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Doubling, Decay and Discontinuity: Pathology and the (Post)Human Body in Marie Darrieussecq's *Notre vie dans les forêts*

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This article focuses on the portrayal of corporeal and textual embodiment in Marie Darrieussecq's novel *Notre vie dans les forêts* (2017), a science fiction dystopia in which all bodily diseases have been cured by advancements in cloning technology. In so doing, it explores how the novel's paradigm of bodily enhancement questions both the physical limits of the human body and the ways in which corporeal changes redefine contemporary notions of subjectivity, life and death. Drawing on posthuman theory and critical theories of the body, the analysis begins with a reading of human doubling and the portrayal of cloning, before considering the text's depiction of bodily decay and dissection as a decentering of Darrieussecq's human subjects. The final section concludes with an exploration of textual discontinuity and its significance for the interpretation of this work. As such, this paper demonstrates how *Notre vie dans les forêts* encourages its readers to contemplate the innate pathologies of the human condition, allowing them to find new life in the forces of decay and disorder that connect all living subjects.



The body, and bodily transformations, hold an important place in the works of contemporary French author Marie Darrieussecq. From her first novel *Truismes* (1996), which portrays the protagonist's metamorphosis into a pig, to *Le Pays* (2005), in which the narrator contemplates her changing relationship with her own pregnant body, the corporeal form provides a means to explore experiences of female subjectivity and the material dynamics of the body (Dalton, 2020), as well as its somewhat contradictory status as an object of fantasy (Damlé, 2014). As scholars have shown, Darrieussecq's writing is also characterised by a reflexive play with textual embodiment: her works blur boundaries between genre and form (Chadderton, 2012), and are notable for their linguistic experimentation with the use of personal pronouns (Schaal, 2012).

Corporeal and textual embodiment are likewise central themes in Darrieussecq's 2017 novel, *Notre vie dans les forêts*, a science fiction dystopia in which all bodily diseases have been cured by advances in cloning technology. Told from the perspective of the psychotherapist Viviane, whose body is gradually falling to pieces, this narrative raises the question of our contemporary desire for physical perfection and its effect on subjective experience. Engaging with this Special Collection's objective of exploring 'the fears, anxieties and desires that society projects onto the body', this article explores Darrieussecq's portrayal of a world without disease as a means to examine how her novel challenges understandings of human and posthuman subjectivity, and the ethical dilemmas posed by bioengineering in an age of material capitalism. In doing so, this article analyses the ways in which the novel's paradigm of bodily enhancement questions both the physical limits of the human body and the possibility of overcoming them as the narrative gradually unfolds to reveal a subjective destabilisation of Viviane's humanity, or, as we learn, *posthumanity*.

The desire for physical enhancement has long been a concern of science fiction and utopian literature. These works range from the superfluous such as Charles Fourier's colourful idea for the *archibras*, a dexterous third arm that he conjures in his 1816 treatise *Le Nouveau monde amoureux*, to the portrayal of scientific intervention as vital to the survival of humankind, such as Frederick Pohl's cyborg programme in his 1976 novel *Man Plus*, which sees human bodies replaced by artificial ones capable of withstanding the climate of Mars. Although such ideas may seem *out of this world*, the increasing rate of technological advancement seen over recent years means that the possibility of humankind undergoing some kind of techno-biological transformation is becoming increasingly likely. Over past decades, advances in biomedical sciences have seen the implementation of new technology in order to cure disease or overcome physical dysfunction, for instance, bone marrow transplantation to treat blood cancers, pacemakers used to treat heart disease, and robotic limbs that allow quadriplegic

patients to regain motor functions. However, scientific progress has also led to the possibility of non-therapeutic enhancements of the human body, such as gene doping used to enhance the performance of athletes in sporting events.

As outlined by Nick Bostrom and Julian Savulescu (2008), the idea of transforming humanity beyond its biological bounds has given rise to active debate from scientists and philosophers alike. On one side of this discussion is the techno-utopian movement of transhumanism, which ‘involves a desire to intensify and extend uniquely human properties beyond their normal physical parameters’ (Fuller, 2014: 201). Whereas transhumanists argue for the free implementation of enhancement technologies, bio-conservatives, on the other hand, believe that alterations of human biology have the potential to produce negative effects on the human condition and so should be rigorously controlled (Bostrom and Savulescu, 2008:1). Adjacent to both sides is the theory of posthumanism, which charts the breakdown of traditional notions of the human to give way to the posthuman, a being which blurs the line between the human, technology, and the environment (Braidotti, 2013). The main ethical questions posed by the practice of human enhancement relate to who can gain access to enhancements, whether their implementation should require therapeutic justification, and how they might be regulated. Furthermore, the effects of such transformations extend beyond physical changes to influence the very way we conceive of the human subject and its interaction with others. As Braidotti states: ‘Genetic bio-capitalism is less of a concept than a web of multi-layered and contested discourses and social practices focusing on the management of Life and living matter’ (2012: 61).

