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Maternity and Motherlessness

Wendy C. Nielsen. *Motherless Creations: Fictions of Artificial Life, 1650-1890*. Routledge, 2022. 262 pp. $48.95. eBook.

Renae L. Mitchell. *Maternity in the Post-Apocalypse: Novelistic Re-Visions of Dystopian Motherhood*. Lexington Books, 2022. Minnesota UP, 2020. 162 pp. $95. Hbk.

There has been some interest in the figure of the child in recent engagements with science fiction and the possibility of a future, particularly in the age of the climate crisis and particularly influenced by Lee Edelman's polemical contribution to queer theory, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). Rebekah Sheldon's *The Child to Come: Life After the Human Catastrophe* (2016), for example, works from Edelman's arguments to claim that the figure of the child is used to shut down the possibilities for political change in conservative ways that amount to an emergency when faced with a climate crisis that goes unaddressed in the face of our contemporary political inertia. Sheldon mobilises science fiction to make her point, as does Heather Latimer whose reading of *Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016) as a text that queers pregnancy and maternity makes a valuable contribution to these discussions (2021). Maggie Nelson's queering of her own pregnancy in her memoir *The Argonauts* (2015) also contributes to the contemporary discussion about maternity and how its heteronormative, restrictive connotations might be read and overturned in literature and in public life. Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that the figure of the mother and the life stages of pregnancy and maternity might continue to be analysed from new perspectives in science fiction studies, and two new monographs – Wendy C. Nielsen's *Motherless Creations* and Renae L. Mitchell's *Maternity in the Post-Apocalypse* – tackle these issues from the perspectives of posthumanism and psychoanalysis respectively.

Nielsen's book starts with a story, and a question. The story goes that René Descartes once set sail with a figure which he claimed to be his daughter, Francine, but who looked wrong in the light of day, causing fellow passengers to cross themselves and blame the poor weather on the supposed automaton until it was tossed overboard, to follow in the ship's wake like a bad omen. Nielsen tells us that the story was a fabrication (1), but this did not stand in the way of its longevity; the desire to frame Descartes as the father of artificial intelligence meant the tale was repeated, and the truth – that the story had been concocted to hide the fact that Descartes fathered an illegitimate child – was lost in the process. Nielsen sees this story as emblematic of a common narrative of artificial intelligence; the being that is produced by a man, thereby eliding the role of the mother and the role of women more generally. She asks, 'Why does early speculative fiction eliminate women's roles as mothers?' (1), and her book is a series of examples and attempts at explanation. She also asks, 'In what ways do beings created without mothers sustain or challenge traditional concepts of gendered or racial identity; what it means to be a mother, father, or creator, and the nature of birth, imagination, and creation?' (1-2). Nielsen takes her examples from English, American, French, and German literature and differentiates the (potentially) bodiless programmes of Artificial Intelligence from the embodied, anthropomorphic Artificial Life – or ALife – which 'has emerged as a discipline in robotics and as an area of critical inquiry of the *posthuman* in philosophy, literature, and gender studies' (2; emphasis in original). The rationale for the historical sweep of the subject is that Nielsen dates 1650 to a time when

automata, and therefore ALife, became the subject of science rather than magic as androids with the potential ability to mimic humans were brought to the market for the first time (2). Nielsen argues that 'in Western literature before 1890, the recurring figure of the motherless creation represents a desire to create the perfect child and sustains pseudoscientific beliefs about the birthing body' (3), for example that a man shepherding a new life into being will be a safer and more rational process than the chaotic danger of old-fashioned labour. Nielsen also connects her work with issues beyond her time period, referring to the later movements of twentieth-century eugenics, posthumanism and transhumanism. In reading these early speculative fictions as examples of transhumanist thought, Nielsen pitches reproductive rights as a precursor to human rights, as the creation of new life, if by a mother, confers human rights, whereas the creation of ALife (most often by a man) does not, bringing to the fore the ways in which 'reproductive rights inform readers' sense of who counts as human' (6). In this way, while Nielsen ostensibly deals with cases in which the mother is notably absent, her work does deal directly with reproductive rights and the history of gynaecology that has sometimes inhibited those rights even while holding the intention of improving maternal outcomes.

