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THE SEMANTICS OF SOLIDARITY: RADICAL VULNERABILITY AND GENDERED LANGUAGE IN ELIA BARCELÓ'S *CONSECUENCIAS NATURALES*

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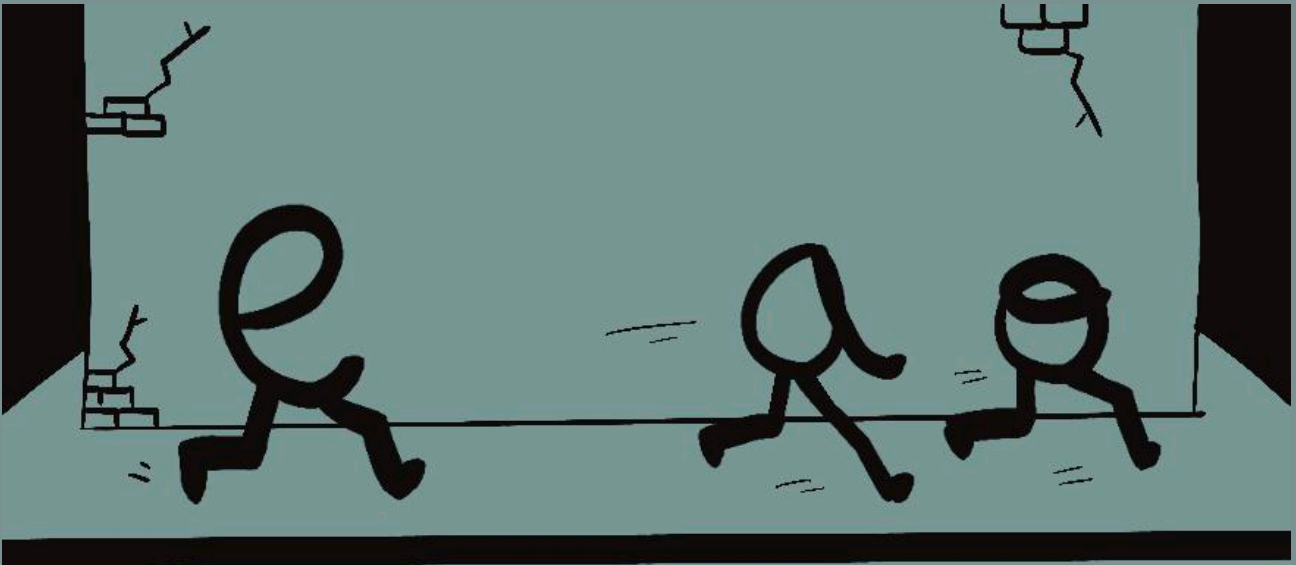
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Abstract || In Elia Barceló's novel, *Consecuencias naturales*, both protagonists undergo biological interventions that cause them to share some or all of the physical characteristics attributed to a gender unlike the one with which they identify. It also deliberately employs gendered language to mount critiques of the heteronormative societal structures that this language reflects. I argue that the trajectory of the protagonists' experiences suggests that physical embodiment is not enough to engage in radical vulnerability with the Other. Instead, radical discursive change is needed to create a mutually understood linguistic paradigm in which both parties may empathize with the other's positionality and lived experience.

Keywords || Radical vulnerability | Peninsular science fiction | Cultural studies

La semántica de la solidaridad: vulnerabilidad radical y lenguaje de género en *Consecuencias naturales* de Elia Barceló

Resumen || En la novela de Elia Barceló, *Consecuencias naturales*, ambos protagonistas sufren intervenciones biológicas que les hacen compartir algunas o todas las características físicas atribuidas a un género diferente al que se identifican. También emplea deliberadamente el lenguaje de género para criticar las estructuras sociales heteronormativas que refleja este lenguaje. Sostengo que la trayectoria de las experiencias de los protagonistas sugiere que la encarnación física no es suficiente para comprometerse en una vulnerabilidad radical con el Otro. En cambio, se necesita un cambio discursivo radical para crear un paradigma lingüístico mutuamente entendido en el que ambas partes puedan empatizar con el posicionamiento y la experiencia vivida del otro.

Palabras clave || Vulnerabilidad radical | Ciencia ficción peninsular | Estudios culturales

La semàntica de la solidaritat: vulnerabilitat radical i llenguatge de gènere a *Consecuencias naturales* d'Elia Barceló

Resum || A la novel·la d'Elia Barceló, *Consecuencias naturales*, ambdós protagonistes es sotmeten a intervencions biològiques que els fan compartir algunes o totes les característiques físiques atribuïdes a un gènere amb el qual no s'identifiquen. La novel·la també usa deliberadament un llenguatge de gènere per a criticar les estructures d'una societat heteronormativa que reflecteix aquest llenguatge. L'article argumenta que la trajectòria dels protagonistes suggereix que l'encarnació física no és suficient per a comprometre's amb la vulnerabilitat radical de l'Altre. En lloc d'això, un canvi discursiu radical és necessari per a crear un paradigma lingüístic mútuament entès dins del qual ambdues parts poden empatitzar amb el posicionament i l'experiència viscuda per l'altre.

