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**Changing Skins and Blurring Borders:  
Woman-Animal Metamorphosis and the  
Posthuman in Sarah Hall's "Mrs Fox"**

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## ABSTRACT

In current times, as defined by the connecting waves of technologically mediated globalisation and the intensification of threats to ecological and social stability, human impact on the other inhabitants on Earth and on the planet itself is not only undeniable, but also irremediable and significantly damaging. Hence, it is of utmost urgency to engage in sustainable practices that meet the social and environmental needs of the contemporary world — an endeavour which requires the radical decentring and redefinition of the human subject in ethically accountable ways. In a critical and theoretical effort to deconstruct obsolete, unproductive conceptions of subjectivity, thinkers in the fields of Posthumanism and Animal Studies have resorted to the exploration of human-animal interactions as a fundamental gesture towards the invalidation of hegemonic ontological categories and the eventual consolidation of new, generative identitarian alternatives. It is on the basis of such considerations that this dissertation aims to analyse the negotiations of identity that emerge from the logic-defying encounter between human and non-human animals in “Mrs Fox”, a short story written by the extensively recognised contemporary British author Sarah Hall. A creative, textual articulation of posthuman becomings, this narrative exploits the inherent liminality of the short story genre as a site of dissidence and diversity as well as the remarkable effectiveness of the literary trope of human-animal metamorphosis to blur the species divide. As such, Hall’s “Mrs Fox” ultimately brings to the fore the affirmative approach to difference and the constitutive embodied and embedded inter-relationality that characterise posthuman, post-anthropocentric configurations of subjectivity.

**Key words:** Sarah Hall, Posthumanism, Animal Studies, Metamorphosis, Short Story, Liminality

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## Introduction

The human species has singlehandedly posed a major threat to its own long-term survival, as well as to other species and, potentially, of Earth as a planet capable of harbouring and supporting life. Characterised by large and rapid demographic growth over the last decades, human population has come to be considered a geological force itself, whose environmental trace is not only irreversible and indelible but also all-pervasive with regards to its effects. Either in the form of manmade global warming, climate change, habitat destruction and biodiversity loss, or in the alarming increasement of overt discrimination, hate crimes and humanitarian or refugee crises during recent years, the current historical moment as essentially moulded by human action is coded in overwhelmingly negative terms. Consequently, in this present geological epoch often referred to as the Anthropocene, albeit human extinction may indeed not be an imminent risk (unlike it is for many non-human species), overall ecological and social sustainability are visibly dependent on a necessary interrogation and redefinition of human lifestyles. In other words, for life —human and otherwise— to be guaranteed the possibility of a future existence, it has become urgent to decentre *Anthropos*, that is, to radically rethink the basic referents within the human species and the manner in which prevailing conceptualisations of the human condition inform our inter-action with the other inhabitants of Earth.

The critical acknowledgment of an issue entails the very first step towards change and its potential resolution. Currently, on a daily basis, political debates and media communication abound with regards to the visibilisation of internalised biases and the discussion of issues such as ecological endangerment, animal brutality, gender diversity and non-conformity, reproductive rights and feminisms, LGBTQ+ rights, disability

awareness, multiculturality and ethnicity, among others. Recognition of such a reality demonstrates that nowadays social and cultural paradigms, as dominated by the transforming waves of technologically mediated globalisation and framed by the easement of access to information in the digital age, are indisputably characterised by an incessant and ubiquitous preoccupation with the representation of diversity and the achievement of equality as conditions thus far hindered by the pressures of hegemonic ontological discourses. Hence, challenging as current circumstances may appear—especially so for younger generations, who are generally targeted by the public opinion and institutions as bearers of the responsibility to ensure a sustainable future—the positive inscription in the contemporary mainstream of an ever-growing awareness about the need to eradicate problematic and oppressive human conducts—as materialised in the numerous manifestations of social and critical activism which are arguably a defining feature of our times—may be understood as a hopeful indication that the abolishment of all inherited destructive human lifestyles is not only possible but, also, a remarkably affirmative experience.

Ever since the proliferation of emancipatory movements during the twentieth century, which simultaneously exposed and opposed conventionally legitimised narratives about what could be considered a (human) subject and what could not, the prescriptive categorical boundaries of humanness have been seriously and continuously compromised. Fundamentally subscribed by an intensification and radicalisation of the scholarly attention directed onto the problematic category of human—as actualised in the academic consolidation of gender and ethnic studies, among other disciplines, and, particularly so, in the efforts of anti-humanist, post-structuralist and, most recently, posthumanist thinkers—the critical addressment of established models of exclusion and inclusion ultimately identified the recorded brutality of the human species with the

naturalised dualistic logics so deeply ingrained in its very processes of socialisation. As such, based on a blatant neglect of interrelationality and a negative reduction of difference to not merely binary opposition but depreciation, the human subject as historically conceived has been revealed a dialectic construct, the result of a violent division between Self and Other(s) determined by and typically compliant with the dominant structures of power. Against this background, it is precisely in light of the anthropocentric and patriarchal hegemonic discourses which have infused the hostile driving force of the Anthropocene and methodically relegated the sexualised and naturalised Others, that is, women and animals, to the claustrophobic position of historical inferiority, that this dissertation aims to study the literary representation of human encounters with category-defying alterity as a key locus for the affirmative overcoming of unsustainable notions of subjectivity.

In such an endeavour to actively investigate and contest anthropocentric and patriarchal reductionist assumptions, this dissertation explores the contemporary use of the literary trope of human-animal metamorphosis as an instrument of hybridisation, exceptionally suitable for the radical disruption of all established limits between human and non-human life. In order to do so, the suggested analysis focuses on the work of Sarah Hall, a present-day author widely acclaimed for her imaginative renegotiations of identity, and her distinctive use in the short story “Mrs Fox” of woman-animal metamorphosis as a demanding yet generative process with positive constitutive effects on the (re)assembly of subjectivity of all involved agents, human and non-human, male and female. Aligned with the widespread contemporary critical and creative preoccupation with the identitarian alternatives that emerge from the rearrangement of inherited hierarchies and the transgression and blurring of borders, both physical and ontological, this dissertation engages with research on liminality and border phenomena,

short story criticism, gender studies and animal studies, all complementary to the interdisciplinary discourse of posthumanism which fundamentally informs the approach of this dissertation. Hence, in a critical attempt to partake in existing conversations on the matter of human and non-human agency and representation, the suggested reflections combine the inspiration drawn from the conceptual proposals of recognised experts in the aforementioned fields of study, such as Rosi Braidotti, Patricia MacCormack, Kelly Oliver, Timothy Baker, Marina Warner, Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann, Mireille Rosello and Stephen F. Wolfe, among others.

Divided into two different chapters, the structure of this dissertation follows a deductive approach, moving from a detailed discussion of the most significant theoretical stances to a critical analysis of the selected corpus. Thus, the first chapter, entitled “‘Run into the Edgelands’: Borders, Negotiations and Transgressions”, focuses on the conceptual basis necessary to grasp both the urgency and the prominence of current attempts to destabilise categorical anthropocentric definitions of subjectivity. As such, the chapter offers an assessment of contemporary academic trends with regards to the centrality and potentiality of borders and bordering processes for present-day debates about identity, followed by an examination of the key notion of liminality and the powerful subversive nature associated with its aesthetic explorations, as particularly articulated in the short story genre. Finally, this chapter investigates the identitarian premises suggested from the theoretical standpoint of Posthumanism, crucially attending to critical cross-fertilisation with the field of Animal Studies, in order to eventually address the creative materialisation of such reconceptualisations of subjectivity in literature depicting human-animal metamorphoses. Grounded on such a selection of relevant theory, the second chapter, entitled “‘All Vestiges Shed’: New Skins in Sarah Hall’s Short Fiction”, provides a concrete realisation for the fairly abstract negotiations

of identity previously outlined. By means of an initial exploration of Sarah Hall's poetic and political inclinations, this final chapter establishes critical connections between the author's work, the posthuman predicament and the short story as a form especially apt for the de- and reconstruction of narratives about subjectivity. Lastly, the chapter closes with a comprehensive analysis of Sarah Hall's short story "Mrs Fox", whose elaborate invocation of human-animal metamorphosis rightly epitomises the affirmative, post-anthropocentric shift towards the unfolding of sustainable posthuman becomings.