These discourses play out in Darrieussecq’s novel as in her futuristic world, along with the appearance of drones and robots, most humans are equipped with a clone known as a ‘half’, or *moitié*, that lies dormant, serving as an organ bank for their ailing human counterpart. The novel’s final twist, in which the narrator discovers that she is herself one of a series of clones supplying organs to an immortal posthuman character, renders the reader’s contemplation of the innate pathologies of the human body, such as ageing and decay, all the more salient. As the following analysis shows, Darrieussecq’s narrative not only interrogates the impact of technological intervention on the body but, in so doing, explores how such changes might redefine contemporary notions of subjectivity, life and death.

To address such questions, this article draws on scholarship on cloning and bodily enhancement from the fields of science fiction and posthuman studies (Braidotti, 2013), as well as critical theory on the body, bio-power (Foucault, 1978), and textual decentering (Braidotti, 2014), to establish a framework for the reading of Darrieussecq’s novel. The analysis begins with the concept of human doubling, and the ways in which *Notre vie*

blurs the lines between human and non-human subjectivity through the depiction of cloning. It then considers the portrayal of bodily decay and dissection as a further deconstruction of the novel's human subjects, as depicted through the physical and social fragmentation experienced by its characters. The final section concludes with an exploration of textual discontinuity, exploring how the style and form of Darrieussecq's prose mirrors the protagonist's corporeal fragmentation, and how these practices influence the interpretation of the text. As such, this article demonstrates the ethical issues raised by human enhancement in Darrieussecq's novel, while highlighting how the text redefines the relationship between human and posthuman subjectivity to bring our attention to the interconnection of all living forms.

Doubles and Halves

The notion of doubling appears across multiple aspects of *Notre vie*: the narrator/protagonist Viviane is a psychotherapist, a profession extremely close to Darrieussecq's own occupation before becoming a writer.¹ Similarly, Viviane's clone is named Marie, introducing another avatar of the author into the narrative. Moreover, the novel's narration, which retrospectively recounts the events that occurred before Viviane came to join the fugitives hiding with their clones in the forest, frames the narrator's attempt to order the plot in parallel to that of the reader, who appears as the 'you', or *vous*, addressed throughout the novel. This use of linguistic and stylistic doubling parallels the ambivalent portrayal of bodily enhancement, made possible by cloning in the text. Focusing on the figure of the clone, this section examines how Darrieussecq's depiction of bio-engineered life foregrounds the contradictory nature of the clone as both the mirror image and the antithesis of its human counterpart, highlighting the fraught relationship between human agency and biology in the novel.

According to Jean Baudrillard, the figure of the clone is a 'regression toward a state of minimal differentiation among living beings' (2000: 6). Following this logic, the act of cloning carries with it a troubling potential: through the removal of difference, the process of doubling foregrounds the liminal nature of our own status as individuals. However, as Sonja Stojanovic has noted, in *Notre vie* the narrator's account of the clone centres on the very differences between the protagonist and her double (2020: 78). Initially referred to as 'the bodies' (13), or *les corps* (23),² rather than the 'halves' as they come to be known, Viviane's description of the clones reveals both a linguistic

¹ Darrieussecq has worked as a psychoanalyst as well as undergoing psychoanalytic therapy herself (Carlini Versini, 2020: 3; Darrieussecq, 2020: 130).

² All English citations taken from Marie Darrieussecq, *Our Life in the Forest*, Penny Hueston (tr.), Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2018. All French citations taken from Marie Darrieussecq, *Notre vie dans les forêts*, Paris: P.O.L., 2017.

and metaphysical differentiation between the humans and their doubles. This could be interpreted as a need on the part of *Notre vie*'s narrator to maintain separation from her clone, as well as an attempt to distinguish between forms of biological life, which Darrieussecq's depiction of scientific intervention seeks to uphold.