Paraules clau || Vulnerabilitat radical | Ciència-ficció peninsular | Estudis culturals

0. Introduction

From the use of neologisms to invented languages to innovative usage of familiar terms, language and its formative, descriptive, and prescriptive functions have long been a fundamental theme of science fiction. In Anglophone science fiction, the intersection of language and gender has also formed a key part of the critical interventions of women science fiction writers, such as Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Suzette Haden Elgin in her Native Tongue trilogy (1984, 1987, 1994).¹ In this article, I turn to a work of Peninsular science fiction that presents interventions of language and gender while also addressing issues relevant and particular to Spain: *Consecuencias naturales* (1994) by Elia Barceló. Often fondly referred to as the “godmother of Spanish science fiction”, Elia Barceló holds the distinction of being one of the first women in Spain to have her science fiction novels published and to receive accolades for them. Barceló began publishing in the fanzine *Kandama* in 1981, and many of her short stories published in the fanzine were later included in her first novel, *Sagrada*. Before the publication of *Consecuencias naturales*, her second novel, Barceló received the 1991 Premio Ignotus for her short story, “La Estrella”—the first of many literary distinctions she would receive over the next three decades.

Consecuencias naturales takes place at an unspecified date in the future where humans have achieved advanced spaceflight and set up outposts throughout the solar system. Though in this distant era the humans of Earth and their outposts claim that they have overcome sexism and achieved gender equality, one of the main protagonists, Nico Andrade, is decidedly retrograde in this aspect. Known for his chauvinism and philandering, Nico views the visit of the Xhroll, a humanoid alien race, to the starship *Victoria* not as a historic landmark of first contact with alien life, but rather as an opportunity to be the first human to have sex with an alien female (Barceló, 1994: 12). Against the wishes of his commanding officer, Nico sleeps with the Xhroll Ankhjaia’langtxhrl (later shortened to Akkhaia by human acquaintances). The brief union results in pregnancy, but to Nico’s shock and dismay, it is not Akkhaia who becomes pregnant, but Nico. The Xhroll, however, are delighted, as they are a dying species. Nico is taken to the Xhroll’s home planet to await the birth of the child, accompanied by the human female captain Charlie Fonseca.

As is the case in many science fiction novels, the theme of encountering the Other forms an integral part of *Consecuencias naturales*. In feminist theory, two approaches that are often applied to real-world and literary encounters and relationships with alterity are situated knowledges and feminist standpoint theory. Situated knowledges, first posited by Donna Haraway, states that individual knowledges are always partial and situated within their social reality. Although it is impossible to construct one perfectly objective knowledge due to this partiality of all knowledges, Haraway asserts that in compiling (approximated) objective knowledge, it is preferable to begin with subjugated situated knowledges due to their

ability to perceive the world from their subjugated position and thereby bear witness to phenomena otherwise ignored by those in positions of power (1988: 348-349). In feminist standpoint theory, Sandra Harding further elaborates on the ideas of situated knowledges by arguing that all knowledge produced in societies stratified by race, gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity is shaped by and situated within the limits set by those categories. Given this, marginalized groups are better situated to be aware of certain social phenomena than non-marginalized groups (1988: 44).

While these concepts are useful in theory, the question becomes how to apply them practically. Richa Nagar posited that the way to positively mobilize standpoint theory and situated knowledges is through the approach of radical vulnerability. Nagar defines radical vulnerability as occurring when one conceives of the self as “intensely relational and co-constitutive with the other” and posits that only way for the self to evolve is through collective journeys built upon “an openness to and an intimacy with the other” (2019: 212). Those who encounter and create relationships with the Other must commit to “surrendering to a politics of co-travelling and co-authorship, politics that are accompanied by difficult refusals” (2019: 240). In order to transform encounters with the Other as events that establish difference and division into the potential for forming a creative, productive, and equal alliance, one must commit to the messy and often difficult process of collaborating openly and equally with the Other. For Nagar, however, the Other in question is a human subject. As I will explain, I take the notion of radical vulnerability as a constitutive element of selfhood and becoming situated within community and expand it beyond the boundaries of the human. Giving the concept a posthuman angle, I propose to extend it to encompass all manner of life in the novel, human and nonhuman.

In *Consecuencias naturales*, Nico Andrade and Charlie Fonseca engage in interactions that cause them to share some of the physical characteristics and stereotypical social roles attributed to both the opposite human gender and the genders of the alien Xhroll they encounter. Given that radical vulnerability is predicated upon acknowledging, accepting, and dialoguing with the different situated knowledges of the Other, one might think that coming to embody the physical and social reality of a group considered Other (e.g. a man becoming pregnant) would more readily enable this process. I argue, however, that this is not the case at all in *Consecuencias naturales*, and the trajectory of the protagonists' experiences within the narrative suggests that physical embodiment does not necessarily facilitate radical vulnerability. Instead, it is the characters who embrace the language of the Other and the mentality it entails that are best able to engage in radical vulnerability. Therefore, the text suggests that radical discursive change is needed on the part of the subject/Self to create a mutually understood linguistic paradigm in which both parties may empathize with the other's positionality and lived experience and thus build positive alliances.