# 1. “Run into the Edgelands”: Borders, Negotiations and Transgressions

## 1.1. Borders, Bordering Processes and Culture

Borders are and have always been central for human life and experience. Such a statement holds true even at the utmost individualised level, as proven, for instance, by extensive research in the field of cognitive psychology on the act of categorisation — the classification of reality in manageable categories which enables the individual to relate to both the physical and the social environment. As such, categorisation is not only one of the most primal human cognitive activities but also, essentially, a form of bordering — and, potentially, of “b/ordering” or othering (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017, 163). Bearing in mind the implications of such a pivotal position of borders in the way humans understand and navigate the world, both internally and externally, it is necessary to acknowledge that any conceptualisation of borders is dependent on the “formatting” of the subject by means of experience, as argued by Mireille Rosello and Stephen F. Wolfe (2017, 1). In other words, the undeniable power imbalances present in contemporary societies fundamentally affect the relationship between the individual —who is both the source and the ultimate user of borders— and the border, as determined by “the contingencies of birth” (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, 1) and by the perception of one’s body or, more specifically, the connections between “bodies and categories of gender, able-bodiedness, health and racialization” among others (Higonnet qtd. Rosello and Wolfe 2017, 2). It is, precisely, on the basis of such considerations that current trends in research on border phenomena have become particularly sensitive to the dangerous sociocultural naturalisation of borders as fixed “lines of demarcation” (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017, 149), contesting the cultural artifice of borders by approaching them, instead, as processes

of an intrinsic performative quality which, therefore, “can be fluid, generative and culturally productive” (Korte and Lojo-Rodríguez 2019, 4).

As suggested by Rosello and Wolfe, “borders can have a life of their own” — a “life” which is articulated in the implied (unintentional) interactions that emerge simultaneous and parallel to the (intentional) separations and distinctions created by the border as a mode of classification (2017, 2). As a result of such collateral interactions resulting from bordering processes —which, when dividing, paradoxically connect— borders themselves are of a subversive nature and they can be a source of “unpredictability and uncanny effects”: “they can reinforce the symbolic difference that created them, or even cause changes in these symbolic differences; they can continue to have effects after the symbolic differences that caused them have disappeared or lessened” (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, 2). In line with such critical reasoning, according to Rosello and Wolfe’s claim, the subversive dynamism and productivity of bordering lays particularly in its aesthetic value, that is, its representation in any given discourse or artistic product (2017, 3). While b/ordering narratives have historically contributed to the internalisation and naturalisation of borders, their subjection to cultural, artistic and discursive processes enables a revelation of their artifice and their link to the workings of hegemonic power, hence allowing borders “to surface as aesthetic figurations —narratives or tropes— which can also interrogate their including/excluding function” (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017, 149).

The importance of such an arrangement of agency with respect to bordering and border aesthetics has been mirrored by an increasing concern with bordering processes (and all related concepts), both creatively and critically, in contemporary artistic expressions. In this regard, contemporary literature appears to be especially preoccupied with the possibilities provided by the border and, more specifically, by the in-between or

the liminal, the uncertain and ambiguous “third space” or “threshold” created by the very bordering process “that makes indeterminacy and insovereignty possible” — what Schimanski and Wolfe, following K. Bhabha, have referred to as, precisely, the locus of creativity and culture (2017, 156).

## **1.2. Liminality and the Short Story**

Derived from *limen*, the Latin word for “threshold”, liminality is a term used to conceptualise “both demarcation and mediation between different processual stages, spatial complexes, inner states, and multiple identities” (Achilles 2015, 35). Albeit fundamentally related to notions of transition and border crossing, as claimed by Jochen Achilles, liminality “marks an arguably more definable and persistent area of discourse and performance than its implications of fleeting processuality may suggest”: an area concerned with capturing and explaining not only the perpetual, inescapable nature of transitions but also the existential and cultural consequences that such destabilisations inflict on the legitimacy of any established boundary (2015, 35). The concept of liminality was originally developed in the field of cultural anthropology with regards to research on rituals of initiation or passage, being first broadly defined by Victor Turner, who stated that “[l]iminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (Turner qtd. in Achilles and Bergmann 2015, 3). Presenting an initial approach to the notion of liminality which would later be transferred and explored in a wide variety of academic and artistic contexts —in Achilles and Bergmann’s words, “stretched and twisted in almost every direction” (2015, 3)— Turner’s considerations of liminality are of crucial relevance insofar as they focus on the subversive possibility provided by the liminal to genuinely detach from normal modes of social action — a withdrawal which “can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values or axioms of the culture in

which it occurs” (Turner qtd. in Henitiuk 2007, 57). Therefore, critically aligned with Rosello and Wolfe’s reflections on the subversive nature of border aesthetics, the power of liminality as a “process of defamiliarization and potential de- and reconstruction” (Turner qtd. in Achilles 2015, 35) has proven increasingly productive in contemporary contexts of artistic creation. As for literature, the aesthetic exploration of the liminal appears to have found a particularly fertile ground in the short story, which has been deemed “the liminal genre *par excellence*” (Achilles and Bergmann 2015, 4).

As an aesthetic and generic phenomenon, the formal liminality of the short story is partly indebted to its literary antecedents. Despite its recognised resistance to fixed definitions, the short story is typically characterised by formal brevity, ambiguity, mutability, openness and indeterminacy — all attributes which can be traced back to the dialogic particularities of the oral storytelling tradition of folktales which the short story can be genealogically associated with, as appropriately suggested by Paul March-Russell (2009). Likewise, the liminality of the short story form is inscribed into its distinctive generic hybridity or interdiscursivity. As argued by Achilles and Bergmann, the manner in which the short story “occupies a middle ground” and “adopts features of and mediates between fable, sketch, essay, novelette, novella, and novel” is an especially productive articulation of liminality which can be ascribed to the flexibility produced by the “brevity and episodic structure” that is so essential a part of the short story genre (Achilles and Bergmann 2015, 4; Achilles 2015, 41), as reflected in its very denomination.

It is precisely its characteristic shortness which has determined, too, the liminality of the short story as an ambiguous cultural manifestation, “simultaneously a product of mass and minority culture” (Adawalla and March-Russell 2013, 4). Albeit today a highly valued genre, both critically and creatively, the short story was virtually neglected until the last decades of the nineteenth century when, in the dawn of the modern world, the

potential of the short story form to break generic conventions and destabilise familiar narrative structures illuminated a new and prolific understanding of its brevity as “something more, something other, than ‘non-extension’ [...] a ‘positive’ quality” (Bowen qtd. in Hunter 2007, 1). Consequently, as the short story established itself through magazine and small press publication —associated to both the commercial and popular and the experimental and avant-garde— the genre became an appealing site for “the representation of liminal or problematized identities” (Hunter 2007, 138), since its formal liberty enabled a state of inclusiveness and the subsequent materialisation of dissident discourses by, to and about those “at odds with the dominant values of their society: women writers, colonial subjects, sexual minorities” (March-Russell 2009, 70). Against this background, as regarded by Adrian Hunter (2007) and Paul March-Russell (2009), it is particularly useful to approach the short story as an example of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have defined as “minor literature”: the type of writing “which a minority constructs within a major language”, characterised by political immediacy, collective value and the deterritorialization of language and the other (1986, 16-22). Such a view of the short story foregrounds its cultural productivity as a genre implicated with liminal subjectivities, which had earlier been othered and mis-considered marginal, and prioritises its “creative resistance to entailments of ‘power and law’” (Hunter 2007, 140).

Liminality, thus, acts as the conceptual mediator “between aesthetic form and existential or political content” in the short story (Achilles and Bergmann 2015, 6). As such, the latent liminal poetics of the short story constitute the genre as a “forum of crisis and change”: both explicitly, by transgressing semantic fields and transforming characters and objects into “precarious containers of liminal undecidedness” (2015, 8), and implicitly, by means of suggestion, ambiguity and omission. In this regard, as claimed by Michael Basseler in his exploration of cognitive liminality, the indeterminate nature of

the interaction between text, reader and context in the case of the short story is particularly effective, more so than other genres, in the creation of a culturally productive gap — “a liminal space, a threshold in which our preconceptions of the world are questioned, augmented, and often changed with lasting effects [...] subvert[ing] our very notions of knowledge as well as the cultural hierarchies thereof” (2015, 78-79). In doing so, the short story crucially textualises and politicises the liminal, pursuing the pressing current need to “undermine such binaries as centre/margin or domination/subordination by actually creating a subversive nexus outside of the rigid, hierarchical model” (Henitiuk 2007, 2). Hence, writers of the short story —as is the case of Sarah Hall, whom this dissertation focuses on— persistently employ and exploit the liminal as a constructive challenge to the status quo, which is delimited by all hegemonic b/ordering processes, whether they be textual, political or ontological, in an endeavour to damage and transgress the oppressive and rigid structures of the contemporary world.