The narrator's clone Marie, or 'Sissy', as she is also referred to, spends most of her life in the 'Rest Centre', or *Centre de Repos*, where she remains in a medically induced coma waiting for her organs to be removed according to the various afflictions of her human double. In this artificially passive state, the clone calls to mind Michel Foucault's notion of the docile body, which provides a physical manifestation of capitalist ideology's power over the individual. As he explains, the docile body takes its form from 'the optimisation of its capabilities, [and] its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls' (Foucault, 1978: 139). In serving as an organ bank, Marie emphasises the clone's status as an object to be used as society and science see fit. As Benjamin Dalton observes in his article on plasticity and biotechnology in the novel, by keeping the clones suspended in the Rest Centre, their manufacturers are 'ridding them of any agency or humanity' (2020: 60). In this sense, Darrieussecq's clones hint at science's potential to denature the very mechanisms of human growth they were engineered to enhance. However, as the following analysis shows, this process of 'othering' ultimately leads to a destabilisation of the distinction between the novel's depiction of the human and posthuman.

Marie's status as Viviane's biological double remains troubling for the narrator, who fixates on the apparent differences between their bodies. As she writes:

Marie is prettier than I am, I said to myself. That should have reassured me, actually. The psychologist from the Rest Centre disagreed with me. The psychologist said that we had the same nose to the millimetre, the same eyes, the same smile, the same jaw, everything, everything exactly identical, and so, therefore I'm as pretty as Marie. But it's not true (14–15).³

The accumulation of bodily features described here highlights the discrepancies that can form through the use of anatomical terminology, as well as the estranging nature of physical materiality as evoked throughout Darrieussecq's novel. However, rather than establishing a reassuring distinction between the protagonist and her clone, this passage reads like an expression of sibling rivalry. The narrator's jealousy of the

³ 'Marie est plus jolie que moi, je me disais. Ça devrait me rassurer, en fait. La psychologue du Centre de repos me disait que non. La psychologue disait que nous avons le même nez au millimètre, les mêmes yeux, les mêmes sourcils, les mêmes mâchoires, tout, tout exactement pareil, et donc que je suis aussi jolie que Marie. Mais ce n'est pas vrai' (25–26).

clone's beauty produces an abject tension that threatens to undermine the unity of the narrator's own subjective positioning.

The clone's body is depicted as a source of disturbing fascination for the protagonist. Viviane covets Marie's perfect skin, observing that she 'seemed to be forever immersed in a milk bath' (15).⁴ According to Maria Aline Salgueiro Seabra Ferreira, 'like the double, the clone can be seen as the mirror image onto which one can project either dreams and wishes unfulfilled in one's lifetime or even socially unacceptable desires' (2005: 44). In this way, the clone's unblemished complexion can be interpreted as a projection of Viviane's desire to regain the youthful perfection of her body. However, rather than being reassuring or even aspirational, this longing is a source of perversion for *Notre vie's* narrator. The sight of the clone's face gives her the desire to damage and corrupt it, as she adds, 'even today her face is so smooth I want to murder her' (15), or translated directly from the original French, to *massacre her*.⁵ The ambivalent and inhumane feelings provoked in Viviane, by the clone's presence, draw attention to the fraught association between human biology and subjectivity in the novel.

This association is all the more troubling when read in light of the narrator's infantilisation of her double. Once Marie is freed from the Rest Centre, Viviane describes the clone as 'like a baby' (4), *comme un bébé* (13), although both she and her double are now almost 40 years of age, and recounts, with an unsettling mixture of humour and frustration, how she was obliged to teach Marie how to walk. She explains:

Take a big, soft body, almost forty years old, even if she barely looks twenty-five, a gorgeous girl, and stand her upright, verticalise her: she opens her eyes, and then *bang*. She falls down. It's funny, that strapping young woman all of a sudden on the ground (2).⁶

These descriptions can be interpreted in a variety of ways. The comedic tone of Darrieussecq's narration would lend itself to a reading of the clone's childlike state as a satirical exaggeration of the desire for eternal youth and beauty. Likewise, Viviane's ridicule of Marie's infantilised state can be seen as an attempt on the narrator's part to revive the classical notion of mind-body dualism. Furthermore, it is important to note the way in which the differences between the human and the clone are outlined according to what the narrator considers to be natural functions of the adult body, such as signs of ageing and the ability to walk. This, in turn, highlights how physical capacity

⁴ 'Marie me semblait [...] éternellement plongée dans un bain de lait' (26).

⁵ 'Même aujourd'hui, son visage est si lisse que j'ai envie de la massacrer' (26).

⁶ 'Vous prenez un grand corps mou de près de quarante ans, même si elle en fait vingt-cinq à peine, un beau brin de fille, et vous la mettez debout, vous la verticalisez: elle ouvre les yeux, et puis boum. Elle tombe' (11).

remains central to the narrator's definition of the ideal human condition, which the figure of the clone acts to destabilise.