While the twist of a male pregnancy in *Consecuencias naturales* may seem to be the main gender commentary of the novel, I argue that it is merely a mechanism used to foreground the text's greater critical interventions that lie in its characters' use of language and discourse. As previously mentioned, the humans of *Consecuencias naturales* proudly declare that they live in a society almost entirely free of sexism. The greatest evidence of this, they are quick to point out, is in the linguistic equality that has been achieved with the elimination of the generic masculine in Spanish. That is to say, whenever a situation of potential linguistic gender ambiguity arises, the correct form of speech is to use both the feminine and masculine forms of the words rather than just the masculine (a practice which I will refer to hereafter as *linguistic doubling*). This can clearly be seen at the beginning of the narrative, when the human members of the space outpost Victoria gather to meet the Xhroll for the first time. The leader of the Victoria, Commander Kaminsky, welcomes the visiting aliens with the following speech:

Honorables huéspedes del planeta Xhroll. Todas y todos de nosotras y nosotros, ciudadanas y ciudadanos del planeta Tierra, nos sentimos inmensamente honradas, honrados, y orgullosas, orgullosos por el raro privilegio que nos ha sido concedido al poder contar con vuestra presencia aquí. (Barceló, 1994: 16)

Though this example may seem extreme, the human characters of the novel are accustomed to incorporating linguistic doubling into their speech. Indeed, upon meeting the Xhroll, the human characters are taken aback, even offended, that the aliens use the generic masculine to address their new human acquaintances, viewing the practice as sexist (Barceló, 1994: 18).

1. How Do You Define “Linguistic Sexism”?

Again, while the characters' reactions may seem excessive, they find their roots in a longstanding debate in contemporary Spain over whether the Spanish language is inherently sexist and, if so, how to rectify this and make the language more equitable. For some, the heart of the problem lies with the Real Academia Española (hereafter RAE), the organization responsible for publishing the *Diccionario de la lengua española*, formerly the Diccionario del Real Academia Española. The RAE has been criticized for its ambivalence toward and perpetuation of linguistic injustice and violence against women, as its guidelines of appropriate and inappropriate usage of the Spanish language carry considerable cultural weight.² Notably, the RAE has only included eleven women since its inception in 1713 (the first of whom was inducted in 1979) and has never had a woman director. Currently, there are seven women in the RAE out of 45 total full members (académicos de número). The RAE's policies and practices on gender equality within the Spanish language are problematic at best, as can be seen through the structure and definitions within the *Diccionario de la lengua española*. For example, although the *Dictionary* is purportedly alphabetical, entries that include feminine and masculine forms are ordered with the masculine

first (e.g. “abuelo, la”). Certain definitions within the Diccionario also reveal a distinctly *machista* bent, such as the definition of *forzar* which until very recently was defined as “gozar a una mujer sin su voluntad” (Bengoechea, 2001: 10). In addition to objectifying the violated woman as a thing to be “enjoyed”—implying that the word is implicitly male in its perspective—this definition excludes men who have suffered sexual assault.

Despite the RAE’s ambivalence (even negligence) toward promoting gender equality in its dictionary, efforts to increase gender parity within the Spanish language have nonetheless proliferated during the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century. In 1988 and 1990, shortly before the publication of *Consecuencias naturales* (1994), the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science and UNESCO, respectively, released guidelines for anti-sexist uses of language. In the three decades since that time, the presence of such guidelines has greatly increased, with autonomous regions, districts, and even private institutions issuing guidelines for avoiding sexist language (Nissen, 2013: 100). Though the RAE has acknowledged these guidelines, it has been largely dismissive toward them as well as toward anti-sexist and inclusive language movements such as the use of @, x, or élle.³ Regardless of the stance of the RAE on these guidelines, Barceló would have undoubtedly been aware of them, particularly the 1990 UNESCO report that advocated for the doubling of masculine and feminine forms in Spanish, just as the human characters of *Consecuencias naturales* do in their speech and writing. That said, it is worth noting that the UNESCO report (along with later proponents of anti-sexist Spanish language such as linguists Mercedes Bengoechea, Carmen Heredero, Uwe Kjaer Nissen, and Benedicta Lomotey) present this linguistic doubling not as a silver bullet to sexism but rather as an opportunity to move the Spanish language toward greater gender parity by increasing women’s visibility through greater use of the feminine form (1990: 2). The human characters of *Consecuencias naturales*, however, see their “equal” language as evidence of a post-sexist society, an endpoint rather than a stepping-stone.

1.1. Bringing the “F” Word (Feminism) to an Analysis of *Consecuencias naturales*

Previous studies of *Consecuencias naturales* have signaled this doubling of masculine and feminine forms of words as a key site for the novel’s gender critiques, though their interpretations of what this critique is may differ.⁴ Cristina Sánchez-Conejero argues that the linguistic doubling of gendered words in characters’ speech satirizes the gendered nature of the Spanish language in order to criticize Spanish machismo *and* feminist political agendas (2009: 53). For the former, she cites the characterization of Nico Andrade, in particular, his tendency to objectify women. Drawing upon Alejandro Gamero’s critique of Spanish feminist proposals to create anti-sexist alternatives to the generic masculine, as well as a personal interview with Elia Barceló, Sánchez-Conejero

concludes that the doubling of masculine and feminine forms found in *Consecuencias naturales* (as seen in Commander Kaminsky's welcoming speech to the Xhroll) is employed as a means of ridiculing feminist claims that such a practice would promote greater gender equality. Moreover, she claims that Barceló's novel *cannot* be analyzed as a feminist work given that Barceló herself does not identify as a feminist. Sánchez-Conejero concludes that as linguistic change does not force men to empathize with women's lived experiences of discrimination, it is only cosmetic in effect (2009: 55). As I will demonstrate, both of these assertions are problematic. The first claim, that a feminist reading cannot be applied to Barceló's work due to her lack of identification as a feminist, fails to consider and unpack the complicated history of Spanish feminism and the prevailing sentiment among many female writers of Barceló's generation that feminism does not have a place within a literary setting. Furthermore, such statements do not negate the possibility of these female writers nevertheless presenting what could be seen as feminist critiques within their works. The second assertion, that the linguistic change of the novel is superficial and does not promote male identification with female lived experiences, is patently refuted by the events and characters of the novel itself.

