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From Trans-Species Vulnerability to Social-Ecological Resilience: Aminatta Forna's *Happiness* (2018)

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Aminatta Forna's *Happiness* (2018) presents contemporary London both as a site of trans-species vulnerability and as a social-ecological system defined by its capacity for resilience, adaptability and transformability. Drawing on Judith Butler's reconceptualization of vulnerability as resistance (2016), and on the ecofeminist extension of the ethics of care to non-human others, my analysis explores Forna's cast of resilient characters who are transiting the postcolonial metropolis and are affected by various expressions of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" (2011). Additionally, by adopting the critical framework of resilience thinking and assuming its capacity to create decolonial narratives of survival and healing, I contend that it is possible to interrogate the boundaries that characterize the Anthropocene—between nature and culture, humans and non-humans, global and local, development and conservation—and accept Forna's proposal to move beyond these dichotomies so as to embrace the importance of shared materialities, affects and ecosystems.

Keywords: vulnerability, social-ecological resilience, Aminatta Forna, ecocriticism, trans-speciesism, ethics of care.

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De la vulnerabilidad transespecista a la resiliencia socioecológica: *Happiness* (2018) de Aminatta Forna

Happiness (2018), de Aminatta Forna, presenta el Londres contemporáneo como un lugar de vulnerabilidad transespecista y como un sistema socioecológico definido por su capacidad de resiliencia, adaptabilidad y transformación. Basándome en la reconceptualización de Judith

Butler de la vulnerabilidad como resistencia (2016), y en la extensión ecofeminista de la ética del cuidado a los otros no humanos, mi análisis explora el elenco de personajes resilientes de Forna que transitan por la metrópolis poscolonial y se ven afectados por diferentes expresiones de lo que Rob Nixon llama "violencia lenta" (2011). Además, al adoptar el marco crítico de la resiliencia y asumir su capacidad para crear narrativas decoloniales de supervivencia y reparación, sostengo que es posible cuestionar los límites que caracterizan el Antropoceno—entre naturaleza y cultura, humanos y no humanos, global y local, desarrollo y conservación—y aceptar la propuesta de Forna de superar estas dicotomías para abrazar la importancia de materialidades, afectos y ecosistemas compartidos.

Palabras clave: vulnerabilidad, resiliencia socio-ecológica, Aminatta Forna, ecocrítica, transespecismo, ética del cuidado.

1. Introduction: Entering the Resilient City

Aminatta Forna opened an article on urban wildlife with this powerful pronouncement: "What bothers people about foxes is that they will not be controlled and humans are control junkies. We love a controlled environment and there is none more so than the city [...] The great metropolis represents humanity's domination over what might cause us harm or discomfort" (2018a). In the same year she published her fourth novel, *Happiness,* where she explores the scope and limits of hospitality, interdependence and human/non-human cohabitation in the globalized metropolis. Echoing Judith Butler's (2016) invitation to rethink vulnerability and resistance in non-antagonistic terms, and the ecofeminist extension of the ethics of care to non-human subjects, my analysis of *Happiness* focuses on Forna's reliance on the intersections between various forms of oppression that define our troubled relationship with endangered, displaced and disempowered others. To a great extent, the novel exemplifies how new ecocritical writing—which in recent years has taken a more sociocentric direction—needs to disengage from Romantic notions of an idyllic Arcadian nature and engage with urbanized —even toxified—environments that are more in tune with the ethical and political complexities of 21st century human/nature cohabitation.[1]

In a thought-provoking article published in *The Guardian,* Forna admitted having read Boris Cyrulnik's *Resilience* (2009) some years after the publication of her memoir *The Devil That Danced on the Water* (2002) about the circumstances surrounding her father's political murder in 1975 in Sierra Leone. She realized that, despite their very different contextualizations, both texts were deeply connected in their common attempt to cope with trauma as a phenomenological, ontological and ethical circumstance

[1] Scholars like Lawrence Buell (2005) and Astrid Bracke (2014) insist that classical environmental writing is too reliant on idealized landscapes where people are absent, thus perpetuating a fundamental disconnection between ecocriticism and contemporary natural circumstances, and disregarding the social, economic, racial or cultural issues implied in such an ideal representation.

that demands a holistic—yet situated—approach. A French Holocaust survivor, neurologist and psychiatrist, best known for popularizing the concept of psychological resilience, Cyrulnik described how traumatic events and their impact on the sufferer are conditioned by the narrative frame through which they are formulated. For him, the context—familial, social, verbal, ecological, cultural—of an experience of suffering is what enables healing because it can help reshape the narrative of damage alongside the narrative of survival. "It's not hard to see the link between Cyrulnik's theories of resilience and storytelling," Forna argues, and tries to explain the experience of those who have been marginalized from history and memory as a result of their expropriation from their own narrative: "The regime in Sierra Leone worked to eradicate every mention of my father's name from the public sphere. In writing his story I was able to take control of the narrative of his life, my life, of my family and my country's story, to write through the lens of our own experience" (2017). In this regard, Forna seems to invoke the notion of narrative as a *fog-lamp*—to use Cyrulnik's metaphor—with which to illuminate and make sense of trauma and loss so as to activate the coping mechanisms necessary for individual and collective reparation.

