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# Hoping for Cyborgs: Cyborg Eco-Heroism, Odd Kinships, and Hopeful Heroics in Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans*

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**ABSTRACT**

Building on Donna Haraway's advocacy for embracing "unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles" (*Trouble* 4), this paper reads Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans* (2013) with a focus on how, in the face of profound environmental challenges, stereotypical narratives of heroism are transformed—like in a compost pile—through cyborg-elements. The essay argues that grounding hero stories in the techno-organismal entanglements of ecosystemic crisis, yields an explicitly instable, corporeal conception of heroism in/of crisis of *eco-heroism*. Reading Smith's protagonists, Fen and Daniel, as eco-heroic cyborgs in conjunction with ideals of the traditional hero's corporeal and affective superiority creates instances of hopeful heroics in the narrative that challenge supposedly stabilizing patterns of identification in traditional discourses of American heroism. This vision of cyborg eco-heroism in *Orleans* makes communicable an unpredictable and instable crisis-state, generating hope as a composted affect in this eco-heroic story of oddkin. (LB)

**KEYWORDS:** eco-heroism, hopeful heroics, corporeality, cyborg, oddkin, affect studies

## Introduction: American (eco-)heroism—hope as conquest, compost, and cyborg

> So much of earth history has been told in the thrall of the fantasy of the first beautiful words and weapons, of the first beautiful weapons *as* words and vice versa. Tool, weapon word: that is the word made flesh in the image of the sky god; that is the Anthropos. In a tragic story with only one real actor, one real world-maker, the hero, this is the Man-making tale of the hunter on a quest to kill and bring back the terrible bounty. This is the cutting, sharp, combative tale of action that defers the suffering of glutinous, earth-rotted passivity beyond bearing. (Haraway, *Trouble* 39; original emphasis)

Stories play a central role in the construction of a supposedly *stable* understanding of reality. Traditional heroic narratives, centered on the stereotypically white, male, human hero as an agent of social order—as told and criticized by Donna Haraway in the epigraph of this paper—can be seen as such stabilizing patterns.[1] Sociologist Kristian Frisk observes that "the hero

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type functions to reduce social complexity, guide perceptions and behaviour and maintain a basic level of moral consensus in society" (95). Especially in times of crisis, these stories establish the hero's role as an emblem of hope and optimism. However, the *instable* and uncertain reality of ecological demise significantly challenges established patterns of identification in these stories. In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway urges her readers to re-think these narrative patterns precisely because ecological crisis does *not* make sense. "[W]e *must* change the story; the story *must* change" (40; original emphasis), writes Haraway, drawing attention to the difficulties that arise from attempting to communicate ecological crisis and its eco*systemic* impact when the old stories fail to elicit the feeling of stability and optimism they promise.[2] In the American context, heroic discourses have frequently been co-opted for the praise of soldierly sacrifice, for a legitimation of colonialist and imperialist warfare, for processes of nation-building (Tanrisever 114–16; Shohat and Stam 101–04; Anker 25–26, 35–36) as well as for a specific subset of exclusionary environmentalist discourses that often capitalize on hegemonic ideals of human–nature relationships and stereotypical savior stories, disregarding or glossing over histories and ongoing instances of oppression. Environmental historian Jenny Price contends that "there's been a long association of American environmentalism with personal virtuous acts" (18), which can be linked to the hero figure as a carrier of an explicit moral imperative. Environmental studies scholar Nicole Seymour criticizes such environmentalist campaigns for their reliance on only a limited repertoire of "appropriate" ecological affects, such as hope/despair, reverence, or self-righteousness, as well as for their heteronormative and white bias (5). These attitudes are also reflected in dominant narratives about American nature that reproduce a national ideology based on inequality and oppression of deviance (Sturgeon 6–7). Within these discourses of hierarchized human–nature relationships, Seymour observes, hope and optimism function as legitimating affects for a belief in progress. As such, these affects can be "easily co-opted, even used to license further destruction" (Seymour 3), to satisfy "humans' desire for certainty and neat narratives about the future" (3–4), and "to make affective appeals based in ideals of wholesome, healthy citizenship" (15). The traditional hero story, most prominently described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), provides both a linear quest narrative and an ideal heroic figure that embodies these "pure" and hence, in certain contexts, suspicious values. Framed as an origin story, the so-called monomyth traces an allegedly universal and recurring pattern that involves ritualized processes of crossing

and movement (Campbell 6; 28). Notwithstanding its supposed universality and Campbell's use of examples from international heroic traditions, the monomyth capitalizes on a Eurocentric ideology of expansion, progress, and exploitation of various "others," including the natural environment (68; 103–04; 119), turning the traditional hero's quest into a *con*quest of otherness.[3] In this paper, my reading of Sherri L. Smith's 2013 speculative fiction novel *Orleans* builds on the observation that contemporary narratives of ecosystemic crisis employ heroic discourses, not only by renegotiating heroic stereotypes, but also by featuring narrative elements of traditional hero tales that shape the monomyth as well as other American discourses of heroism. Reading Smith's novel as such a hero story in/of crisis, this paper investigates the legitimacy of hero stories as a source for a complex sense of hope in times of environmental havoc.

Critical of both hope and its binary opposite despair, Haraway notes that "[t]here is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference" (*Trouble* 4). Instead, "staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (1). Haraway calls for "stories of becoming-with, of reciprocal induction, of companion species" (40) and advocates for embracing "generative oddkin" (3), that is, multispecies kinship and responsibility beyond seemingly fixed boundaries (2–4). According to Haraway, making oddkin means that "we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles" (4). A compost pile offers a way to organically break down and reassemble the components of a discarded entity in conjunction with other elements. The process of composting involves the intricate interplay of human, nonhuman, and more-than-human participants—the human gardener(s), plants, animals, and the natural elements (water, air, heat, soil), as well as human-made tools and utensils. The transformation effected in the compost pile is always a communal effort, dependent on the balanced and mindful connection between everyone and everything involved—in Haraway's terms, a sympoiesis (58), that is, a process of "worlding-with, in company" (58), of becoming-with, of forming a relationship between oddkin. The compost as both material reality and trope, thus, stands in contrast to notions of singularity, clarity, and linear progress that frequently surface in traditional hero narratives. In the context of this paper, the compost pile emerges as a