At times, the concept of *women's writing* has come to be used interchangeably with *feminist writing*. While the two terms are not interchangeable and this kind of slippage is problematic regardless of its context, conflating women's writing with feminism or feminist writing is particularly fraught in the context of Spanish literature, given the fragmented, complex history of Spain's feminist movement. A 1991 interview with Cristina Fernández-Cubas, Soledad Puértolas, and Mercedes Abad—all authors who hail from the same generation as Elia Barceló—highlights the difficulty of equating women's writing with feminist writing in a Spanish context and sheds light on Barceló's position in declining to identify herself as a feminist. Asked by the interviewer if they considered themselves feminists, all three authors emphatically state that they are not. Fernández-Cubas asserts that to call oneself and one's work feminist is to automatically associate with political activism. Moreover, she stresses that "literatura y feminismo no tienen nada que ver" (Zecchi, 1991: 158). To her, and to Puértolas and Abad, their work is an art form that should be considered as simply literature, and the notion of "women's literature" is something that should be left to sociology and psychology (Zecchi, 1991: 159). Monica Threlfall asserts that during the Transition, in which both Barceló's work and this interview fall, many women's attitudes towards feminist movements and the idea of feminism in general were negatively colored by a lingering association of all-women's groups with the segregationist practices of Franco's dictatorship, specifically the Sección Femenina (1996: 121). While it is impossible to say with certainty that authors such as Fernández-Cubas and Barceló's perspectives of feminism can be attributed to Threlfall's argument, there is a strong parallel between their rejection of a feminist identification and the attitudes of many women and women authors of their generation who witnessed the heyday, division, and ultimate crumbling of the Spanish feminist movement during the Transition. Along

those lines, it would perhaps be inappropriate to call Barceló's work *feminist* in the sense of the Spanish single- and double-militancy feminism that predominated in the late 70s through early 80s or even the female-centered institutions that became codified within the Spanish government in the mid-to-late 1980s. This does not mean, however, that is impossible or even inappropriate to carefully apply a feminist *reading* to her text, taking into consideration the social and cultural contexts that shaped it.

To return to Sánchez-Conejero's second assertion—that linguistic change is only cosmetic in effect as it does not force men to empathize with women's positionalities—I contend that the narrative *does* place a man, Nico, in the physical position of a woman through his pregnancy, as well as force him to experience discrimination usually reserved for women. Furthermore, the linguistic changes and standards already present in the novel may need to take further steps to be truly inclusive, but the behaviors of the novel's characters show that such changes are *not* cosmetic and indeed influence the characters' perception of reality. And though there could be a certain level of parody occurring with the extent of linguistic doubling in the novel, it is not done, as Sánchez-Conejero contends, to ridicule feminist agenda but rather to demonstrate that linguistic doubling is not enough: other aspects of (male) individuals' lived experiences must also be *doubled* (physical, material, experiential) and they need to journey and collaborate openly and vulnerably alongside female-identified persons so that they internalize the importance of gender equality.

In another study, Vanessa Knights asserts that Barceló plays with gendered language throughout the novel in order to draw attention to and critique the constructed nature of language (2004: 91). Furthermore, she rightly observes, "the rules and regulations in place to promote equality have not been sufficient to completely erase discriminatory behavior" (2004: 89). For example, although Nico Andrade is a caricature of a chauvinistic male from a contemporary perspective (to say nothing of the perception of his behavior within his supposedly egalitarian society), his attitudes surrounding gender and gendered language are nonetheless indicative of underlying biases still inherent in that language and, by extension, the society that uses it.

The most telling example of this lies in Nico's limited apprehension of the possibilities of gendered embodiment. The human language of the novel (Spanish) only makes reference to two genders: male and female. According to the principal of linguistic relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, different languages segment reality differently. Or, as Benjamin Lee Whorf put it, "All observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated" (1940: 7). There are two schools of thought as to how to interpret this assertion: either that an individual's perception of reality is linguistically *influenced*, or an individual's perception of reality is *circumscribed* by the language that they speak. In the latter interpretation, a concept that exists

outside of the speaker's language would be inherently unknowable to the speaker.⁵ Following the second school of thought for the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Nico's perception of the reality of gender is circumscribed by this linguistic limitation, and he cannot conceive of gender beyond the limited male-female binary. Given this, he has a (stereotypical) set of understandings of what it means to be man, and what it means to be woman. After one sexual conquest, Nico muses that the human woman he slept with had behaved like "una mujer auténtica":