Although occasionally drawing on Cyrulnik, who is often invoked in Eurocentric theorizations of trauma, much of Forna's work revolves around the impact of political conflicts on the Global South that demand context-specific articulations beyond hegemonic definitions of the traumatic experience.[2] In trying to decolonize dominant conceptualizations of suffering and recovery, Forna aligns herself with other women writers from the global peripheries, like, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Isabel Allende, who, according to Annemarie Pabel, are contributing to the postcolonial debates on marginal trauma, often left unrecorded or invalidated when approached from the perspective of Western criteria (2023). However, although the representation of violence and conflict in Forna's work has been significantly explored from the perspectives of Trauma and Postcolonial Studies (Pabel 2023; Palmer 2019; Lionnet and MacGregor 2017; Cole 2016; Pérez-Fernández 2017), her engagements with ecocriticism remain considerably unaddressed, even though *Happiness* articulates prominent environmental anxieties. Among the existing scholarship on this novel, the articles by Ernest Cole (2018) and Merve Sarikaya-Sen (2020) explicitly discuss its emphasis on the importance of human/animal interconnectedness in enabling post-traumatic reparative agency. However, even though both address the relationality of the self as the premise from which to question the limits of anthropocentric sovereignty, neither of them explores in depth the notion of shared vulnerability and its implications in the articulation of reparation within an ethics of interdependence and conviviality. Consequently, the model of the social-ecological systems adopted in my analysis can be regarded as particularly relevant to delineate what Sarikaya-Sen calls "the map of

[2] Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and Dominick LaCapra conform to the Western cultural canon of Trauma Studies which favors the Holocaust and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as its central markers, thus leaving other manifestations of suffering untheorized.

interconnectedness" (2020, 419) and to expand contemporary discourses on resilience in decolonial and ecofeminist directions.

Happiness starts with the accidental encounter between Jean Turane, an American biologist studying the behavior of urban foxes and Attila Asare, a Ghanaian psychiatrist who specializes in post-traumatic stress disorder. As their stories gradually intertwine, it becomes apparent that Forna conceives narrative resilience as a relational project, a "compromise" (O'Brien 2017, 59) that challenges the solipsistic, dissociative and unspeakable aesthetics of many trauma narratives (Basseler 2019, 22). Both protagonists transit pre-Brexit London interacting with other outsiders, a position that elicits the feelings of unbelonging and homelessness at the core of most postcolonial stories. Aminatta Forna herself is actually half Scottish/half Sierra Leonean and admits to having experienced this double consciousness, which allows her to critically view this conception of Englishness as a masquerade and, ultimately, as a self-legitimizing exercise of imperial nostalgia.

> He [Attila] liked to watch the English perform, enacting a conception of Englishness still held sacred in some quarters, among expatriates who went about their parties, bashes and games of golf with a kind of strained urgency, but also here on home turf, in this room, were gathered the guardians of the flame [...] The English behaved as though they were playing themselves in a farce. 'He sees himself', Attila's mother used to say of people she thought guilty of posturing. And yet what was nostalgia if not loss dressed in finery? The English saw themselves and yet at the same time they did not see themselves at all. England was a nation of Miss Havishams. (Forna 2018b, 31)

So, in line with Attila's deconstructive perception, standing in deep contrast to these "guardians of the flame" and these "Miss Havishams," Forna populates her London with the underclass of West African and Eastern European immigrants that Jean recruits as wildlife sighters and will eventually help Attila find his niece's son, who has gone missing after an anti-immigration police raid. Forna dignifies this otherwise anonymous and invisible team of street-sweepers, wardens and street performers by providing them with names—Komba, Abdul, Ayo, Olu, Tano and Osman—and background stories of trauma and adaptation, while legitimizing them as unorthodox contributors to the development of citizen science through their reporting and data collecting. Additionally, this reliance on principles such as self-organization, voluntary participation, mutual benefit and solidarity networking that both the wildlife spotting and the boy's search mobilize illustrates the need to sit on common ground when approaching human and non-human vulnerability and to envisage social-ecological resilience as a collaborative effort.