productive metaphor to think about heroes and their stories *in crisis* as entangled with other human, nonhuman, and more-than-human bodies, likewise affected by the instability of an ecosystemic crisis-state which defies explanation on the basis of established heroic types and patterns. Thinking of heroism as a *composted concept* draws attention to both the ways in which these heroic stereotypes are in need for reconfiguration—composting—in times of crisis and the ways in which these composted hero stories can be used to make ecosystemic crisis communicable. I see this metaphorical composting of heroic discourses as a source for hope because the compost metaphor foregrounds the importance of interconnection and kinship in the face of environmental upheaval. It does so, however, without neglecting, even depending on the uncertainty and instability of crisis. Thinking of heroic discourses as composted embeds them directly in the reality of crisis, without glossing over the processes of "heroic" conquest and exploitation that have contributed to this state of crisis. Grounding hero stories in the multidimensional and multispecies corporeal entanglements of ecosystemic crisis yields a new kind of heroism in/of crisis. I call this explicitly instable conception of heroism *eco-heroism*.

I define eco-heroism as a brand of heroism that makes the uncertainty of ecosystemic crisis communicable in the shape of a hero story by foregrounding the corporeal experience of crisis, that is, the heroism that lies in *daring to exist* in a crisis-state, connected to other crisis-stricken bodies.[4] My reading of *Orleans* emphasizes this corporeal aspect of crisis by mobilizing the disruptive figure of the cyborg. I read Smith's novel as an eco-heroic story in which ecosystemic crisis is made communicable through *cyborg elements* in a way that generates hope as an equally complex composted affect in times of socio-ecological demise—one that does not depend on an omnipotent human hero, but on communal efforts and odd kinships for multispecies survival. The cyborg is, arguably, a figure as contested as the hero figure, but the cyborg's disruptive corporeality—originally proclaimed by Haraway in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985) and since reconfigured in various literary, cultural, and scholarly contexts—can be used to communicate the disruptions caused by crisis.[5] I investigate ecosystemic crisis as the cyborg-like coexistence of an ecosystem with a human-made crisis-state. The connections of human, nonhuman, and more-than-human bodies with the technologies that have contributed—and continue to contribute—to the ongoing, all-encompassing reality of ecosystemic crisis can be read in conjunction with Haraway's original definition of the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a

creature of fiction" ("Cyborgs"191). More so, instead of reinforcing the divide between the human and the nonhuman, this idea of cyborg eco-heroism points to the embeddedness of *all* crisis-stricken bodies in the techno-organismal entanglements of ecosystemic crisis. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway makes the cyborg's role in making oddkin explicit, incorporating it into the compost, when she states that "[c]yborgs are kin . . .. [They] are not machines in just any sense, nor are they machine-organism hybrids. In fact, they are not hybrids at all. . . . Cyborgs are constitutively full of multiscalar, multitemporal, multimaterial critters of both living and nonliving persuasions" (104–05). As "other" heroes, cyborgs "damp down the certainty of [traditional heroism and] villainy and explore the complexities of cyborg worlding" (115).

Haraway's rejection of a binary conception of hope and despair in light of ecological challenges and her emphasis of complex relations between human, nonhuman, and more-than-human beings aligns with recent interdisciplinary scholarship that acknowledges the importance of affect as a relational experience for understanding and rethinking social, political, and environmental relations in times of crisis—beyond hope and despair (Bladow and Ladino 15–16; Berlant 1–2; Seymour 26–27). Nicole Seymour emphasizes that "[a]ffect, in all senses of the term—emotional pull, visceral reaction, comportment—plays a central role in this current reality" of crisis and points to ecological issues as a source for "great emotional distress" (2). The late cultural theorist Lauren Berlant's highly influential study *Cruel Optimism* (2011) acknowledges that sometimes even supposedly positive attitudes to a crisis-stricken reality, like hope and optimism, "might not *feel* optimistic. Because optimism is ambitious, at any moment it might feel like anything, including nothing: dread, anxiety, hunger, curiosity . . ." (2; original emphasis). Thus conceived as "visceral," even "cruel," affect always has an explicit bodily dimension. As ecocritics Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino contend, "[b]odies, human and nonhuman, are perhaps the most salient sites at which affect and ecocriticism come together" (3).

Smith's heroes' bodies reflect this crisis-stricken cyborg state in various ways, turning their joined quest from a heroic savior story into a composted, instable eco-heroic narrative of embodied ecosystemic crisis that lacks the linearity, clarity, and hopeful progression of a traditional hero tale. From this perspective, hope is no longer guided by a naïve and optimistic belief in a heroic resolution of crisis but is equally complex, arising from an instable conception of heroism in crisis. I employ the term *hopeful heroics* in this paper to denote instances of eco-heroism in Smith's narrative where the

traditional hero story is disrupted precisely because the reality of ecosystemic crisis defies any sense of stability, but where this instability generates hope despite uncertainty. My analysis first discusses Smith's protagonists Daniel and Fen as eco-heroic cyborg figures, then explores how their odd kinship challenges the individualistic hero's quest. As Haraway's *Terrapolis*, which "makes space for unexpected companions" (*Trouble* 11), Smith's fictional storyworld also embraces nonlinear, entangled stories of oddkin, suggesting a "composted" affect of hope.

**Hopeful heroics: cyborg eco-heroism in *Orleans***

Reading the cyborg as a hero figure and a narrative like *Orleans* that features cyborg-like characters as a hero story is an endeavor that already confronts heroism in crisis.[6] *Orleans* is set in a dystopian American society shaken by Delta Fever, an epidemic caused by the far-reaching socio-ecological ramifications of several severe storms in the area of former New Orleans. The quarantined zone, now called Orleans, is walled-off from the so-called Outer States, because, according to the government's "Declaration of Separation" (Smith), "[t]he shape of our great nation has been altered irrevocably by Nature, and now Man must follow suit in order to protect the inalienable rights of the majority . . .."[7] Despite the fact that the *multi*dimensional crisis affecting both Orleans and the Outer States has caused "deaths by debris, cuts, tetanus, or loss of blood; suicide; heart attacks caused by stress of loss, or stress of rebuilding, . . . [d]omestic violence . . . [and] murder," depleted resources (47), and led to the emergence of the uncontrollable virus as well as to a looming war in Orleans (216–19), the government frames this crisis as a stereotypical heroic battle between humans and "Nature." "Nature" is constructed as a *singular*, homogenized threat, clearly outside of the human realm, in fact, allegedly contained behind a wall. Capitalizing on images of the glory and exceptionalism of a seemingly "great nation," the rhetoric surrounding the epidemic in the narrative evokes discourses of traditional heroism, supposed to uphold a constructed sense of stability in the face of a profoundly *in*stable and uncertain state of crisis.