Siempre le resultaba curioso ese cambio que se operaba en las mujeres en cuanto conseguías meterles en la cama, como si todos los siglos de lucha por la igualdad sexual no habían sido más que una maniobra intelectual de las insatisfechas para robarle a la hembra humana su auténtica realización, su comportamiento natural de entrega al hombre, a su protección y deseo. (Barceló, 1994: 121)

While Nico's male compatriots disavow themselves of such explicitly chauvinist opinions, their reactions belie their words. Upon learning from the ship's doctor that "el teniente Andrade va a tener un bebé", Nico's friends burst out laughing, "con acompañamiento de lágrimas y palmadas en los muslos" (Barceló, 1994: 41). They attempt to explain that they are only laughing at the notion that Nico would be concerned with the news that he had gotten a Xhroll pregnant. Yet rather than express concern for the (presumably female) Xhroll who they assume has been impregnated, their first inclination is to laugh. When they learn the truth of who is carrying the child, however, their reaction changes to horror. This response implies that they, too, still unconsciously hew to the notion of woman as object of man's desire: actions committed against the woman-object do not carry the same emotional and moral weight as those done to the man-subject. The woman-object receives the actions of the man-subject and is not allowed judgment upon them, creating opportunities for even highly abhorrent actions such as rape to be rendered risible. The reactions of Nico's compatriots also give further evidence that despite this future society's assertions of egalitarianism, greater steps are needed to alter perceptions of gendered language beyond simple doubling of gendered words. The changes may have made them more sensitive to the need to include women in both discourse and societal positions of power, but they have not yet dealt with the lingering sexist connotations within the language.

The lingering linguistic inequality of Spanish proves to be a barrier to Nico and Charlie's ability to engage in radical vulnerability with one another and with the Xhroll. In the latter case, however, the existence of this barrier is largely dependent on each protagonist's willingness to learn the eponymous Xhroll language. Although both humans and Xhroll have machine translators that can capture the basic meanings of each other's language, the nuances are often lost in translation or impossible for the machines to parse. Nico patently refuses to learn Xhroll, and his refusal to do so causes no end of misunderstandings, confusion, and reinforced divisions on the Xhroll home planet. One reason for this is that *male* and *female* do not exist for the Xhroll. Instead, the Xhroll recognize three genders that do not neatly translate to human binaries (and therefore are

not picked up by the translators): abba, ari-arkhj, and xhrea. These gender designations are based upon the Xhroll's reproductive capability, as all Xhroll are anatomically identical, appearing to have genitalia similar to human females and lacking breasts. Abba are capable of bearing children, ari-arkhj beget children of abbas, and xhrea are infertile. In order to designate their capacity to beget children, ari-arkhj have chest augmentations surgically implanted, giving the appearance of breasts. Ostensibly, reproductive capability also determines one's social status within Xhroll society: as the bearers of children, abbas are regarded most highly, followed by the ari-arkhj, and the xhrea hold the least social value.

The key word here is *ostensibly*. In reality, the social dynamics are flipped. Though they cannot reproduce, the xhrea have slowly taken steps to become administrators of every aspect of Xhroll, to the point of having "prácticamente todo el poder, a pesar del trato deferente reservado a abbas y ari-arkhjs" (96). In reality, the high social regard for the abba is connected not to their value as subjects but rather to the value of the offspring they bear. Once with child, an abba is deprived of the power to travel, make decisions, or even speak without the presence of an ari-arkhj chaperone. Once with child, the abba loses all autonomy over their body: their ari-arkhj chaperone and the administrative xhrea around them determine what is "best for the child" and act upon the abba's body as they see fit. In this way, the abba reflect Susan Bordo's observations of the legal and social conception of pregnant women in many contemporary Western societies as *res extensa* (mere bodies), instead of conscious subjects (1993: 73). Once with child, Bordo argues, a woman is viewed no longer as a subject but as an "incubator to her fetus", a container who, if need be, "is supposed to efface her own subjectivity" (1993: 79). The ari-arkhj possess agency and subjecthood in their role as implanters of life and chaperones to abbas. It is not adequate, however, to draw a direct parallel of ari-arkhj to human male embodiment, as the ari-arkhj are ultimately subordinate to the social control of the xhrea. Indeed, if any direct parallel to human gender is to be made, it would be that Barceló's characterization of the Xhroll's three genders seems to argue that the gendered imbalance of power finds its source in societal perceptions of which bodies and which human actions *belong* in the public versus private spheres. The abba and ari-arkhj, associated with reproduction in roles similar to males and females, caretaking, and child-rearing, remain largely in the private sphere and have no say in the governance of their society. By contrast, the xhrea take no part in procreation or raising offspring and operate almost exclusively in the public sphere.

To the Xhroll, Nico is not male but abba, as he is the one bearing the child. Akkhaia, perceived as female by Nico due to their chest implants, is instead ari-arkhj, the one who "implanted" life in him. And Charlie is mistaken by the Xhroll to be an ari-arkhj due to her breasts and admission that she has children. This Xhroll's initial confusion regarding Nico and Charlie's genders ultimately cause the two humans to embody subject positions that they would normally consider Other to themselves. Nico experiences the physical changes of a pregnant human woman, and is

treated as a Xhroll abba—symbolically revered but otherwise infantilized. Charlie fulfills that chaperone role, with her voice elevated above Nico's. What's more, Charlie takes on what is typically viewed as a male embodied position when she is asked by the Xhroll to implant life in Xhroll abbas in the hopes of producing more hybrid children.