Despite being the products of technological advancement, the clones present the characteristics of primitive humans. Viviane observes that following their escape to the forest, while she and the other humans discuss ways to evade the surveillance of the nameless authorities, the 'halves' are only interested in 'sugar, sex, food, sleep (as if they haven't slept enough!) and to hunt like cats (in the forest, the halves are our best procurers of protein)' (98).⁷ Although Viviane struggles to survive in the forest, Marie appears to thrive. In this sense, the clones are evocative of Braidotti's notion of *zoe*, a concept of posthuman life encompassing 'the entire animal and Earth's others' (2021: 72), which she frames in opposition to that of *bios*, an ideologically determined notion relating the way life is lived according to certain humanistic principles (2013: 60). Whereas *bios* distinguishes between life forms, *zoe* positions life as a continuum across human and non-human entities. The relationship between the notion of *zoe* and Darrieussecq's writing has been explored through a range of texts by Amaleena Damlé (2012; 2014), who suggests that her works represent life 'not in terms of humanistic limit points, but as the flux of *zoe*' (2012: 315). The primitive nature of Darrieussecq's clones thus has a significant bearing on the interpretation of subjectivity as presented in *Notre vie*. In this sense, the distinction between the protagonist and her clone may be read as an illustration of the competing concepts of life as the humanistic *bios* and the non- or post-human *zoe*. This dichotomy is further demonstrated when Viviane observes that the clones have 'no political sensibility at all, no metaphysical yearnings, no impetus towards the future' (98),⁸ highlighting the base nature of their life form. However, despite this distinction, the life of the novel's narrator remains bound to that of the clone. It is important to recall that the clone's existence is predicated by the declining state of the narrator's body, which the clone was engineered to remedy. In other words, Viviane's *moitié* exists as both a double and a literal half of the human for whom she was created and is unable to live without. As such, the process of doubling found in *Notre vie* highlights the instability of the human condition, which can only be maintained through the intervention of the non-human. This paradox illustrates the ambivalent nature of human enhancement and its ethical implications in the novel. As shown through the analysis of decay and dissection in the following section, Darrieussecq's portrayal of life and immortality remains coupled with that of death and decline.

⁷ '...du sucre, coupler, bouffer, dormir (comme si elles n'avaient pas assez dormi!) et chasser comme des chats (ce sont nos meilleures pourvoyeuses de protéines, dans la forêt)' (126).

⁸ '...aucun sens politique, aucun désir métaphysique, aucun élan vers l'avenir' (126).

Decay and Dissection

Bodily decay is a central theme in *Notre vie*. In the opening pages, the narrator informs the reader that she is in a hurry to record her story before she succumbs to her physical ailments. As she remarks: ‘I’ve got a feeling I have to move fast. I don’t have much time. I can feel it in my muscles, in my bones. In my remaining eye. I’m not in good shape’ (2).⁹ The narrator’s body, already broken down into its various components by this description and missing one eye, is in a state of deterioration. Providing the impetus for the narrative, the character’s corporeal decline is likewise mirrored by the environmental ruin of her world. Viviane’s narration is given while she hides from surveillance drones under the cover of the trees though, as she observes: ‘the logical thing would be for them to burn them all down [...] no more undergrowth, no more [opacity]’ (6).¹⁰ Although Darrieussecq’s narrator does not reveal who ‘they’ are – thus refusing to strip away the plot’s undergrowth – this ongoing threat of planetary and bodily destruction imbues the novel with a tension driven by decay and the desire to overcome it.

In contrast to the narrator’s metamorphosis into a pig in *Truismes* which, according to Amaleena Damlé, ‘articulates, rearticulates and transforms cultural significations of the female body’ (2014: 129), the physical changes experienced by the characters in *Notre vie* are, for the most part, a series of uncontrollable and debilitating pathologies that act to highlight their mortal condition. As seen in the citation above, one of the narrator’s eyes was removed after she was diagnosed with a degenerative form of prosopagnosia (2018: 73; 2017: 94), an inability to recognise faces, which is deemed dangerous as the condition threatens her ability to distinguish between the clones and humans of her world. This is only one of a string of disorders Viviane’s body is assailed by, and while her various symptoms can be cured through the recurring process of dissection and transplantation, it would appear that the congenital cause of her illnesses cannot be overcome. As the narrative progresses, we gradually learn that Viviane was born with only one lung and that she is also prone to kidney failure. These afflictions provide a manifestation of the fragility of the character’s body, which continues to be plagued by what Braidotti calls the ‘liminal condition of the living subject—its “becoming corpse” so to speak’ (2010: 181). Although Viviane accepts the transplant of two replacement organs from Marie, this does little to assuage her fear of her pathological condition, as the character’s physical enhancement only takes place because of her body’s decay.