Nielsen approaches her material chronologically, but finds convincing rationales for her periodisation that produce distinct and meaningful interventions in each section of the book. First, she considers the 'pseudoscientific justifications' (6) for creating life without mothers in the period 1650-1800. This section of the book is perhaps the most interdisciplinary, considering medical literature and philosophy of the period. Medicine imagined women as passive vessels for the male seed but with the ability to deform and corrupt through the womb as a hostile environment, or through the impact of the maternal imagination. Spermatozoa were often depicted in this period as transferring a perfectly-formed homunculus to the womb, where the womb's material might either passively sustain the foetus, or corrupt it, and Nielsen connects this with Marilyn Francus' observation that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries see the disappearance of the good mother from literature, to be replaced by 'wicked mothers, pushy mothers, and evil stepmothers', figures who 'dominated the cultural landscape in ballads, fables, novels, plays, and court records' (10). Once the negativity of the womb and the figure of the mother have been established, the desirability of male midwives, bringing children into the world through obstetric automata or producing life ex utero becomes apparent. Part Two deals with the Romantic period 1800-1832, starting with Nielsen's reading of *Pygmalion*, which gives special attention to the versions by André-François Boureau-Deslandes and Jean Jacques Rousseau. The story of a statue brought to life by her creator is concerned, in Nielsen's view, with the power of man and a narcissistic mirroring of man's power, 'an allegory for a self-reflexive creative process that valorizes the agency of the artist' (58). Romanticism developed a critique of men creating life without women, 'life, artificially created, is a farce, an inversion of the human condition that nonetheless represents a critical model of the human' (70). Nielsen reads the motherless creations of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (the creature) alongside Goethe's *Faust* (Homunculus, a critique of the academic as a motherless creation that only serves to create more academics!; 'they fail to bring true life into the world and only make more versions of themselves: cynical scholars', 85), and E.T.A. Hoffman's *The Sandman* (Olympia) to argue for a transhumanist through-line from these texts to the concept of the singularity (as coined by Vernor Vinge and popularised by Ray Kurzweil). The reading of *Faust* is wide-ranging, drawing in biographical detail (the possible influence of the death of Goethe's son on the

finished text), the homunculus as a figure for Goethe's ideas on morphology, the comparisons with academics and the Illuminati, and the student fraternity movement. The proliferation of ideas here sometimes means the focus on the motherless nature of the ALife creations is lost, but that being said, the academic rigour and detail here cannot be in question, with detailed references to Goethe's other literary works, including his novel *Elective Affinities* (1809), his published conversations, and relevant historiography.

The lynchpin of the book, and an opportunity that Nielsen takes to draw connections between these motherless creations and discourses surrounding chattel slavery at the time, comes in Part Three where she turns to American and French literature of the period 1850-1890 to tease out the interwoven threads of motherhood, fatherhood and slavery. This focus on race can sometimes distance the book from the importance of gender and the focus on women that one might expect from the book's title, themes that could perhaps have been brought together with the inclusion of some Black studies texts focusing on motherhood. Nielsen focuses on the creation of metallic men in Melville's 'The Bell-Tower' (1856) and Edward S. Ellis's *The Steam Man of the Prairies* (1868), a dime store young adult novel which Nielsen describes as 'a divisive fable that sustains the notion of white supremacy' by coding the titular steam train as Black, a mechanical replacement for slave labour that, in Nielsen's view, highlights the ways in which Black people in the US of the period were already coded as machine-like.

Nielsen's range of languages, cultures, and time periods makes for an eclectic book. She writes that focusing on motherless creations, as she does here, 'represents an attempt to reorient tales about creation around male imagination and control. Thus, the relegation of the birthing body to an external mechanism naturally entails the silencing of female voices' (220). In combining this study with issues of race and transhumanism those female voices are not significantly represented here (Mary Shelley being the only female author involved in the study), but Nielsen's attention to some under-analysed texts and her close attention to the details of each texts' production means there is some real value in bringing these texts together and reading them alongside each other, despite their significant differences. Nielsen's book does two things in different places – sometimes it has a gender focus about the treatment of women, particularly in the first third of the book, but more broadly it deals with its texts as examples of nascent transhumanism inflected with racial narratives (for example in the figure of the golem, or the iron automaton of 'The Bell-Tower' which ultimately kills its creator). This is a significant contribution, as *Motherless Creations* speaks to a wider trend in posthumanism and artificial intelligence (AI) studies to look at longer histories for our understanding of these phenomena. Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter have argued for a posthumanism 'without technology' (2007), and projects like Cambridge's AI Narratives Project and the resulting collection (Cave et al, *AI Narratives*, 2020) look to figures of ancient and modern history to trace origin stories for our philosophical and cultural understandings of artificial intelligence or life and how it might change our societies and definitions of the human.