Other readings of Smith's novel have focused on its depiction of African American identity through Smith's protagonist Fen de la Guerre, a sixteen-year-old Orleans native. Melanie Marotta reads *Orleans* as an Afrofuturistic narrative of emancipation, which she links to the generic structure of (neo-)slave narratives (56–58), tracing Fen's "journey from object to subject, from powerless to powerful" (57), as the young woman learns to assert her individuality as a black female leader (60–62).[8] Similarly to Marotta,

Sam Morris highlights *Orleans's* "racial positionality" (265) in comparison to other Young Adult novels, but also adds the element of hope to the discussion of *Orleans*. Focusing on the Blochian "idea of utopia as an impulse that exists in people rather than as a place" (265), he discusses Fen's potential for embodying hope despite uncertainty (265; 271). My reading of *Orleans* builds on these observations about Fen's "other" heroic journey to individual agency, but also highlights the connective aspects of crisis. Therefore, I also discuss Smith's "secondary protagonist" (Morris 265), scientist Daniel Weaver, who enters Orleans from the Outer States.[9] Daniel's stance as a traditional, individualistic hero on a "quest" to single-handedly "solve the riddle of Delta Fever" is challenged by the reality of ecosystemic crisis in Orleans and his odd kinship with Fen as the two unlikely allies navigate the city (Smith 74). I am especially interested in how elements of traditional hero stories continue to surface in this narrative as communication tools of ecosystemic crisis that can provide a complex—composted—sense of hope in times of profound instability and uncertainty.

At the same time, Smith's novel, while speculative fiction, is clearly rooted in not only the rich cultural history of New Orleans, but also its history of disaster. Interdisciplinary scholarship on Hurricane Katrina acknowledges the intricate connections between racism and official responses to the hurricane, including insufficient evacuation efforts and rescue work, lack of medical assistance, and racialized media representation. Thus, similarly to the far-reaching effects on human, non-human, and more-than-human bodies presented in Smith's narrative, the aftermath of Katrina unveiled the impact of long-standing class and racial segregation in the city of New Orleans, as those most affected by the disaster were predominantly poor African Americans (Levitt and Whitaker 5–7; Marable x-xiv; Robillard 133; 143–44). However, in the face of crisis and failure, these communities came together, rebuilding and recovering alongside their crisis-stricken environment in a way that calls to mind the process of composting. Heroic efforts emerged—and continue to emerge—not from narratives of human hubris and exceptionalism but from narratives of ecosystemic crisis, in which discarded human bodies and bodies of land and water rebuild and thereby transform each other like elements in a compost pile. Disasters like Hurricane Katrina—and their speculative explorations in fictional works like *Orleans*—disclose the intricate connections between human and environmental health (Robillard 143–44) as well as the complexities that lie at the bottom of affect and heroism. When coping with disaster, notions of the heroic do not necessarily become intertwined with hopeful images of rescue but can also be linked to

"overwhelming stress, anxiety, and uncertainty" (Robillard 148) during the process of rebuilding, "juxtapos[ing] great loss with great personal strength" (149) in communities united through recovery. Embedded directly in the reality of ecosystemic crisis as a corporeal experience, eco-heroism draws attention to the interwovenness of human, nonhuman, and more-than-human bodies in crisis—beyond an organic conception of corporeality. The interplay between technology and organisms (Hayles 162–64) in a state of disaster evokes the image of the cyborg as a disruptive, eco-heroic figure. As a narrative of hopeful heroics, *Orleans* communicates ecosystemic crisis through its protagonists' crisis-stricken bodies that I read as eco-heroic cyborg corporealities as well as through a shaky quest that challenges notions of linear heroic progress.

**Daniel**

The American hero's connection with the natural environment—his wilderness adventure—has historically been constructed as an exclusionary process, in which "connecting to nature is a corporeal act, an act that requires a complete, whole, preferably fit body" (Ray 37). Environmental studies scholar Sarah Jaquette Ray links the heroic wilderness adventure to an ideal white hypermasculine corporeality when she contends that "[t]he individual white male who escapes to the wilderness is thus a defining trope in wilderness culture and environmentalism" (41). In this context, hope can be read as an explicitly corporeal affect, yet one that, in its alleged purity, is used to justify, or *puri*fy, the hero's movement through space—his (con)quest. *Orleans* recounts scientist Daniel Weaver's "quest" of developing a cure for Delta Fever. Daniel casts himself as the "hero" (Smith 197) of his battle against the epidemic; however, contrary to the traditional hero story, Daniel's savior "quest" does not look like the stereotypical hero's linear progression towards inevitable success. Instead of producing the desired treatment, Daniel's efforts have led to the creation of an even deadlier virus that would kill patients upon contact. Afraid that the military might abuse his creation as a weapon to regain control of the Delta region and its vast resources, Daniel ventures into the quarantined zone to work on a cure on site, taking the new virus with him (46–47). Despite his failure to produce a cure, the scarcity of reliable information about Orleans, and his lack of basic survival skills (72–74; 134–37), Daniel is convinced that he "was here [in Orleans] to save the world" (109). His fantasy about Orleans as "[t]hat mysterious, abandoned city . . . [that] was legendary in the rest of the United States" (52) exposes his adherence to dualistic thought structures that cast the natural space as "other"