### **1.3. Exploring the Limits: Posthumanism, Animal Studies and Metamorphosis**

The subversive and empowering potential of liminality as a by-product of all bordering processes, as aesthetically epitomised in the short story genre, directs critical and creative attention to the so-called Other who inhabits the liminal locus. Nonetheless, in order to prove successful in its endeavour to undermine all alienating hierarchies and polarities, any vindication of the liminal Other must necessarily entail, as well, an interrogation of what the feminist and posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti has referred to as “that entity which, out of laziness and habit, we call the ‘*self*’” (2013, 100; emphasis added). In this light, thus, Posthumanism emerges as generative and navigational tool to assist contemporary societies in the urgent reassessment of the complex —and undeniably problematic— dialectics of Other and Self which are grounded on the very notion of

‘human’ as inherited from obsolete anthropocentric narratives (Braidotti 2013, 5, 15; 2017, 40).

Humanism, as the philosophical attitude whose premises became structural in the contexts of Enlightenment and modernity, rooted in classical and Renaissance ideals, was based on a series of assumptions about the “image of Man as a rational animal endowed with language” as constitutive of the basic referent for the subject (Braidotti 2015, 10). Hence, at the core of the humanist doctrine stood the alleged uniqueness of the human as provided by the self-regulating and intrinsically moral powers of rationality (Braidotti 2013, 13). As such, the humanist construction of human subjectivity was driven by “an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress”, subscribed by a self-reflective claim at human transcendence and exceptionalism, and firmly grounded on what has been identified, as aptly expressed by Braidotti, an “unshakable certainty [about] the almost boundless capacity of humans to pursue their individual and collective perfectability” (2013, 13, 66). However, far from a representation of an ideal referent for future growth or an objective average and middle ground, humanist figurations of the Self developed, instead, into a standard “of Sameness” (Braidotti 2013, 26) according to which subjectivity was ascribed on the basis of a deeply fundamental bias. Thus, the humanist human —or, perhaps more appropriately, hu/man— was shaped in the form of a Man, essentially white and European, a speaker of a standard and majoritarian language, urbanised and of fully recognised citizenship, sexually defined in terms of reproductive heteronormativity, healthy and able-bodied (2013, 65, 68).

The configuration of such a partial image of the hu/man subject, as emblematically represented by Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, evidently prioritised certain forms of life over others, operating within a universalising binary logic which would remain profoundly ingrained into Western mindset for centuries. As their —or, rather, his—

defining characteristics supposedly provided the considered hu/man with an intrinsic position of superiority over all non-conformity with normative and regulatory humanist ideals, the humanist dualistic scheme of thought which located “Man/reason/culture on the one side and Woman/matter/nature on the other” (Braidotti 2015, 9) became structural within hegemonic discourses of power. In other words, insofar as it implied the establishment and naturalisation of such a biased individual and cultural model for the human, Humanism effectively functioned as an institutionalised project of bordering or b/ordering between Self and Other — a secular civilising narrative, fuelled by self-aggrandising, Eurocentric and universalising visions and founded on “lethal binaries” which equated difference with pejoration (Braidotti 2013, 14-15, 37).

Disguised in the name of progress, the inherent violence of Humanism manifested itself in the historical dehumanisation and demonisation of the Other, both in ontological and social terms, as crucially denounced in the vindication of the sexualised and racialised others in the various waves of feminism(s), anti-racism, de- and post-colonial movements which flourished throughout the twentieth century. As argued by Braidotti, it was precisely in the articulation of such emancipatory movements that Humanism declined into its current state of crisis and Posthumanism, both as a theoretical predicament and as the irrefutable current historical condition, was inaugurated (2013, 37, 66). As such, the posthuman condition was introduced by the former structural others of modernity whom in their empowerment not merely opposed the humanistic subject but, rather, productively materialised alternative and viable modes of subjectivity, decentring the hegemonic image of the hu/man in favour of diversity. Hence, in their actualisation of “other visions of the self”, “[s]exualised, racialized and naturalized differences, far from being the categorical boundary-keepers of the subject of Humanism, have evolved into fully fledged alternative models of the human subject” (Braidotti 2013, 38).

Albeit it does, indeed, rest on the assumption of the historical collapse of humanist hegemony, Posthumanism approaches such a crisis in a fundamentally affirmative way (Braidotti 2013, 37). While critical assessments of “being *post* anything” are often articulated in negative terms of opposition with regards to “the ghostly presence of that past we try to ‘other’”, as expressed in Hunter’s discussion of Angela Carter and post-modernism (2007, 128), the relevance and generative potential of the posthuman shift lays in the fact that it does not intend to “other” or negate the human in the first place. Instead, as a predicament of thought, Posthumanism is an attempt to move beyond negative difference and binary oppositions altogether by means of a critical engagement “with the humanist legacy to critique anthropocentric values and worldviews” (Clarke and Rossini 2017, xiv) in order to enable the production of:

socially relevant knowledge that is attuned to basic principles of social justice, the respect for human decency and diversity, the rejection of false universalisms; the affirmation of the positivity of difference; the principles of academic freedom, antiracism, openness to others and conviviality [aimed at making] sense of the complexities we find ourselves in. (Braidotti 2013, 37)

In such an endeavour to meet the complexity of our times in discursive, social, political and ethical terms, the posthuman condition materialises a radical re-thinking of the self towards a new conceptualisation of the subject that is integrative, non-negative and non-reductionist (Braidotti 2013, 5, 12). As such, posthumanist thinkers in the vein of Braidotti, drawing on the theories of Baruch Spinoza, Cary Wolfe, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, among others, advocate for a posthuman notion of subjectivity which is, in Braidotti’s terms, “nomadic”: “materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded [...] firmly located somewhere [...] multifaced and relational” (2013, 188).

Formulated against the Cartesian mind-body split which provided the humanist hu/man with its alleged rational superiority, the posthuman nomadic subject is articulated

in materialist or “matter-realist” (Braidotti 2013, 99) terms, bringing to the fore “the recalcitrant and connected nature of nature, of bodies and of embodied selfhoods as more than a bounded, cerebral affair of willpower and intention” (Åsberg and Braidotti 2018, 7-8). In this sense, the posthuman condition rests on the assumption that the effects of globalisation and scientific and technological advances have significantly displaced and blurred many of the former categorical boundaries “between the given (nature) and the constructed (culture)” — a situation which enables the critical and creative replacement of former static binaries such as mind-culture/body-nature in favour of hybridity and multiplicity (Braidotti 2013, 2-3). Hence, in its nomadic embodiment and embedment, the posthuman is an integral part of what Braidotti names the “nature-culture continuum” (2013, 2). As such, characterised by “mobility, changeability and transitory nature” (Braidotti 2002, 70), posthuman subjectivity exists not as a fixed state but rather as a dynamic “process of auto-poiesis or self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values and hence also multiple forms of accountability” (2013, 35).

As argued by Braidotti (2002, 2013, 2017), inscribed in the nature-culture continuum, the posthuman subject is articulated as a mode of “becoming” instead of “being”: an ongoing process of transformation which is fundamentally inter-relational and defines the subject as “a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole” (Braidotti 2013, 82). A challenge to hegemonic bordering narratives, thus, the posthuman “contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the ‘exceptionalism’ of the Human as a transcendental category” (2013, 66) by expanding subjectivity towards what Braidotti has coded as “*zoe*”: “the wider scope of animal and non-human life [...] the dynamic, self-organizing structure of *life itself* [...] the *transversal force* that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated

species, categories and domains” (2013, 60; emphasis added). Therefore, Posthumanism is crucially post-anthropocentric, as well, engaging in a displacement and replacement of “well established dualisms with the recognition of deep *zoe*-egalitarianism between humans and animals” (2013, 71). In this central vindication of the animal, the naturalised, “necessary, familiar and must cherished other of Anthropos” (Braidotti 2013, 68), the posthuman advocacy of situated and accountable perspectives and practices (2013, 51) derives inspiration from ecology and environmentalism (2013, 47-48) and establishes a critical and creative alliance with other disciplines of knowledge which also endeavour to actively shift away from oppressive dualistic schemes, as is the case of Animal Studies or Human-Animal Studies.