Nico's rejection of the Xhroll language prevents him from forming relationships with the Xhroll and developing a more nuanced perception of Xhroll society, just as his limited notions of the terms *male* and *female* impede him from empathizing with discrimination against women. Despite his pregnant state, he views the changes in his body as abhorrent, even malignant. When asked if he plans on raising the baby after it is born, he scornfully replies, "Es como una especie de tumor. Nadie se quedaría con un tumor cuando los médicos han conseguido extirparlo" (Barceló, 1994: 72). His attitude echoes classical notions of the masculine and feminine embodiment. Western philosophy has long had at its roots the dualism of mind/body, with the mind occupying the superior position over the body. The mind housed one's true self, one's will and spirit, through which one could achieve transcendence of the mundane flesh—that is, the body. At the same time, masculinity was linked to the mind and femininity to the body, creating the paradigm of the masculine signifying positive and aspirational transcendence/the mind the feminine negatively (or at the very least inferiorly) signifying immanence/the body (Threadcraft, 2018: 209). Nico equates womanhood with the body of a woman, which he has habitually objectified and devalued. Indeed, many of his references to women or Xhroll who he misgenders as women characterize them first and foremost as *bodies* or in terms of their physicality. He cannot conceive of himself in that light, so he alienates himself from his body.

In one particularly violent example, near the end of his pregnancy, Nico takes out his frustration and revulsion at his body by raping a xhrea, who he misgenders as female. He rationalizes his actions to himself by thinking, "...esa muchacha iba a pagar su humillación con otra igual...en esos momentos lo único que le importaba era...que volvía a estar en posesión de sus facultades" (Barceló, 1994: 141-142). Rape constitutes one of the greatest destructive, denigrative acts that can be done to the female body, and it is committed by a man in the midst of a pregnancy, often characterized as one of the female body's great creative or culminating experiences. Nico's conviction that his rape of the xhrea is the path through which he will be able to come back into his own as a man reveals a desire to symbolically cancel out the feminine aspect of his current embodiment. It is only through this symbolic elimination of his undesired feminine body that he feels he can return to his "faculties"—a notable word choice that more often connotes *mental* capabilities than physical—that he can reject feminine immanence and ascend to masculine transcendence. Given that Nico views his rape of the Xhroll as an attempt to restore himself to his *natural* place atop the patriarchal hierarchy, he appears to justify his actions as a "consecuencia natural" of the disruption to the phallo-anthropocentric order caused by his pregnancy, adding a darker implication to the title of the novel. In this

way, Nico also embodies the dark side of humanism: for all its championing of logical thought and secularism, traditional humanism still holds to a patriarchal, Eurocentric, and anthropocentric hierarchy. Holding to this hierarchy, Nico's actions can be seen as an effort to re-establish his *correct* order of the universe. In his dominance over and violation of the xhrea—a (misgendered) female nonhuman—Nico further distances himself from it in order to reassert himself—a white, human male—at both the height and center of the *natural* order.

Charlie, on the other hand, is not in thrall to such notions. Unlike Nico, Charlie takes it upon herself to learn the Xhroll language. As a result, her perception of how Xhroll society is gendered and structured gains greater profundity. What's more, she is able to engage in radical vulnerability with Akkhaia to create an intimate and intense relationship that is imperfect, messy, and continuously evolving. Though there are misunderstandings and setbacks in their communication and interactions, the willingness of the two individuals to work and grow with one another results in richer understandings for them both: Charlie gains insight into how Xhroll language shapes their actions and motivations, as does Akkhaia for human language and nonverbal cues.

The greater comprehension of the Xhroll worldview that Charlie gains through learning their language and forming an alliance with Akkhaia ultimately allows her to prevent war between humanity and the Xhroll. Desperate to preserve the life of their dying species, the Xhroll plan to invade Earth and forcibly implant (i.e. rape) human males to beget children. This proposed action goes against everything that their society, until then dedicated to respectful coexistence and natureculture, has represented. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the inspiration of this plan of conquest and violation comes not from Xhroll but humans—specifically, from Nico's original deception of Akkhaia that resulted in his pregnancy. At the same time, the xhrea that Nico rapes becomes pregnant, something thought to be impossible for that gender. Realizing that the Xhroll's apprehension of their own genders may be as constrained by linguistic connotations as humanity was (and often still is) with the connotations of male and female, Charlie suggests to Akkhaia that Xhroll's population crisis might be solved by involving the xhrea in reproduction efforts. Akkhaia is initially appalled:

- Es imposible, Charlie. Un xhrea no puede concebir. No puede.
- ¿Por qué?
- Porque es xhrea.
- Esa es solo una clasificación lingüística.
- Que refleja la realidad.
- O que la impone y no os permite pensar de otra manera. (Barceló, 1994: 174)

After a time, however, they agree to give it a try, acknowledging that success would result in a need to rethink how to talk about gender and, potentially, the upheaval of Xhroll society. In addition to reflecting the positive evolution that can be attained through journeys of radical vulnerability, this exchange also reflects the first school of thought

surrounding the principle of linguistic relativity: language influences a speaker's perception of reality. Since Akkhaia and Charlie have taken the time to grow together, linguistically and in their mutual understanding of one another's cultures and lived experiences, Akkhaia is able to reflect upon Charlie's statement and consider changes they would not have entertained in the past, thus adapting and avoiding the death of their species due to fossilized thinking.