2. Embracing social-ecological resilience

Overcoming the traditional separation between nature and society, the paradigm of social-ecological systems—defined by their capacity for resilience, adaptability and transformability (Folke 2006)—acknowledges their mutually constitutive and

dynamic interaction at both local and global scales.[3] And, since nowhere but in urban environments is this coupling between the biophysical and the social more evidently tested, cities have started to be addressed as social-ecological systems (SESs) developing their own complex, adaptive and resilient behavior. This new ecological thinking includes humans in ecosystems and conceives the city as a particular form of landscape that incorporates "human decisions, culture, institutions and economic systems" (Grimm et al. 2000, 575), and possesses its own capacity to embrace change and conflict in sustainable ways. In the introduction to their coedited volume on urban resilience, Dorothee Brantz and Avi Sharma address the capacity of city dwellers to withstand economic, social, health and environmental risks by arguing that cities have become a particular object for resilience approaches, because, "[a]s population, commercial, religious, and political centers, [they] have always served as amplifiers, and when disruptions do occur, they are felt with particular intensity in urban centres" (2020, 13).

Forna observes the social-ecological system of the city, the way its human and non-human inhabitants relate with one another and with their environment, just as Jean observes her foxes, annotating their moves and reactions, how they expose and conceal themselves from public view, how they elicit responses from others and how their behaviors impact urban habitats. In this sense then, she turns her narrative into a sort of field notebook evidencing how the ecological, as Margarita Estévez-Saá and M. Jesús Lorenzo-Modia argue, can permeate the text not only thematically but also stylistically (2018, 141). Along these same lines, it is also worth noticing how, seemingly contesting the high-speed tempo of the city, as the site of our accelerated technocapitalist development, some of her narrative choices—long flashbacks and detours challenging linear temporality and extended intertextual passages on psychiatry and animal behavior—may illustrate Forna's preference for the slow pace of reconnection, of lingering observation, of compassionate listening to others.[4]

To this extent, in her depiction of London cityscape, Forna seems to invoke Barry Commoner's four laws of ecology to validate the synergistic interaction among the circuit's participants, as in the episode describing foxes' and businessmen's shared materialities: "Three miles distant a dog fox crossed Waterloo Bridge. In its jaws it carried the bone of a Berskshire pork chop, the remainder of which rested, along with a side order of sautéed mushrooms, the Dorset crab starter, and a quantity of decent

[3] For a more comprehensive definition, see Redman et al. for whom a social-ecological system (SES) is "[a] coherent system of biophysical and social factors that regularly interact in a resilient, sustained manner; a system that is defined at several spatial, temporal, and organizational scales, which may be hierarchically linked; a set of critical resources (natural, socioeconomic, and cultural) whose flow and use is regulated by a combination of ecological and social systems; and a perpetually dynamic, complex system with continuous adaptation" (2004, 163).

[4] In an analogy to ecocriticism's growing interest in narrative form, Michael Basseler advocates for a narratology of resilience, which would help investigate how the adoption of certain narrative or aesthetic structures may afford (or constrain) certain political notions of resilience (2019, 29).

claret in the belly of a fund manager now headed due west in the back of a car" (2018b, 96). [5] The episode's stress on the interaction between luxury and precarity, between consumption and the associated production of waste suggests a world replete with a surplus of capitalistic greed—incarnated in the figure of the "fund manager" —one of the major drivers of the environmental crisis that resonates consistently in Forna's writing.

By the same token, the novel's emphasis on observation and witnessing suggests the importance of perspective and situatedness, the need to attend to context over universal judgements, echoing the proposals of feminist scholars like Rosi Braidotti (2017) and Donna Haraway (1988) in their revisitation of the notions of vision, standpoints and seeing that have dominated many philosophical accounts of how knowledge is produced. Against the fallacy of objectivity —"view from above, from nowhere" (Haraway 1988, 589)—which, under the guise of impartiality or neutrality, universalizes a very specific position that is mostly male, white, heterosexual and human, the vision here proposed is embodied, contradictory and ethically accountable for what one sees: "Vision is always a question of the power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices" (1988, 585). Much in line with these proposals about the importance of situated and subaltern perspectives and of the scopic regimes that are activated through the gaze, Forna succeeds in unseating vision from a privileged position and characterizes her protagonist, Jean, as a female observer that resorts to even more peripheral and disempowered sighters—the immigrants, homeless, street cleaners, hostel wardens—to help her track urban foxes. She typifies what Braidotti would consider a "feminist nomadic subject," (2017, 176) engaging with the complexity of her own interaction with human and non-human elements, and with her multiple layers of ethical belonging as subject-in-process (Braidotti and Regan 2017, 176). This gendered and racialized viewpoint challenges the androcentric and hierarchical vision of much scientific discourse, offering instead what Marti Kheel calls a "loving eye" that conveys the "need for caring relationships, compassion, and reciprocity," because, "respecting nature literally involves '*looking* again' [...] through the painstaking process of piecing together the fragmented world view that we have inherited" (1993, 257; italics added).