Having unfolded from the margins of academic interest toward its current central position only in the later decades of the twentieth century, Animal Studies or Human-Animal Studies —its denomination, unlike its purpose, often not agreed upon— is a relatively recent trans- and meta-disciplinary field of research dedicated to the exploration of the relationships and connections between human and non-human animals with particular focus on issues of representation and animal agency (Marvin and McHugh 2014, 2-3; McHugh 2011, 6). As such, parallel to the posthuman interest in subjectivity, Animal Studies undertake the complex task of conceptualising non-human animals without denying or reducing their specificity as agents to narrative logics “of human intentionality or psychological interiority” (Marvin and McHugh 2014, 5). Hence, such a deconstructive, critical and creative inquiry into the dynamics of power between people and animals enables “reflections that are as important to honouring our shared past as to continuing to share a future” (2014, 5) — a common and sustainable future, affirmatively attuned to the post-anthropocentrism of the current posthuman era.

The historical representation of non-human animals, as studied from the standpoint of Animal Studies, may be wholly identified as a hegemonic discourse of b/ordering and othering which Kelly Oliver appropriately names “animal pedagogy” (2009). As Oliver argues, philosophers and thinkers, even the defenders of (human) alterity who rejected the humanist, Cartesian model, have systematically used the non-human animal as a measure unit to define the human by means of opposition (2009, 4-5). To such an extent, animals “have been tamed, even maimed, in the name of philosophy or science” for the sake of “teach[ing] us to be human” (2009, 8, 5). The critical exploration of the dynamics of this animal pedagogy ultimately reveals, on the one hand, the constructedness of the animal — an artifice analogous to that of the referent category it others, that is, the human, as brought to light by anti- and post-humanist thought. As discussed by Timothy C. Baker, this fictive binary which reductively conceptualises the animal as “precisely what man is not” (Simondon qtd. in Baker 2019, 13) is based on a fundamental act of linguistic and ontological violence which “presages the physical violence enacted upon other animals” — that articulated in the instrumental invention and use of the single term “animal” to refer to the whole spectrum of non-human species, eradicating difference and producing invisibility (Baker 2019, 7; Ortiz 2016, 4-5). On the other hand, the critical acknowledgement of such a violent human physical and symbolic dependence on non-human animals exposes all materialisations of human subjectivity and relationality to be precarious, precisely because they rely on the denial of kinship with animals (Oliver 2009, 16). Aligned with this reflection, for instance, stand contemporary debates on the issue of animal rights movements: both from the field of Animal Studies (Oliver 2009) and Posthumanism, deemed a “moral but inherently flawed” gesture that unproductively anthropomorphises animals, denying their specificity and ultimately confirming categorical binaries by “benevolently extending the hegemonic

category, the human”, with its inherent instability and precarity, towards the non-human others (Braidotti 2013, 79).

Against such unproductive discourses of sameness which leave intact the categorical conceptions of animal and human, Animal Studies and Posthumanism coincide in the need to move, instead, “through an ethics of difference, toward an ethics of relationality and responsivity” (Oliver 2009, 21). As such, in maintaining that “the point about posthuman relations [...] is to see the inter-*relation* human/animal as constitutive of the identity of *each* [...] a transformative or symbiotic relation that hybridizes and alters the ‘nature’ of each one and foregrounds the middle grounds of their interaction”, Braidotti’s posthuman (2013, 79) actualises Oliver’s animal pedagogy on the basis of a crucially affirmative shift. In this light, embracing the critical cross-fertilisation between feminist and posthuman thought and, in particular, some of the core notions of present-day feminisms, Birke and Holmberg significantly suggest that human-animal relations be envisioned as intersectional and performative, since not only they are affected by power structures, such as gender, class or race, but they also “co-produce sociality and culture” in an inter-relational manner alongside them (2018, 119, 126). Accordingly, the affinity between Animal Studies and Posthumanism also resurfaces in the central addressment of embodiment as specifically related to the notion of vulnerability (Ohrem 2017b; Tsing 2015; Braidotti 2013). As noted by Dominik Ohrem, it is necessary to rethink vulnerability beyond its traditional negative connotations as associated to the dichotomy agency/vulnerability towards more productive and affirmative conceptualisations of vulnerability as a motor for agency (2017b, 45, 51-53). Hence, rather than helplessness and passivity to be acted upon, vulnerability ought to be embraced as the positive and active interdependence of all embodied and embedded (posthuman) subjects — that is, the constitutive “world-openness” (2017b, 68) of *zoe*

which enables multiple modes of “being-in-relation” or “becoming-with-the-world” (2017a, 11, 6) within the nature-culture continuum.

The shared project of Posthumanism and Animal Studies to challenge and overcome oppressive categorical binaries about subjectivity on the basis of the embodiment, embedment and inter-constitutiveness of all forms of life, human and non-human, is not merely a current critical and theoretical endeavour but also, and importantly, a creative and imaginative one (Braidotti 2013, 191). It is in light of such needs that literature emerges as a particularly productive field of discussion, not only as a source of knowledge about problematic representations of the human, the animal and the relations between both but, essentially, as a creative opportunity to perform new, uncategorical subjectivities in a space where, unlike in science, economics and politics, “anything can be said” (Ortiz 2016, x). In this vein, as an articulation of the increasing critical concern with transversal and hybrid relationships between human and non-human animals as integrative of a nature-culture continuum, the literary trope of metamorphosis becomes a particularly productive tool for the interests of Posthumanism and Animal Studies.

Of specific current relevance and high incidence, metamorphosis literature depicting human-animal transformations is the “literary progeny” of creation myths and fairy tales (Warner 2002, 2) and highly indebted to a long literary tradition significantly rooted, in Western art, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Asker 2001, 2). Providing “a way of constructing a social reality and an ontology”, as argued by D.B.D. Asker (2001, 2), metamorphosis literature has historically functioned as one of the many articulations of the humanist, Cartesian anxieties about the tensions between mind and body, human and nature. As such, traditionally coded in terms of punishment and “utter degradation for the human being” who helplessly loses its humanity, literary human-animal metamorphoses

have been instrumental in the definition of the human against the fear of the animal Other (Gymnich and Segão Costa 2006, 71). Nevertheless, it is precisely in its necessary preoccupation with the consequences of crossing established borders that human-animal transformations are of an inherently subversive and transgressive nature. This being so, despite such traditional articulations, metamorphosis literature manages to prove, in imaginative terms, that “we do not live in a hermetically sealed universe, called human life, which is entirely distinct from the world of other species”, presenting interspecies relationality as a practical matter (Asker 2001, 9) — if not an ethical one. In other words, by actively exploring and making visible the liminal locus and the exchanges within, metamorphoses are “virtually bound to challenge culturally dominant assumptions” (Gymnich and Segão Costa 2006, 69), materialising instead dynamic disruptions of static dualistic schemes about subjectivity, self and other, human and non-human.

Therefore, as an artistic manifestation characterised by its higher frequency in liminal or transitional (temporal, geographical and mental) spaces, as is the case of the current posthuman era, metamorphic writing bears the promise of change and freedom to enter, inhabit and explore the new points of view which arise from the “breaking of rules of natural law and verisimilitude” (Warner 2002, 17-19). Precisely, the particularly productive power of fictional, literary human-animal transformations resides in their ability to invoke the real transformations which take place in the critical recognition that human identity and perspective depend on human (inter)relations with non-human life (Asker 2001, 19). As such, metamorphosis literature emerges as a form of resistance against the invisibility created by categorical borders, making the impossible happen through fiction in a creative actualisation of the common endeavour of Posthumanism and Animal Studies to “desacraliz[e] the concept of human nature” by engaging with non-

human others in a process of defamiliarization, destabilisation and deterritorialization of the oppressive hegemonic dynamics of human-animal interaction (Braidotti 2002, 121).