from the autonomous human individual. Daniel's scientific interest in "support, research, [and] evidence" (109), and his "morbid curiosity" (109) about Orleans are reminiscent of the traditional hero who, according to Campbell, eventually "establish[es] . . . the foundations of our human civilization" (272) by invading and transforming the wilderness. Likewise, Daniel concludes that the information he has gathered about Orleans equip him with the right to explore the city, and that "[n]avigating the empty streets of Orleans should be simple enough" (72). Consequently, for Daniel, Orleans becomes an explorable wilderness, only vaguely reminiscent of civilization (71). Morris calls "the hopeful Daniel" (270) out for his "naïveté or stupidity" (270), and Marotta notes that, over the course of the narrative "Fen's voice will dominate Daniel's, thereby showing that hope for Orleans's future generations exists with an African American female who prizes community and survival" (58). However, Daniel's perspective is precisely that of an alleged heroic stereotype in crisis. As an eco-heroic narrative, Smith's novel grounds a new vision of hopeful heroics directly in Orleans's crisis-stricken ecosystem, as Daniel becomes entangled with all the "other" "snaky, unheroic, tentacular, dreadful ones, the ones which/who craft material-semiotic netbags of little use in trials of strength," like in a compost pile (Haraway, *Trouble* 43). This metaphorical process of composting traditional heroic discourses as well as naïve notions of hope and optimism attached to such stereotypical conceptualizations of heroism can be seen as a new way to communicate ecosystemic crisis. Daniel's "quest" is not easily resolved by the "shining hero going against the dragon" (Campbell 293). In *Orleans*, the reality of ecosystemic crisis puts Daniel's strife for scientific quick fixes and heroic glory in jeopardy on various levels, which also complicates his idea of him being "the best hope for Orleans" (Smith 197).

As an eco-heroic figure, the cyborg and its configuration as a disruptive body can be used to make communicable the intricate interconnections between discourses of ecosystemic crisis, affect, and heroism. The corporeal dimension of traditional heroic discourses draws attention to the continuous commodification of "other" bodies—of women, people of color, animals, land, and water—thus legitimized by these bodies' alleged inferiority. To this day, gendered, racialized, disabled, and otherwise "unideal" bodies are disproportionately affected by environmental threats. Yet, their perspectives and experiences continue to be frequently marginalized or completely erased in contemporary environmentalist discourses (Sturgeon 8–9; Seymour 9; Houser 10). Such exclusionary and oppressive discourses also significantly impact the accessibility of hope

(Berlant 14; Houser 12). Paradoxically, Daniel's healthy body makes him "other" in the toxic environment of Orleans, requiring him to depend on his high-tech encounter suit as a requisite for his "wilderness" experience. His hazmat suit, which Daniel has specifically "upgrad[ed]" prior to his departure, not only protects him from contracting Delta Fever, but also provides nutrition and waste-processing mechanisms (50). Alongside his datalink, a small wrist computer linked to an implant behind his ear as well as his goggles (51–54), Daniel's encounter suit turns him into a human machine hybrid—a cyborg. The cyborg's contradictory stance as a hero figure challenges supposedly "universal" hero narratives like the monomyth. On the one hand, as a potential superhero, the cyborg is situated in the American tradition of idealized heroic corporeality, often in connection with racialized and gendered images of white hypermasculine (super-)power (Alaniz 4–6; Isaacs 136–38), similar to Campbell's depictions of the stereotypical hero. On the other hand, as literary scholar Marit Hanson observes in her work on cyborg superheroes and disability, "in contemporary science and particularly literature and popular culture, what does and does not constitute a cyborg or a cyborg body, and how that cyborg body is integrated (or not) into its world changes from field to field, and even between different story narratives" (101), making this cyborg appear as simultaneously empowered and "other," in different contexts (101; 104–06; Bukatman 73). Jeopardizing the "pure" corporeal connection with Orleans's ecosystem that would bring him closer to the traditional hero ideal based on the notion that "modernity, especially technology, has severed our connection to nature" (Ray 37; 43–46), Daniel's stance as an empowered cyborg in Orleans disrupts the dualisms of human/nature, organism/machine, and hero/other. Simultaneously this hero's cyborg body is grounded directly in an ecosystem impacted by the techno-organismal entanglements of crisis.

Through these cyborg-elements, Daniel's hubristic mission is turned into an eco-heroic narrative of hopeful heroics. Daniel's cyborg-ness may be a catalyzing force of empowerment for what he sees as his heroic savior quest, but, at the same time, it enables him to immerse himself in the reality of ecosystemic crisis in the city—a viewpoint he has previously been unable to experience on the other side of the Wall to the Outer States. In fact, Daniel cannot function in Orleans without the protective cyborg-like enhancements provided by his suit and datalink. His cyborg-ness is less a knightly armor than a testimony to N. Katherine Hayles's observation that "humans, animals and intelligent machines are more tightly bound together than ever in their cultural, social, biological and technological evolutions" (162). Daniel's full

potential as an eco-heroic cyborg emerges only when he—in Haraway's words—"make[s] kin" with the city's rebellious community and breaches the cultural gap that keeps him from comprehending this ecosystem's insurgent survival (*Trouble* 1).

**Fen**

Smith's novel paints an intricate picture of group identity and resilience in times of a crisis that spans across and beyond the entirety of this abandoned city's ecosystem. In Orleans, identity is based on blood type, creating blood tribes that provide both community within, and hostility between, the tribes. Tribe members "talk tribe" (91), a local color dialect that connects them as a community, while also making it easy to recognize outsiders. The so-called "Rules of Blood" (16), a type of nursery rhyme, lay out the foundations of the city's tribal affinity. When Daniel meets Fen de la Guerre, the sole survivor of an attack on her tribe, she is on a mission to take her diseased friend's newborn across the Wall before the little girl contracts Delta Fever. Centered on notions of motherhood, community, and care—ideas that stand in direct opposition to stereotypical images of the hero as an individualistic conqueror (Campbell 103–04)—Fen's "quest" thus differs from Daniel's hubristic savior story that is altered by his immersion in Orleans's crisis-stricken ecosystem. Unlike Daniel, Fen is different from the heroic ideal of the white male adventurer in terms of both gender and race, and her composted form of heroism springs directly from her experience as an "other" heroic body in *Orleans*. The fact that traditional notions of heroic conquest and exploitation continue to influence crisis management in Orleans has left traces on Fen's body that reflect the complex, cyborg-like entanglements of affective, corporeal, and heroic discourses.