While Nielsen's work ranges from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and considers literature from multiple geographical areas, Renae L. Mitchell's *Maternity in the Post-Apocalypse* focuses on contemporary fiction from North America to trace an alternative route through the ruined landscapes of dystopian literature. Mitchell rightly points out that dystopian imaginaries tend to depict societies where the worst excesses of patriarchal

domination are left to run riot and women are often enslaved for their sexuality and maternity. In seeking a counter-narrative, Mitchell looks beyond the typical example of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1984) to a series of texts that she argues encapsulate different stages of maternity and its treatment in apocalyptic literature. Mitchell traces a path from the portrayal of gestation and pregnancy in Louise Erdrich's *The Future Home of the Living God* (2017), to depictions of birth in Meg Ellison's *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* (2016), to new motherhood and breastfeeding in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1999), and finally looks to the maternal futures envisioned by Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2014) and Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Talents* (1999). The journey Mitchell traces from gestation to maternal futures is a pleasing arc, and bringing these texts together under the rubric of motherhood in the apocalypse is a move that brings less obvious readings to the fore; particularly successful is the book's engagement with theology, both in identifying the Marian imagery that infuses Erdrich and Ellison's depictions of maternity, and in analysing the importance of writing as a source of religious authority in Okorafor and Butler. These theological readings form a convincing thread between the novels, and one that potentially speaks to the eschatological nature of postapocalyptic fictions. Bringing this theological reading to the fore might have strengthened the book as a whole, but instead Mitchell focuses on the psychoanalytic idea of the Symbolic, which she takes primarily from Judith Butler's account in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler describes the Symbolic as 'the paternal law [that] structures all linguistic signification…and so becomes a universal organizing principle of culture itself' (quoted in Mitchell, 10). Mitchell discusses whether situating maternity as a site of key importance in postapocalyptic societies might undermine or do away with the Symbolic in some sense. In doing so, Mitchell aligns the Symbolic very closely with the patriarchal power structures associated with it in psychoanalysis, sometimes to the detriment of a clear understanding of the concept and the role it plays, in psychoanalytic theory, of structuring language and culture. A clearer engagement with the idea of the Symbolic from the outset would have clarified Mitchell's position, and likewise regarding her commitment to intersectionality which is clearly of great importance to her but is not analysed or theorised with any rigour until her discussion of Hopkinson's work over halfway through the book.

Mitchell starts some important conversations about the visibility of maternity in contemporary culture, though her claim that 'perceptions of maternal characters in post-apocalyptic novels are changing from victim to protagonist, reflecting the growing view of mothers as decreasingly defined by subjection or perceived social abjection to embodying a formative role in which the maternal is a means of empowerment…and the primary driver of the narrative' (3) is perhaps a bit of an over-stretch. The texts here are drawn from the last 25 years and represent only a tiny minority of the wider genre, and at times the book is at risk of forgetting more established depictions of pregnancy and the figure of the child in its insistence on the novelty of this phenomenon and its desire to situate this 'maternal turn' in terms of contemporary political issues such as the rise of Trumpism and the covid pandemic. For example, in the book's afterword Mitchell claims that the 2021 winner of the Nebula Award for best short story, Rae Carson's 'Badass Moms in the Zombie Apocalypse', points to a 'growing attention to an undercurrent of anxiety that seems to be embodied by fictional apocalyptic events' (144), thereby overlooking the long history of the figure of the child in the zombie narrative that stretches back at least to George A Romero's *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968). There are also some places where the scholarship does not appear as up-

to-date as it could be, such as when Mitchell describes Okorafor's work in terms of Afrofuturism, overlooking the author's move towards Africanfuturism in 2019 and subsequent discussions about Africanjujuism. Mitchell does stipulate in her introduction that she sees postapocalyptic dystopian literature as situated within 'speculative' fiction, 'a genre that lends itself to imaginative conjectures about the future' (6) rather than *science* fiction (which is not defined here), so perhaps some of these gaps in the scholarship and generic context might have been aided by closer attention to the viewpoints of science fiction studies.

Taken together, these monographs do some major work to situate reproduction and maternity in terms of key contemporary debates surrounding posthumanism, transhumanism, comparative studies, and dystopian studies. Both bring together texts that are read in a very different light when placed against each other, under the guiding themes of reproduction and the maternal, and I do not doubt that they represent helpful forays into this territory that will serve future scholars well as they build on these foundations, perhaps even signalling the emergence of a 'maternal turn' in science fiction studies.

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