## 2. “All Vestiges Shed”: New Skins in Sarah Hall’s Short Fiction

### 2.1. Sarah Hall and The Posthuman Becoming-Animal

Born in 1974 in the northern English county of Cumbria, a region with a latent presence in most of her literary production, Sarah Hall is a novelist and short-story writer whose work has been widely praised by critics. Considered one of the best young British authors, Hall’s short stories have recently granted her a significant share of critical attention, having been shortlisted, nominated and awarded in numerous occasions with highly renowned prizes such as the BBC National Short Story Award or the Edge Hill Prize. Among many others, recognitions of such kind have led Hall to become, as argued by Elizabeth Baines, “possibly the most acclaimed short-story writer working in Britain today” (2020, 235).

Extensively celebrated for their content as well as their form, Hall’s short stories epitomise the contemporary literary attention given to bordering processes and liminality as sites of subversive cultural translation and re-negotiation of all hegemonically established “truths” — including, notably, the current concern with transgressing and blurring the epistemological binary values of relational identity which have systemically marked an oppressive and obscuring distinction between Self and Other(s). Such a representative status is grounded on the author’s profound understanding and vindication of the defamiliarising potential of the short story form as one fundamentally defined by a poetics of liminality. This distinct consideration of the genre is precisely what Hall herself articulates when, interviewed by Baines, she associates her inclination to short-story-writing with its “strange, powerful and quite particular” ability to demand, in its inherent “negative space”, an “intense communing with and questioning by the reader as she or he imports and tests more of the self, morally, experientially, psychologically” — a

challenging, “exorcist”-like nature which provides the short story form with what the author deems its especial “suitability as a receptacle for life’s disturbances and extreme events” (2020, 236). It is on this critical basis, which aligns at length with theoretical approaches to the genre as the ones previously outlined, that Hall considers the short story more apt and “far more potent than its heftier cousin” for her “main preoccupations and tendencies” (2020, 236). As for such interests, the author herself recognises them as being those indicated by Baines: “issues including climate change, community, despotism, feminism, technology and perhaps *above all identity, what it is to be human*” (2020, 236; emphasis added). Specifically coded in terms that resonate with particular strength with Posthuman ideas about the processual and transformative quality of subjectivity, such crucial thematic concerns are stated by Hall in the form of two questions “so central to all of us”: “*who am I? [...] who am I becoming?*” (2020, 239).

In a self-proclaimed political (2020, 242) endeavour to explore contemporary anxieties about human identity, Hall’s short stories take the shape of narratives which (almost exclusively) depict female protagonists as they navigate through patriarchal and, by inference, anthropocentric structures of power in a wide variety of ordinary and extraordinary experiences. Significantly, the poetic world of Hall’s short fiction is also markedly inhabited by animals: whether in the form of bees, wolves, horses, dogs or foxes, such a conspicuous physical presence of non-human life within human narratives is ascribed by the author to the impression left on her by the animal-dominant demographics of the Lake District where she grew up (2020, 239). Thus, in Hall’s work, non-human animals become visible as the equally valid “neighbours” of the human whose absence in her writing, the author regards, would be “bizarrely omissive” (2020, 239). In this light, the poetic and political intentions behind Hall’s subjects of literary representation emerge from an interest “in the porous borders, intersections of the

physical and the cognitive” rooted in her strong conviction that “humans constitute wildlife *too*, we are human animals *as well as* human beings” (2020, 239; emphasis added). In view of her core conceptualisation of the connections between human and non-human animals, Hall coincides with the identitarian projects suggested from the fields of Posthumanism and Animal Studies: rather than denying the specificity of the human in favour of the animal or vice versa, Hall codes the relationship between both as one “that functions by ‘and-and’, not by ‘either-or’” (Braidotti 2017, 37) — that is, one oriented towards the unfolding of, in Braidotti’s terms, *zoe*-egalitarianism. Accordingly, Hall’s preoccupations and narratives may be approached as standing in critical agreement with what Stacy Alaimo has denominated “trans-corporeality” — an affirmative return to nature and a conception of “materiality as agential” based on the idea that nature “is not something external nor something eternal, but instead, the immediately present, *ever-changing, materiality of the world and ourselves*” (2018, 49; emphasis added).

Against this background, focus on one specific short story written by Hall allows the identification of further critical and creative connections between the author’s inclinations and the posthuman predicament. Among the many pieces dedicated to the exploration of identity negotiations which integrate Hall’s short-story production, in “Mrs Fox”, from the 2017 collection *Madame Zero*, the shift in identity takes place as a physical change — the human-animal metamorphosis of the female protagonist. Hall’s resorting to the literary trope of metamorphosis exposes, in a particularly illustrative manner, her critical belief that “identity is mutable [...] we inhabit a character, a mind, and a body undergoing the variable states of life [...] we endlessly destabilize and re-stabilize identity, fail and fulfil potential, progress, programme and re-programme ourselves” (2020, 238). Likewise, the fact that in this story the metamorphosis does not happen instantly but, rather, the reader is made witness to the development of an actual material

change of the body, as noted by Baines (2020, 239), reveals Hall's discernibly posthuman-aligned conception that "the body is the pivotal existential point — it's how we interact with the world, pin narratives" (2020, 238). Thus, actualised in her depiction of a physical metamorphosis, Hall's focus on corporeality and embodiment fundamentally subscribes posthuman notions of materiality as the key locus of subjectivity. Furthermore, the centrality of change in "Mrs Fox" is reflected, too, at a textual level, since the narrative itself can be interestingly approached as metamorphic: in true liminal fashion, this story articulates an ambiguous and dynamic balance between what Baines regards as "the folk-tale strand inherited from Angela Carter" (2020, 235) and the realist registering of contemporary quotidian experience. As such, the metamorphic woman-animal who inhabits this short story by Sarah Hall, simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary, transforms the narrative into a textual challenge to the natural-supernatural divide and, by inference, to all categorical truths about subjectivity associated with the "rational" idea of reality.

In the particularities of her invocation of the woman-animal metamorphosis, Hall intentionally exploits the performative and transformative nature of subjectivity as she engages in a creative de- and reconstructive disruption of Western, anthropocentric and patriarchal values of identity which have historically othered and oppressed both women and non-human animals. As a result, the metamorphic, virtually monstrous, fluid body who populates the selected story not only entails a deterritorialisation of and disidentification with hegemonic notions of subjectivity, but also emerges as an identitarian alternative — a hybrid, nomadic subjectivity which "split[s] at the seams the neatly formatted version of Man as a rational animal to explode its built-contradictions" (Braidotti 2002, 136). As such, Hall's "Mrs Fox" functions as a literary expression of what Braidotti has coded as posthuman and "feminist figurations" which "materially

embody stages of metamorphosis of a subject position towards all that the phallogocentric system does *not* want it to become” (2002, 13). Hence, as the author overtly focuses on a subject radically different to the possibilities provided by categorical borders between human and non-human animals, Hall’s narrative about a metamorphic woman-animal effectively manages to take an ambivalent but evidently empowering flight from oppressive humanist constraints towards the posthuman affirmative conception of *zoe*. In other words, in her crucial subversive identification of subjectivity with the fluid body of a female human protagonist who indeterminately metamorphoses into an animal, Hall’s “Mrs Fox” actualises the “becoming-animal axis” of posthuman transformation, acknowledging the cross-species liberatory benefits of displacing anthropocentrism in favour of embodiment and embedment (Braidotti 2013, 66-67).

Parallel to the manner in which Hall’s story, in Braidotti’s words, opens and, more importantly, leaves open “intensive spaces of becoming” for the posthuman (2013, 80), the author’s curated use of the liminal aesthetics of the short story form emphasises the especial potential of the genre for the exploration of the posthuman condition. Metamorphic, simultaneously familiar and strange, fragmentary, open-ended, opaque and resistant to unequivocal interpretations, the short story as presented by Hall becomes itself, as Julia Ditter argues on the basis of Richie Nimmo’s revision of Luce Irigaray’s ideas, a threshold space particularly apt to the abandonment of anthropocentric “epistemological certainty” (2019, 202) and the achievement of “intimacy at a distance, for which closeness lies not in possessing or bringing near [...], but instead in a relational being-with otherness that is comfortable with degrees of unknowing” (Nimmo qtd. in Ditter 2019, 196). Therefore, as deeper discussion of the text may confirm, the joint identitarian premises of Posthumanism and Animal Studies, as well as their inherent challenges to avoid the reduction of non-human animal difference to human

representational logics, find a textual body —and a particularly productive one genre-wise— in the short stories of Sarah Hall, as especially manifest in “Mrs Fox”.