⁹ ‘Je sens qu’il faut que j’aille vite. J’ai peu de temps. Je le sens à mes os, à mes muscles. À l’œil qui me reste. Je suis mal en point’ (10).

¹⁰ Here I have changed the end of the English translation from ‘gloomy light’ to ‘opacity’, which is closer to the original French and carries multiple meanings in this context. ‘Le plus logique serait qu’ils les brûlent, les forêts [...] plus de sous-bois, plus d’opacité’ (15).

As Anne Balsamo explains, the notion of biologically engineering bodies as a means to control life and death is accompanied by an ambivalent concomitance of reactions, whereby ‘beliefs about the technological future “life” of the body are complemented by a palpable fear of death and annihilation’ (1996: 1–2). In *Notre vie*, the experience of bodily enhancement causes Viviane to fixate on her physical imperfections. At one point she describes herself as ‘hacked about and tinkered with’ (114), or *bricolée et charcutée* (146) in the original French, evoking the image of a Frankenstein-like assembly of body parts. Unlike her kidney and lung, for a reason unknown to the character, her eye is not replaced, leaving Viviane plagued by a sense of absence as she imagines the presence of a phantom eye under her scar (2018: 16; 2017: 27). Ironically visible on Viviane’s face but not on that of her clone, this trace underlines the pathological nature of the character’s body in spite of continual surgical intervention. Darrieussecq’s portrayal of the narrator’s scar thus acts as a reflexive critique of science’s denaturing of the body’s natural decay processes.

This contradiction is also illustrated by the character Romero, with whom Viviane has a brief relationship prior to her life in the forest. Romero would appear to be one of the healthier humans of this new world; he competes in pentathlons and Viviane even describes him as ‘the complete athlete’ (75), *un athlète complet* (98). As seen with the earlier description of the smooth skin of Marie’s face, *wholeness* would appear to be the mark of health and beauty in *Notre vie*. However, despite these superficial signs of perfection, Romero too has bodily defects, which Viviane discovers when she spends the night with him. As the narrator recalls:

I couldn’t sleep; my whole memory of that night has been reduced to the sight of Romero’s dentures in a glass of effervescent liquid. A row of teeth mounted on a pink base that resembled gums. All his lower teeth were false. He slept peacefully beside me, in a sportsman’s restorative slumber, deep and sound. I resisted the urge to push apart his lips like you do on a horse. To see (86).¹¹

In this passage, Romero’s dentures, a prosthetic aid used by many, are recast as an alien object. The narrator’s fixation on the image of the false teeth highlights the unnatural nature of Romero’s attempt at overcoming his physical flaw. This incident once again underlines the inevitable decay of the body as described throughout the text, and which can only be overcome through artificial intervention. Viviane later demands

¹¹ ‘...je ne dormais pas, et tout le souvenir de cette nuit se réduit à la vision du dentier de Romero dans un verre. Une rangée de dents montées sur un support rose imitant la gencive, dans un liquide effervescent. Toutes ses dents du bas étaient fausses. Il dormait paisiblement à côté de moi, de son sommeil de sportif, lourd et sain, réparateur. Et je résistais à l’envie d’écarter ses lèvres façon cheval. De voir’ (112).

that Romero ask for a transplant. Unsurprisingly, they separate soon after due to what is described as Viviane's attachment disorder (88), or *trouble de l'attachement* (114), which ironically hints at the narrator's continued inability to remain whole.

This pervading sense of both bodily and social fragmentation appears to be a product of the institutionalised world portrayed in Darrieussecq's novel. Another character that Viviane becomes involved with is the enigmatic 'clicker', whose job consists of coding human practices and emotions into a series of single words so that robots can learn to mimic humans (2018: 8; 2017: 18). By dissecting human life into a series of coded associations, the clicker's role is intended to establish order, once again demonstrating technology's propensity for distinguishing between the structured notion of life as *bios* and that of the unruly *zoe*. Viviane, in turn, as a psychotherapist, tries to help people live with their feelings of internal disorder, or in her words: 'My profession, the way I was trained, was to make the trauma people have experienced seem possible. I can't say it any other way' (16).¹² This description further problematises the nature of care in this novel, where humankind is treated not to be cured or to be made whole, but in order to keep functioning at a basic level. Despite these institutionally enforced modes of dissociation, Viviane soon becomes overwhelmed by her own psychological trauma as her feelings of guilt lead to gruesome nightmares, in which she is consuming the body of her clone. As she states:

I had dreams in which I was eating Marie. I began with a finger; it was tasty, so I grew bolder. I continued up her hand, to her arm; it was bleeding and I panicked at the idea that all this blood was going to mean the end of my transplant deal (108).¹³

These troubling thoughts and the encouragement of the 'clicker' lead to Viviane's decision to disconnect herself, *de se déconnecter* in the original text,¹⁴ from the institutionalised world around her, and she disappears into the forest with her clone (2017: 118). This shift in the narrative framework would thus appear to mark the end to the continuous cycle of dissection and transplantation in the novel, thereby reaching towards a sense of resolution where the 'half' and her human double are united, perhaps even become whole. However, in drawing to its conclusion, the novel enacts, this time, a formal break that threatens to undermine our initial interpretation of its narration. This occurs when, while in the forest, the 'clicker' discovers a series of videos which he shares with Viviane. Showing idyllic images of elderly people walking along a white beach, our protagonist assumes that these videos are some sort of advertisement;

¹² 'Mon métier, la façon dont on m'a formée, c'était de rendre possible pour les gens les traumatismes qu'ils ont vécus. Je ne sais pas le dire autrement' (27).

¹³ 'Je faisais des rêves où je mangeais Marie. Je commençais par un doigt et je trouvais ça bon et je m'enhardissais. J'avancerais dans la main, dans le bras, ça saignait et je paniquais à l'idée que tout ce sang allait signer mon forfait' (138).

¹⁴ Here I have chosen to use a translation closer to the original French rather than Hueston's 'to log out' (91).

however, they zoom in on one particular woman to reveal a striking resemblance between her face and Viviane's:

It was me as a very old woman. That seemed strange for a start. The image had been doctored, altered, enlarged, the wrinkles photoshopped out, but it was an old woman who was identical to me. Me when I would never reach that age. Because I'm going to die soon, with what's left of my body (138).¹⁵

This *mise en abyme* splinters the narrative frame, as we learn that Viviane is in fact not a human with a cloned double, but is herself a clone, a third, or perhaps one of a potentially vast series of copies in a line of mass bodily production (2018: 140; 2017: 176). This revelation dissolves the distinction between the human and posthuman subjects of the narrative. The almost unrecognisable woman in the video, who is estimated to be 160 years old, is not human, but through a series of transplants has become posthuman, extending her body's capacities piece by piece to live beyond the limits of mortality. The potentially dehumanising repercussions of bodily enhancement are thus laid bare for the reader as Viviane goes on to describe her progenitor as an object of terror:

A narrow scar circled her left eye. It was attractive, like a smile line, but I'm sure that scar annoyed her—when we zoomed in you could see she tried to hide it with concealer. It was an attractive scar. It had turned out well. She had not only taken my eye but also my eyelids, my attractive eyelids, still smooth, transplanted onto that face stranded somewhere beyond time. [...] It was my eye, my missing eye. I had a feeling in my belly, something black like bile, icy-cold. I'm frightened, I thought. That's it. She frightens me. She is terrifying, horrendously so. Pure horror (138–39).¹⁶

Once again blurring the line between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the natural and the unnatural, Darrieussecq's description of the woman's attempt at concealing her scar like a crease reveals the novel's ambivalent intertwining of bodily decay and enhancement. This, combined with the horror provoked by the immortal figure, provides an articulation of what Fredric Jameson describes as one of the essential paradoxes of utopian desire. As he explains:

¹⁵ 'C'était moi en très vieille. Déjà, ça, ça me faisait bizarre. Bricolée, modifiée, gonflée et déridée, mais très vieille et identique à moi. Moi quand je n'aurai jamais cet âge. Parce que moi je vais mourir bientôt avec ce qui me reste de morceaux de mon corps' (174).

¹⁶ 'En cercle autour de son œil gauche il y avait une fine cicatrice, jolie comme une ride mais je suis sûre que cette cicatrice l'embêtait parce qu'en zoomant on voyait qu'elle tentait de la masquer avec de l'anticerne. Elle ne m'avait pas seulement pris mon œil mais aussi mes paupières, mes jolies paupières encore lisses, greffées dans ce visage échoué hors du temps. [...] C'était mon œil, l'œil qui me manquait. J'avais un sentiment dans le ventre, noir comme de la bile et glacial. Je me suis dit: j'ai peur. C'est ça. Elle me fait peur. Elle est effrayante, abominablement' (174–75).

The fundamental Utopian dispute about subjectivity [centres on] whether the Utopia in question proposes the kind of radical transformation of subjectivity presupposed by most revolutions, a mutation in human nature and the emergence of whole new beings; or whether the impulse to Utopia is not already grounded in human nature, its persistence readily explained by deeper needs and desires which the present has merely repressed and distorted (2005: 168).