It is not just the Xhroll, however, who contemplate radical linguistic change at the end of the novel. Charlie adopts Nico's baby, Lenny, whose gender is impossible to classify due to their Xhroll/human hybridity. On her way to care for the child, Charlie muses,

Al fin y al cabo era su hija.
 O su hijo.
 Y ella era su madre.
 O su padre.
 O su madre.
 O su padre. O... (Barceló, 1994: 185)

The ellipsis, itself a sign of pause and continuation in an as-yet undetermined direction, signals an aperture, a possible line of flight toward a different mode—a multiplicity of modes—of conceptualizing gender as well as gendered caretaking roles. The ellipsis also highlights a key facet of radical vulnerability: the importance of nonarrival. Radical vulnerability is an ongoing process—indeed, coming to the end of the journey of co-evolution among involved subjects necessarily means the end of radical vulnerability. Instead, radical vulnerability calls for “a recentering and a fluid mode of alliance work...[that] cannot be achieved without complex processes of translation” and that cannot settle into an endpoint (Nagar, 2016: 512). Charlie ends her rumination in an ellipsis and does not rush to fill it with a conclusion or final takeaway. Her smile as she goes on her way at the end of the novel demonstrates an acceptance of that space and nonarrival proposed by the ellipsis, and therefore her relationships with Lenny and the Xhroll. In considering how to describe her relationship to Lenny, Charlie reconfigures herself, acknowledging that her new lived experience may require new terminology that better fits it, and displaying comfort in the discomforts that will inevitably arise in pursuing her ongoing and intensely relational interactions with Lenny and with the Xhroll.

1.2. *Consecuencias naturales*: Satire or Linguistic Foresight?

As I have previously stated, most studies of *Consecuencias naturales* and interviews with Elia Barceló have identified the extensive doubling of masculine and feminine in the human characters' Spanish as an exaggeration or even parody of anti-sexist language initiatives. At the time of the novel's publication, even with the burgeoning initiatives of UNESCO and the Spanish government to promote anti-sexist language, such doubling most likely would have been seen as excessive to a public as-yet new to the idea. As often happens with science fiction, however,

the content of Barceló's novel as read in 2020 appears less satiric and more prescient with regard to anti-sexist language movements and the public's attitude toward them.

Though public opinion is still divided on radical linguistic change in the name of inclusivity (such as modifying the language structures of Spanish), studies done in the last decade show that anti-sexist language that calls for mild to moderate additions or changes to written and spoken language has slowly gained widespread acceptance and usage. Mercedes Bengoechea, who has studied the sociolinguistic trends of anti-sexist language use (or the lack thereof) since the 1990s, notes that there is a growing tendency of newspapers to use anti-sexist and/or feminized language in their publications. These changes include using gender-neutral terms instead of gendered (e.g. *el profesorado* instead of *los profesores*), altering the names of positions or job descriptors to include the feminine (e.g. *la comisariada* instead of *la comisariado*), doubling masculine and feminine forms (e.g. *los profesores y las profesoras*), or altering the language entirely through the gender-inclusive suffix -@ (2006: 141-151).⁶

Beyond academic studies, current events in the Spanish political arena have also highlighted calls for anti-sexist language, backlash certain organizations have received for adopting it, and the rise of far-right groups that denounce all attempts to normalize inclusive and anti-sexist language. In February of 2018, the spokesperson of the left-wing political party Unidos Podemos, Irene Montero, made headlines by referring to herself as the *portavoza* of the party. Reactions to Montero's use of the term ranged from supportive to scornful. Carmen Calvo, then the Minister of the Presidency, Relations with the Cortes and Equality and a member of PSOE, declared that "Las mujeres tenemos derecho a que la revisión del lenguaje sexista nos ayude en la reivindicación de todos y cada uno de nuestros derechos y de la igualdad" (García de Blas, 2018). On the other hand, Emilio del Río, Culture spokesperson for the Partido Popular [People's Party], asserted that Montero's feminization of *portavoz* did nothing to promote gender equality and instead only displayed a willingness to "cargarse todo al servicio del sectarismo ideológico" lo que demuestra "una profunda incultura" (2018).

At the far end of the spectrum lies the rhetoric of Vox, Spain's far-right political party. Known for overtly opposing projects linked to gender equality, Vox has repeatedly denounced efforts to introduce inclusive language in Spanish government and society. As recently as March of 2020, Javier García Bartolomé, regional representative of Vox in Valladolid, introduced a motion to the city council to eliminate all inclusive language from the local government, linking it to "sesgo ideológico" and a leftist desire to "imponer un lenguaje feminista" (Salvar, 2020).