## 2.2. “Kicking Away the Manmade World” in “Mrs Fox”

Lead story of Sarah Hall’s second short-story collection *Madame Zero* (2017) and winner of the BBC National Short Story Award in 2013, “Mrs Fox” is a tale of human-animal metamorphosis in which transformations are multiple, transversal and collective, not limited to the bodily changes of the metamorphic individual. After an initial immersion into the dynamics and intimacies of the married couple, “Mrs Fox” relates Sophia Garnett’s sudden and complete transformation into a vixen while she enjoys an ordinary stroll through the woods with her husband. An incredulous witness to such a logic-defying transfiguration, the narrative follows the unnamed husband as he undertakes, too, a radical transformation of his own, actively striving to adapt to a disrupted reality precipitated by the loss of his wife as he had known her. Told from his point of view, the story focuses, thus, on the husband’s manoeuvring of the imperative and generative choice which, as argued by Patricia MacCormack, arises from all encounters with alterity: “to turn away by knowing the other as abnormal and therefore affirming the self as normal, or to enter into a bordering or pack with the monstrous, *creating a revolutionary hybridity of two who were already hybrids*, and so forth” (2012, 91; emphases added).

In alignment with the later of the options provided by MacCormack, throughout the narrative Hall approaches such a critical choice in a fundamentally affirmative manner, albeit not exempt of difficulties. While “Mrs Fox” successfully offers a glimpse into how such revolutionary hybridity with alterity may be achieved with mutual, cross-species benefits, it overtly addresses the challenges inherent to any conscious endeavour to redefine the relationship between Self and Other. Hence, as Sophia’s metamorphosis suspends the categorical distinctions between human and non-human animals at a literal

level (Ortiz 2016, 2), the story is rendered a textual exploration and exploitation of the disruptive potential of the literary animal to produce “moments of taxonomic breakdown and the blurring of identities” (Baker 2019, 3). In doing so, Hall’s short story is revealed to stand in critical alliance with the narrative strategies discerned by Bruce Clarke and Marina Rossini as those employed by postmodern theorists, such as Gilles Deleuze, to “splinter the humanist understanding of the unified self”: “highlighting an existential or ontological plurality, a fragmentation of identity, and a breaking up of aesthetic norms, by mixing ‘high’ and ‘low’ elements of culture, liberally citing intertextual allusions, breaking up narrative continuity and teleology, and celebrating radical plurality” (2017, xvii). As such, on the basis of the multiple and complex, positive and self-aware negotiations of identity which take place in the aftermath of Sophia’s metamorphosis, “Mrs Fox” emerges as a creative articulation of the posthuman theory of the subject, whose purpose may be ultimately identified, as argued by Cary Wolfe, with the end of “violence against the social other of *whatever* species — or gender, or race, or class, or sexual difference” (Wolfe qtd. in Rossini 2017, 155).

In its imaginative efforts to trouble the categorical boundaries of identity, both among humans and between human and non-human species, “Mrs Fox” invokes a tradition of literary animals which proves remarkably productive for the Posthuman reconceptualisation of subjectivity. Albeit evidently mysterious and seemingly supernatural, Hall’s depiction of a human couple whose relationship is destabilised by the animal shape of one of the partners would hardly be regarded as alien by any reader who approaches the text, since such a scenario bears noticeable resemblances with folk narratives about animal bridegrooms. Familiar in contemporary imagination as inherited through fairy-tale literature and film, generally conceived —and wrongly dismissed— as children’s fantasy, the literary tradition known as Beauty and the Beast narratives has its

roots in ancient myths across cultures regarding the anxieties about “the menace of the Other” (Warner 1995, 273-274, 276). On the grounds of a recurrent plot which moves “from the terrifying encounter with Otherness, to its acceptance, or, in some versions of the story, its annihilation” (1995, 276), as argued by Marina Warner, the numerous historical variations of the animal bridegroom narrative expose the Beast to be “always in flux, and even provide a gauge of changing evaluations of human beings themselves, of the meaning of what it is to be human, and specifically, since the Beast has been primarily identified with the male since the story’s earliest forms, what it is to be a man” (1995, 279). Within this frame of reference, thus, “Mrs Fox” actualises the author’s posthuman-informed, deliberate exploitation of the intrinsic fluidity of the animal bridegroom as a strategy to circumvent the inevitability of categorical definitions about the human. In other words, Hall critically reappropriates the comfortably familiar narrative of the animal bridegroom so as to turn it against its own (human, male, heteronormative) bias, while the unfolding of events effectively redirects attention towards the posthuman preoccupation with human-animal kinship and the possibility of developing nomadic, *zoe*-egalitarian assemblages.

In her posthuman rewriting, to a considerable extent comparable in terms of de- and reconstructing intentions to Angela Carter’s 1979 momentous collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, Hall recognises and manipulates the parallel structural othering of women and animals as she directly transforms the female protagonist into an actual animal whose distinct agency defies human control. Thus, diverting from traditional animal bridegroom narratives, in “Mrs Fox” there is no anthropomorphic beast whose animality is redeemed, nor is Sophia’s metamorphosis a symbolic human replacement or eventually reverted in a reaffirmation of her transcendental humanity. Rather, in Braidotti’s terms, there exists merely “the radical immanence of ‘just a life’”

(2013, 132): that of a real animal which is “simply, unknowably, other, and cannot be contained by the text” (Baker 2019, 83) nor by the initially anthropocentric logics of the husband — a life which forces an engagement, as reflected in the husband’s own transformation, with the very notion of animality as allegedly opposed and inferior to humanity.

In line with such subversive intertextual associations, “Mrs Fox” may be approached, as Timothy Baker (2019) and Julia Ditter (2019) suggest, as a reworking of David Garnett’s 1922 novella *Lady into Fox*, which relates the desperate attempts of Mr Tebrick to come to terms with the unexpected metamorphosis of his wife, Silvia, into a vixen. However reminiscent of this modern British text, from whose author Hall borrows her protagonists’ surnames, “Mrs Fox” makes a radically affirmative departure from Garnett’s tragical ending, in which Silvia is rendered so other in her animal form that “a return to normalcy is only possible through [her] brutal death at the novella’s end, after which [Mr Tebrick] lives to a great age, apparently contented” (Baker 2019, 83). Far from coincidental or a consequence of a shared literary tradition, the evident connections —and, more importantly, the distances— that Hall establishes with this earlier text allow her to articulate in “Mrs Fox” a critical comment on the need for revision of inherited narratives, both literary and ontological, suggesting that “our common understanding of human-animal relationships is outdated and needs to be readjusted in a way that does not perpetuate the Cartesian hierarchy” (Ditter 2019, 194).

Consistent with such an endeavour to revise and destabilise conventional discourses about human identity, Hall’s specific use of the vixen to represent the irreducible, unavoidable animal ‘other’ comes to light as more than a simple detail. Defined by Baker as “threshold creatures”, the common presence of foxes in urban environments, as is the case of most British cities, where they are “neither companion nor

wholly alien” to human inhabitants, poses a direct challenge to binary oppositions between familiar and unfamiliar, wild and tame, symbol and experience (2019, 77). While such current reality alone illuminates the fox as a form of life “particularly suited to discussions of border crossing in all its manifestations” (2019, 77), traditional literary renditions of foxes are of similar transgressive quality. Significantly cross-cultural (Asker 2001, 24, 48), the literary fox has been often coded in terms of artfulness, deceptiveness and cunning (Asker 2001, 24; Baker 2019, 77). Providing the basis for the elevation of the fox to a conventional metaphor as a “subversive, disruptive, intelligent marauder” (Asker 2001, 38), such universal characterisation has been frequently explored, as noted by Asker, by means of human-animal metamorphosis and often, though not exclusively, associated to women (2001, 24-25). In view of this, by transforming Sophia into a vixen of all animals, Hall draws yet another relevant intertextual link with a long tradition which, albeit limitedly, has provided an animal ‘other’ with a distinctly positive form of agency. Hence, taking advantage of their subversive metaphoric representation, Hall “positions foxes as the nonhuman animal most capable of unsettling traditional species hierarchies” (Baker 209, 79) — that is, one especially apt for the posthuman interrogation of subjectivity.