Jean's interaction with her foxes—whom she even gives charming names to, such as Jeremiah, Babe, Finn, Black Aggie and Light Bright—exemplifies this ecofeminist plea for mutualism and interdependence in the human/non-human relationships. She recalls her first contact with a coyote almost as an erotic encounter in its overwhelming intimacy:

[5] Barry Commoner, considered the father of modern environmentalism, anticipated the notions of Great Acceleration and sustainability, and formulated the Four Laws of Ecology according to which our global ecosystem is a connected whole, and any impact caused by human effort must be compensated so as to repair biodiversity loss: (1) Everything is connected to everything else. (2) Everything has to go somewhere. (3) There is no such thing as a free lunch. (4) Nature knows best. (1971, 16-24)

> On a whim she stretched out a hand and fondled his ears and stroked his muzzle. The coyote's coat felt smooth and soft, not greasy as she had been told. She stroked the fur of his underbelly. Finally, she laid her cheek against his chest and felt the beating of his heart, turned to bury her face in his fur. The rankness had not been unpleasant; heavy with musk and the scent of sun-scorched earth. The coyote had been Jean's first. She had never forgotten. (Forna 2018b, 48)

But more than a fantasy about interspecies sex, or an anticipation of Jean and Attila's lovemaking, the episode stands as an example of what Stacy Alaimo (2010) has called "transcorporeality," a materialist understanding of the embodied interconnections whereby mutually affected physiologies and subjectivities of humans, non-humans and the environment come into being, sharing across anatomies and bodily responses. From Alaimo's belief in the porosity of bodies and in the vulnerability such openness involves, there follows a "transcorporeal" ethics that challenges our deeply ingrained notions of anthropocentrism by unseating humans from our privileged and sovereign position (2010, 16). It is in this light that we may read Jean's gesture as indicative of a particular sensitiveness "to the lively, agential, vast, material world and the multitude of other-than-human creatures who inhabit it" (Alaimo 2011, 281).

A close reading of this episode reveals how, though the woman's relation to the coyotes is initially mediated by technology—she tries to manage their ferity by resorting to tranquilizer darts, syringes and radio collars and receiving equipment—it gradually becomes enacted by emotions and proximity. This shift underscores Jean's climactic transition from studying the animal as a scientific object of inquiry to regarding it as a living, breathing and sentient creature, thus experiencing eros, nurturance and corporeality in terms other than just human. After all, since speciesism is an embodied practice, its deconstruction has to take place at the body, but without stopping at the purely physical or material. Even though the excerpt is heavily inflected by the sensorial, Jean emphasizes the coyote's subjecthood as if vindicating the need to embrace participatory science and compassionate consciousness as the bases for animal advocacy. This model replaces the subject-object epistemology, which defines the classical Cartesian paradigm, through an alternative subject-subject conception implying that "the other has a nature of her own that needs to be respected and with whom one enters into conversation" (Ruether 1974, 196). The juxtaposition of animals' activities with those of humans is actually a noticeable technique in the novel through which Forna stresses our behavioral and affective commonalities and the urge to consider the ethical and ontological complexities of trans-species relationships.[6]

[6] Ernest Cole connects Forna's technique with African mythology and folklore, "abounding in images of both humans with animal traits and animals with human attributes;" a tradition that "emphasizes a state of interdependence or cohabitation between humans and animals in the representation of communities as a wider ecosystem" (2019, 289).

Actually, this relationality of the self that Forna recurrently invokes throughout the novel, and which implies overcoming dualistic logics to recognize both continuity and difference, does not end at the connection with its human others, but necessarily embraces non-humans and natural environments. Here it is worth drawing on ecofeminist Val Plumwood, for whom the relational model "means acknowledging the other as neither alien and discontinuous from self nor assimilated to or an extension of self" (1993, 6). The following section addresses precisely the potentialities of this ethics of recognition involving mutuality and connectedness in order to make us attentive to and responsible about interpersonal and interspecies needs.