A childhood survivor of blood rape—a traumatic experience of corporeal invasion, during which Fen's blood was forcefully taken against her will by an unnamed man who paid for her blood—Fen has experienced the other side of the traditional hero story as a tale of domination (Smith 94–99). In a city where identity is based on blood type and blood transfusions can be used to combat Delta Fever, universal O-type donors like Fen are likely targets for blood hunters and blood slavery (16–17). At nine years old, newly orphaned Fen was welcomed into what she thought would be her new family, her new home (88; 91), without realizing that she was actually joining a children's blood cult run by a religious fanatic, "Mama Gentille," whose name is in itself an ironic telling name, implying the kindness of the blood slave holder (94). The fact that Fen's "arms be smooth and free of needles" (94–

95), made her "[a] virgin, untouched by needle or knife" (95), and, thus, a pricy blood slave to be sold to older men. Hence, even in a place that has itself been othered by the dominant fraction of the United States population in the Outer States as "dead, diseased" (110; 172–73), otherness stems directly from the body, echoing discourses of traditional heroism centered on the conquest of sexualized and racialized "others." In the narrative, Mama Gentille casts Fen's blood rapist as a kind and honorable "gentleman"—a designation that calls to mind traditional heroic discourses of male superiority (95). Historian Richard Slotkin identifies the American hero figure as a part of the class of "natural aristocracy" (176), whose "primary sign of social and moral superiority is not nobility but *virility*" (176; original emphasis). This uniquely American hero represents "a new racial type" (175) in a Social Darwinist sense, justifying his "use [of] violence in a privileged manner" (180) against various "other" bodies.[10] From this perspective, the invasive act of violence against Fen's "other" body can be read as a scenario reminiscent of the stereotypical hero's courteous encounter with the figure of the goddess in Campbell's monomyth. According to Campbell, this female figure "represents the hero's total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master" (101). In the novel, this image of domination is reinforced by the "gentleman's" insistence that the blood "virgin" Fen wear a long white dress (95), which he later "rip[s] . . . down the middle," further underlining the quasi-religious, ritualistic character of this act of bodily violation (96). Discourses of traditional heroism gloss over, and thereby legitimate, oppressive practices through a reliance on a stabilizing discourse of heroic civility. The stereotypical hero looms large above the crisis he creates, unfazed by its consequences, and the hopeful vision of his destined path to glory remains intact. However, when Fen's blood rapist invades the little girl's body in a way that parallels a sexual assault, "enter[ing] . . . [her] through the skin," the imagery in this memory clearly evokes the violence and horror that emanate from the phallic symbol of the "needle, sharp and hot" (96), thereby linking together discourses of heroism and affect in ways that fundamentally challenge notions of the stereotypical hero as a carrier of hope in times of crisis.

In this scene, the heroic body as carrier of hope is put in jeopardy as it becomes, instead, the carrier of a virus that threatens a multispecies community. The "gentleman" is not the allegedly heroic character Mama Gentille sets him up to be—a masculine body in *power*—but an infected body in *crisis*, dependent on Fen's blood for survival. The sense of pervasive powerlessness, emanating from both the rapist's and Fen's body, disrupts the

idea of an explicitly heroic race (Slotkin 54; 175)—the fittest race, surviving at the cost of "other" bodies. Viral and human bodies coexist in a state of multispecies corporeal connection that spans beyond infected bodies, impacting not just other human bodies, like Fen's, but Orleans's entire ecosystem (314).[11] In this eco-heroic narrative of crisis, human, nonhuman, and more-than-human bodies become linked together, corporeally and affectively (Bladow and Ladino 3), surviving *together* in complex entanglements. Fen's fear and terror in this passage, her inability to move, and the fact that, bound to the bed, she "do[es]n't fight" and "do[es]n't know how" evoke uncertainty and immobility instead of hope and a belief in progress, the "expected" affective responses to a traditional hero's presence (Smith 96). Stabilizing narrative patterns and elements of traditional hero stories—notions of heroic (con)quests, attached to an image of the hero as a knightly nobleman—are, in turn, *de*stabilized and disrupted by cyborg eco-heroism in *Orleans*.

In the closing statement of her Cyborg Manifesto, Haraway states that she "would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (223). In the vein of the cyborg figure's stance as an "Ironic Dream" (190), this statement can—ironically—be linked to Campbell's description of the goddess (101) as the traditional hero's submissive Other. Indeed, Fen is no goddess, but another cyborg eco-hero in Orleans, whose composted heroism and crisis-stricken cyborg body can be seen as a way to make ecosystemic crisis communicable. According to Haraway, cyborgs "seiz[e] the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" ("Cyborgs" 217). In the novel, instead of succumbing to her fate as a blood slave, Fen reclaims her agency through self-mutilation, wrapping her arms around a hot pot "'til they burned near to the bone" (Smith 98), hence rendering them useless for blood-taking. Contrary to Daniel's, Fen's cyborg eco-heroism departs from the original definition of the cyborg as a hybrid between organism and machine. Nonetheless, she, too, is immersed in the cyborg-like crisis state in Orleans and directly impacted by the ramifications of this techno-organismal crisis. As corporeal traces of crisis, Fen's scars can be read as empowering, cyborg-like enhancements—albeit organic rather than technological—that help her break down the boundaries of gender, race, age, and blood type supposed to disable her (Haraway, "Cyborgs" 193–96; Shaviro 171–72; 176–77; Federmayer 108–09).[12] Fen's scarred arms are a testimony to the cyborg-like coexistence of crisis-stricken bodies with an all-encompassing, multidimensional crisis state that transcends anthropocentric strategies of crisis management and human-centered conceptions of individualistic, omnipotent heroism. When read as a hero story in crisis,

*Orleans* points to a new and different way of imagining heroism as an instable concept in times of crisis, whose shakiness, nonetheless, creates instances of hopeful heroics. In *Orleans*, this reimagination of the traditional hero story of conquest and exploitation as an eco-heroic story of oddkin points to the complex sense of hope that arises from Orleans's regeneration in the face of crisis.

**Tribe**

In its function as a stabilizing structure, the heroic quest narrative is, ultimately, a story of binaries—human/nature, male/female, organism/machine, amongst others—which reinforce the heroic individual's superiority and prevalence over any type of "other" threat (Hourihan 2, Plumwood 43–44). Within this framework, Ahu Tanrisever sees the American hero figure as "a contingent construction that is embedded in specific (cultural, economic, political, or social) context and participates in the perpetual articulation and negotiation of concepts of individual and collective identities—by embodying as well as producing social meanings and social practices" (5). As "world-maker" (Haraway, *Trouble* 39), the traditional hero is endowed with "the divine prerogative of naming" (Shohat and Stam 141–42). Deeply rooted in settler colonial history, this practice—the hero's "Weapon of Knowledge" (72), in Campbell's words—thus, creates the very structures of meaning and power that assure his domination over nature and "other" bodies. Comprised of "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (28), Campbell's monomyth establishes progress, linearity, and clarity as central pillars of the traditional hero's (con)quest narrative. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note that such traditional stories of Western progress "provid[e] a sense of the purposeful movement through time of fictional entities bound together in a narrative whole," creating "the notion of a linear, comprehensible destiny" (102; Campbell 274). My reading of *Orleans* as an eco-heroic story calls into question the problematic power structures and hierarchies that lie at the bottom of these stereotypical stories of progress. Fen and Daniel's odd kinship constitutes a move away from individualistic notions of hope, attached to a single human hero figure, creating—in Haraway's words—"potent and taboo fusions" of eco-heroic cyborg identities that generate hope as a composted affect in a vision of hopeful heroics ("Cyborgs" 215).