Although Viviane acknowledges its fine execution, the scar around the woman's eye symbolises the fracture in the supposedly utopian ideal of immortality. As the passage continues, the uncanny beauty of the woman's eye is reframed in terms of the narrator's loss, thereby highlighting the fragility of the line between enhancement and mutilation.

In *Notre vie*, the desire to treat physical defects and extend life rests on an exaggeration of capitalist ideology, which in turn predicates the death of the cloned others. As the 'clicker' explains, the individuals wealthy enough to afford clones are part of the 'one per cent of super-rich who own ninety-nine per cent of the world's wealth' (141).¹⁷ Meanwhile, the clones, who are compared to yogurts, have an 'expiry date' (143),¹⁸ as their illnesses are not borne out of their own genetic predisposition but are a result of the cloning process. Brought about by an all too human obsession with eternal life, the novel's portrayal of bioengineered immortality is inseparable from death and destruction. Through the narrator's estranging perspective, it is the clone, whose body is in pieces, who is most closely aligned with the reader, thereby reframing illness and death as a sign of our very own (post)humanity. As the narrator explains, decay and regeneration are part of the natural cycle of the body:

All our cells have automatically replaced themselves. All our body tissues renew themselves several times in the course of our lives. Our heart and our brain take longer, I think, but most of the organs in our bodies are routinely less than ten years old and are continuously regenerating (146).¹⁹

In *Notre vie*, the notion of death is thus integral to both human and posthuman subjectivity. The final pages of the novel, in which the narrator imagines the reader coming across her bones in years to come, portray the character's inevitable death as part of an ongoing continuum. As Stephanie Posthumus suggests of the novel's ending,

¹⁷ '1% de super-riches qui possèdent 99% de la richesse du monde' (177).

¹⁸ 'Il paraît que les lignées de clones faiblissent avec le temps. D'où une sorte de date de péremption. Un peu comme des yaourts' (180).

¹⁹ 'Toutes nos cellules se sont auto-remplacées. Tous nos tissus se renouvellent plusieurs fois dans notre vie. Notre cœur et notre cerveau, je crois que c'est plus lent, mais la plupart des organes dans notre corps ont systématiquement moins de dix ans et continuent à se régénérer sans cesse' (183).

for Darrieussecq's protagonist, 'death and dying are key to experiencing ecological interrelatedness and evolutionary continuity' (2020: 47). As such, by describing the narrator's body as an artefact to be found by future generations, *Notre vie* concludes with the representation of death not as a finite annihilation of the subject, but rather as a posthuman process of 'perpetual becoming' (Braidotti, 2013: 131), which, as we shall see in the final section, is paralleled by the novel's textual embodiment.

(Dis)Continuity

Notions of textual and corporeal embodiment are closely linked in Darrieussecq's novel. From its very first pages, the reader is confronted with the troubling implication of subscribing to the account of a narrator whose own vision is obstructed. Viviane's one eye can be seen as an allusion to the character's blindness to the true nature of her situation as one of a vast series of clones for most of the novel. The parallel bodily and narrative fragmentation can likewise be traced across the rest of the narrator's body which, as shown above, is described as 'hacked about' (114), or *bricolée* (146) in the original French. This patchwork image also corresponds to the structure of the novel in which the narrator recounts her life through a disjointed series of fragments. *Notre vie* does not have a linear structure; instead, it begins at an undetermined point towards the end of Viviane's life and follows with analepses from various episodes throughout her lifetime that blur into each other through the novel's first-person account. The novel's discontinuous timeline enacts a chronological decentering of Viviane's life, which is furthered by the narrative's stylistic fragmentation.

In addition to freely jumping from one point in the narrator's life to another, Darrieussecq's style is marked by its orality, as well as its contrasting use of long and short sentences which, at times, are cut up into single words. For instance, after a digression on Marie's nature, Viviane writes: 'Well, anyway. Where was I? Back in the old days' (99), the semantic fracture of which is all the more palpable in the original French: 'Bon. Où j'en étais. Autrefois' (127). This comment reflexively draws attention to the narrative's tortuous plot as well as highlighting the fluidity of time throughout the novel. This type of reflection, which is repeated in various ways across the text, likewise highlights the narrator's subjective role in *Notre vie*'s construction, once again foregrounding the central nature of subjectivity in the text. The novel also includes the interjection of familiar and oral language, such as 'hurry', or *vite* (2018: 122; 2017: 156); 'Ha!' (2018: 44; 2017: 60); 'anyway' or *bref* (2018: 125; 2017: 159); and the frequently repeated 'get a grip' or *du nerf* (2018: 97; 2017: 115). Occurring throughout the prose, these stylistic practices also have a significant bearing on the interpretation of human and posthuman subjectivity in the novel, as the patchwork of the narration sees *Notre vie*'s textual embodiment mirroring that of its character's decaying and interconnected bodies.