3. Towards the Recognition of our (Hum)Animal and Vulnerable Others

Though non-human others have always been part of our human existence, from bacteria living in our guts to cattle supplying bodily organs for human transplant, our relationships with them are deeply conditioned by power dynamics. As such, thinking across species not only questions the hegemony of anthropocentrism but also sheds light on different manifestations of human oppression—sexism, racism, classism, heterocentrism, ageism, ableism, ethnocentrism—that are likewise informed by operations of power that preside over our troubled relationship with precarious alterities. For Aminatta Forna, these vulnerable others seem to be affected by what Rob Nixon defined as "slow violence" or the "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2011, 2). Unlike sudden spectacular catastrophes, it happens out of public view affecting individuals and environments at a pace too slow to assign blame, its harm being powerfully rooted in inequality. But, though described as "spectacle deficient" and even "uncinematic" (Nixon 2011, 6), slow violence is not entirely invisible, at least not for those who want to see; and, very much in line with the figure of the writer-activist advocated by Nixon, Forna exhibits a keen eye for those inconspicuous repercussions of "slow violence," which are all the more challenging because they have eluded effective accountability and policy making. In her description of the cityscape, she draws our attention to particular elements revealing this ecocidal urbanism, like the houses "crammed together in a row, like a mouthful of broken teeth" (2018b, 50), the scent of "dead trees and diesel" (2018b, 116) coming from a polluted river Thames, or the "sulphurous yellow of the sky above the city" (2018b, 99). As a critical observer of this damaged urban environment, Forna seems to endorse Anne Spirn's affirmation that "seeing nature in the city is only a matter of perception" (1985, 29).

Seemingly influenced too by what Patricia Yaeger has called "detritus aesthetics" to refer to the obsession with trash in postmodern culture (2003), Forna explores the city as a metaphorical body that excretes its own filth and as a complex social-ecological system making productive uses of the waste it creates. Her descriptions invite provocative analogies with our responses to what—or whom—is simultaneously left out, discarded or devalued, and recovered, reused or recycled:

> In the days when the power station on the south side of the Thames was being converted into a gallery for modern art, an installation artist accompanied by a team of volunteers headed down to the riverside at low tide and removed and recorded the debris they found in the mud of the foreshore. The findings were displayed in a cabinet of curiosities inside the new gallery. Plastic toys, oyster shells, clay pipes, buttons, rusted chains, more than one letter in a bottle, false teeth, bricks, hobnail boots, bottles and fragments of glass. (2018b, 185)

In this excerpt, Forna refers to the project led in 1999 by artist Mark Dion who combed the shore of the Thames at Bankside in front of what is now Tate Modern Gallery aiming to explore London's complex material history through the artefacts buried in the mud and gravel of its beaches. The findings were presented as an installation—Tate Thames Dig—arranged in the form of a *Wunderkammer,* or curiosity cabinet, so as to challenge traditional hierarchies and taxonomies of knowledge by museologizing objects that might otherwise be considered rubbish but that illustrate an unconventional version of the city's past. This past, Forna argues, is not only made attainable through our relationship with material waste, since it turns out that its relics also provide a conduit through which to comprehend our interaction with non-human others. Based on the assumption that investigating (hum)animal relations is essential to reconstructing our shared lineage, she reflects on the contribution of animal remains to this garbage archive of the city, because, even inserted in the chaotic and collage-like riverside junkyard, the bones of horses and other vertebrates speak eloquently about people's behavioral patterns towards these beasts: "Rib bones, femur, scapula, fragments of the skull, whole jawbones. The fractured skeletons of animals that had once worked the city, pulling carts, carriages and barges, consigned to the waters of the river" (Forna 2018b,185). London's other-than-human past, Jean tells Osman, one of the wildlife sighters, can be read palimpsestically in the city's subsoil as evidence of this right to place and belonging that she now reclaims for the urban foxes: "You know, when Trafalgar Square was excavated one hundred and fifty years ago, they found an ancient riverbed and it had hippo bones in it. There was evidence of elephants and lions. Hyenas, hippos once wallowed in Trafalgar Square" (2018b, 132).

Within a more contemporary context, urban wildlife experts state that, with the rising of global temperatures and the destruction of wildlife habitats via deforestation and urbanization, many animals and plants have made the city their new home by developing complex strategies of assimilation and camouflage (Holmberg 2015; Adams 2016; Schilthuizen 2018). Jean claims that most urban fauna subsists on improperly stored garbage or food materials generated by people's untidy habits, but she also defends the fact that it is precisely through these species' adaptability and resilience that they have been able to survive in a hostile environment:

> 'If you remove a coyote from a territory, by whatever means, say even if one dies of natural causes a space opens up. Another will move in'.

> 'What if you were to kill a number of them, ten per cent of the total population, say?'
> 'They'd reproduce at a faster rate. We call it hyper-reproduction. Have larger litters of cubs. Begin to mate younger, at a year instead of at two years. All animals do it, not just a coyote', said Jean. 'Humans do it after a war. The last time it happened we called it the "baby boom"'. (2018b, 178)

However, as Bettina Stoetzer contends, celebrating nature's resilience runs the risk of absolving humans from collaborating with all living beings to restore urban ecosystems and from being accountable to the unequal ways in which different bodies become vulnerable (2020, 361).[7] In addressing the urban controversies around interspecies entanglements, Forna interrogates the "more-than-human" possibilities of living in a city. By making Jean vindicate the benefits of cohabitation with this urban wildlife against the local bureaucrats' campaign for their extermination, Forna calls attention to the populist rhetoric that renders unwelcome species—human and non-human—as invasive, parasitical and contagious. In this light, engagements of Trauma Studies and ecocriticism serve to identify intertwining expressions of suffering where humans traumatize ecosystems, which eventually become traumatic to the humans (Woolbright 2011). Some of these theoretical imbrications imply we are "eco-beings" commonly affected by "eco-trauma" resulting from the violence we inflict upon each other, animals and nature, and whose impact may ultimately spark communal and shared forms of "eco-recovery" (Amorok 2007, 29-31).