Grounded on such a strategically elaborated use of intertextual referentiality, parallel in its revisionist aim and critical acknowledgement of previous narratives to the posthuman engagement with the problematic legacy of hegemonic anthropocentrism (Clarke and Rossini 2017, xiv), the woman-vixen transmogrification depicted in “Mrs Fox” manages to blur the ontological border that divides human from non-human animals while avoiding the elevation or the denial of specificity of either form of life. Instead, through her characters and their inter-constitutive relationships, Hall offers an alternative affirmative approach to difference which brings to the fore the radical plurality of life

itself, namely, the material power of *zoe* to escape “the control of the supervisory agency of the Self — built on the twin pillars of narcissism and paranoia [...] the holy precinct of the ‘me’” (Braidotti 2002, 132). Such preoccupation is positively manifest in the narrative point of view, as the events are filtered through the experiences of the husband. In this light, it is rather meaningful that the focaliser of such a story about transversal transformations is no other than a male human character, that is, the ever-privileged structural Self of hegemonic anthropocentric and patriarchal discourses. On the basis of this representational value, hence, the evolution of the husband actualises a self-aware discussion of the limitations and possibilities of the hegemonic human perspective, critically aligning “Mrs Fox” with the posthuman quest for ethical accountability in human (inter)actions.

In the immediate moments after Sophia’s sudden metamorphoses, visibly absorbed by the overwhelming presence of the animal other looking back at him, the husband’s rational understanding of reality is completely dislocated and destabilised, “his mind’s a shock of useless thought, denying, hectoring [...] He says half words, nothing sensible” (Hall 2019, 12). It is precisely amid this state of cognitive collapse that the first interaction between the vixen and the husband betrays the man’s interiorised anthropocentric attitudes. As Ditter rightfully notes (2019, 197), the husband’s initial perception implies a fabricated assumption of the animal as submissive, her movement toward him being described as equivalent to a dog “returning to its master” (Hall 2019, 12). Following this encounter, the husband’s actions are motivated by a blatant sense of entitlement over the animal, as reflected in the phrasing of his decision to lift and take the vixen to the couple’s house, depriving her of autonomous agency: “Down the path he walks, holding *his fox* [...] *he bears her like a sacrifice*, a forest Pietà” (13-14; emphasis added).

Secluded in the domestic space, the husband lapses into anthropomorphising the animal. Selfishly locating “his unnatural longing” (24) and “his hope” (22) of “relief, perhaps even reverse” (17) in the vixen, he attempts to domesticate her by projecting the former behaviour of his wife —such as sleeping on the bed next to him (16-17, 21)— and denying both her environmental and nutritional needs — “[p]art of his brain will not translate what she wants: that she must have [food] raw. Her eyes flicker after the birds in the garden [...] She will not tolerate being in the same room for long [...] She wants what’s outside [...] but he knows he cannot let her go” (22). Nonetheless, the continued, material resistance of the vixen to the husband’s control progressively renders his efforts useless and the situation unsustainable: “[i]t cannot go on — the proof is everywhere. Musk on the doorframes. Stains on the carpet. Downy feathers” (24). Thus, “a thing from another realm that he has brought home” (21), the vixen’s inescapable physicality eventually exceeds its symbolic perception as a substitute for Sophia, forcing him to wonder if it is “she or he who is lost” (20) and, ultimately, to realise that “in this terrible arrangement, it is he who is not adjusting” (23). Consequently, the husband’s radical transformation of mind arises from his increasing awareness that alterity cannot be reduced to human logics — “[h]e is not able to unlock anything reasonable in his mind” (18)— and that human language is an asymmetric and deficient means of communication —“every time he speaks he feels the stupidity of words” (18), “[h]e cannot speak to her anymore. She doesn’t understand and his voice sounds ridiculous to his own ears, a cacophony” (22). Hence, as the husband eventually frees the vixen and reaches the “revelation” that “[a]ll things tend towards transience, mutability” (28), anthropocentric thought crumbles from within against confrontation with the intricate embodiment of the vixen, which provides the animal other with the “potential for meaning-making and creating new frameworks of perceiving the world” (Ditter 2019, 196).

In its depiction of how metamorphic embodiment is capable of triggering change in individual behaviour regarding cross-species inter-relationality, “Mrs Fox” mirrors the posthuman affirmative conception of the body as something deeply interactive and agential, “knotted into interdependent networks that are both corporeal and discursive, natural and cultural” (Rossini 2017, 157). As such, otherwise inaccessible and “withheld” (Hall 2019, 3) to both husband and reader, the evident unknowability and otherness of Sophia and the vixen are only bridged by their corporeality, as reflected in the numerous, exclusively physical descriptions of both throughout the narrative. In line with this, the explicit attention provided to their skin (2, 5, 6, 16), the changing aspect and texture of the external, porous membrane of the body, evinces a critical intention to represent the “permeability of the individual subject” (Rossini 2017, 162), conveying self-identity as a flux rather than an enclosed entity. Similarly, the alleged integrity of humanness is tested as the limits of the human body are rendered unstable by not only the characteristic dynamism of Sophia’s metamorphosis —her transmogrification takes place while “[s]he runs hard”, identitarian statism violently rejected as “her body twitch[es] in an effort to remain still” (Hall 2019, 10)— but also by the suggestive images of abjection which precede it. Significantly, Sophia is sick the mornings before the transformation and descriptions of her body evoke a transgression of its very limits — “[a]s she leans forward the notches in her spine *rise against the flesh of her back*. Her *protruding* bones, the *wide-open* mouth” (4-5; emphasis added). As a result, Hall’s use of metamorphic bodies in the story effectively challenges and deconstructs the anthropocentric “myth of compulsory humanness [...] the belief that being human is the most desirable state of subjectivity” (MacCormack 2020, 529) — as implied in the husband’s perception of his wife’s transmogrification as a shedding of vestiges of a somewhat faulted identity, “a purging of *the disease of being human*” (Hall 2019, 15; emphasis added).

Attempting to render the body a dynamic locus of potentiality and subjectivity, Hall contests the anthropocentric and patriarchal pejorative association of women and maternity with animals and animality (Oliver 2009, 17) as she brings into full focus sexuality as a process, “a force, or constitutive element” capable of disturbing binary standardised patterns of identity and interaction (Braidotti 2013, 99). Accordingly, sexual encounters between Sophia and her husband are presented as a powerful form of communication and intimacy, while the language used to describe such passages significantly intertwines the portrait of human pleasure with images that transgress the limits of the human-nature divide — “[her] taste reminds him of a river” (Hall 2019, 6). This potential of sexed bodies to blur categorical identitarian distinctions culminates in the episode when, weeks after setting her free, vixen and husband reencounter and she guides him to her den, where he discovers she has birthed four cubs (31). Upon meeting her progeny —perhaps also his, and so he struggles to negotiate (31)— the husband finally enacts a posthuman affirmative and accountable approach to alterity. As Ditter observes (2019, 200), in this crucial encounter the husband fully recognises the agency of the vixen as an equally valid subjectivity by accommodating to her non-linguistic, corporeal communication, while he demonstrates to be acutely aware that his earlier anthropocentric perspective of the other is a thing “of the past” (Hall 2019, 30) — “She cocks her head, as if giving him licence to speak. But no, he must not think this way” (23). On this account, the husband effectively moves across the ontological divide and actively abandons all anthropocentric entitlement, assuming instead that his role in the “fragile intimacy” (Ditter 2019, 201) of the cross-species companionship he has *become* part of is merely that of “a guest [...] a watcher” and that their existence or survival is “beyond his control” (Hall 2019, 32, 33).

Simultaneously, his new-found connection with *zoe* prompts in the husband the development of an environmental or ecological conscience: he suddenly becomes attentive to their embedment in a nature-culture continuum which, albeit generative, is also ridden with vestiges and overt menaces of human destruction, as materialised in the heath where both the metamorphosis and encounters take place, a “protean place [...] latched away by bulldozers” (27). Thus, critically aligning with Deleuze and Guattari’s conception that “becoming-animal” is not an individual process but a collective one (Ortiz 2016, 73), the embodied processes of maternity and reproduction are shown in Hall’s text to produce a change towards identitarian plurality and hybridity at a communal level: vixen, cubs and husband conform a pack of nomadic subjectivities, open with regards to each other and the world, fundamentally “unknowable” and “unbelonging” (Hall 2019, 35, 36). By means of this depiction, positively framed by the happiness the husband derives from the cross-species bond (34), “Mrs Fox” crucially meets the posthuman need for “new genealogies, alternative [...] representations of the new kinship system and adequate narratives to live up to this challenge” (Braidotti 2013, 80).