Returning to Braidotti, we are reminded that ‘style is not decorative, but a complex strategic operation of positioning’ (2014: 168). In composing her novel as a continuous series of linguistic and narrative fragments, Darrieussecq stylistically positions her text as a rhizomatic and mobile substance, allowing the reader to draw a plurality of inter- and intra-textual connections and disconnections as the plot develops (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). This nomadic potential is best illustrated by the narrative shift mentioned above, in which Viviane discovers that she, like Marie, is a clone of an unrecognisable ancestor, of which the narrator observes: ‘[this knowledge] requires a radical change of thinking, really, to no longer see yourself at the centre of things—at the centre of your own vision of the world. To understand that you are nothing more than a peripheral offshoot’ (153).²⁰ Reconfiguring the reader’s understanding of human and non-human subjectivities, the decentering of the narrative’s form thus acts to further underscore the significance of (dis)continuous embodiment in Darrieussecq’s novel.

As Braidotti explains, such ‘nomadic shifts’ in writing allow

for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction, experience and knowledge. They urge us to reflect upon the affects and ethics of our own writing practices and the potency of our own figures of speech, so as to fully assess their potential for empowerment (2014: 182).

In this way, *Notre vie*’s structure reflexively encourages the reader to contemplate the power of the novel as a means to interrogate the ethics of human cloning and bodily enhancement. With this in mind, perhaps the best way to comprehend the text is in the words of its narrator, as she states:

I should be telling it in order, but in my poor head it’s like a leafy landscape with lots of valleys and alternative paths and people waiting, all half-dead, for me to let them speak, lickety-split. They’re all speaking at the same time, and everything connects with everything else: the past with the present and with the future, what’s happened with what’s going to happen (23).²¹

²⁰ ‘Ça demande une révolution mentale, vraiment, de ne plus se voir au centre. Au centre de sa propre vision du monde. De comprendre qu’on est juste un surgeon périphérique’ (182).

²¹ ‘Il faudrait que je raconte dans l’ordre mais dans ma pauvre tête ça ressemble à un paysage feuillu avec des tas de vallées et de chemins possibles et des gens qui attendent, tous à moitié morts, que je leur passe la parole en vitesse. Ils causent tous en même temps, et tout me renvoie à tout: le passé au présent et au futur, ce qui est arrivé à ce qui va venir’ (26–27).

As Dalton explains in his analysis, the forest in *Notre vie* is not just ‘a simple hideaway from science’s control, but instead emerges as a fertile space’ in which to experiment with new notions of living and being in the world (2020: 69). The leafy landscape described by the narrator can thus be seen as a metaphor for not only the novel’s plot, but also the ways in which the text generates new connections in the reader’s thoughts. Much like the description of the narrator’s own mind, in reading this text the reader wanders through a forest of signs and words as they explore the possible pathways that have the potential to transform their trajectory. In this way, *Notre vie* mobilises the reader’s understanding of the human condition as a process of continual development, allowing them to find new life in the forces of decay and disorder that connect all living subjects.

Conclusion

The desire for a world without decay and death that does not disrupt notions of human subjectivity is one of the eternal contradictions of the human condition. As Thomas Cole states, ‘ageing, like illness and death, reveals the most fundamental conflict of the human condition: the tension between infinite ambitions, dreams, and desires on the one hand, and vulnerable, limited decaying physical existence on the other’ (1992: 239). The correlation between humanity’s vulnerability and longing for immortality is dramatised in *Notre vie*’s tale of human enhancement. The combined textual and corporeal embodiment of the narrative allow the reader to grapple with the conflict of humankind’s innate pathologies and the competing desires for biological transformation and natural beauty that beset the novel’s protagonist. From the uncanny feelings of jealousy provoked by the presence of her clone to the ongoing fear of her own destruction, Viviane’s narration dissects the ethical implications of bioengineering and the inescapable inequalities that accompany material wealth in a techno-capitalist society. Further reflected by its fragmented and fluid structure, this novel reveals the continued interrelationship between forces of creation and destruction. Through her imagination of a world without disease, Darrieussecq thus lays bare the paradoxical nature of humanity’s desire for eternal life, while revealing the experience of decay to be integral to both human and posthuman subjects.

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