As Thora Holmberg argues, analyzing how humans and other animals perform their belonging in cities may enable the development of a more sustainable concept of convivial justice towards our neighboring "others," who are all subject to complaints—when perceived as trespassers of geographical, legal and cultural ordering systems—along with conservation practices and biopolitical interventions (2015). Forna presents these and other social anxieties that currently pervade post-Brexit London as metaphorical symptoms of *fortress Europe*, which is closing its borders and expelling undesirable human strangers—also removed from their habitats—instead of addressing the systemic causes of their displacement. Against this background, where certain lives and environments are socio-ecologically degraded to the point of being viewed as disposable, the novel conjures up contemporary debates around the idea of hospitality, which is being challenged by the effects of global migration and the increase in intersectional inequality on territories, communities and individuals that ultimately requires a revision of the guest/host metaphor. Forna denounces the

[7] In line with Stoetzer, other critics (Walker and Cooper 2011; Neocleous 2013; Evans and Reid 2014; S. Bracke 2016) have denounced the fact that resilience discourses have been instrumentalized by neoliberalism, which has found in the concept and its related practices a convenient substitute for policies promoting social support, justice and inclusion. They all agree that, in emphasizing the individual's capacity for adaptability and denying the state's responsibility in providing security and stability to disenfranchised communities, neoliberal systems tend to scapegoat and stigmatize those who fail to participate in the source of their own trauma by regarding them as not 'resilient' enough to overcome it by their own means.

hierarchies of racial, sexual and social oppressions that sustain what Derrida termed "conditional hospitality", in order to expose not only the fragility or arbitrariness of hospitable conventions, but also the complex power dynamics between enmity and generosity where hostile attitudes towards the foreigner often win out—resulting in expressions of "hostipitality" in Derrida's own formulation (2000). She proposes, instead, more positive negotiations of belonging and difference that are neither anthropocentric nor exclusionary, but where, following Mireille Rossello, "both the host and the guest accept, in different ways, the uncomfortable and sometimes painful possibility of being changed by the other" (2002, 170). This fear of being exposed to others, of embracing conflict and difference, is precisely what confines Jean's client in her garden design business inside her sky-rise apartment, unable "to dare to be outside in the city in the damp and the darkness" (Forna 2018b, 95), and in sharp contrast to resilient creatures—like the tracked foxes and, to some extent, the missing boy—heading home while developing survival strategies in the inhospitable urban space, trying to figure out "where to hunt, where to find food, water, shelter, where they feel safe from predators" (84).

In this respect, Forna's description of the eviction of a colony of parakeets from the trees of a local graveyard by workmen with chainsaws is strongly reminiscent of the daily ejections of vulnerable families—like that of Tano, another of Jean's wildlife spotters—from their precarious homes. Together with the episode of the anti-immigration police raid, this incident offers a (hum)animal analogy that is too powerful to go unnoticed because it signals a regime of capitalogenic "slow violence" that affects both non-human beings and underprivileged persons: "Fear swept the colony, one hundred birds took to the air, green-winged angels, screaming banshees. The air rolled with wingbeats. Then nothing. Not even the sound of the chainsaw as the young man silenced the machine to look up at the sky. Only falling feathers" (2018b, 296). [8] And yet, as if to illustrate her claims about the importance of resilience thinking, Forna inserts a significant image at the end of the novel: that of a group of parakeets, now housed in a dead tree, which "Jean feels certain must have come from the old colony in the cemetery" (2018b, 308). Through this episode, the author demonstrates that the recognition of trans-species trauma calls forth the need to envision collaborative and empathic forms of eco-recovery, and that ecocritical literature allows us to perceive wounded environments in parallel with human experience. Such recognition thus helps confirm that "ecological trauma is linked to and expressible through human trauma" (Woolbright 2011, 15).