The current debate over inclusive language in Spain centers in great part on the inclusion or exclusion of feminized nouns (*portavoza*, *jueza*) and doubling masculine and feminine forms of terms (*los empleados y las empleadas*)—again, debates that now seem presciently envisioned in

Consecuencias naturales. Barceló's novel, however, also predicts two other linguistic movements for inclusive language that go beyond linguistic doubling and are just barely beginning to emerge in Spain: Latinx and *éлле*. Just as the conclusion of *Consecuencias naturales* suggests that a new linguistic paradigm is necessary to forge alliances between and among genders and species, so too do the Latinx and *éлле* movements propose a reconfiguration of Spanish to achieve gender equality and inclusivity. In the United States, many universities, feminist organizations, and members of the LGBTQ+ community have widely adopted the use of the morpheme -x as a gender-neutral alternative to masculine and feminine endings of words. Given the difficulty of incorporating -x into spoken Spanish (e.g. todxs lxs alumnxs) and the claim that Latinx is an inorganic creation of the ivory tower, however, usage of -x is as yet a principally United States phenomenon and has not caught on outside of the country (Sulbarán Lovera, 2018). In contrast, the *éлле* movement has recently gained ground and popularity in its spoken and written usage, particularly in Argentina and Chile among young adults (Marcos, 2019). Similar to Latinx, *éлле* introduces the morpheme -e as a gender-neutral solution for linguistic inclusivity (e.g. todes les alumnes). Just as in other contemporary cases of promoting inclusive language, *éлле* has received pushback from elected leaders and some linguists. The head of the Argentine Academy of Letters, José Luis Moure, protested that to use -e "antes hay que atenderlo debidamente, como si aprendiéramos una lengua extranjera... Eso implica un esfuerzo que contraría la tendencia natural aprendida" (Ruiz Mantilla, 2019). But then, as *Consecuencias naturales* demonstrated thirty years earlier, contradicting *natural tendencies* to build a new understanding of language and the relationships it engenders is precisely the point.

3. Conclusion

In Elia Barceló's *Consecuencias naturales*, language serves not only as the central novum of the novel but also as the base from which the text problematizes the role of language in achieving gender equality. While the novel's future society views its linguistic doubling of masculine and feminine forms as proof positive of transcending patriarchy, the events of the novel demonstrate that this assertion does not bear out. Nico Andrade's pregnancy, the attitudes of his compatriots toward his pregnancy, and the assumptions of the human characters about the nature of the Xhroll characters based on (erroneous) application of male/female genders to the alien race highlights that humanity's linguistic doubling may have made male and female equally visible in the language, but this visibility does not necessarily erase underlying masculinist structures. In addition, language is central to the negotiation, success, and/or failure of interactions with the Xhroll, the alien Other of the novel. Although both Charlie and Nico take on aspects of the physical embodiment of a gender they do not identify with throughout the novel (Nico with that of a human woman and Charlie with that of an ari-arkhj), this does not ultimately have a great effect on their success at understanding and working alongside different genders and/or species.

Instead, it is the willingness of the two human protagonists, Charlie and Nico, to take on learning the Xhroll language that forms the greatest determining factor in their ability to engage in the messy, vulnerable, imprecise process of forging alliances with the Xhroll and adopt the posthuman sensibilities that enable becoming-nomad subjectivities. This contradicts assertions—seen in both a study of this work and in contemporary Spanish debates on inclusive language—that linguistic change is superfluous in the absence of measures that obligate one to embody the lived experience of the Other.

Within its context, *Consecuencias naturales* argues that although the leveling of the Spanish language through linguistic doubling in the novel is done with good intentions and in order to create alliances between genders, it is ultimately a superficial step, as it maintains binaristic gender divisions and does not create linguistic opportunities for its speakers to go beyond their original lexical foundations and their connotations and work alongside the other gender/Other's lived experiences. On a broader scale, the novel demonstrates how radical linguistic change is required to create the possibility of mutual understanding. In this way, it establishes itself not only as a precursor to contemporary Spanish linguistic debates over inclusive language but also movements such as Latinx and élle that demand radical linguistic change to bring about a more inclusive and equitable Spanish language.

Notas

¹ For more on the intersections of science fiction and feminism, and science fiction theory, see Armit (1991); Cranny-Francis (1990); Donawerth (1997); Hanson (2020); Lefanu (1988) and Melzer (2006).

² See: Bengoechea (2001); Cabeza Pereiro and Rodríguez Barcía (2013); Lomotey (2015); Maldonado García (2015).

³ A 2012 article written by RAE council member Ignacio Bosque and endorsed by all 33 Numerary and Correspondent Academics of the RAE considers nine such guides for anti-sexist language from autonomous communities and universities. Though he admits that gender-based discrimination and violence are serious problems in Spain, he concludes that the guides are of little use in solving the issue (Bosque, 2012: 16).

⁴ See Clúa (2017) and Casas (2019) for further feminist interventions on Barceló's works.

⁵ As might be expected, this more extreme interpretation of linguistic relativity is quite polemical among linguists to this day. Its inclusion in this chapter does not reflect any support or promotion of this perspective on my part, but rather is merely an observation of its existence within the novel's narrative.

⁶ Bengoechea's study was published in 2006, nearly a decade before later variants of the Spanish language-altering suffixes -x and -e (e.g. Latinx, todes) entered into mainstream conversation. The use of the -@ suffix has decreased dramatically in recent years in the United States and parts of Central and South America—but remains common in Spain—due to the recognition that the -@, which symbolizes both male and female suffixes, excludes nonbinary, genderqueer, and agender people.

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