Daniel's misguided individualistic conviction that "[h]e had a world to save" (200), is put in jeopardy when Fen agrees to take him to "the Institute of Post-Separation Studies" (52), a research facility set up by a group of Outer

States scientists in Orleans. Daniel's reverent recollection of the scientists' "ultimate sacrifice" (52) of staying in the quarantined city as "a last, heroic attempt to make a name for themselves" (198) during what he sees as "a silver age, an age of hope" for Orleans (200), evokes notions of the traditional hero's ultimate victory, linked to an optimistic belief in progress and science (Campbell 72; 272; Shohat and Stam 2; 14–17). At the Institute, he realizes that the professors he idolizes experimented on Orleans inhabitants like Fen, devising the system that divides the population by blood type to investigate blood tribes as "[a] new form of racism" (Smith 207). In creating the identity categories that shape Orleans's social structure, the scientists acted in the role of the traditional hero as meaning-maker. Created under the premise that tribal identity based on "the rules of blood make[s] race irrelevant" (207), with "[b]lood tribes cross[ing] all ethnicities" (207), this new practice of corporeal categorization can be seen as a strategy to construct a new sense of stability, without, however, providing treatment or a cure for Delta Fever (207). Similarly to how the Wall is supposed to keep the virus from spreading to the seemingly "healthy" Outer States—"[f]or the safety of the population at large" (n. p.)—this attempt at stabilization through a clear-cut division of "other bodies" happened at the expense of the commodified bodies of Orleans's inhabitants. However, as Haraway puts it, in times of ecosystemic upheaval, "[n]one of the parties in crisis can call on Providence, History, Science, Progress, or any other god trick outside the common fray to resolve the troubles" (*Trouble* 40). In *Orleans*, hope does not arise from an individualistic heroic fantasy, nor from a reliance on supposedly stabilizing anthropocentric categories that do not adequately describe the all-encompassing state of ecosystemic crisis. In this eco-heroic narrative, hope emerges from the complex interconnections between human, nonhuman, and more-than-human bodies coming together in the face of crisis.

The act of bodily division by blood type in the narrative, ultimately, does not lead to the tribes' disempowerment; instead, it provides a new conception of community as a catalyst for Orleans's process of recovery, which calls to mind communal efforts of rebuilding in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Robillard 148–49). At the same time, the narrative refrains from presenting the central idea that "tribe is life" as a one-dimensional pathway out of crisis (Smith 190). In *Orleans*, the construction of tribal identity has conditioned cyborg-like entanglements of recovery and loss that challenge conceptions of hope attached to optimistic progress. The professors' hubris leads to their becoming consumed—composted—by the crisis surrounding them when they contract Delta Fever. Kept alive by

intravenous feeding tubes, yet abandoned in the ruins of the Institute, their own crisis-stricken bodies continue to exist in a cyborg-like stasis, able to communicate as computational voices as the city's natural environment begins to creep in through the Institute's supposedly stable walls (181–83). *Orleans* paints a nuanced picture of a crisis that not only affects humans, but their relations with each other and an entire ecosystem in crisis. Heroism, in turn, also ceases to be outside of crisis with the hero "coming to the rescue." Instead, cyborg eco-heroism in *Orleans* generates hope as a complex composted affect that can be empowering while it is also grounded in a profound sense of loss.

The narrative gestures towards a process of recovery that moves away from individualistic ideas of heroic saviorhood. It is not independence and individualism, but community, exemplified by Daniel and Fen's odd kinship, that points to a composted vision of hopeful heroics as a way to communicate crisis in the novel, grounded in the human heroes' cyborg-like entanglements with Orleans as a crisis-stricken ecosystem. Orleans and the Outer States exist in a complicated state of interconnection, "no longer a nation" (Smith 253), yet their mutual survival would depend on their cooperation, made impossible by the constructed division between the two parts of the crisis-stricken country. In the novel, Fen's focus on community—her conviction that "[i]f Orleans gonna have a better future, we in this together now" (207)—points to the merits of a communal eco-heroic effort in the face of crisis. Despite her mistrust in Daniel's failed research and the deadly virus he carries, she decides that their odd kinship means "[n]o more 'every man for himself'" (207). Hence, with his humbling encounter with Orleans's cyborg scientists, Daniel's quest turns from an allegedly linear tale of progress into an exhausting race against time as he unites with her on her mission to save "Baby Girl" Enola. As they navigate the city, Daniel loses his supposedly firm grip on science, when he loses his deadly virus in the overgrown ruins of Orleans. As a result, he is forced to abandon the idea of "trying to be a hero . . . to set things right" (315) when he is unable to retrieve the vials. The constant presence of Delta Fever—"in the water, the air [, i]n [Fen]" (314)—as well as the uncertainty surrounding both Orleans's and the Outer States' future, also disrupts the clear-cut narrative structure of the traditional hero's quest.

*Orleans* resists notions of linearity, progress, and closure, connected to the traditional hero tale. When the group reaches the heavily guarded Wall, Fen poses as a mother with a baby as a distraction, while Daniel and Enola cross the border to the Outer States (Smith 320). By using her own "other"

body and giving her life—shot by the guards (323)—to protect both Daniel and Enola, "[her] tribe" (320), Fen asserts her agency as an empowered eco-heroic cyborg. Both Marotta and Morris suggest a reading of Fen's emancipatory journey as a hopeful impulse that transcends the borders of Orleans with baby Enola (Marotta 62; Morris 271). From this perspective, Fen's rescue mission calls to mind traditional tales of heroism with Enola as "the Golden Fleece . . . the boon [that] may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds" (Campbell 167), brought to safety by Daniel like a beacon of hope. However, the reality of multidimensional ecosystemic crisis in the narrative complicates the idea of hope attached to a single act or body, thereby challenging traditional notions of individualistic heroism (Marotta 69; Morris 277).