Accepting that the precariousness of life lies at the core of community, it is in our shared vulnerability that we can recognize kinship and envision a sense of social connectedness that enables us to overcome suffering, in just the same way as some

[8] Jason Moore coined the more nuanced term Capitalocene to address precisely systemic forms of oppression like class, gender or empire neglected by the Anthropocene scholars who have tended to blame the species (Anthropos, the entire humanity) and not the system— "a world-ecology of power and production" (2019)—for the planetary environmental crisis.

animal species—including fire ants, locusts, certain fish and apes—develop *swarm intelligence* in order to resist damage and recover efficiently from its impact. After all, while, etymologically, the first part of the word "vulnerability" (deriving from the Latin *vulnus*, i.e, "wound") mostly alludes to the susceptibility of being physically or psychologically "wounded" (Have 2016), the suffix "-ability" might also indicate a capacity of agency that points beyond the realms of trauma and victimhood to engage with more nuanced conceptualizations of hope and resilience.

Her ecofeminist ethics of care makes Jean attentive to those London everyday cruelties—manifestations of urban "slow violence"—that would pass unnoticed by cosmopolitan *flâneurs* or what she calls the "uninterested public" (Forna 2018b, 220), whose desensitized gaze stands in clear contrast to her empathic witnessing and situated observation. While watching a group of immigrant street jugglers, Jean feels moved at the sight of a bag hidden in the bushes containing worn sneakers and an exercise book with notes in an unknown language. In essence, "this pitiful collection of belongings" (2018b, 220) stands as the material signifier of these survivors' embodied vulnerability and resistance, two concepts that, according to Butler, we should start to rethink in non-antagonistic terms: "Indeed, I want to argue affirmatively that vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment" (2016, 22). Butler's resignification of vulnerability is similarly inspired by various expressions of what she considers a street politics where bodies and public spaces are employed to mobilize and perform resistance. In light of Butler's argument, this episode of the novel could be read as one of these performative interpellations where vulnerability inspires subjects like Jean to engage politically with the precarity of others and to activate a transformative grief.

In her cast of vulnerable and expendable others—immigrants, the homeless, refugees, the demented, lost children, traumatized war survivors and urban foxes—Aminatta Forna aligns with the ecofeminist assumption that the unjustified domination of non-human nature is a continuation of the project of subjugation of the *other*—nature, women, indigenous peoples and subordinate classes—which spans the history of patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism. Jean's compassion for these endangered beings lines her up with ecocritics Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993), Mary Mellor (1997) and Ariel Salleh (2017) who advocate for an ethics of care extended to non-human others as a model for sustainable living and as a challenge to the matrix of overlapping hierarchies of race, class, gender and species underlying the Nature/Culture dichotomy. Against the neoliberal myth of the self-made man rooted in the exaltation of individual autonomy, ecofeminism promotes a perspective of human beings as inter- and eco-dependent social beings and ultimately, as constitutively incomplete, relational and needy subjects. Spanish ecofeminist Alicia Puleo argues that men who defend non-human animals are dissident from the patriarchal speciesist order which is sustained by a supremacist model of socialization, and sees in the animalist cause a powerful redefinition of hegemonic masculinity, built on the imperative to master all that is placed under the term *Nature*,

including those human groups seen as "closer to Nature" and, as such, often "animalized" (2011, 360-65). The underestimation of women and racialized groups in the colonial imaginary has, in fact, been predicated on racist and sexist claims of bestiality that have always tried to *primitivize* a culture's others in order to subjugate them.

Nevertheless, even admitting to the urge to replace the logic of domination and oppression with formulas of cooperation, attention and care aimed at effectively confronting the global socioecological crisis, Forna seems to agree with other feminist critics (Bowden 1997; Cuomo 1998; MacGregor 2004; Puleo 2011) when they argue that the positive identification of women with caring ought to be treated cautiously. Their common claim is that essentialist implications of feminized care lie at the foundations of gender bias in Western philosophical traditions, which privileges reason over emotion and renders care as subsidiary to justice. They raise the alarm about an uncritical emphasis on women's care-related morality that would ultimately reify exclusionary notions of care if questions of citizenship or scientific vocation are not also taken into account as the basis of women's environmental concerns. Forna escapes judiciously from these oversimplifications by democratizing what was once considered as essentially female and by constructing more complex characters that subvert this "gender division of moral labor" (Friedman 1995, 64) whereby different moral commitments and behaviors are expected of men and women. While being a somewhat negligent and relatively distant mother to her own son, Jean is a committed environmental activist, defending her beliefs against the populist rhetoric that tries to hinder efforts at wildlife conservation. As such, her ecofeminism, far from being an essentialist extension of the maternal, is firmly entangled with politics, citizenship and justice. In tune with this reversal of traditional roles, Attila is the nurturer, the care-giver, the mourner whose contact with extreme human grief opens up a challenging view of happiness, which has little to do with the pursuit of conflict-free existence, or what he calls "a prelapsarian innocence" (Forna 2018b, 290).

