remains that many women have written marvellously out of anger" (Meyer Spacks, 1975, pp. 11-12). They thus respond to Linda Grasso's (2002) call of making sure that "women's anger holds" (p. 194) in order to remain steady in our convictions and actions against the gender injustices still plaguing the 21st century.

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