Finally, the closing paragraph of “Mrs Fox” presents the reflections of the husband on his situation, as thoughts about “the woman he loved [...] stepping across the room, bare” merge into images of “the fox, in her blaze, her magnificence” (Hall 2019, 36). In this combined embodied absence, both Sophia and the vixen are conceived by the husband as embedded participants of a nature-culture continuum, whose complex vital processes have pragmatically rendered the species divide porous and self-enclosed (human) identity unstable. In light of this, the man’s concluding recognition that the significance of his own life depends on his inter-relations with the vixen —“how could life mean anything without his *unbelonging* wife?” (36; emphasis added)— actualises what Braidotti has coded as “*amor fati*”: a love of life released from individuality, resting

on the acknowledgment that life is shared with a multiplicity of others and that posthuman subjectivities are “the expression of successive waves of becoming, fuelled by *zoe* as the ontological motor” (Braidotti 2013, 123). Appropriately articulated in a rhetorical question about the inter-constitutiveness of human-animal interactions, the ending of the story disturbs established notions of progress and teleology — the question is unanswered and the narrative is significantly left open to the multiple possible futures which unfold from the generative encounter between self and other. As such, in its textual rendition of woman-animal metamorphosis, Hall’s “Mrs Fox” productively materialises the post-anthropocentric shift towards *zoe*-egalitarianism by providing a literary, creative space for the development of posthuman, nomadic subjectivities who, in their imperative embodiment and embedment, interact with other forms of life in ethical and sustainable ways.

## Conclusions

As argued throughout this dissertation, the contemporary endeavour to adopt socially and ecologically sustainable practices with the purpose of ensuring the long-term survival of life on Earth is, essentially, a deeply de- and reconstructive project. In view of the intertwining of crisis and fast-paced positive changes that characterises present times, it has become a vital necessity to interrogate the ways in which prevailing human lifestyles have systemically depended on the silencing and oppression of other forms of life for the aggrandisement of their own. Therefore, requiring a critical and creative engagement with the historically obscured dynamics of non-dominant forms of life —both (sub)human and non-human— as well as a radical disidentification with all inherited assumptions about what constitutes a subject, the current call for sustainability is intensely demanding and potentially violent insofar as it entails a severe humbling of *Anthropos*, a desacralisation and decentring of the Human as the sole ruling force in power relations among species.

In light of the pressing critical attempt to examine and contest what the ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood has appropriately coded as the “hyperseparation” of Western Man from the rest of existence (Ohrem 2017a, 7), the theoretical efforts of thinkers involved in areas of research such as Posthumanism and Animal Studies emerge as particularly productive for the development of new approaches to subjectivity and identity which are attuned to the complexities and ethical demands of our social and environmental circumstances. Based on the crucial acknowledgment that the categorical conceptualisation of human is a fundamentally biased construct, a result of the institutionalisation and generalised interiorisation of the obsolete Humanist dialectics of otherness which positioned a specific articulation of the human (male, white, able-bodied, heteronormative) as the prescriptive measure for agency, new identitarian premises move

beyond —and not against— the very notion of human by embracing difference and relationality as constitutive of the subject. Hence, the posthuman condition urges for a sustainable and accountable redefinition of subjectivity, human and otherwise, that transcends the anthropocentric and patriarchal binaries which have relegated sexual and natural difference, that is, women and non-human animals, to historical inferiority. As such, avoiding the stasis and enclosedness of categorical divides, the posthuman subject ought to be understood as the product of a continuous process of transformation —“becoming” rather than “being”— and transversally inscribed in a nature-culture continuum which is not regulated by the monopoliser tendencies of *Anthropos* but, in Braidotti’s terms, by the self-organising force of life itself or *zoe*.

A challenge to hegemonic narratives, the posthuman shift encompasses a manipulation of ontological bordering processes, contesting their naturalisation and exposing not only their discursive, artificial nature but also their inherent performativity and potential for subversion. Consequently, it is the interstices of established borders, in the culturally productive threshold or liminal space, that the possibility of establishing affirmative posthuman assemblages unfolds in exceptionally powerful ways. As liminality is rendered central for the development of posthuman subjectivities, two significant representational possibilities emerge in terms of the creative endeavour to rethink received notions about self-identity through literature as a locus for unrestrained performances of agency. On the one hand, the short story form, known as “the liminal genre *par excellence*” (Achilles and Bergmann 2015, 4), provides a fertile ground for the materialisation of dissident discourses like the posthuman, since its characteristic allusive and ambiguous disposition effectively represents diversity while circumventing binaries and dogmatisms — challenging, even, the limits between reader and writer by means of its essential openness. On the other hand, the literary trope of human-animal

metamorphosis, due to its central preoccupation with change and the depiction of transgressions and fluid exchanges across physical borders, lends itself especially appropriate for the posthuman articulation of inter-species relationality as an unavoidable material reality which crucially influences any given subject. Accordingly, literary pieces such as Sarah Hall's "Mrs Fox", a short story relating a woman-animal metamorphosis, surface as distinctly relevant textual spaces for the examination of posthuman subjectivities and their contemporary creative representation.

It is on the basis of such considerations, raised from a complementary investigation into the identitarian proposals of Posthumanism and Animal Studies as well as an inquiry on bordering processes, liminality and short story criticism, that this dissertation suggests an analytical reading of Sarah Hall's "Mrs Fox" as an effective literary manifestation of the posthuman. Accordingly, as it forces a liminal encounter between human and non-human life where both established meanings and subjectivity collapse into a posthuman becoming-animal, Hall's particular invocation of woman-animal metamorphosis manages to destabilise categorical assumptions about self-contained individual identity and anthropocentric convictions with regards to the species divide, which is rendered not only unstable and flux but also unproductive. As such, by means of a careful use of focalisation, subscribed by its narrative opacity and openness, the story overtly addresses the limitations and drawbacks of reducing non-human life to static anthropocentric logics, which eventually break down in confrontation with the radical materiality of hybrid forms of life and their embodied and embedded practices. Consequently, the border-defying encounter depicted in "Mrs Fox" produces an affirmative change at a communal level, as reflected in the generative reorganisation of genealogy, which ultimately displaces the centrality of human life and perspective in favour of inter-constitutive relationality and zoe-egalitarian, posthuman assemblages.

The precise exploration of the posthuman through the lens of the short story and the literary trope of human-animal metamorphosis as proposed in this dissertation, albeit considerably thorough with regards to the selected corpus, could be further studied so as to achieve a deeper understanding of the urgency and prominence of present-day critical attempts to develop posthuman, post-anthropocentric discourses about subjectivity. Thus, the possible arguments and lines of research which are unexplored in this dissertation due to its restricted scope may be open for future examination. In this regard, comparatively attending to other texts where the author deals with negotiations of identity by means of human-animal encounters —as is the case, for instance, of her 2015 novel *Wolf Border* or her short stories “Bees” (from her 2011 collection *The Beautiful Indifference*) and “M” (from her 2019 collection *Sudden Traveller*)— may prove fruitful in order to establish deeper and broader connections between Hall’s critically acclaimed work and the posthuman predicament. Likewise, drawing on her revision of earlier narratives related to folk tradition and the perceptible similarities between part of her work and that of writers such as Angela Carter, Hall’s reappropriation of animal-bridegroom narratives could be productively approached in light of contemporary critical rewritings of fairy tales. In a more general vein, it may be remarkably valuable to study similar creative configurations of the posthuman through metamorphosis literature beyond Western and white societies, that being the context of both the literary text and the reference works employed throughout this dissertation. Hence, the application of a cross-cultural, intersectional approach which takes into consideration the perspective of the racialised ‘other’ as well as naturalised and sexualised difference would effectively amplify and reinforce posthuman discourses about the centrality of transversal diversity and interrelationality for the unfolding of sustainable conceptualisations of subjectivity, as illustrated in this dissertation.

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