Daniel and Fen's quests ultimately do not lead anywhere. As the soldiers' bullets puncture her already-scarred body, Fen does not embody the heroic ideal of purity and hope, and her death does not promise redemption, change, or "release" (Campbell 303; 299–303). Unlike in a traditional hero's quest, her death is not an epitome, nor does it mark the completion of a heroic destiny (306–07; Shohat and Stam 102). Rather, the bullets rupturing her body can be read as emblems of the techno-organismal entanglements of crisis. As an eco-heroic cyborg, Fen does not progress, but stays behind like a discarded part of a bodily whole, ready to be composted. Likewise, Daniel's cyborg eco-heroism is no longer an individualistic quest, but a story of oddkin that intertwines his own body with Orleans. Daniel's cyborg-ness discloses the bodily link between affect and heroism with his encounter suit not only functioning as a life saver for him and, by extension, Enola (Smith 320), but also as a keen reminder of his terror and helplessness. The suit processes his corporeal response—his "cold sweat" (322)—to the danger he faces, "recycled for later" (322), similarly to his formerly fixed heroic expectations that become transformed—composted—in Orleans. Moreover, the fact that Enola crosses into the Outer States with Daniel does not provide closure, nor does it re-establish order or bring certainty. After Fen is shot by the guards, the narrative does not evoke praise for Daniel and Enola's safe return to the Outer States. To the contrary, the fact that "[t]hey had made it" (323) is overshadowed by Daniel's exhaustion and the "wasteland, thirty feet of barren ground" (323) he faces upon reaching the other side of the Wall that does not keep crisis from seeping into the Outer States. Orleans is not completely sealed-off; its seams are porous, with crisis leaking out as Daniel steps across the border—the return of a cyborg eco-hero whose immersion in crisis significantly disrupts traditional tales of the hero's hopeful

completion of his (con)quest. By contrast to the shining hero carrying the Golden Fleece, Daniel's body carries crisis, organically in the shape of his own bodily waste, his exertion, and his memories, but also in the shape of his now worn-out, wet, and dirty cyborg suit—and baby Enola, another body that corporeally connects him to his immersive experience in Orleans. These cyborg-like eco-heroic connections, between two human bodies, between organism and technology as well as between human and ecosystem, can be seen as a new way to make crisis communicable through heroic discourses—beyond the anthropocentric definitions of a returning hero. Daniel and Fen's shaky quest communicates crisis not through stabilizing patterns of optimistic and linear progress. Its focus on the disruptive, instable aspects of crisis, grounding these eco-heroes' cyborg-bodies directly in the reality of crisis that does not end on the final page of the novel but leaves gaps and loose ends, without a closure or a solution, makes this eco-heroic narrative a story of oddkin and hopeful heroics.

**(No) conclusion: envisioning a cyborg ecosystem**

While reading *Orleans*, I have focused on how, in the face of profound environmental challenges, stereotypical narratives of heroism are transformed—like in a compost pile—through cyborg-elements. I have argued that, as a disruptive eco-heroic figure, the cyborg embodies the techno-organismal entanglements of ecosystemic crisis. My reading of Fen and Daniel as eco-heroic cyborgs in conjunction with ideals of the traditional hero's corporeal and affective superiority grounds the figure of the hero in the multidimensional, multispecies reality of crisis. The instances of what I call hopeful heroics in the narrative also challenge supposedly stabilizing patterns of identification in traditional discourses of American heroism that capitalize on linearity, predictability, and closure. This vision of cyborg eco-heroism in *Orleans* makes communicable an unpredictable and instable state of ecosystemic crisis, generating hope as a composted affect in an eco-heroic story of oddkin.

While my paper on *Orleans* has discussed the human eco-heroic cyborg figures Fen and Daniel, an ecocritical perspective on heroism as an embodied, corporeal experience of ecosystemic crisis also encourages a reading of odd kinships and cyborg eco-heroism beyond anthropocentric heroic discourses. Within this dynamic, an ecosystem can be conceived as another eco-heroic cyborg body in crisis, which exists as the product of the techno-organismal entanglements that condition its crisis-stricken state daring to exist eco-heroically because and in spite of crisis. In the novel the

cyborg ecosystem of Orleans can no longer be conceived as a passive space outside of heroic discourses, but–as a vital—and *active*—participant in the city's regeneration.[13] Haraway's argument about cyborg bodies that "[t]he regrown limb can be monstrous, duplicated, potent" ("Cyborgs" 223) also applies to the overgrown cityscape, where, in Daniel's words, the regenerative power of "Mother Nature's gargantuan fist" (Smith 163) is reclaiming Orleans as a space for human, non-human, and more-than-human cyborgs. As another empowered eco-heroic cyborg, the regenerating natural environment is connected with Orleans's multispecies community—as well as with the Outer States—in what can be read as another odd kinship (70–72; 224–27; 249–56) and an instance of hopeful heroics in *Orleans*.

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## Notes

1. Parts of this paper have been presented at the 2020 X Lisbon Summer School "Ecoculture."

2. I use the term "ecosystemic crisis" to highlight that the effects of the human-made crisis-state affect all human, nonhuman, and more-than-human bodies embedded in an entire crisis-stricken ecosystem, beyond an anthropocentric view of crisis and corporeality.

3. Despite its problematic framework based on a dualistic worldview that legitimates the hero's inevitable domination, Campbell's study continues to influence heroism scholarship, and definitions and classifications of the heroic still tend to be built on a recognizable symbolism and Western social standards (Frisk 95–96; Allison et al. 5–8; Kinsella et al. 25–28). In my analysis of eco-heroic narratives of crisis, like *Orleans*, I critically engage with the ongoing impact of traditional heroic discourses and narrative patterns of identification on the communication of ecosystemic crisis in these novels.