In the subversive lecture that closes the novel, Attila interrogates the ways human suffering is institutionalized, pathologized and medicalized, while celebrating resilience and affirming, in Butlerian terms, that "the emotional vulnerability of trauma is oftentimes transformed into emotional strength" (Forna 2018b, 304). His African background facilitates Attila's affiliation with decolonial perspectives on resilience (O'Brien 2017; Keeling 2017; Martínez-Alier 2004; Yountae 2019), which are less subject-centered and more relational, by placing greater emphasis on the well-being of others and developing socially and environmentally sustainable responses. On that account, he denounces the individualistic ethos of neoliberal societies where, he complains, we consistently "build psychological fortresses to protect ourselves against the possibility of pain" (Forna 2018b, 306) and end up identified with those "untouched, who were raised under glass, who had never felt the rain or the wind, had never been caught in a storm or run through the thunder and lightning, [and] could not bear to be reminded of their own mortality." (2018b, 232)

Challenging hegemonic understandings of resilience as inspiring *bounce back* organizational policies to prevent and minimize all potential crises and disturbances (European Commission 2019), non-Western approaches are more reliant on uncertainty and unknowability as positive aspects that should not be avoided in our confrontation of the future; a future, Attila argues, which Africans contemplate in non-deterministic or non-reductionist terms: "Our expectations of life [...] are more modest than the European's. What I mean to say is that the script of life for most of us is, dare I say, a great deal more fluid." (Forna 2018b, 216) If we were able to think beyond the fetishes of equilibrium and stability, change and disruption could be perceived as positively emancipatory from the *norm*, and even conducive to happiness, he defends: "What if we were to have revealed to us that misfortune can lend life quality? Whatever does not kill me makes me stronger, yes. What if I told you that there are times when whatever does not kill me can make me more, not less, than the person I was before?" (2018b, 304). According to Forna, being responsive to the changing world is not a matter of overprotectiveness, but of being open to the other and the unknown, and it is not surprising that she chooses London, the core of the Empire which has sustained many of these Eurocentric hierarchical views of trauma by validating some expressions of suffering while neglecting others—mainly those of non-Western, minority or racialized populations. London cartography is thus depicted as the site of flux and ambivalence, charged with utopian possibilities with which to imagine alternatives to contemporary racist and environmental injustices and to envision unexpected alliances within decolonial narratives of survival and healing. At this point, Sara Ahmed's (2010) subversive conceptualization of "happiness" might help unravel the ambivalence of the novel's title. In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) Ahmed urges us to embrace unhappiness, not as an exaltation of suffering, but as a catalyst for new opportunities. For Ahmed—as for Attila—being unhappy is to be affected by a necessary creativity that invites us to suspend our subordination to normative happiness—loaded with oppressive preconceptions and limitations—and to promote an eco-sustainable existence that is not governed by its imperative.

4. Conclusions

In view of the multiple bodies of critical knowledge—ecofeminism, trauma, postcolonial, migration and animal studies—that Forna's text brings together, the model of the social-ecological systems adopted here has proved effective in dealing with her own epistemological *transcorporeality*. If, following Walker and Salt, "resilience thinking is about understanding and engaging with a changing world" (2006, 14), by equipping ourselves and our social-ecological environments to work with change instead of simply being victims of it, then we should interpret Forna's cast of resilient characters as subjects confronting risk, suffering and conflict and developing coping mechanisms to overcome trauma in efficient and sustainable ways, because, in the end, Attila questions, "how do we become human except in the face of adversity?" (Forna 2018b,

229). With that in mind, sticking to Walker and Salt's argument, if inequalities....then impact the sustainability of economic, social and environmental development, then, resilience thinking has to be endorsed from a holistic and intersectional perspective that addresses the overlapping of different threats and oppressions. By the same token, an ecocritical reading of *Happiness* evidences that Forna espouses resilience as a decidedly collaborative project, one that aspires to social-ecological transformation which contests the often-unfathomable individualism of most trauma narratives and the risks of neoliberal appropriations.

As argued in the above analysis, when facing a sense of shared vulnerability that escapes the framework of individual sovereignty, Forna concludes that it is impossible to separate human corporeality—no longer understood as discrete, singular, and self-sufficient—from the wider material world. In the assumption of such mutual permeability of the human and non-human, she envisions different ways in which the hegemony of anthropocentrism may be eroded.

As suggested in the novel's ironic title, Forna problematizes traditional assumptions of happiness by engaging with life narratives of precarity, suffering and resilience. In a culture that fetishizes controlled pleasure and well-being, she argues, any experience that escapes those realms is perceived as a threat, even though it may broaden our possibilities of transformation and solidarity. Seen in this light, we might agree with Forna that understanding animal and environmental exploitation is essential to both acknowledging human forms of oppression and developing a coherent concept of justice, one in which we are ultimately confronted with Sara Ahmed's question about the possibility of rewriting the history of happiness from the point of view of the wretched (2010, 17).[9]

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