4. When I discuss narrative patterns of hero stories as a way to communicate ecosystemic crisis, I build on American Studies scholar Priscilla Wald's observations about the connective aspects of communicable disease. In her influential study *Contagious* (2008), Wald defines what she calls the "outbreak narrative" as "a contradictory but compelling story of the perils of human interdependence and the triumph of human connection and cooperation, scientific authority and the evolutionary advantages of the microbe, ecological balance and impending disaster" (2). Wald's observations make clear that instances of crisis never exist in isolation. In fact, attempts to make crisis, such as the emergence of a new virus in *Orleans*, comprehensible, and hence, controllable, always deliberately mask the complex intersections between the different dimensions of crisis, systematically stigmatizing "other" bodies to uphold a constructed sense of stability (8–9). In this context, eco-heroism means *daring to exist* in this state of crisis—a wordplay I use to reference *Merriam-Webster*'s definition of the adjective "heroic," which, amongst other explanations, includes "exhibiting or marked by courage and daring" ("heroic").

5. Haraway's cyborg is linked to feminist empowerment as much as to an abandonment of the narrative of domination and conquest. In "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," Haraway highlights the constructed nature of allegedly "natural" differences, based on sex, gender, or race, in the old dichotomies, rendered visible by the obviously technological character of cyborgs, robotics, or artificial intelligence (203–04). However, a reading of cyborg-hybridity as a mere combination of an otherwise unrefuted dualism inherently perpetuates these binaries, leading N. Katherine Hayles to argue that "the cyborg . . . is not *networked* enough" (159; original emphasis), and, hence, an inadequate representation of the interconnected state of humans, animals, and machines (Hayles 162–65; Isaacs 140). The cyborg has since been redefined both by Haraway and in interdisciplinary scholarship on Black cyborgs in media and film (Isaacs; Shaviro), on African American rebellion (James), and on interspecies connectivity (Federmayer), emerging as a versatile critical tool that gestures towards new ways of existing—daringly and eco-heroically—in a state of crisis.

6. *Orleans* is part of a long line of speculative fiction works whose representations of heroic characters challenge exclusionary definitions of heroism. Among these, Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean* (1986) and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable* series (1993, 1998) are yet another two examples whose depiction of non-white, non-male—even alien—heroes, and communal forms of heroism constitutes an impactful move away from Campbell's heroic archetype, and towards a reconfiguration of traditional heroic discourses in their portrayals of ecosystemic crisis in the sense of eco-heroism.

7. The novel is divided into a "Before" and "After" section, and only the "After" section—the actual narrative—has page numbers. "Before" is a collection of the fictional documents surrounding the formation of Orleans, that is, a brief impression of when the storms began, the timeline of hurricanes, the casualty report, and the "Declaration of Quarantine" as well as the "Declaration of Separation." The inclusion of these fragmented narrative elements constitutes a break with a linear narration style and genre conventions from the beginning. This narrative instability can be linked to the difficulty of communicating ecosystemic crisis, as familiar narrative structures, only inadequately capturing the toll of crisis, are shaken up.

8. Like traditional hero stories, slave narratives frequently feature the quest motif and its themes of spiritual and physical transformation, independence, and self-assertion, while also challenging the quest narrative's link to histories of conquest and domination in favor of a future of freedom and equality (Gould 12; Stauffer 204–07). In 1994, cultural critic Mark Dery coined the term "Afrofuturism" to describe "[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). Afrofuturistic texts, like *Orleans*, actively engage in the renegotiation of hope in times of crisis as these texts "both revise history and imagine impossible trajectories of black freedom" (Zamalin, 10) as alternative futures beyond linear narratives (Iheka 27) and stereotypical hero tales.

9. The idea of Daniel as the "secondary protagonist" (Morris 265) can be linked to the novel's narrating style. Both Fen and Daniel are focalizers in the narrative. Fen narrates her own perspective on the story autodiegetically in the present tense as events unfold, and hence, she is also narratologically immersed in Orleans. To the contrary, while Daniel also functions as an internal focalizer for just over one fourth of the story, the narration that focuses on his perspective is neither autodiegetic nor immediate, but temporally removed, employing past tense, without, however, providing external information or knowledge. His

perspective is, therefore, in various ways more distanced and more limited, lacking crucial insights about Orleans. Thus, Daniel's less informed perspective on Orleans complicates the idea of an allegedly objective, scientific view which he strives for. At first separated structurally into different chapters, Fen and Daniel's perspectives eventually mix and overlap over the course of the narrative, which can be seen as another instance of making oddkin in Haraway's sense (*Trouble* 2–4). The fact that Daniel, ultimately, remains the sole narrator at the end of the novel—with his perspective now fundamentally transformed and affected by Fen—further points to the novel's reconfiguration of narrative patterns, leaving the supposed traditional hero as the focalizer whose altered view serves as a new and eco-heroic way to communicate ecosystemic crisis.

10. Specifically, Slotkin discusses one of the most influential literary depictions of American heroism, Owen Wister's 1902 cowboy novel *The Virginian*, which contributed to the establishment of the cowboy frontier hero as a stereotypical American hero figure in the likes of Theodore Roosevelt (169–83).

11. Reading "victims of natural disasters and global economic collapse a[s] the new living dead" (175), cultural studies scholar Sheryl Vint contends that, in times of crisis, "humanity becomes split between 'real' humans and infected, dangerous posthumans . . ." (175–76). Vint's observation points to the problematic effects of a continued reliance on constructed dualisms. Simultaneously, it highlights the instability of these categories as human life is already intricately intertwined with other organisms in multispecies connections (Wald 2), calling into question the ongoing hierarchization of different bodies and the devaluation of "other" crisis-stricken lives.

12. American studies scholar Éva Federmayer discusses a similar idea of organic cyborgs, when she argues for a cyborg-reading of Octavia E. Butler's Xenogenesis series wherein alien species mate and fuse with humans, creating cyborg-like superbeings to ensure species survival. Federmayer's criticism of traditional science-fiction narratives for their focus on conquest and their lack of female or POC characters as protagonists (103–04)—alongside her discussion of Butler's cyborg protagonists' journeys towards preventing species extinction (108–12)—demonstrates how Butler's novels, like Smith's *Orleans*, reconfigure supposedly stable narrative patterns, shifting the focus away from the individual heroic protagonist towards a vision of interspecies kinship.

13. I examine the idea of "nature itself as a participating actor in ecological battles" (Bickert 16; 15) in "Heroes in Body Bags: Renegotiating Heroism in Rebecca Roanhorse's *Trail of Lightning*," published in *COPAS* (2020).

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